



Evil and the Augustinian Tradition

Charles T. Mathewes

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Recent scholarship has focused attention on the difficulties that evil, suffering, and tragic conflict present to religious belief and moral life. Thinkers have drawn upon many important historical figures, with one significant exception – Augustine. At the same time, there has been a renaissance of work on Augustine, but little discussion of either his work on evil or his influence on contemporary thought.

This book fills these gaps. It explores the “family biography” of the Augustinian tradition by looking at Augustine’s work and its development in the writings of Hannah Arendt and Reinhold Niebuhr. Mathewes argues that the Augustinian tradition offers us a powerful, though commonly misconstrued, proposal for understanding and responding to evil’s challenges. The book casts new light on Augustine, Niebuhr, and Arendt, as well as on the problem of evil, the nature of tradition, and the role of theological and ethical discourse in contemporary thought.

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imus autem non ambulando sed amando
St. Augustine, *Epistula*, 155.4

Ουκουν, εφη, εγω . . . των γε σων κληρονομος;
Plato, *Republic* 1.331d.8

. . . Indeed some of these new writers, at the same time that they have represented the doctrines of these ancient and eminent divines, as in the highest degree ridiculous, and contrary to common sense, in an ostentation of a very generous charity, have allowed that they were honest well-meaning men: yea, it may be some of them, as though it were in great condescension and compassion to them, have allowed that they did pretty well for the day which they lived in, and considering the great disadvantages they labored under: when at the same time, their manner of speaking has naturally and plainly suggested to the minds of their readers, that they were persons, who through the lowness of their genius, and greatness of their bigotry, with which their minds were shackled, and thoughts confined, living in the gloomy caves of superstition, fondly embraced, and demurely and zealously taught the most absurd, silly, and monstrous opinions, worthy of the greatest contempt of gentlemen possessed of that noble and generous freedom of thought, which happily prevails in this age of light and inquiry. When indeed such is the case, that we might, if so disposed, speak as big words as they, and on far better grounds . . .

Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will*

The generally accepted view teaches
That there was no excuse,
Though in the light of recent researches
Many would find the cause

In a not uncommon form of terror;
Others, still more astute,
Point to possibilities of error
At the very start.

W. H. Auden

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Charlottesville, Virginia
August 28, 2000
Feast Day of Saint Augustine

Abbreviations

<i>Conf.</i>	<i>Confessiones</i>
<i>DCD</i>	<i>De civitate Dei</i>
<i>DDC</i>	<i>De doctrina Christiana</i>
<i>DeMor.</i>	<i>De moribus ecclesiae catholicae</i>
<i>DeMus.</i>	<i>De musica</i>
<i>DLA</i>	<i>De libero arbitrio</i>
<i>DNB</i>	<i>De natura boni contra Manichaeos</i>
<i>DUC</i>	<i>De utilitate credendi</i>
<i>DVR</i>	<i>De vera religione</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Epistulae</i>
<i>IoEp.</i>	<i>Tractatus in epistolam Iohannis,</i>
<i>OpImp.</i>	<i>Contra Julianum opus imperfectum</i>
<i>QAS</i>	<i>De quaestionibus ad Simplicianum</i>
<i>Retr.</i>	<i>Retractationes</i>
<i>Sermo</i>	<i>Sermones</i>

Introduction: reaching disagreement

Evil as such, which [allegory] cherished as enduring profundity, exists only in allegory, is nothing other than allegory, and means something different from what it is. It means precisely the non-existence of what it presents. The absolute vices, as exemplified by tyrants and intriguers, are allegories. They are not real, and that which they represent, they possess only in the subjective view of melancholy; they are this view, which is destroyed by its own offspring because they only signify its blindness. They point to the absolutely subjective pensiveness, to which alone they owe their existence. By its allegorical form evil as such reveals itself to be a subjective phenomenon.

Walter Benjamin 1977, 233

SOME FACTS

Here are some facts:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and God saw that all was good, and so all is good. Among God's many creations was mankind, whom God gifted with freedom in order that they may love, both one another and God, as God loves them as well as God's self. The cost of this gift is risk; for a free being is by definition never wholly under another's control, and their actions can never be perfectly determined by another's will. In creating free beings in order to enter into relationships of love with them, God risked the possibility that they would resist that love. And so we have.

Sin came into the world through the first humans, and by that act all after them are placed under its yoke. Now sin spreads its stain far and wide, and the whole world groans under its weight, but the bare fact that all creation *suffers* sin reveals that there is an underlying goodness to being which can be destroyed only by destroying being itself. So our sin does not end creation but mars it, echoing down through history, crippling all

humanity in its always futile, because never more than partial, revolt against its source of being in God.

As God's will demanded the final perfection of communion between human and divine, and as humans had refused that perfection, the redemption of humans required divine intercession. Christ's life, death, and Resurrection have secured that intercession, and the Incarnation has consummated God's relation to the world; through Christ, God's absolute involvement with the world secures the possibility of human salvation, and thus the fulfillment of the divine will. God in Christ comes in time, to redeem time, and so time, while still in part our prison, becomes also the theater of our redemption, and a vehicle for grace – the arena of our repentance, our slow, painful, turning back, in Christ and through the Spirit, to God. We suffer in the interim – indeed we suffer the very interim itself – until his second coming, when sin and death shall be no more. But now, in this in-between time, sin most emphatically does exist.

For Christians, this is our condition; and Christians rightly call these “facts,” events accomplished, whose reality is evidenced in the lives we live today. Christian theology begins with these facts, and attempts to construct an account of the human situation which comprehends them all. But theology also begins where we are, in the middle of our muddled lives, so it must interpret those facts, and our understanding of our lives, in such a way as to reconcile them – in such a way that one explains the other, and that, vice versa, one exemplifies the other. In such attempts, questions naturally arise about the sense – both the specific meaning and the potential meaninglessness – of these theological claims. This book is concerned with one set of such questions: what light can this account throw upon our existence as moral creatures, particularly as *flawed* moral creatures? How are we to understand ourselves, and how *can* we understand ourselves within this account? What illumination can it bring to our experiences of fallibility, failure, and fault, and what illumination can such experiences bring to the account?

Sometimes reflection on our experiences can make this narrative seem deeply implausible, indeed possibly harmful, even to those (perhaps *especially* to those) who know the narrative best. Here, for example, is the theologian James M. Gustafson, reflecting to his old friend Paul Ramsey on the (in)adequacy of the Christian tradition's typical response to evil:

I think the tradition has sold people short, Paul Ramsey. It has led them to expect things in the primary language of the tradition that failed over and over again. There are experiences of suffering in the world, Paul. There are experi-

ences of suffering of the innocent in the world, and traditional religious language has a way of just putting syrup on that stuff – and not suffering with the suffering, and not being in pain with those who are in pain! (Gustafson in Beckley and Swezey 1988, 239)

This book is meant especially for those who both feel the power of the Christian moral vision proclaimed above and yet remain painfully aware, with Gustafson, of its “Pollyannaish” perils. It is also meant for anyone who cares to think soberly and practically about the phenomena of evil; for I judge that anyone so interested would be wise to heed the Augustinian tradition of reflection on these matters. But the book does not resolve this tension for believers, or provide a tight solution for more skeptical inquirers. It means instead to show how the Augustinian tradition seeks to help humans accept this tension as inescapable in our world, and thus to help us more fully inhabit it, by learning to live with both claims simultaneously. By returning to one of the primordial sources for much Christian thinking about suffering and evil – Saint Augustine of Hippo – and by thinking through his thought, we can recover the lessons that he and the tradition he inaugurated – the Augustinian tradition – aimed to teach about understanding and responding to evil.

MODERNITY AND EVIL: SUBJECTIVISM AND ITS LIMITS

This is especially important now, because our culture seems to lack the ability, and more particularly the moral imagination, to respond usefully to evil, suffering, and tragic conflict. Indeed the whole intellectual history of modernity can be written as the story of our growing *incomprehension* of evil, of our inability adequately to understand both the evils we mean to oppose, and those in which we find ourselves implicated. Most philosophy, ethics, and even theology proceed magnificently, as if at the center of all our lives there did not squat this ugly, croaking toad.¹ We have largely forgone attempting to comprehend evil, and choose instead to try to ignore or dismiss it through some form of ironic alienation, muscular moralism, or (if you can imagine it) some combination of the two. This problem cripples our thinking about how to respond to evil, and leaves us trapped in a stuttering inarticulateness when faced with its challenges. Andrew Delbanco puts it well: “A gap has opened up between our awareness of evil and the intellectual resources

¹ Exceptions include, in different ways, Berkouwer 1971, Midgley 1986, C. Plantinga 1995.

we have for handling it" (1995, 3). We know neither how to resist nor how to suffer evil, to a significant degree because we do not understand it: it bewilders us, and our typical response to it is merely a theatricalization, a histrionic which reveals no real horror at the reality and danger of evil but rather our fear of admitting our incomprehension of what we confront, what it is we are called to respond to, when we encounter evil. We oscillate between what Mark Edmundson calls a glib optimism of "facile transcendence" and a frightened, pessimistic, "gothic" foreboding (1997, xiv–xv, 154–5); this oscillation exhibits the guilty conscience of modernity.

In this setting, any attempt directly to reflect upon evil is already also, and simultaneously, an attempt to deconstruct the modern project's most grandiose self-understanding – not in order to renounce modernity's achievements, but rather to detach them from the perilously Promethean triumphalism within which they are so frequently embedded. It is no surprise, then, that the greatest modern self-critics, namely, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche, reflected in sustained ways on our difficulties in coming to grips with what we have traditionally called "evil", Merold Westphal aptly calls them "the great modern theologians of original sin" (1993, 3). And it is no surprise that their reflections led them, in different ways, to the conclusion that the root cause of modernity's failure adequately to conceptualize evil lies in the prototypically modern understanding of human being-in-the-world. Freud's philosophy of mind, and Nietzsche's philosophy of agency, both challenge the coherence of pictures of the self as a strictly autonomous being, precisely because such pictures cannot handle the full complexity of our situation before, and implication with, evil and tragic conflict. And they were right: our confusion before evil is due to modernity's general commitment to what I call "subjectivism," the belief that our existence in the world is determined first and foremost by our own (subjective) activities – that the sources of power and control in the universe are our acting will and knowing mind, before which the world is basically passive.

Subjectivism has disastrous consequences for our attempts to understand and respond to evil because it obscures our complex implication in the difficulties we face; it ignores how we are "always already" implicated in evil and mistakenly suggests that the challenge is straightforwardly (if not easily) soluble by direct action. It leads us to picture evil as fundamentally an *external* challenge to ourselves (hence making our basic moral claims ones of innocence and victimhood). Furthermore, even those contemporary positions that explicitly resist assent to subjectivism – most typically, significantly enough, prompted by reflection on evil and

tragic conflict – imply that vulnerability to such vexation is simply our “natural” situation, brought on by our failure to be perfectly subjectivistic agents, thereby offering us (as a consolation prize, as it were) a “wisdom” which threatens to plunge us into despair. In both cases, evil’s challenge goes missing, and becomes redefined as either the simply contingent difficulties of our time and place, or the insuperable natural conditions of human existence.

Evil’s problematic status to us is deeply debilitating – not because we need our noses rubbed in evil out of some juridically perverted urge to make us morally housebroken, but because we need to find a better way to respond to evil. Unfortunately, most of those who write on these matters, few as they are to begin with, rest content with speaking of our need to be perpetually “open” to “the tragic.” I cannot speak for you, but the last time catastrophe happened to me, it did not knock and ask to be let in. We need not be told to be “open” to tragedy; such talk is actually an attempt to mitigate tragedy’s damage to us, like leaving the front door unlocked so that the burglars will not break the frame when they come to rob and kill you. We do not need merely to hear the bad news, nor do we need a more intimate *acquaintance* with evil; we need to know *what to do about it*. Indeed without knowing what to do we will be psychologically incapable of acknowledging the depths of our depravity. To despair sufficiently, we need to hope. And until we transcend subjectivism, we cannot even know what real hope is.

THE AUGUSTINIAN TRADITION: PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS

This book argues that the Augustinian tradition can help us better to understand and respond to evil. In a world riddled by conflict, cruelty, and suffering, a world which seems daily more vexed by these questions, renewed study of Augustine, who so famously brooded over these matters throughout his life, would seem to be a wise move. But this is a surprisingly controversial proposal, as Augustine is more often a spectral presence haunting the debate than a participant within it; he appears most often, in Goulven Madec’s felicitous phrase, as the “evil genius” of our heritage (1994). Most contemporary thinkers mention his name merely to dissociate themselves from him, or to blame him for our own puzzlements before these issues. The reasons these thinkers give for this shunning of Augustine are interestingly different, and indeed even contradictory: some claim his picture of evil as privation is too “aesthetic,” too consoling and optimistic, others claim his account of sin is

too “juridical,” too repressive and pessimistic; some claim he legitimates violence against demonized opponents, others claim he makes us passive victims of others’ assaults; some claim he is too otherworldly, others claim he is all too worldly, indeed even “Constantinian.” While these critics’ diagnoses of and prescriptions for our problems may differ, they share a common aversion to any attempt to return to Augustine; for them, progress in answering these questions is measured by movement away from all Augustinian resonances.

This book argues the reverse: despite contemporary prejudices to the contrary, Augustine’s program, appropriated and extended by others – in particular, Reinhold Niebuhr and Hannah Arendt – offers much that we can still use. Even in our “demythologized” twentieth century there have been authentic Augustinians. (It seems odd to call the century with Nazism, Communism and consumerist advertisement-culture a “demythologized” age; but let that one lie for now.) This claim – that a “tradition” of Augustinian thought persists in modernity – faces criticism from two sides. “Modernists” argue that past thinkers such as Augustine are defunct, while “anti-modernists” argue that modern thinkers such as Niebuhr and Arendt are failures. But both are far too simplistic in their posturing. Contemporary prejudices against the tradition are largely due to misrepresentations of the Augustinian proposal as grounded most basically on a negative insight into – sometimes more dramatically portrayed as a disgusted recoil from – the realities of sin and evil. In fact, however, Augustine’s project is grounded most basically in his positive account of love (and correlatively freedom) rather than pessimism (and correlatively enslavement). And that account continues to inform some of the best work done in modernity on human existence. Hence, we can meet the challenges to the Augustinian tradition by showing how its insights, in both Augustine’s own thought and in the thought of several of his recent descendants, remain vital to understanding our own ethical and religious situation.

To summarize those insights: the Augustinian tradition interprets evil’s challenge in terms of two distinct conceptual mechanisms, one ontological and the other anthropological. Ontologically, in terms of the status of evil in the universe, it understands evil as nothing more than the *privation* of being and goodness – “evil” is not an existing thing at all, but rather the absence of existence, an ontological shortcoming. Anthropologically, in terms of the effect of evil on a human being, it depicts human wickedness as rooted in the sinful *perversion* of the human’s good nature – created in the *imago Dei* – into a distorted, mis-

oriented, and false imitation of what the human should be. *Privation* and *perversion*: together these capture the conceptual contours within which the tradition proposes its practical response to evil. Against worries that these concepts are archaic, relics of a superstitious pre-modernity, the book shows how they continue to inform moral and religious reasoning in modernity, by tracking their role in modern thought. And theirs is a major role: Niebuhr's "Christian realism" develops Augustine's account of sin as perversion, and implies the normative account of human nature that that account assumes; similarly, Arendt's work on totalitarianism and "the banality of evil" develops an Augustinian account of evil as privation, and entails the normative metaphysics of creation from which that account derives. Two of the twentieth century's most important thinkers on evil and sin – perhaps *the* most important thinkers on this topic – are distinctively Augustinian in their accounts of evil and sin. This is no accident.

Then again, both accounts require substantial revision, for each is flawed by a partial adherence to subjectivism. Subjectivism can manifest itself *epistemologically*, in the belief that humans alone must construct their intellectual relations to the world, or *agentially*, in the belief that humans act in ways that rely for their determination, wholly and finally, on the free and spontaneous choice of the human will. Niebuhr's "epistemological" subjectivism underlies his account of the roles "general" and "special" revelation play in shaping humans' interpretation of themselves, their world, and God; Arendt's action-subjectivism underlies her account of the human's capacity for action which is essentially non-teleological in form. For both of them, the self remains the primary actor: for Niebuhr, "in the beginning was the question," so to speak, the question that the self finds itself compelled to ask and answer; for Arendt "in the beginning was the deed." But the key subjectivist assumption both share is that in the beginning is *the self*.

Neither of them consciously endorsed subjectivism; on the contrary, the programs of both thinkers are sharply critical of particular manifestations of it. (Indeed, ironically enough, each critiqued the form of subjectivism the other suffers from.) And their critiques rely on insights that each appropriated from the Augustinian proposal. The subjectivist leaven in their thought is precisely what is *not* idiosyncratic to them, but part of their common modern inheritance, and even more precisely, that part of their inheritance that they did not themselves critically evaluate, but instead unreflectively assumed. Conversely, their real value lies in how they partly escaped these subjectivist commitments, a partial escape

that was due to their partial appropriations of the Augustinian tradition's insights. Niebuhr, impressed with the Augustinian tradition's analysis and critique of the various dogmas of voluntaristic freedom, avoided the voluntaristic valences of subjectivism; Arendt, educated by Heidegger and Jaspers to appreciate the agent's experiential situatedness within an environment and a "world" which orients the self, avoided the reflective form of subjectivism. So both were fundamentally opposed to some versions of subjectivism, and for reasons which are fundamentally related to their partial appropriation of an Augustinian proposal, both were able partially to escape this subjectivism. The difficulty with their positions lies in the *partiality* of their escape.

Because of this, neither account can wholeheartedly warrant our hope for the world, and both contain elements which work against that hope; hence neither can illuminate our response to evil's challenges in terms of a basic response of increased *commitment*. In explaining the necessity of faith as a support for sustaining hope in the face of the challenge of tragedy, Niebuhr "naturalizes" evil by positing evil as a preexisting and primordial force which we meet in interpreting our world, and so undermines our confidence that God is wholly good. Meanwhile, in unpacking the power of freedom to overcome evil in the world, Arendt ends up rendering us episodic beings, and so subverts our ability to talk about our relation to the world as one of deep commitment. The axiological ambivalence of Niebuhr's proposal subverts our rationale for why we should be committed to the world, while the anthropological voluntarism of Arendt's account cannot explain *how* we are committed to the world. By seeking to secure the primacy of the subject, Niebuhr and Arendt are led to imply that the subject is victimized by something not themselves – either (as in Niebuhr's case) an external determination to sin, or (as in Arendt's) an internal fountain of natality that determines the agent's action. In seeking to secure the subject's freedom, both instead enslave the self all the more firmly to forces it can never control. Their subjection to subjectivism turns out to be nothing more than a modern form of what Augustine diagnosed as the *libido dominandi*, the lust to dominate that is itself the dominating lust.

Each of these failures is rooted in a deeper failure to understand our relations to the world as essentially relations of love. Niebuhr's account insists that humans meet God most primordially in experiencing the absence of God, not in a fundamental experience of love which sustains and directs their existence even before they are aware of its operation; similarly, Arendt's account insists that action is strictly autonomous,

independent of any interests or goals, so action is essentially an *ex nihilo* reality happening within humans, a reality which cannot be understood as a loving response to the *mundus* which sustains our existence. Neither thinker wants wholly to do this; both, at other moments in their thought, conceive our relations to the world as basically erotic. But both are led by their residual subjectivist assumptions to undercut these more central motivations in ways which render their proposals incoherent. How can we advance beyond them?

In resolving the problems faced by both accounts, we are helped by a more thorough *ressourcement* of the work of St. Augustine. It is precisely those aspects of Niebuhr's and Arendt's thought in which Augustine's influence does not penetrate their modernist shells that were most vulnerable to subjectivist temptations; on the other hand, those aspects of their thought that were most Augustinian were most secure from such temptations – and indeed served them as the launching pads for powerful critiques of each other's subjectivist commitments. Thus our interest in offering a less subjectivist account than they admit may be materially advanced by offering a more thoroughly Augustinian proposal than they do. Augustine's theological anthropology resists our subjectivist temptations, and offers a well worked-out alternative to them: against subjectivism, a properly Augustinian anthropology understands human agency as always already related to both God and the world, so it chastens modern predilections for absolute autonomy while still affirming the subject's importance. To do better in grappling with evil, we must avoid subjectivism; and to be less subjectivist, we must be more Augustinian – or so this book argues.

REACHING DISAGREEMENT

This work makes this argument in three parts. Part I delineates evil's challenge to us, and drafts its understanding of the Augustinian tradition. Chapter one sketches the general contours of modernity's present perplexity before the challenge of evil, and diagnoses what in our situation makes it difficult for us to bring evil clearly into focus, locating our fundamental difficulty in our implicit commitment to subjectivist understandings of human existence. Chapter two describes the Augustinian response to evil, summarizes the concerns that the proposal typically elicits, and defends the Augustinian account against common claims that it develops from a negative insight into evil and sin, arguing instead that it derives from a more primary and fundamental positive vision of the

universe, the human, and God, built upon Augustine's account of love. Part II rehabilitates the conceptual fundamentals of this Augustinian position, by tracking its role in the work of Reinhold Niebuhr and Hannah Arendt – both (as is often recognized) in terms of their accounts of evil and sin, and (in a manner less well known) in the frameworks in which they place those accounts, frameworks which build upon Augustine's account of love. Yet neither Niebuhr's nor Arendt's formulation is fully adequate as it stands, for their Augustinian insights are undercut by subjectivist commitments which a fuller appropriation of the Augustinian proposal helps us expunge – a task greatly aided by their own partial apprehensions of (or at least openness to) the Augustinian insight into love's primordially. Chapter three details Niebuhr's revision of Augustine's psychology of sin, beginning from his "Christian realist" account of original sin, and illuminates how his account, while crippled by subjectivism, still offers a hope we can mobilize practically, and so shows us how to acknowledge sin without collapsing into cynicism. Chapter four details Arendt's revision of Augustine's ontology, beginning from her account of "the banality of evil," and illuminates how this "banality of evil" thesis, while (again) hindered by her subjectivist assumptions, entails her "political ontology" and her practical proposal of *amor mundi*. Given these conceptual developments, Part III details the practical program following therefrom, arguing that the Augustinian tradition is ultimately a way of life offering a vibrant and world-affirming response to evil, in ways that its critics do not recognize. Against critics who accuse the tradition of otherworldly escapism and/or reactionary pessimism, Chapter five argues that the tradition demystifies and "demythologizes" the discourse of evil, refusing it any ultimate place in our cosmology by practices of forgiveness and "dirty-hands" action which allow humans to acknowledge the this-worldly inescapability of evil, suffering, and tragic conflict while still fully participating in worldly life. The book concludes by insisting that this response is not finally a *solution* to the problem of evil, but a resolute way of facing life vexed by that problem – a way of living in a world where evil will never be wholly defeated by human action, and yet a world where faith proclaims evil has already lost.

This argument is not likely to meet with general assent. But that is part of its value; its dissent from the contemporary consensus is not frivolous, a sort of diatribe from a crazy back-bencher made precious by its powerlessness. Today, when the confabulation and ritual demolition of straw men is quite common in normative inquiry, articulate and intelligent dis-

agreement can be enormously profitable. At this point in time, debates about evil, tragedy, and sin do not need another formal attack on the idea of theodicy, nor another material defense of it, nor an appeal to “truths found in suffering that have been long repressed by the authoritarianism of orthodox Christianity.” Contemporary theological and ethical research concerned with these issues has often remained unhelpfully general and vague in terms of positive proposals; while we can understand what it is that thinkers condemn, it is hard to see precisely what it is that they commend.

My complaint here is not essentially aesthetic or ethical; it is pragmatic. The project is strategically necessary: one of this book’s main methodological assumptions is that we must understand thinkers rhetorically, as attempting to “push” conversations in particular directions. Books – perhaps especially academic books – are not finally aesthetic artifacts; they are interventions in ongoing debates. And those debates are constrained, operating within an “intellectual field” of potential “moves” (see McCole 1993, 24–8). The most appropriate intervention in the contemporary debate is not direct but indirect, not an attempt to address some single interlocutor, but rather to take a step back and call attention to what risks being obscured. We need a careful and detailed articulation of the tradition of thought that many contemporary works on this topic take themselves to be rejecting. To do this is an act of charity (in the sense of Augustinian *caritas*) for those outside the tradition, as at least then they will be clear about what they dispute. This is what this book seeks to offer. It aims to “reach disagreement” with its interlocutors – clarifying what issues separate us, and why they do (Elshtain 1995b, xi). It is not meant to be *charming*, but provocative; without real interlocutors to offer resistance, the debate risks falling into a frictionless whirling that goes nowhere.

The book’s central task is to offer just this sort of resistance; by providing a detailed and pugnacious counter-position, it seeks to raise the standards (and perhaps the stakes) of the debate a notch or two. The opposition being so unclear, representatives of the Augustinian tradition must articulate the position they propound as clearly and forcefully as possible. The work does not centrally engage in a defensively apologetic project, fending off all possible challenges to the Augustinian proposal, nor does it attempt irrefutably to prove the truth of the Augustinian tradition, obliterating its opponents; rather it welcomes the challenges as opportunities more fully to rearticulate the tradition’s fundamental insights, in the conviction that those insights still have much to say to us

today. While it is prompted by criticism, it attempts to turn that criticism to positive use by elaborating the Augustinian tradition's "moral ontology," paying special attention to its account of suffering, evil, and sin, in order to investigate the tradition's understanding of, and proper response to, perils that always threaten, and often vex, our lives.²

This project is liable to be misread by different audiences in different ways. I would like to head off those misinterpretations as best I can here. Some want a thoroughly particularistic language, one wholly in the first-order terminology of Christian theology, and they are suspicious of attempts to talk in general philosophical abstractions, as if I am speaking in some sort of "public" or "lowest common denominator" language. For such "particularists," the language of sin is a distinctly Christian language, and non-Christians have nothing to say about it – and it has nothing to say to them. (Barth once said "only Christians sin," and I imagine he meant something like this.) My response to such worries is simply that their concerns are misplaced. Nothing in this book precludes a finer-grained, more particularistic discourse on evil and sin (though I think mine is fairly fine-grained as it stands), and the kind of linguistic purity they desire is inappropriate. I will not just preach to the choir, however much the choir may need the preaching; I want to reach as many people as possible.

Second, it is all too easy for a book like this to be read as simply the latest in a long line of sour messages, "hellfire and damnation" sermons delivered by tight-lipped preachers, a sermonizing to which, the culture assumes, we all ought to give momentary nodding respect, and then go about our business as before. But in fact both Niebuhr and Arendt give the lie to this ideology of the once-born, those who believe in the power of positive thinking. Their more "pessimistic" and their more "optimistic" visions are all of a piece, and are meant together to transcend the simplistic dualism into which we are tempted to read them. Hence, I spend time underscoring with each thinker the way that a real appreciation of their thought shows against the typical dismissive criticisms of their work as pessimistic (in Niebuhr's case) or despairingly nostalgic (in Arendt's). The Augustinian tradition, that is, is often read in modern America as essentially focusing on things we ought not think about so much. I want to resist this reading. But that, as Albert Hirschman has said, is "[p]robably all one can ask of history and of the history of ideas

² See C. Taylor 1989, 41: a moral ontology is a framework that "lies behind and makes sense of [our] intuitions and responses."

in particular: not to resolve issues, but to raise the level of the debate” (1977, 135). I do not want so much to deliver a message as to open a box of problems for the reader.

As neither thoroughgoing prolegomena nor comprehensive apologetics, the book attempts neither to defeat all comers *tout court*, nor to establish the Augustinian proposal on invulnerable foundations; of the making of critiques there is no end.³ Rather, it uses the opportunity offered by the critical suspicions about the tradition to deepen our understanding of both evil and the Augustinian tradition. In Augustine’s own terms, it uses the polemical occasion of defending the position as an opportunity for further, and deeper, constructive inquiry: it responds to commonly formulated worries about the tradition’s account of evil – worries which it sees as arising as questions within the tradition itself, and not just imported into it from outside – in order to help us understand both the tradition and the challenge. To address these challenges, then, is to attempt to grasp the deepest roots of the Augustinian tradition, and to bring those roots to light.⁴ In doing so, the work helps us better understand both the tradition’s insights and the challenges we face.

FREEDOM, LOVE, AND THE AUGUSTINIAN TRADITION

One can legitimately describe this book as an investigation into the nature of human freedom. What is freedom’s nature and extent, its capacities and limits? How should our understanding of it shape our understanding of our moral endeavors? How should it shape our understanding of God? Conversely, how should our understanding of God shape our understanding of human freedom? In a way, it uses the problems that evil presents to us as an opportunity to ask these questions.

“Freedom” has not gone undiscussed in modernity, but all too often the concept has been treated with more enthusiasm than thought, as if

³ Thus Augustine, *DCD* II.i (based on 1972 translation, p. 48): “will we ever come to an end of discussion and talk if we think we must always reply to replies? . . . You can see how infinitely laborious and fruitless it would be to try to refute every objection they offer, when they have resolved never to think before they speak provided that somehow or other they contradict our arguments.”

⁴ Thus, while this account does not explicitly engage in a negative (and perhaps defensive) apologetic project, it does suggest that criticisms such as these, which such an apologetic would have to address, have little merit. (This does not imply, of course, that there are more pressing concerns than this, more genuine worries about Christianity.) Thus it engages extra-traditional challenges only implicitly. Explicitly, it is centrally concerned with exposition of the tradition, and by so being a positive account, it has negative implications; in being properly constructive, it is apologetic. In Augustine’s own terms, it uses the occasion of defending the faith as an opportunity for deeper inquiry into the true character of the faith. See Mathewes 1998.

the sheer assertion of human freedom, vocalized with enough gusto, would in itself resolve, or dissolve, all obstructions to the progress of human happiness. This sort of “just do it” voluntarism proclaims the human’s capacity to achieve any goal over any and every obstacle by the simple power of self-will. But the volume of the speakers’ voices is equaled only by dimness of their vision. It is hard to believe that any sensitive moral agent would reflectively affirm that all obstructions to her or his own highest aspirations are essentially external to her or his own will. And, in fact, it is unlikely that any of us really believe it; for at the same time that our egotistical fantasies are fattened up by shoe advertisements, our moral self-understanding starves on a thin gruel of victim language – a diet able to sustain us only with heaping helpings of naive optimism, generated by the promise of “get happy” psychotropic substances with no relevant differences from other drugs, to offers of which we are told to “just say no.” The problem with this moral worldview – what we may call the “just do it/just say no” account – is the simplicity, the “just”-ness, which it imputes to human agency, a simplicity possible only for a creature with a capacity to act in a wholly unconditioned manner, a way entirely self-determined. This vulgar voluntarism meets no one’s needs, but, when coupled with a despairing pharmacological fatalism, it may staunch the hemorrhaging of our self-understanding just enough to create the (semi-)permanent illusion that, to borrow another recent mendacity, “I’m OK and you’re OK.”

This voluntarism has as its *doppelgänger* an equally profound nihilism, the faith that all can be embedded within a fundamental framework of necessity. All will fall back into the abyss of nature; all is part of the ongoing cycle of death and rebirth. We want to live, but we also want to die.⁵ The shrill cries of marketeers cannot drown out this *basso profundo* which, no less than they, informs the tenor of the age. Because for us moderns our opposition to reality, and reality’s ultimate triumph over us, are equally absolute, the absoluteness is an absolution; it offers us fatalism as the resolution to the problem of evil. This fatalism is merely the most superficial of nihilism’s implications; more threatening, again because more basic, is the implicit understanding of the human as standing against reality, condemned to be in absolute opposition to it, until we finally absolutely submit to it. These two, optimistic voluntarism and pessimistic nihilism, constitute the Janus faces of our age; mod-

⁵ See Ricks 1993, 1: “Most people most of the time want to live for ever . . . But like many a truth, it is a half-truth, not half-true but half of the truth . . . for, after all, most people some of the time, and some people most of the time, do not want to live for ever.”

ernity is able to manage the travails of reality only by repeatedly (and schizophrenically) switching from one mask to the other.

In contrast to this cultural schizophrenia, Augustinians offer a calmer and more integrated vision. It is not surprising that we moderns understand evil centrally in terms of the exercise and restriction of our freedom and agency (terms which render invisible important aspects of the challenge), for this conceptualization seems the only one available to us. However, from an Augustinian perspective, the problem does not most basically concern our freedom, but rather our loves. As Heine said, freedom is a prison song, ultimately only of instrumental value; the bare fact that we are free to choose is meaningless if what we can choose offers us no satisfaction or happiness. Our contemporary anxieties about our freedom suggest something about our dissatisfaction with what material ends we can achieve, and in general with the overall happiness of our life. We must realize that our concern with freedom is ultimately not the most adequate formulation of our deepest cares.⁶

Love is crucial because it directly opposes the picture of ourselves that we typically assume – that we are fundamentally autonomous, fundamentally independent, isolated monads who must work to be connected to anything outside ourselves. Augustinians think this is a perniciously false self-image. The self is not fundamentally alone, nor is the world fundamentally a constellation of discrete atomic individuals; we are all in our lives intimately related with one another, so intimately indeed that this relation is in part *constitutive* of what and who we are. This is true not simply on a mundane level, but also – and indeed more primordially – on a theological level: God, as Augustine says, is “closer to me than myself,” and the presence of the otherness of God at the bottom of the self is the fundamental energy moving the self to flower outwards toward otherness. This openness toward otherness is the core and primordial basis of what we call “politics,” though our contemporary understanding of this term is so debased that it bears only the most attenuated connection to this deeper sense of politics. So Augustinian accounts place a great deal of pressure on our understanding of this term, insisting that we stretch our understanding to accommodate this broader sense.⁷ Both Niebuhr and Arendt help us gain this broader

⁶ This argument draws on C. Taylor 1989, especially chapter 25, “Conclusion: The Conflicts of Modernity.”

⁷ This insight is not restricted to Augustinian accounts; other, quite different programs have begun in recent years to think about the positive significance of politics beyond its typical (for our world) negative task of negotiating privacy for us. See Gutmann and Thompson 1996 and Sandel 1996.