

**Augustine, Ancestors and the Problem of Evil:
African Religions, the Donatists, and the African Manichees**
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Abstract

In this paper, I compare the philosophy of Augustine with the philosophy of relevant African traditions: Donatists, Manichees, and African traditional religions. I try to demonstrate that Augustine's religious thought was partly influenced by local African religions or movements, but also differed from them substantially. I will carry out this comparative work looking at two important issues: (a) the problem of evil and (b) the existence of other supernatural entities, such as ancestors, and their relationship with humans. These comparisons lead to a new understanding of evil in Augustine's thought; namely, evil as an inevitable world phenomenon.

Keywords: Augustine, African Traditional Religions, Ancestors, Problem of Evil, Free Will, Donatism, Northern African Religions.

Introduction

Augustine is one of the most important philosophers of religion in history. In fact, he has significantly influenced Christian thought and is potentially the most influential philosopher of Christianity, along with Thomas Aquinas. His views on evil have especially played an important and influential role in Christian philosophy. Indeed, the concept of "will" is usually attributed to Augustine, who developed this concept to interpret God's all-goodness and the existence of evil. According to him, the good God created a good cosmos, but human beings chose to rebel against God using their free, but intermediately good, will. To explain the concept of will, Augustine constructed a series of arguments that contrasted Christianity with African religions, the Donatists and the African Manichees.

In this article, I will compare Augustine's view with those of some important African religions, that is, ideas in African traditional religions, the Donatists, and the African Manichees. From this comparison I will conclude that evil ought to be understood as a natural fact of the world. In the first section, I will show that Augustine and the Donatists hold some views which are likely influenced by African religions. In the second section, I will compare Augustine's views on evil with the African Manichees, Donatists, and African religions.

Augustine and his Context: Traditional Religions, Sacrifice, and Ancestors

Augustine was born in 354 CE in Taghaste, a small city in Roman North Africa. His mother, Monica, was probably a Berber because she was named after Mon, the Berber god. His father, Patrick, had Roman descent. From the generation of Augustine's grandmother, the whole family subscribed to Catholic Christianity. After his father and mother married, the family mainly continued their Catholic beliefs, although Patrick became a catechumen and was baptized before he died (AUGUSTINEa 2009, 1.11.17; 9.9.19; 9.9.22). While learning and teaching rhetoric in Carthage, Augustine gave up his pursuit of Catholicism, although not a Catholic yet. From 373 to 383 CE, Augustine had indulged in Manichaeism for more than nine years (AUGUSTINEb 1991, 1.18.34, 2.19.68; AUGUSTINEc 1994, 1.2; AUGUSTINEa 2009, 3.4.7; 3.11.20; 4.1.1; 5.3.3; 5.6.10). He only became a Catholic when he dramatically converted in Milan in 386 CE. However, even until the time Augustine became the Catholic bishop of Hippo Regius, he did have some relatives who were members of the Donatists, a sect separated from the North African Catholic church at the beginning of the 4th century.

During the age of Augustine, North Africa was experiencing a deep process of Christianization. There were at least five main religions in the region, including Catholic Christianity, Donatism, Manicheism, Judaism and the Roman traditional religion. It is very possible that Augustine, in addition to being influenced by such religions, was also influenced by local African religions. For example, his mentioning of sacrifice for past sins in *Confessions* is likely to originate from local African religions. Indeed, many African religions have sacrifice as a core of their practice (IBEABUCHI 2013, 289-314). Hence, it is likely that such African religious traditions influenced Augustine. Indeed, this influence can sometimes be found in his own work. Take, for example, the following passages in *Confessions* 6.2.2, where Augustine describes the North African version of memorial rituals for passed saints:

In accordance with my mother's custom in Africa, she had taken to the memorial shrines of the saints' cakes and bread and wine, and was forbidden by the janitor. ... After bringing her basket of ceremonial food which she would first taste and then share around the company, she used to present not more than one tiny glass of wine diluted to suit her very sober palate. She would take a sip as an act of respect. (2009, 6.2.2)

But Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, "ordered that no such offerings were to be made, even by those who acted soberly, ... because the ceremonies were like meals to propitiate the departed spirits and similar to heathen superstition." (2009, 6.2.2)

Here, it is clear that Augustine's mother exerted significant influence on his thought. The result was that their North African Christian practices were considered much more superstitious than the Italian ones (MEER 1961, 498-526).

This influence can also be found within the Donatists. The Donatists, named after their second bishop, Donatus the Great, were a Christian sect that grew in North Africa. In fact, the Donatists developed quickly, and became much more influential and powerful amongst the Northern African population than did the Catholic church in North Africa. Indeed, in terms of adherents to the Church, the Donatists largely outnumbered the number of Catholics (FRIEND 1952).

Just like Catholic Christians, Donatists in North Africa shared the same memorial ceremonies for their passed saints. They also celebrated saints' feast days with customary but drunken banquets in their churches (AUGUSTINE 29.11). It is very likely that these memorial ceremonies were similar to the African traditional religions' ceremonies for their ancestors. Just as in traditional African Religions, those who passed away were regarded as "the living-dead" and "the oldest members of the household" (MBITI 1970, 107-111). Certainly, in the Roman religious culture, people would take food and drink to their ancestors' tombs, just so the ancestors could eat and drink with them. Likewise, in African traditional religions, it is normally believed that ancestors are present in the lives of living humans and likely to dwell within the community or in a nearby forest.

Hence, it is possible to draw some important comparisons here. In their own way, Augustine and the Donatists both believe in the importance of rituals for the dead and, more particularly, rituals that involve sacrifices. The dead play an important role in Northern African Christianity, as they were believed to interfere in the life of the living. The origin of such beliefs is likely to be traditional African religions, which also hold such views. In the case of Augustine, his mother, who strongly influenced him, is likely to be another important source for his doctrine. For the Donatists, local religious beliefs appear to be the most likely way that these rituals, sacrifices and beliefs have grown.

God, Free Will and Evil: Augustine, African Manichees, and the Donatists

Christian philosophy and the problem of evil are highly influenced by the thought of Augustine. In *De libero arbitrio* and other early works, Augustine defined at least three kinds of evil: metaphysical, moral, and natural. Metaphysically speaking, according to him, evil is not a substance but only the privation of good (*privatio boni*). In other words, evil is not an actual thing, rather; it is an absence of a thing (good). Therefore, evil has no essence; it is just an absence of something (AUGUSTINE 2009, 7.12.18). Moral evil

originated in Adam's fall and is revealed in human sins. Moral evil can be explained as the absence of morally good agency. Natural evil refers to all disasters (e.g., earthquakes, typhoons, etc.) by which God punishes human beings. This kind of evil is understood as the absence of God's grace.

Also important to Augustine's philosophy are his views of God. Augustine argued that God was omnipotent, the creator of the cosmos and a morally perfect world. The question that of course emerges at this point is why evil exists in a morally perfect world? Augustine's answer is that in a morally good cosmos, human beings must be moral agents and take responsibility for all moral evils. A cosmos where there is no moral agency is not a good cosmos. In Augustine's words:

Since the will is moved when it turns itself away from the unchangeable good towards the changeable good, where does this movement come from? It is surely evil, even if free will should be numbered among good things on the grounds that we cannot live rightly without it. (2010, 2.20.54)

To understand this better, it is also important to understand Augustine's theory of will. For Augustine, in this created order, creatures constitute a hierarchical sequence, with the human soul, like angels' souls, occupying the highest level, only below God Himself. Within the human soul, the higher part consists of intellect, will and memory, among which will is being able to decide freely. This kind of freedom means that, only before the fall of Adam, could will turn itself to the unchangeable good or the changeable good.

As "an intermediate good" (*medium bonum*) (AUGUSTINEe 2010, 2.19.53), the will can be directed to God or to other creatures. But if the will is not directed to God, then sin and evil originate (AUGUSTINEe 2010, 2.19.52.). After the corruption of the will, our wills fall into a state of ignorance (*ignorantia*) and difficulty (*difficultas*) (AUGUSTINEe 2010, 3.18.52) so that human beings can no longer will good or do good, but necessarily fall into willing evil and doing evil. Although it is necessary, carrying out evil is still a decision made from our own free choice, which means it is a kind of sin that we must bear moral responsibility for. Due to the corruption of will, we have damaged the "image" and "likeness" created by God (Gen. 1:26), and the higher part of the soul has lost control over the lower part, i.e. the bodily desires. Because of the body's rebellion and disturbance, we have thus fallen from the state of "cannot sin" (*potest non peccare*) to the state of "cannot avoid sin" (*non potest non peccare*) (AUGUSTINEf 1971, 13-18.7-8). However, regarding Adam's first sudden turn of will from God to the creature, Augustine never gives a clear and reliable answer. This suggests that the first evil must have been incomprehensible to him (BROWN 1978, 315-329).

The views above are, in fact, a response to the philosophy of Manichaeism. Augustine was initially influenced by Manichaeism over a number of years. Nonetheless, following his conversion to Catholic Christianity, he began to debate against Manichaeism using philosophical arguments and biblical exegeses (AUGUSTINEa 2009, 3.6.10, 3.12.21, 4.8.13, 5.11.21 and AUGUSTINEg 2004). Manichaeism was founded by Mani (216-277 CE) in the Persian Empire. It developed rapidly across the whole Roman Empire as a missionary religion and became especially significant in the North African region. Moreover, as a gnostic religion, it absorbed a lot of Christian doctrines, especially Paul's theology, into its dualistic system, although this became regarded as the most deadly heresy of Paulism (FRIEND 1953, 21; O'MEARA 2001, 49-50).

Contrasting with Augustine, the Manichees believed that, in the beginning, there were two material masses in the universe. One was dominated by God and was morally good. The other was dominated by the son of darkness (Satan) and was morally bad. At a certain point in time, the evil mass violated the good mass so that the former imprisoned the latter, and so our world was created by a kind of mixture. An example of this is that our body imprisoned our soul in itself, but there was always a binary opposition between body and soul. For Manichees, the soul was good (and regulated by God), but the body was evil (and regulated by the devil). Hence, the soul was not responsible for any moral evils, but the body could be led to sin. Therefore, the cause of evil is the interference of this evil mass in the good mass, which resulted in a world that mixed evil and good. Evil is, therefore, a metaphysical entity. It certainly exists in the world. But it is unclear whether God is omnipotent according to this view. God is certainly powerful, but perhaps not all-powerful so that he can avoid everything in advance. That is, from this viewpoint, the Manichee God can foresee everything, but he may not be able to stop everything (AUGUSTINEg 2004).

An important contrast is also between Augustine's view and the philosophies of the Donatists. The Donatists were rigorists, i.e., they held a strict judgement on how to follow Christian norms. Rigorism is a doctrine that originated in 250s CE as a reaction to Catholic Christians offering a sacrifice to pagan gods or the emperor to show their political loyalty and avoid harsh punishment. Rigorists considered these Christians traitors (*traditores*). In fact, some rigorist Christians insisted on a view of "a purified church". They argued that those who break the moral norms of Christian doctrine should not be permitted to reunite with the Church. Moreover, the bishops who failed to fulfill their Christian duties would lose their authority to execute baptism and consecration (TERTULLIAN 2015; CYPRIAN 1971). The Donatists, therefore, held a very tough view on sin, where forgiveness did not play an important role and was, in fact, viewed as a mistake. Augustine, however, considered that sinning was somehow part of human nature. To engage in acts

of evil is somehow inevitable, but what is important is to repent. His views on baptism are relevant for understanding this point: In *Confessions* 1.11.17, Augustine reflected his deferred baptism during his childhood:

She (Monica) hastily made arrangements for me to be initiated and washed in the sacraments of salvation, confessing you, Lord Jesus, for the remission of sins. But suddenly I recovered. My cleansing was deferred on the assumption that, if I lived, I would be sure to soil myself; and after that solemn washing the guilt would be greater and more dangerous if I then defiled myself with sins. (2009, 1.11.17)

Initially, this view seems to be a rigorist one and it is in fact likely that it was influenced by the Donatists' rigor. However, in order to refute rigorism, in *Confessions* 10.30.41-42 and later works, Augustine argued that "I", even a bishop, was disturbed by temptations of sin and may even commit sins in dreams, but that God's grace would cure this sickness and forgive all these sins (AUGUSTINEh 1974, 4.2.10). Furthermore, for Augustine, the church could never become a purified one in a secular world, but always a mixture of real Christians and false ones.

Surprisingly, it is interesting that the Donatists, who were an indigenous African Christian sect, seemed to be less influenced by local beliefs. African religions usually consider that evil is natural in the world; they hold a kind of moral realism, i.e., evil is simply something that humans, ancestors and even God are likely and, sometimes, morally justified to do. Donatists, as rigorists, significantly disagree with this point. On the other hand, Augustine seemed to somehow share the view held by African religions that evil is something that will inevitably occur, even though he thought that metaphysically evil does not exist. Evil is not an entity, metaphysically speaking, but an inevitable occurrence in the world. That is to say, the absence of goodwill inevitably happen. Although Augustine would agree with African traditional religions that evil must occur, he disagreed that God is morally imperfect, as many African religions believe (CORDEIRO-RODRIGUES 2021).

Conclusion: Towards a New Understanding of Evil

Augustine was a philosopher living in the 4th and 5th centuries, but he left a tremendous legacy to all human beings. This legacy shed and will continue to shed much light on the problem of evil as well as the problem of human moral agency. Furthermore, Augustine has significantly influenced Christian doctrine and, particularly, views on evil. In this article, I have tried to show how African religions have played a role in Augustine's thought, as well as contrast his work with African religions to carry out a comparative philosophical enterprise. This view can bring us to a new understanding of evil

whereby evil is a natural phenomenon that inevitably occurs. This is partly because it is a necessary condition for goodness. This view, shared by Christian philosophers like Richard Swinburne, is also present in Augustine, for he believed that a cosmos with free will is a better cosmos. But considering African religions as an influence on Augustine allows for a new interpretation of Augustine: that evil will necessarily occur as a fact of the world. Evil is part of what the world is and therefore is inevitable.

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