"ONLY THAT WHICH IS GOOD CAN BE EVIL."
AUGUSTINE ON EVIL AS *PRIVATIO BONI*

by

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ABSTRACT

"Only that which is good can be evil."
Augustine on evil as *privatio boni*

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The aim of my thesis is to suggest that the church consider adopting a privative view of evil. St. Augustine's ontology of evil is the subject of the thesis. Augustine's views are first explained, and then compared to Plotinus' view of evil to show that Augustine radically transformed Plotinus' teaching in light of Scripture. Augustine's views are then compared to Scripture's teaching on evil to show that a privative account of evil is consistent with and complimentary to language of Scripture as well as systematic theology. Some fruitful pastoral applications are offered at the end to show that this issue is far more than merely philosophical or abstractly theological. Of the views of evil present to the church today, the best available option is a privative account of evil.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

they and their ideas are valuable by the time and thoughtfulness of his critique inspires his students to do better than they thought possible.

Finally, I'm thankful for my wife, Karen and my children, Dana, Jane, Clara, Jonathan, and Josie. It's been a long seven years since I started this program. If I didn't have their support, I never would have finished it. I dedicate this paper to them.

ABBREVIATIONS

civ. Dei   *De civitate Dei*

conf.   Confessiones

ench.   *Enchiridion (ad Laurentium) de fide spe at caritate*

Gn. litt.   *De Genesi ad litteram*

MFO   Measure, Form, and Order

mor.   *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae at de moribus Manichaeorum*

nat. b.   *De natura boni*

ord.   *De ordine*

PMFO   Privation of Measure, Form, and Order

Trin.   *De Trinitate*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When people say that a child is deprived, they typically mean that there is something that he should have, but doesn't. Saying that all evil is privation is similar to this. At the most basic level, to say that all evil is privation is to believe that all evil reduces down to a lack of something that should be there. On this model, evil is an absence of goodness, rather than a positive, independently existing thing.

Since the ancient church, theologians have believed evil to be privative. Origen, Athanasius, Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin and countless others have believed this doctrine to be true, and it remains a staple in the Thomistic tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. When and how this doctrine came to be discarded by Protestants is an interesting question, but beyond the scope of this project of suggesting that readers consider readopting a privative view of evil.

There are Protestants today who hold to a privative concept of evil. Many cyber-apologists find themselves excited about evil as privation, but often misunderstand or misuse the doctrine. In such contexts, privation is often used as a kind of trump card of definition to attempt to dissolve variations of the logical problem of evil. Versions of the problem of evil all boil down to the claim that belief in a God who is good and omnipotent is inconsistent with the existence of evil. The cyber apologist retorts that evil is privative and therefore doesn't really exist. Therefore he somehow wins the debate.

The atheist rightfully feels annoyed at a misunderstanding and misuse of a doctrine for a purpose it was not intended.

A great example of a full and proper understanding of a privative view of evil is found in St. Augustine. For him, a privative view of evil was not an answer to the problem of evil but a clarification of terms before dealing with the problem. The problem of evil asks, "From where does evil come if God is good?" Augustine would reply that "*What* is evil?" is an essential and logically prior question to "*Where* did evil come from?" Thus Augustine's dealing with the problem of evil presupposes a definition of evil as privation of goodness.[1]

Compared to the preliminary explaining evil as privation, Augustine spends much more time writing on the topic of the problem of evil. In many ways he is the father of the free will defense. He couples this with a version of the stoic or aesthetic theodicy and greater good defense ("O Felix Culpa!"[2]). These all work together to show that the beings that God created are the immediate causes of evil and therefore guilty of sinning against God (free will defense). Further, this in no way thwarts the sovereign plan of God who in his omnipotence is able to use evil to accomplish his will and bring goodness out of evil (aesthetic theodicy), even to the point that the creation is even better after sin has been dealt with than before it existed (O Felix Culpa!). For Augustine, a privative view of evil in no way dissolves the problem of evil, but makes it that much more difficult by clearly defining evil in such a way that amplifies the question of "How then has evil entered a universe entirely created by a good God?" For Augustine this ethical problem is deeply

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[1] D.A. Cress, "Augustine's Privation Account of Evil: A Defense," *Augustinian Studies* 20 (1989) : 116.
[2] That is, "Oh happy fall!"

personal and biblical. It is a much more important and ultimate issue than the topic of

thesis, Augustine's answer to the question of "what is evil?" Although Augustine's work

dealing directly with the problem of evil is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is vital to

keep in mind that for Augustine, while the ontology of evil is logically prior to the ethics

of evil, the ethics of evil are much more important and ultimate. In no way was Augustine

guilty of making the problem of evil primarily an ontological issue.

Nevertheless, the scope of this thesis is limited to Augustine's ontology of evil.

Augustine held that evil was real, but that it was non-being. This sounds strange to the

21st century mind, but for Augustine and many ancients of the era, to be is to be good.[3] A

thing "is" only insofar as it is good, and insofar as it is not as good as it could or should

be, it *is not*. Putting this in terms of the Army commercial, it wasn't just that I wasn't all I

could be, but that insofar as I wasn't all I could be, *I wasn't*. On this account, evil is not a

substance, but a lack, perversion, or corruption of a good substance. It does not have a

nature or essence of it's own, but it parasitically disintegrates or destroys the good of

other created beings. All creatures are good, and if they were annihilated, evil would no

longer exist. This is because evil is not some thing. Rather it is a lack, a hole, a

deficiency. When a good thing is not as good as it was created to be, or is corrupted in

some way, this is evil. Augustine refers to evil as *privatio boni*, or privation of good.

Augustine takes a lot of flack for this position on evil. Often it is because he is

misunderstood. The goal of this thesis is to vindicate Augustine's concept of evil as

privatio boni. Notwithstanding ties to Plotinus and the surrounding Platonic culture,

Augustine's evil as *privatio boni* is an attempt to describe the nature of God, creation,

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[3]Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.12.18. trans. Maria Boulding, (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City
Press, 1997), 174.

good, and evil primarily in light of the authoritative teaching of Scripture and secondarily in the terms and ideas of the surrounding culture. Although his language is foreign to the modern ear, Augustine was attempting to describe biblical realities by borrowing and transforming ideas from the surrounding culture. His language for evil is consistent with and complimentary to the language used by Scripture for sin. Additionally, a privative account of evil is the best available option for maintaining the coherence of Reformed systematic theology. If the concept of evil as privation is true, then it would be a fruitful concept not just theologically and philosophically, but also experientially. Some examples at the end of the work are offered to demonstrate the pastoral fruitfulness of a privative concept of evil. In light of this, the church today is urged to consider adopting a privative account of evil.

Before beginning, it may be helpful to summarize the plan of attack for the remainder of this project. Chapter two is a summary of Augustine's concept of evil as privation, in the context of his larger belief system. Augustine's view of evil is dependent upon his views of God, creation, and goodness, so it is important to clearly understand them before moving on to his view of evil.

Chapter three is a summary of the Neoplatonist Plotinus' view of evil. Plotinus and Augustine's accounts are then compared. An analysis of the two shows that most of what Augustine borrowed from Plotinus was radically transformed in light the content of Scripture. This should quiet that group of critics who claim Augustine to be a convert to Neoplatonism rather than Christianity. If one group of critics misunderstands Augustine's view of evil by assuming it to be too Platonic, the other group fails to understand it by not seeing the Platonic view of goodness on which it depends for coherence. While

Augustine radically transformed much of Neoplatonism in light of Scripture, he nevertheless held on to some concepts. An evaluation of this residual Neoplatonism is the main subject of the next chapter.

Chapter four is primarily an evaluation of Augustine's Scripturally-transformed Neoplatonism. It is proposed as a model which helps shed light on what Scripture teaches about God, creation, goodness, and evil. Comparing Augustine's language for evil to the language of Scripture for sin shows that the two are consistent and complimentary. After this the privative account of evil is examined in light of what Scripture teaches according to Reformed systematic theology. Privation is not only consistent with Reformed theology, but currently is the only available option to explain God's permissive decree towards evil.

Chapter five proceeds on the assumption that a privative account of evil is the best available option for the church to conceptualize evil. A few case scenarios of privation in action demonstrate the pastoral fruitfulness of privation.

Chapter six concludes by suggesting that the reader consider embracing a privative view of evil not just in light of the individual arguments of this project, but more in light of the fact that it has been the accepted doctrine of the church throughout most of its history and has only begun to die out in modern times. Thus the project ends by borrowing a propaganda tactic successfully used by environmentalists to move masses of people to protect endangered species. In the scope of the history of ideas, privative evil is becoming something of a Blue-Footed Booby, and we should know something about it so that we can make an informed decision about whether or not it should pass into oblivion.

CHAPTER 2

AUGUSTINE ON GOD, CREATION, AND EVIL

Augustine's concept of evil is rooted in his view of creation, which is dependent upon his view of God. So we'll begin with Augustine on God in order to ultimately understand how he can view evil as *privatio boni*.

Most of Augustine's beliefs about God are orthodox. God is triune as well as eternal, immortal, incorruptible, unchangeable, living, wise, powerful, beautiful, just, good, blessed, and spirit.[1] This description of God would fit most conservative systematic theologies. It is when Augustine begins to speak of God as "Being" or "Being itself" that people begin to question Augustine's doctrine of God. Because of our lack of familiarity with the concept of being as used by Augustine, and because it is at the heart of what it means for evil to be a privation of the good, Augustine's idea of God as Being needs to be thoroughly explained.

God as Being has its source for Augustine in both Scripture as well as the underlying Platonic culture of his day. Quoting Exodus 3:14, Augustine says, "God said, 'I am HE WHO IS.' For God existence is in a supreme degree—he supremely is—and is

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[1] Augustine, *de Trinitatae*, XV.5.8, in *Augustine: Later Works,* trans. and ed. John Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 132.

therefore immutable."[1] God is not only wise, powerful, beautiful, just, good, and all those other characteristics. He is all of those things in the most perfect or fullest manner possible. Immutability follows from perfection because change would entail a movementaway from the way he is. One cannot be better than perfection, and God could certainly not change for the worse. Therefore, to be in a supreme degree entails immutability.

While this concept of immutability has ties to the Greek philosophical tradition, Augustine also sees God's immutability in Scripture. In *de Natura Boni* 24, Augustine quotes Psalm 102:27 "Thou shalt change them and they shall be changed; but Thou thyself art the same." as well as Paul "To the invisible, incorruptible, only God,"[2] and James, "Every best giving and perfect gift is from above, descending from the Father of light, with whom there is no changeableness, neither obscuring of influence."[3] While immutability was a perfection as seen by Augustine's culture at large, He also sees a Scriptural basis of God's immutability.

Another key aspect of God as Being is his "oneness." While triune, God is essentially a unity. Augustine uses the word "simple" (*simplex)* to describe the unity of God.[4] Using the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4 as a touchstone,[5] Augustine argues that all

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[1] Augustine, *De Civitatae Dei* XII.2, trans. Henry Bettenson, and John Joseph O'Meara. (London: The Penguin Books, 1972), 473.

[2] Augustine, *De Natura Boni Contra Manichaeos* XXIII, trans. Albert H. Newman in ed. Philip Schaf *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers Series I volume 4 (*Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1887), 617. Scripture quotation is I Tim 1:17

[3] James 1:17

[4] *civ. Dei* XI.10, 441; *Trin.* XV.7, 133; *conf.* IV.16.29, 110.

the attributes of God are not "parts" or characteristics he could lose. He simply is what he has. Essentially, he is a unity.

Augustine's concept of God as Being is not rooted only in Scripture, however. Augustine closely connects being and goodness in a way that many see as fundamentally Platonic. When Augustine interprets Exodus 3:14 as God being He who supremely is, entailing that He is all of his attributes at the highest and most perfect level, he is smuggling not a few of his Platonic assumptions into the mix. To be is to be good and to be good is to be. Therefore, that which is perfect in goodness IS in the highest degree possible. And if something "is" in the highest possible degree, than it cannot change, because even the possibility of change would negate its perfection. Therefore to be is to be good, and to be perfectly is to be in the highest possible degree, and thus to be perfectly is to be immutable. This may see like a disproportionate amount of God-talk for a discussion of evil, but evil as *privatio boni* is dependant upon a definition of the goodness that is deprived. If God is the perfect and unchangeable Good, then obviously he cannot be deprived of anything. It is all of creation that is good by virtue of its being created by God that can be deprived. To that we now turn.

For Augustine, all goodness which is not God, is derived from God, the Highest Good.[6] Here lies the foundation of Augustine's dualism between the Creator and creation. There is that which is immutable, timeless, infinite, incorporeal, and perfect (God) and

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[5] Some might argue that God's unity is more of a Platonic or even a Pythagorean concept, but Augustine would likely assert that it is primarily Scriptural and that the philosophers also believed it by what we'd call a common grace insight. For other common grace insights of the Platonists according to Augustine, see *conf.* VII.9.13.

[6] *nat. b.,* I, 595.

that which He created. Creation is *from God*, but not *of God*.[7] This is a key distinction,

because that which is of God is Himself. This includes the three Persons of the Trinity, as

well as Truth, Goodness, and Measure, Form, and Order, (which describe the

fundamental structure of creation—more on this below).[8] Anything that is by nature

timeless, universal, or necessary is, by nature of its being immutable, part of the divine

nature.

That which is not *of God* but *from God* is that which He created out *of nothing*.

The fact that God created out of absolute nothingness illustrates two fundamental

principles for Augustine's theology.[9] First it shows his omnipotence. "For he is so

omnipotent, that even out of nothing, that is out of what is absolutely non-existent, He is

able to make good things both great and small, both celestial and terrestrial, both spiritual

and corporeal."[10] Second, creation *ex nihilo* is for Augustine a sufficient explanation for

the contingency and mutability of creation. Not only is it contingent and mutable, but it is

completely dependent upon its creator if it is to not digress towards nothingness. A visual

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[7] Ibid.

[8] For an excellent development of God as Truth, see Samantha E. Thompson "What Goodness is: Order as Imitation of Unity in Augustine" *The Review of Metaphysics* 65 is. 3 (March 2012) : 525-553, especially sections IV and V. For a discussion of measure, form, and order as the structure of creation finding their true reference in God, see Lewis Ayers "Measure, Number, and Weight" in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 550-552.

[9] It actually illustrates much more than just these two. Torchia, in fact, argues that it is the cornerstone of his theology. See N. Joseph Torchia *Creation Ex Nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine*: *The Anti-Manichaean Polemic and Beyond* (New York: P. Lang, 1999).

[10] *nat. b.*, I, 595.

arrangement of these concepts shows how the concept of creation *ex nihilo* illustrates the stark distinction between Creator and creature.

Creator	omnipotent	immutable	Being	Good	necessary
creature	dependent	mutable	beings	goods	contingent

All of these characteristics of creation are vital to Augustine's concept of evil as *privatio boni* because evil is a lack of God-derived goodness. Before dealing with evil as privation, though, we need to understand the nature of this goodness that is derived from God.

Although created out of nothing, all of creation is *from* God and thus good. Had God created it *of* Himself, it would be perfect in all the ways we described above, including immutability.[11] But being created out of nothing it is still good, but a lesser good than God. While wholly good, creation is comprised of varied goods in a kind of hierarchy of greater and lesser goods. Angels would be at the top, then humans, animals, plants, minerals, etc. This is based on criteria of the most godlike characteristics: spiritual, rational, sentient, living. Angels have all of these. Men are only partly spiritual being comprised of both a soul and a body. Animals are typically living and sentient and plants are only living. Non-living beings have none of these characteristics so are the least types of good. Even though lesser goods, it is vital to Augustine's system that they are all wholly good because of Him who created them.

Anything that is not perfect is mutable, and mutability implies contingency. All created things thus have the potential to change for either the worse or the better. All of

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[11] *nat. b. X,* 604.

creation depends on its originating source in order to actualize the fullness of goodness with which it was created. The more something is cut off from its source, the more it is diminished. Augustine uses a number of analogies to describe this ranging from a person and food, a fountain and its source, and something that is illuminated being blocked from its source of light.[12]

Augustine uses the term "participation" to describe the proper way that creation depends upon God for actualizing its intended goodness. He states:

> There is one good which is good supremely and in itself, and not by the participation of any good, but by its own nature and essence; and another good which is good by participation, and by having something bestowed. Thus it has its being as good from the supreme good, which, however, is still self-contained, and loses nothing. This second kind of good is called a creature, which is liable to hurt through falling away.[13]

So on this account, goodness is something that is bestowed as a part of its dependence upon or participation with God. When elaborating on the nature of this goodness, Augustine uses the categories of measure, number, and weight.

All things, insofar as they are things, are fundamentally comprised of to what Augustine calls "measure, number, and weight." While these categories have a history in both Christian and pagan intellectual history,[14] Augustine bases his discussion of them on

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[12] *conf.* 4.1.1, 92; 1.6.10, 44; and Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram (The Literal Meaning of Genesis)* VIII.12.25-26, trans. John Hammond Taylor, vol. II, Books 7-12, vol. 42 of Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, ed. Johannes Quasten, Walter J. Burghardt, and Thomas Comerford Lawler (New York: Newman Press, 1982)

[13] Augustine, *De Moribus Manichaeorum (On the Morals of the Manichaeans)* II.4.6, trans. Richard Strothert in ed. Philip Schaf *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers Series I volume 4. (*Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1887), 119.

[14] Ayers, 550.

the Old Testament apocryphal Book of Wisdom 11:21 "Thou has arranged all things by measure, number and weight." He quotes this verse over 31 times in his writings to establish this point.[15] In the Literal Meaning of Genesis, Augustine argues that these three exist in God, and thus existed before creation as a part of God.[16] Although they existed before creation, God is not subject to them, rather he is "the Measure without measure . . . the Number without number . . . the Weight without weight."[17] God simply is measure, number, and weight, just as God is Being. He has imparted measure, number, and weight to all that he has created, and these are the ontological principles that apply to all created beings.[18]

But what are measure, number, and weight? To begin with, measure is associated with limit. Other terms Augustine uses in various works include "extension," "oneness," "unity," and even "existence." What Augustine is getting at here is that all created beings are finite. They are a unity, but unlike God the simple unity, they are a unity comprised of many particulars.[19] Man reflects the image of God, but the creature-Creator distinction is still in tact. Both are unities, but in very different ways. Both reflect "measurement" but one infinitely and one finitely. Says Augustine:

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[15] Ibid*., 551.*

[16]*Gn. litt*. IV.3.7., 108.

[17] Ibid.

[18]Brian Keith Kooy, "Between Being and Nothingness: The Metaphysical Foundations Underlying Augustine's Solution to the Problem of Evil" (Philosophy Theses Paper 32. Georgia State University, 2007), 48-49.

[19] Ibid., 51.

To be . . . is nothing but to be one. And so, to the extent that a thing acquires unity, to that extent it has being, for unity brings about the harmony and uniformity by which composite things have their measure of Being. Simple things [i.e., God] exist in themselves because they are one, but those which are not simple imitate unity through the harmony of their parts, and, in the measure that they achieve this harmony, they exist.[20]

The second in the triad is "number." In addition to "number," Augustine also at times uses the words "form" and "species." Part of Augustine's intention behind using the word "number" is to maintain a traditionally Pythagorean view of numbers as the ultimate principle of all that is.[21] More important to our understanding of Augustine's view of evil is the more common use of "number" as "form." Augustine's form is not just a material form, but a form of virtues which may direct the soul. It is a form into which things are intended to grow.[22] It is important to note that these forms have their origin in the mind of God and it is by participation in these forms that anything that is is what it is.

Augustine sometimes substitutes the last of the triad, "weight," with "order." Weight deals with the divinely prescribed order of things and the place that each thing is intended to have according to its nature and the divine plan. We can grow towards accepting our place within creation through attention to God's will and presence in creation.[23] When a thing exists in its proper place according to its "design plan" it is said to "fully be" to the degree for which it was created.

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[20] *mor*. II.7.10, 72.

[21] Augustine, *de Ordine* II.14.40; II.15.43; II.16.44l II.15.43; II.14.4. *Sant 'Augostino Augustinus Hipponensis* [online database of Augustine's works in Latin]; available from http://www.augustinus.it/latino/ordine/index2.htm; Internet; accessed July 20, 2012.

[22] Ayers, 551.

[23] Ibid., 552.

At this point we have spoken at length on Augustine's view on God, creation, and goodness. This is essential an essential foundation to understanding Augustine's ontology of evil because evil is the deprivation of the good inherent in creation, and this good is derived from God as its creator and sustainer. So far we have seen that Augustine has a view of God that is both Scriptural and Neoplatonic. Augustine's God is a simple unity, Who is all of His attributes in the most perfect way. This entails that He is an unchangeable simple unity. For Augustine this also means that God is Being and is the Good.

Originally God was all that existed, until he created the universe out of nothing. Because the universe was created by God and from God (but not of Him) it is entirely and wholly good. Although completely good, creation does not enjoy the self-sufficient highest level of goodness of God. Creation is made up of various good things that are greater and lesser goods. All created things are what they are because of their particular measure, number, and weight (or extension, form, order etc.) that structure all created things. This triad resides in the mind of God and is thus part of his simple Being. Because God created all things out of nothing, they are contingent, and thus maintain the possibility of changing for the better or the worse. Change for the better happens by beings "participating" in God as they were intended according to the divine design. Change for the worse happens when they don't. Now that we are familiar with Augustine's concepts of God, creation, and goodness, we are finally in a position to understand Augustine's concept of evil.

Evil is real, but it is non-being.[24] That is because all that is, is good, and evil is the deprivation of the good. Evil is not a substance.[25] It is not a thing. It was not created, and could not have been created, by God. It is not an independent force that opposes Him. It is a lack, a deficiency, an absence. Evil is a corruption or perversion of what something is. And what something is is defined and prescribed by measure, number and weight. Therefore, evil is the corruption of any combination of measure, number, and weight.[26] In short evil is the falling short by something of what God designed it to be, and thus prescribes it to be.

Following Plato, Augustine does not distinguish between axiology and ontology. To be is to be good. A horse is a horse to degree that he corresponds to the standard of what it means to be an excellent horse. The more excellent a horse is, the more real it is. The more it simply is a horse. A man is man insofar as he lives up to the archetype of manhood as prescribed by measure, number, and weight. An excellent man is more of a man than a man who lacks "manliness." A man lacking that which makes a man is, literally on this model, not much of a man. Plato uses the forms as the standard of excellence, where Augustine prefers the triad of measure, number, and weight (or its variant terms) as found in Wisdom 12:21. The basic idea is the same in the two, but Augustine is more specific in his terminology, and includes Plato's form (number) along with measure/extension and weight/order. Augustine also places these standards as part of the divine Being. For both Plato and Augustine, being is a matter of being excellent.

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[24] Hopefully this sentence is more meaningful now than it was in paragraph two.

[25] Augustine, *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love* XI, trans. Thomas S. Hibbs (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Pub, 1996), 11.

[26] *nat. b*. IV, 598.

A thing is what it is because of its particular God-given nature, which for Augustine is synonymous with measure, form, and order.[27] So long as a creature participates in Being, so long as it follows the divinely prescribed order, so long as it is true to its nature, it is good. Evil is a corruption of that nature, and thus measure, form, and order. It is essentially a disordering of the divine order, which manifests itself as a lack of order, a lack of nature, and a lack of measure, number, and weight.[28] It is important to note, that what remains after the lack is taken into account, is still wholly good, even though a diminished good.[29]

In *De Natura Boni* XXIII Augustine discusses ways in which measure, form, and order can be considered bad. We'll begin with form. Everything that is, depends upon a certain form to define its being. Insofar as something conforms to its ideal, it is. Evil has no form because it is not a substance. It has no nature because God did not create it. In the case of form, a thing is evil (and is not) insofar as it fails to conform to the divine standard as typified by that things ideal in the mind of God. On Augustine's model then, corruption of form entails distance from God's will and thus God Himself. Inversely, goodness in terms of form entails a nearness and similarity to God Himself.[30]

Order (or weight) is also part of Augustine's triad of what it means to essentially be something, and thus be good. In Augustine's mind, order refers to the divinely arranged hierarchy of being. Order has to do with place, and each thing recognizing its

[27] Christian Schäefer, "Augustine on Mode, Form, and Natural Order" *Augustinian Studies* 31 (2000) : 67.

[28] *nat. b.* IV, 598; *ench*. XII. 12-13.

[29] e*nch*. XI-XII, 11-13; *nat. b.* IV, 598.

[30] Schäefer, 70.

proper place in reality. When things are operating according to their divinely arranged

order, the result is peace and harmony.[31] Wretchedness describes the act of rebelling

against this order and the result is that the experience of peace, harmony, and blessing is

diminished to the degree that order is abandoned. Nevertheless, even rebellion against

order follows a divinely prescribed order of the consequences of abandoning order, and

insofar as any orderliness remains, so does peace and harmony, however much so

diminished.[32]

The final part of what makes something good is having the appropriate measure.

Measure is corrupted by an inappropriate amount of something. Corruption may come by

way of excess or poverty. Part of a human's measure is having two legs. Two are good,

wouldn't three be better? By Augustine's concept of measure a third leg would actually

be a privation of goodness by way of violating part of the man's God-prescribed nature.

(By the same logic clearly the absence of a leg would also be a privation of the good.)

Measure is not just about corporeal nature, however. Actions can also violate measure.

Someone can violate measure by doing less than he ought to have done, doing more than

he ought to have done, doing something in a way that he should not have done, or even

doing something in an inconvenient way.[33]

All evil then, is a privation of the good in that something does not possess (or is

not possessed by) the proper measure, form, or order. Something is good insofar as it

conforms to its divinely endowed nature, and this nature is comprised of measure, form,

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[31] *civ. Dei.* XIX.13, 870.

[32] Ibid., 871.

[33] Schäefer, 74.

and order (or their synonymous terms). Lack of conformity is evil because it entails a lack of goodness or excellence. By God's standards, a thing ought to be as it was created to be. When it falls short of this standard, evil occurs. Evil on this account is the lack of something that should be present, and thus the title *privatio boni*.

CHAPTER 3

AUGUSTINE'S TRANSFORMATION OF PLOTINUS

Augustine's relationship to Neoplatonism is complex and controversial. For a brief overview of the various positions, we'll begin at the poles and work toward the center. The most critical of Augustine's relationship to Neoplatonism are of older vintage. Prostper Alfaric's thesis is typically cited representing this camp, claiming that Augustine was converted not to Christianity, but to Neoplatonism.[1] On the opposite end of the spectrum are those who uncritically identify Augustine's Neoplatonic Christianity with Orthodoxy. Today those in the Radical Orthodox vein take such a position, and elevate Augustine to canonical status imploring the church to embrace robust Augustinianism.[2]

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[1] P.Alfaric, *L'évolution intellectuelle de saint Augustin,* vol. 1, (Paris, E.Nourry, 1918), 380–1. Cited in Robert Crouse. "Paucis Mutatis Verbis: St. Augustine's Platonism" in *Augustine and His Critics,* ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless, 37-50. (London: Routledge, 2012), 37; and Jaroslav Pelikan. *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600).* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 295.

[2] For a discussion of Radical Orthodoxy from a Reformed perspective, see James K. A Smith, and James H. Olthuis. *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation.* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2005) and James K. A. Smith. 61-132. *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology.* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2004). For a critical evaluation of Radical Orthodoxy see lectures from James Anderson, "Radical Orthodoxy 1 and 2" *Church and the World,* Reformed Theological Seminary, available from http://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/the-church-and-the-world/id438192927; Internet;

Between these poles the moderates are manifold and titles sometimes say it all. John Rist's book *Augustine: Ancient thought Baptized* is a very picturesque way to represent this relationship, but of course leaves open many questions. Was Augustine's relationship to Neoplatonims one of *use*, where he simply selectively borrowed and employed certain concepts from Neoplatonic sources? Or was it one of *synthesis* where to two were combined in such a way where it is hard to tell which is which? Or perhaps was it more of a *completion* or *fulfillment* as say the Roman Catholics? Robert Crouse, having surveyed the landscape of this discussion lands on the term *conversion*,[3] which is roughly synonymous with the concept of *transformation* as used in the Reformed tradition. This is where I land, too. In the following I'll argue that Augustine's concept of evil as privation and the concepts of God, creation, and goodness it presupposes are potentially valuable to the church today *because of* it's departure from Neoplatonism. Augustine was attempting to be biblical while using the philosophical concepts and language of his day. To illustrate this, we'll compare Augustine's views on God, creation, good, and evil to their Neoplatonic counterparts in order to see how just how drastically Augustine transformed them. While he clearly borrowed from the Neoplatonists on each of these topics, he consistently did so while transforming them in light of the teaching of Scripture. In order to appreciate how much Augustine changed the views of Neoplatonism, we need to begin with the doctrines in their original form. To that end we'll examine Plotinus' views on God, creation, good, and evil as compiled by his student Porphyry in *The Enneads*.

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accessed 7/20/2012. Specifically, Anderson targets problems with RO's Neoplatonic participation ontology.

[3]Crouse, 43.

Plotinus' view of reality is a hierarchy. The higher up something is, the more real, and the more good it is. The top of this hierarchy is made up of three hypostases or principles. At the very top is The One. The One is the first principle. It is that with no cause which is the "main constituent" of all else (1.4.3). You cannot successfully describe it with language, and even the title of "The One" fails to describe it, but it is the least inadequate term to get at the fact that The One is a simple unity with no attributes. As an absolute unity it is the source of all other things (VI.1.26). It is a unity of the essences of all things.[4] All things themselves are unities of particulars (VI.9.1), and ultimately derive their unity from that which is pure unity itself (VI.1.26).

The One is perfect, and therefore immutable. It is the source of the world, but is neither the cause nor creator of the world, since causality and creativity entail activity and activity entails change and change entails imperfection. Technically it is not even a first principle but pure passive self-sufficiency that out of its self-presence necessarily and effortlessly overflows generating a lower level of existence. Therefore Plotinus chooses the words "proceed from," "radiation," and "emanation" to describe how the lower levels of reality have come to be and continue to be. Plotinus compares The One to the sun ceaselessly generating its light without being altered or diminished (V.1.6).

Out of its abundance and self-presence, The One overflows, and generates what can be conceptualized as a ring or band around itself called Intellect-Principle, which is also Being (V.4.1.7-11). In I.1.8 Plotinus refers to Intellect as *theos,* and in VI.7.42 as He. Thus, Intellect is for Plotinus God. Plotinus' God is one who is dependent upon a higher principle (VI.9.6). Intellect is motionless as it contemplates The One, and the result of

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[4] Jason Lewis Saunders. *Greek and Roman Philosophy After Aristotle* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 11.

this contemplation is the Platonic forms (V.9.8). Thus for Plotinus, the forms are in the mind of God, as it were. The creation of beings requires motion, and Intellect is motionless. The act of creation belongs to another level, so out of its abundance Intellect radiates the third level, Soul (V.2.1.6-7).

Both The One and Intellect are unities. Soul is dualistic in that it is both contemplating and acting. The upper Soul is that which contemplates the various Forms or Ideas of the Intellect. The lower Soul, (or nature, cosmos, universe, world, world-soul) is that which is the actualization or creation of these forms. The universe itself has a soul as do all living things in it. Soul generates matter as an image of the intellect and individual souls are that which give form to the matter. Soul looks on Man, for example, and then realizes a man (VI.9.1.5). All the way down the hierarchy things proceed from Soul according to the Forms/Ideas of the Intelligence-Principle.

For Plotinus, nature is an image of the divine hypostases and is excellent insofar as it corresponds to the Forms by acting as a "total" or displaying unity (VI.9.1). Unity and goodness go hand in hand because The One is Unity more than anything else, and is also equated with Goodness. Items in nature are particulars united by their particular Form. Insofar as they display the unity of their form they are good, insofar as they lack unity they are not.

A final word on Plotinus' concept of goodness as we transition to his view on evil: It is important to underscore that each level that emanates from The One is less good than the One since unity and goodness are nearly synonymous for Plotinus. The three hypostases (the two Beings and Beyond-Being) are completely good (I.8.3.1), and evil only exists in the realm of Non-Being, where all things "have their seat in" or "to a

certain degree communicate in Non-Being" (I.8.3.2).

"Non-Being" is what is at the very bottom of the pyramid of emanation. It is "Evil Absolute," which is measureless, unbounded, unshaped, ever needy, every undefined, never at rest, all accepting but never stated, utter dearth, and lawless void (I.8.3.5). This is what contemporaries have labeled "unformed matter," (Plotinus elsewhere calls it "Matter") and it is pure evil without any trace of goodness in it (I.8.3.12).

Because nature has its seat in matter, all things are evil to at least some degree simply by communicating in Non-Being. If nothing else, their evil lies in their inevitable disintegration into unformed matter (I.8.4.8). At the same time, Plotinus also states that there is the possibility of a perfect specimen of a particular kind. Of course it would be lacking all those characteristics of kinds above it in the hierarchy, but he is simply pointing out that not all lack is evil (I.8.5.2).

But much lack is evil for Plotinus. "Very considerable shortcomings" (I.8.5.4) which rebel against order and measure (such as sickness) or form (such as ugliness) are all examples of evil (I.8.5.6-7). Even poverty is evil because the lack of a need happens only by our association with Matter (I.8.5.6-7). All these accounts are rooted in nature resisting conformity to Goodness and participating in Matter. It is important to note than man is not the cause of evil on this account since Matter was before man and Matter is what binds him against his will (I.8.5.8).

At this point we've summarized both Augustine and Plotinus on God, goodness, and evil, and we stand in a position to compare the two as a means of showing that Augustine's relationship to Neoplatonism is best described as one of conversion or transformation. While there are significant areas where the two are the same, the

differences between the two far outweigh their similarities, and that this is due to Augustine changing the Neoplatonic ideas in light of the authoritative teaching of Scripture.

Plotinus and Augustine share many views about God. For both God is immutable and a *simplex* or unity. Both see Him as infinite, perfect, incorporeal, incomprehensible, and residence of the forms. It was the Neoplatonic belief in God as incorporeal that enabled Augustine to come to understand the Christian concept of God and leave the Manichaeans for the Church. These shared beliefs about God are uncontroversially orthodox. For example, chapter II.1 of the Westminster Confession reads, "There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute . . ." Believers with a high view of Scripture would likely see the Platonists as "getting it right" here and chalk it up to a common grace insight.

But beyond this, the two part ways. Some have argued that Augustine was indebted to Plotinus for his concept of God as a Trinity,[5] but it is more likely that Augustine's view of God as three hypostases was rooted in the councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) that took place before his birth and conversion respectively. Demonstrating that won't be necessary though since a side by side comparison of the two men's beliefs is sufficient to show that after the triad of hypostases they part ways in nearly every way: For Plotinus originally there was only the One, which began a sequence of emanations, making both Intellect and Soul subservient to and contingent

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[5] See, for example, Thomas A. Wassmer, "The Trinitarian Theology of Augustine and His Debt to Plotinus," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 14 (1961) : 248-255.

upon the One. Augustine holds to the creeds' Trinitarian views of eternal begottenness and procession of the Son and Spirit respectively. They are necessary persons who make up the Godhead and share in its essence. Plotinus' trinity is but one necessary being, as it were, emanating two contingent beings. Augustine sees one Being or Essence comprised of three persons, which is itself a simplex and entirely necessary. Beyond the fact that each discusses three hypostases, two have little in common in terms of their "trinities."

Plotinus' three hypostases are also problematic on their own. Technically, the second tier hypostasis of Intellect is the closest equivalent to the Biblical God (even though it is much more of an Aristotelian God) and yet is a contingent being which is proceeded by yet another which is higher. Thought of in Anselmian terms of that being of which none greater can be conceived, this God fails to be God.

Another huge difference is the incomprehensibility of each of their highest beings. For Plotinus, the One is fully incomprehensible. You can say nothing about it since it is beyond Being. Even unity or oneness, the best available options, fail to describe the One in light of is utter incomprehensibility. For Augustine, God is ultimately incomprehensible, yet He has revealed Himself in Scripture and we can know many things about him. We can describe Him insofar as He has revealed Himself to us.

Further differences in their Gods unfold as we compare the two on how their Gods created. For Plotinus, all creation is *ex deus* and happens passively, impersonally, and by necessity. Emanation is out of the substance of the One, all the way down to matter. Plotinus diverges from the Platonic concept of pre-existent matter and states that formless matter is the last in the necessary chain of emanations and is that from which nothing more can emanate since it is pure emptiness (I.8.6.7). Formless matter is Evil for

Plotinus and thus it follows that Evil was emanated *ex deus*. Most would find it highly

problematic to hold that the ultimate source of all and highest Good to eventually

emanate Evil, and to hold that this Evil is necessary.

Creation itself is also necessarily evil for Plotinus due to the fact that it is formed

matter, and matter itself is evil (1.8.12). Plotinus also sees matter as the responsible party

for the fall of man and virtue occurs in fleeing matter.

Augustine avoids many of these problems by basing his doctrine of creation on

creation *ex nihilo.* God did not create out of Himself but out of nothing. Were He to

create out of himself, the creation would be the same substance of God, and thus

immutable, infinite, etc. Rather, God created out of nothing and for Augustine the fact of

creation's being created out of nothing is the explanation for creation's finiteness,

contingency, and possibility to be evil.

Additionally, creation for Augustine is good from top to bottom. This is a massive

point of departure from Plotinus. Augustine quotes Paul in order show that matter, and

even flesh, is good saying,

> But that God made even the least things, that is, earthly and mortal things, must
> undoubtedly be understood from that passage of the apostle, where, speaking of
> the members of our flesh: "For if one member is glorified, all the members rejoice
> with it, and if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it;" also this he
> then says: "God has placed the members each one of them in the body as he
> willed;" and "God has tempered the body, giving to that to which it was wanting
> greater honor, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members
> should have the same care one for another." But what the apostle thus praises in
> the measure and form and order of the members of the flesh, you find in the flesh
> of all animals, alike the greatest and the least; for all flesh is among earthly goods,
> and consequently is esteemed among the least.[6]

For Augustine's God, creation was not an impersonal, passive, necessary

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[6] *nat b*. XXX, 624, quoting I Cor. xii, 26, 18, 24, 25.

occurrence, but a free choice made in love. God lacked nothing, and yet he chose to create. The fact that he created out of nothing shows His omnipotence as well as His love. Although it was not *of* God, all of creation is *from* God and because of this all of creation, even formless matter, is good.

The idea of evil being *of* God or even *from* God was unthinkable to Augustine since such an idea was contradictory to his conception of the nature and character of God. For Plotinus Evil is a necessary step in the emanation process and it is a necessary characteristic of all of creation. On Augustine's account, evil is contingent. It is not caused by Matter, but by man when he elevates something other than God to the place of God. The possibility of evil is explained by the fact that man was created out of nothing. And Augustine refers to this causality as deficient, rather than efficient.

A final difference is that virtue, for Augustine, comes not from fleeing matter, but by recognizing the proper order of all things, with God at the top. Since all things are created good they remain good when viewed and used according to their proper order. When God is the chief love or end of man all other good things can be loved in their proper context or order.

We'll finish our comparison on a final point of overlap. Both Augustine and Plotinus followed Plato in making Siamese twins out of ontology and axiology. To be is to be good. The more excellent something is the more real it is. Both of them thus see evil as privation of the good, and both specifically see this privation of the good as a privation of measure, form, and order. Augustine kept this triad from Plotinus believing it was Scriptural since he found it in Wisdom 11:21 "Thou has arranged all things by measure, number and weight."

CHAPTER 4

AUGUSTINE'S DOCTRINE OF EVIL EVALUATED

From the above comparison it is clear that Augustine differed with and changed much more of Plotinus' teaching on God, creation, and evil than he kept. This is vital to establish in light of the popular complaint that Augustine sold out to Neoplatonism and undermined his own credibility. Under the guidance and authority of Scripture, he transformed most of what Plotinus taught on these subjects. He was attempting to be biblical, not Neoplatonist.

Admittedly though, Augustine did keep some Neoplatonist ideas without transformation. Some of what Augustine kept without change, such as certain attributes of God, is orthodox. Some of what he kept without change is heterodox, and thus needs to be evaluated in light of the teaching of Scripture. Chief among this group is Augustine's borrowed notion of evil as privation of measure, form, and order.

Augustine confidently held on to the idea of evil as privation of measure, form, and order because he believed it to be Scriptural. Over thirty times Augustine quoted Wisdom 11:21 "Thou has arranged all things by measure, number and weight" as a means to establish measure, number, and weight (or measure, form, and order) as the basic building blocks of being and thus the basic categories of privation. Sadly for Augustine, the Book of Wisdom is not a part of the inspired canon of Scripture and

enjoys only deuterocanonical status. Because of this, Augustine's concept of evil as privation of measure, form, and order must be evaluated according to its own merits without Augustine's assumed Scriptural support.

In order to evaluate Augustine's concept of evil as privation of measure, form, and order (hereafter PMFO), I'd like to use Paul Helm's concept of a model. A model is "a worked out idea about the relationship between God and His creatures that would do at least two things: it would provide a coherent way of thinking about the relationship which does justice to at least some of the Scriptural data on the matter, and would not go beyond those data by knowingly violating other Scriptural data."[1] Evaluating PMFO as a model asks a series of questions: Is PMFO consistent with Scripture? Does it give us some kind of insight into the biblical data that we can't get elsewhere? What is the cost of adopting it?

In order to demonstrate that PMFO is consistent with Scripture, we need to examine the biblical language of evil. Scripture speaks much more about sin (a type of evil) than simple evil. Much of the language used by Scripture to describe sin denotes a form of privation or lack, and this is consistent with Augustine's language. We'll begin with the Old Testament by quoting Berkhof on the Hebrew vocabulary for sin:

> *Chatta'th* directs attention to it as an action misses the mark and consists in a deviation from the right way. *'Avel* and *'avon* indicate that it is a want of integrity and rectitude, a departure from the appointed path. *Pesha'* refers to a transgression of the law, and a breaking of the Covenant. And *resha'* points to it as a revolt or a refusal of subjugation to a rightful authority, a positive transgression of the law, and a breaking of the Covenant. And *resha'* points to it as a wicked and guilty departure from the law. Furthermore, it is designated as guilt by 'asham, as unfaithfulness and treason, by *Ma'al*, as vanity, by *'aven*, and

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[1] Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 164.

as perversion or distortion of nature (crookedness) by '*avah*.[2]

All of these terms are consistent with PMFO. In order to show this, we'll examine a few salient quotes from Augustine. First, in De moribus Manichaeorum, he says,

> I ask a third time, What is evil? Perhaps you will reply, Corruption. Undeniably this is a general definition of evil; for corruption implies *opposition to nature*, and also *hurt*. But corruption exists not by itself, but in some substance which it corrupts; for corruption itself is not a substance. So the thing which it corrupts is not corruption, is not evil; for what is corrupted suffers the *loss of integrity and purity*. So that which has no purity to lose cannot be corrupted; and what has, is necessarily good by the participation of purity. Again, what is *corrupted* is *perverted*; and what is perverted suffers the *loss of order, and order is good*.[3]

For Augustine, evil is a want or violation of God's order. Violating this order leads to a loss of integrity and purity which results in corruption and perversion.

In *de Natura Boni*, Augustine discusses sin in terms of measure, form, and order not being what they ought to. In the following passage he elaborates especially on measure:

> Therefore a bad measure, a bad form, a bad order, are either so called because they are less than they should be, or because they are not adapted to those things to which they should be adapted; so that they may be called bad as being alien and incongruous; as if any one should be said not to have done in a good measure because he has done less than he ought, or because he has done in such a thing as he ought not to have done, or more than was fitting, or not conveniently; so that the very fact of that being reprehended which is done in a bad measure, is justly reprehended for no other cause than that the measure is not there maintained.[4]

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[2] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1996), 231.

[3] *mor*. II.5.7, 120, emphasis mine.

[4] *nat b.* XXIII, 617.

Thus Augustine states that there is a standard that things are expected to conform to and can violate by way of excess, poverty, inappropriateness, or incongruence. Later in the same work, Augustine explains how God is the standard by nature of his excellence:

> Likewise because sin, or unrighteousness, is not the striving after evil nature but the desertion of better, it is thus found written in the Scriptures: "Every creature of God is good." And accordingly every tree also which God planted in Paradise is assuredly good. Man did not therefore strive after an evil nature when he touched the forbidden tree; but by deserting what was better, he committed an evil deed. Since the Creator is better than any creature which He has made, His command should not have been deserted, that the thing forbidden, however good, might be touched; since the better having been deserted, the good of the creature was striven for, which was touched contrary to the command of the Creator. God did not plant an evil tree in Paradise; but He Himself was better who prohibited its being touched.[5]

So sin is the desertion of God, the highest Good. This desertion is shown in the act of disobedience to God's commands. This reveals that subjugation to God is the proper way of being according to man's nature.

In the next chapter of *de Natura Boni*, Augustine states that goodness is obedience to God and sin is disobedience. Disobedience brings about a penalty. He says:

> For besides, He had made the prohibition, in order to show that the nature of the rational soul ought not to be in its own power, but in subjection to God, and that it guards the order of its salvation through obedience, corrupting it through disobedience. Hence also He called the tree, the touching of which He forbade, the tree "of the knowledge of good and evil;" because when man should have touched it in the face of the prohibition, he would experience the penalty of sin, and so would know the difference between the good of obedience, and the evil of disobedience.

Berkhof's summary of biblical language for sin and the quotes from Augustine presents us with a vast amount of information. The following chart attempts to digest the above by way of side-by-side comparison of biblical words for sin alongside their

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[5] *nat b*. XXXIV, 628.

Augustinian privative counterpart. In order to restrain myself in attempt to "oversell" the

scheme, I've taken the Augustinian phrases straight from the quotes above and placed

them in the chart without comment or modification.

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF OLD TESTAMENT AND AUGUSTINE'S
VOCABULARY FOR EVIL

OT Word	OT Definition	PMFO Counterpart
Chatta'th	to miss the mark	less than should be;
	deviate from the right way	alien and incongruous
'Avel/ 'Avon	want of integrity/rectitude	loss of integrity and purity
	departure from appointed path	desertion of the better
	perversion/distortion of nature	perversion; opposition to nature
	crookedness	loss of integrity; perversion; corruption
	vanity	corruption itself is not a substance
Pesha'	transgression of law breaking of covenant	His command should not have been deserted
		contrary to the command of the Creator
Resha'	wicked and guilty departure from law	nature of the rational soul ought . . . [to be in] subjugation to God
'Asham	guilt	God guards the order of its salvation through obedience
Ma'al	unfaithfulness treason	corrupting through disobedience
		good of obedience, and the evil of disobedience
		hurt

This comparison shows that PMFO is at least consistent with the Old Testament language for sin, and also has a great amount of overlap or echoing.[6] Both seem to be "painting the same picture" using somewhat different vocabulary. The Old Testament pictures sin as a deviation from the right way and a missing the mark that results in crookedness, perversion, and brokenness. This is a wicked and treacherous violation of the Covenant that leaves the unfaithful lawbreaker in a state of guilt. Nevertheless, sin is also "vanity" or mist, vapor, or breath—in comparison to God it is like nothing.

Augustine's picture is very similar, but in spite of his attempt at a biblical transformation of Plotinus, nevertheless retains a tinge of Neoplatonism. On Augustine's model, man was created by God to be subject and obedient to him. This is the proper order of things. When the being that is a lesser good properly "participates" in the Being which is the highest Good, he enjoys a kind of maximal existence. But when he violated that order by deserting the better for himself, he experienced the penalty of sin which manifests itself in corruption, perversion, alienation, loss of integrity and purity, and hurt.

What, then, about the New Testament? To quote Berkhof again, "The corresponding New Testament words, such as *hamartia, adikia, parabasis, paraptoma, anomia, paranomia,* and others, point to the same ideas [as the Old Testament vocabulary for sin]."[7] This is not surprising, since the New Testament was written mostly by Jewish converts in a culturally Jewish context, seeing the acts and teaching of Christ as

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[6] For an in depth analysis of the Hebraic concepts of sin and their relationship to their Greek counterparts, see Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 70-81.

[7]Berkhof, 231.

fulfillment of the Old Testament. If then, we can say that evil as PMFO is consistent and overlapping with the Old Testament concept of sin, then it follows that it is also consistent with that of the New Testament. Thus evil as PFMO has passed a crucial test in order for it to be considered as a model.

One final thing worth pointing out at this point is how Scripture drove Augustine's transformation of Plotinus' system. Taking the chart above and adding a column summarizing Plotinus' view of evil reveals with a powerful simplicity just how drastically Augustine deviated from Plotinus in light of the teaching of Scripture.

TABLE 3

COMPARISON OF OLD TESTAMENT, AUGUSTINE, AND PLOTINUS ON EVIL

OT Definition	PMFO Counterpart	Plotinus
to miss the mark deviate from the right way	less than should be; alien and incongruous	to not be united by form to emanate from one of the three hypostases
want of integrity/rectitude departure fr appt'd path perversion/distortion of nature crookedness vanity	loss of integrity and purity opposition to nature perversion; desertion of better loss of integrity; perversion; corruption corruption itself is not a substance	want of unity to be material have their seat in matter matter corrupts or perverts Being evil/matter is nonbeing
transgression of law breaking of covenant wicked and guilty departure guilt from law unfaithfulness treason	His command should not have been deserted contrary to the command of the Creator nature of the rational soul ought . . . [to be in] subjugation to God God guards the order of its salvation through obedience corrupting through disobedience good of obedience, and the evil of disobedience hurt	very considerable shortcomings which rebel against measure, form, and order Man is not the cause of evil (matter is) so and man is bound by matter against his will creation is necessarily evil evil is a necessary result of the emanation process man expected to flee evil/matter

A further check for biblical consistency is to compare it to systematic theology. Consistency with vocabulary is one thing, how does evil as PMFO compare to what the Bible teaches? First of all, a privative account of evil seems to offer great explanatory power to show consistency between doctrines of God's sovereignty, the goodness of creation, and the reality of evil. All that is is God and that which he created. God is good, and cannot be the creator of evil and still be the God he has revealed himself to be. "If evil were something positive, then one would have to say either that this evil is immediately caused by God, in which case God is in some way evil since the effect reflects to some degree the nature of the cause, or that there is some being in the universe which is not immediately caused by God, in which case there is some creator other than the one God. If evil is not privation, then theism is incoherent."[8] If evil is not privative, then evil is a positive being of some kind, and there is something either that God did not create or that God created and is not good. Privation has great explanatory power to show how God is not the creator or author of evil.

Nevertheless, evil is real, and God is the ultimate cause of everything. So, even if evil is nonbeing, it is still real, and caused by something. Would not Crosby's quote above render Calvinism incoherent? In order to check privation for consistency against systematic theology this question must be addressed.

First, Calvin believed Augustine's account of privation to be true, but stated that most people found it to be an unsatisfying nuance.[9] (Perhaps people then, like today,

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[8] Patrick Lee, "Evil as Such is a Privation: A Reply to John Crosby," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 81 3 (2007) 470.

[9] John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (1552), trans. J.K. S. Reid (London, James Clarke and Co., 1961), 169; cited in Paul Helm, "Augustine and Calvin

misplaced the purpose of a privative account of evil by viewing it as an attempt to solve

or dismiss the problem of evil.) Additionally, Calvin also agreed with the degrees of

being that a concept of evil presupposes. To make this point, I'd like to quote Paul Helm

at length:

> This scheme of things, with the idea of degrees of being, and therefore of the
> privative notion of evil, is not simply a speculation of a Roman Catholic such as
> Gilson, it is also embedded in Reformed theology. I'll briefly try to show this in
> the case of Calvin. Strangely enough, there are places in which it seems that
> Calvin deliberately downplays that degree of goodness in which God originally
> created humankind. In a work of his on providence, The Secret Providence of
> God, published in 1558, Calvin refers to the man who was originally created as
> quae fluxa et caduca erat, 'weak and liable to fall'. This corresponds with what he
> wrote in the Institutes, 'Adam, therefore, might have stood if he chose, since it
> was only by his own will that he fell; but it was because his will was pliable in
> either direction, and he had not received constancy to persevere, that he so easily
> fell.' 'Nor was it reasonable for God to be constrained by the necessity of making
> a man who either could not or would not sin at all. Such a nature would, indeed,
> have been more excellent'. So according to Calvin man 'easily fell' because he
> was inconstant, and there is a 'more or less' to excellence in natures; some natures
> are more excellent as natures than others, and so it is possible to arrange these in a
> hierarchy–God, incapable of sinning, angelic creatures and human creatures,
> capable of sinning; angelic and human creatures actually sinning; non-human
> animals, and so on.[10]

So, in addition to agreeing with Augustine's idea of evil as privation, Calvin also

embraced the idea of levels of excellence in a thing's nature, at least in terms of beings'

ability to sin or not. This is also congruent with (if not borrowing from) Augustine's

model of mankind pre, during, and post fall as *posse peccare, non posse non peccare,*

on the Knowledge of God," *Helm's Deep: Philosophical Theology,* July 1, 2009 [blog
online]; available from http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2009/07/augustine-and-
calvin-on-knowledge-of.html; Internet; (Accessed July 22, 2012)

[10] Paul Helm, "Lapsing Into Nothingness," *Helm's Deep: Philosophical Theology,*
January 1, 2009 [blog online]; available from
http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2009/01/lapsing-into-nothingness_31.html; Internet;
(Accessed July 22, 2012)

and non posse peccare.[11] So, for Calvin privation and the levels of excellence it assumes does not seem to be a problem.

Assuming that one person believed a doctrine is a far cry from demonstrating its truth however. To do so would be a fallacious appeal to authority. The question is still open: whether privative or not, evil is still real, so how does one reconcile the fact that God ordains whatsoever comes to pass and the reality of evil? The answer lies in God's permissive decree, and a privative concept of evil is consistent with this, while a positive concept of evil is not.

Although God has ordained whatsoever comes to pass, his decree in relation to evil is said to be permissive. Calvin borrowed from Augustine in working out the concept of God being permissive towards evil,[12] and the Westminster Confession of Faith develops Calvin's ideas in its discussion of God's degree in light of evil. First examine Augustine in the Enchiridion,

> In a way unspeakably strange and wonderful, even what is done in opposition to God's will [of desire] does not defeat his will [of decree]. For it would not be done did he not permit it, and of course his permission is not unwilling, but willing; nor would a Good Being permit evil to be done except that in his omnipotence he can turn evil into good.[13]

And then Calvin, after quoting Augustine at length, states,

> . . . so that in a wonderful and ineffable manner nothing is done without God's will, not even that which is against his will. For it would not be done if he did not permit it; yet he doesn't unwillingly permit, but willingly; nor would he, being good, allow evil to be done, unless being also almighty he could make good even

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[11] That is, able to sin, not able to not sin, and not able to sin.

[12] This fact pointed out by William G. T. Shedd, *Calvinism: Pure and Mixed: a Defense of the Westminster Standards* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 91.

[13] *ench.* C, 116.

out of evil.[14]

The Chapter V.IV of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* picks up on these ideas and

connects them to the impossibility of God being the Author of evil:

> The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far
> manifest themselves in His providence, that it extends itself even to the first fall,
> and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such
> as has joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering,
> and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends; yet so,
> as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature, and not from God, who,
> being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.

Augustine, Calvin, and the Confession affirm that God ordained evil, yet He did so by a

willed permission. He could have prevented it. In his sovereignty, He not only allowed it,

He ordained it and uses it as a means of accomplishing his will. If evil is privative, then

we have something real that God did not create that he willingly permits, ordains, and

uses to accomplish his will. If evil is something positive, even the doctrine of divine

permission does not resolve the problem of there being some being or thing that is evil

that God did not create. Only privative evil maintains coherence between the beliefs of

systematic theology.[15]

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[14] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* 1.18.3, trans. Ford Lewis Battles. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 1: 235.

[15] For an opposing Reformed view, see John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 166-168 where he lists and explains seven reasons he is not persuaded to hold to a privative view of evil. All objections stem from the assumption that seeing evil as privation is an answer to the logical problem of evil, which was never its intended use as stated in the introduction to this paper. Interestingly Frame later cites Elisha Coles and Jerome Zanchius as two Reformed privation advocates alongside Calvin as examples of Reformed explanations of how God is not the cause of sin, p. 175.

CHAPTER 5

AUGUSTINE'S DOCTRINE OF EVIL APPLIED

If a doctrine is true, then by nature of its truth it will have fruitful, life-changing applications. A privative concept of evil has tremendous pastoral value. Think back to the earlier concepts of Calvin and Augustine of man before, during, and after the fall. Man was created good, but not as excellent as he could have been since he had the characteristic of possibly sinning.[1] Because of the fall, now man is in a position of not being able to not sin. He is far less excellent now than he was created to be. There is a tremendous lack in his existence. A lack that is not only frustrating but also reprehensible to God because it is rooted in rebellion to His lordship. Those who are now in Christ have a tremendous hope that God is at work not just to restore mankind to the way it was created, but by being united to Christ man will be glorified to a better than pre-fall state reflecting the divine permanence by not being able to sin. Our lack will not only be filled up to the original level of excellence but God's super abounding restoration will be beyond even the goodness we were created with. Add to this the fact that Scripture speaks in terms of a now/not yet eschatological tension stating that while we obviously

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[1] By way of reminder, Augustine attributes this to being created out of nothing. Were man created out of God he would be of the same substance as God and thus divine. Also, the characteristic of being corruptible (but not corrupted) would be privative but not an evil since God designed man that way. It would be like the privation of x-ray vision to humans. It is a lack, but not evil on account of goodness being defined by God and evident by a particular MFO.

struggle with sin on a daily basis, in the eyes of God we are already as good as glorified. This means that for those in Christ God's super-abounding filling of our sinful lack is a promise that is as good as done. When God looks down on the person who is in Christ, He does not see the fraction of a good being that is so deprived of goodness; He does not even see this being in its pre-fall state of original goodness; Rather He sees the super-abounding goodness of Christ that has been credited to their miserably de-prived bank account. When viewed in light of a privative concept of evil, the richness of the hope we have in the Gospel has undeniably powerful pastoral implications, as I'll try to demonstrate in the following examples roughly based on my own experience.

Paul and Jamie are church members, and are both believers, but their marriage is in a state of utter ruin and their children are suffering. They married while young and immature and after dating only a few months. Living under the same roof with her parents for the first year of their marriage added to the fact that Jamie had a child from a previous relationship brought additional strain to their relationship. From there things only got worse. Ten years later, neither loves the other and were it not for the kids they would have divorced long ago. Each feels they are trapped in a relationship with a person whom they loathe, and both are utterly frustrated with other person in terms of not living up to each other's expectations. Their relationship has become one where each one is looking out for themselves, and neither is willing to attempt to make themselves vulnerable to the other after a long pattern of being hurt again and again.

The counselor with a mindset bent towards seeing evil as privative will be able to affirm each spouse feelings and experiences rooted in the fact that the other fails to measure up to his or her standards. The pain this causes is real. The miserable life that

results from this is an undeniable reality. It is simply a fact of fallen existence that no one measures up to God's standards, and thus it is not surprising that we don't measure up to each other's. But seeing the other as an evil being or as essentially evil flies in the face of biblical truth. Counseling the couple rests on a Gospel foundation of declaring that each spouse is an image bearer of God himself. As image bearers and creations of God each is essentially good, although corrupted by sin. This sinfulness is often felt as a lack of measuring up, or hitting the mark, a deviation from the path or right way. In everyday experience, the relationship seems nothing like what each imagined it should be like, because it is not. Both feel utterly let down by the fact that their spouse seems nothing like the "gift of God's grace to them" that they've heard taught in church. The language describing the problems of their relationship is of both Scripture and privation. The biblical language of sin is sufficient to describe the problems in their marriage, but the privative concept of evil is what allows each to realize that the other is not an evil person insofar as they are an image bearer. Additionally, a privative concept of evil prevents us from seeing the evil in their marriage as something positive or some being that somehow thwarts the will of God. All that is, is good. That which is evil, although obviously powerful, is truly nothing compared to the sovereign lordship of God who is the Ordainer of evil, the user of evil to accomplish his good will, and in fact already sees his people as "having been made whole."

Each member of the relationship must come to realize that God sees their spouse as perfectly restored in Christ and, though far from what they were created to be (let alone what they will eventually be), each is in the process of being sanctified towards glorification whereby God is filling, straightening, and restoring all the de-prived areas of

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their being.

The hope of the Gospel as expressed in the language of evil of PMFO goes beyond each individual and addresses the marriage itself. God has a design, form or order to what a godly marriage looks like. Paul and Jamie's marriage is corrupted, twisted, perverted, and deprived. They have hope in the fact that there is a God-designed order to a marriage that can be attained by the power of the Spirit. Further, this design was intended to make people happy and even flourishing. God is grieved at their failing marriage and they are miserable precisely because God's design is not even remotely realized. Yet there is hope for their marriage because of God's sovereign and effectual work in his people driving them towards the realization of His design for their lives, including their marriage. God is in the process of making something out of their marriage.

This is but one example of how viewing evil as PMFO can be pastorally fruitful. Beyond a marriage, the practice of seeing those you are tempted to hate or demonize as essentially good but evil insofar as they are de-prived has to potential for a lot of traction in carrying out Jesus' command to love our enemies. Compare this to President Bush's granting ontological status to evil with his "axis of evil" speech and the violence that it has since caused. Many Christians, if my experience is at all representative, are tempted on a daily basis to grant positive existence to evil in our hearts towards other people by conceptualizing them as evil beings. If evil has no positive existence, if all that is is essentially good but corrupted because of the fall, then conceptualizing others as evil is a view of reality that flies in the face of the God-created Reality.

Many instances of people hurting can be explained as an unrealized ideal that that

while rooted in man's sinfulness, is the very target of the Gospel at work. The good news of God is that redemption is all about God realizing his ideals in people who confess that they are responsible for their lack and unable to do anything about it. Discussions of evil as PMFO can act to convey the healing salve of the Gospel.

The next example is about three families whom are close friends of mine. All have left the PCA due to consistent preaching which came across to them as telling them that they were essentially sinful beings. "You are a sinner. You are puss. You are scum." are recurring lines that they share with me as they retell what they found to be very harmful preaching. What these couples have in common is that at least one of the members of each grew up in an abusive household where they were constantly told how bad or worthless they were. Understandably then, the unqualified emphasis in preaching that they were sinners struck them as very abrasive.

Some may object that this is an anomaly rooted in subjective dysfunction. These individuals were abused, so the truth of the Gospel gets warped as it passes through their warped grid. But imagine this scenario for a couple that grew up in a relatively healthy household. If they sat under preaching that regularly emphasized that they were "sinners, puss, scum" even after conversion, would this be biblical? I'd like to suggest that it would not, and that seeing evil as privative can add significant insight to help clarify this situation.

A key assumption to the view that all evil is privation is that all that is, is good. Everything that is has a nature and that nature is good. Even Satan, insofar as he is an angelic being created by God, is good. On the privation model, if here were completely evil, then he would be entirely consumed by nonbeing and cease to exist. So while Satan

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is only a fraction of what he was created to be, he is essentially good, not evil.

If this is the case, then as Knox Chamblin was prone to say in class "preaching ought to liberate people by the indicatives of the Gospel" and "not beat them over the head with the imperatives of the law." A biblical-privative model would entail emphasizing that believers are still essentially good as God's creations but that every area of their being has been corrupted by sin, and thus is not what it should be. Further, they are responsible for their sin and thus are standing in judgment before God for not meeting His standard of righteousness. Nevertheless, because of the work of Christ, God looks upon them and sees not sinners, not puss, not scum, and not even the reality of their wicked lack of conformity to God's law, but the perfect righteousness of Christ, which is not only a future reality, but a present reality given that the eschatological future has broken into the present. The reality is that Christians still lack much of the goodness or being they were designed to be. The other reality is that Christians already have even more than the goodness or being than they were originally created with! In faith then, we are called to walk through time in this reality and towards this reality. On this model people, including those who have grown up in abusive homes, can much more easily accept the responsibility and guilt for their sin and accept the restoring power of the Gospel.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

I've argued that many misunderstand Augustine's account of evil as *privatio boni* by not seeing the Neoplatonic context that influenced his doctrine. Because of this they often wrongly assume what it is that evil is de-prived of. Taking his cue from Plotinus, but thinking he was backed by Scripture, Augustine argued that evil was a privation of measure, form, and order. In short, this means that evil is a deviation from a God-ordained prescription of what it meant to be or act as a particular being. On this account, privation is disorder, corruption, and malfunctioning. It is the lack of being all one could and should be as whatever kind of thing one is. "That act was not charitable." "He's not much of a husband." "Coors light is beer, but barely." In each of these examples, it is not that there is an attribute of evil, or some evil being or positive reality lurking in the shadows, but that a good nature has been twisted, perverted, and has deviated from its proper path. This is the essence of privation.

From his Neoplatonic background Augustine also inherited a hierarchical view of reality where there are levels of being. Taking his cue from Exodus 3:14 he believed he saw a common grace insight in the Neoplatonists who saw God as Being and all others as simply beings. On this model, all created things are good because of the Good Creator who made them. There are various levels of good, however. A man is better than a dog,

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and a dog is better than a rock. Even before the fall this would have been true. All these examples could be free from blemish, and nevertheless the higher goods would be better then the lower goods. Part of this model is also the view that a particular thing can be more of a being, or have more being, or be better insofar as it conforms to the divine standard according to which it was designed. So, when we speak of a privative evil, it is not so simple as the person or act lacking something generally, but lacking something specific. That which is lacking is being, or goodness, which Augustine equates. Many who take pot shots at privative accounts of evil do so without understanding this nuance.

Secondly, I've argued that many misunderstand Augustine's concept of evil as *privatio boni* by seeing it as too Platonic. They assume that Augustine took the teaching of Plotinus, swallowed it whole, and peddled it to the church for the next thousand years. The worry is that to adopt a privative concept of evil is to trade biblical truth for secular Neoplatonism. Hopefully it is clear that while Augustine did keep some of Plotinus' teaching on evil without modification, he radically transformed most of it in light of the authoritative teaching of Scripture. Thus it was an attempt foremost to be scriptural, and however one evaluates Augustine's account of evil, no one can argue against the claim that it was vastly different from Neoplatonism.

Next we evaluated Augustine's final product and found that the language of privation was consistent with, and in many places an echo of, the language of Scripture used for sin. We pressed further and evaluated a privative account of evil in light of Reformed systematic theology. Calvin himself believed evil to be privative and even saw levels of excellence in mankind in the teaching of Scripture. Many Reformed theologians since Calvin have believed the same and have made cogent, biblically-based arguments

to support the claim. Privation has tremendous utility in helping explain God's ordination of evil in terms of a voluntary permission but not authorship, in light of the fact that He created all that is, and that all that is is good. This chapter concluded with the claim that it is only with a privative concept of evil that Reformed systematic theology maintains coherence.

Finally we examined the pastoral value of seeing all evil as privative. This continues to be the most difficult section for me for at least a couple of reasons. First, I have no problem with philosophy or theology for their own sake. I'm not a person who has to see an apparent use of a doctrine to appreciate it. Secondly, I have a hard time generating hypothetical situations. Thus, I have only a few specific applications of the doctrine. I considered constructing a missionary scenario of bringing the Gospel to Haitians oppressed by Voodoo which sees evil as a kind of positive being and puts people in fear of coming to Christ, or other such examples, but not having actually experienced such, I feel a bit sheepish about concocting such a scenario. Perhaps I should have more self-confidence in such things. Even advocating privative evil as boldly as I have has not been by way of any confidence in my own opinion, judgment, or intelligence. Historically speaking, I do have a tremendous confidence in the work of the Spirit in maintaining the purity of the doctrine of the church. If Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Ambrose, Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, John Calvin, Elisha Coles, Jerome Zanchius, C.S. Lewis, Paul Helm, and countless others in between have held to a privative concept of evil as scriptural, then not only am I more emboldened to suggest it as true, but I am confident that if true, it will inevitably be pastorally fruitful as the Spirit works to fill us and make us whole.

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