

# The Cause of Evil

## Augustine of Hippo

The text, *On the Freedom of the Will*, is significant because it was written over a period of several years during which Augustine's views on this human freedom would change dramatically. Books I and II, which were written not long after Augustine's conversion, are fairly optimistic about man's freedom to choose the good and avoid evil. Book III, however, was written later as Augustine began to absorb the insights of St. Paul about original sin and the slavery of habit. In this text, we can see Augustine beginning to come to grips with the question of how human beings can still be responsible for sins they do not willingly commit and which are the penalty for sins committed by our original ancestors.

## BOOK I

### 1. Is God the Cause of Evil?

*EVODIUS*: Will you please tell me whether or not God is the cause of evil.

*AUGUSTINE*: I'll tell you, if you explain what kind of evil you're talking about. We typically speak of "evil" in two ways: first, the evil that someone has done, and, second, the evil someone has suffered.

*EVODIUS*: I want to know about both kinds.

*AUGUSTINE*: Well, if you believe that God is good (and it is wrong to think otherwise) he does not do evil. On the other hand, if we believe that God is just (and it is blasphemous to deny this), then we must also believe that he gives rewards to the good and punishes the wicked—punishments which naturally are evils to those who suffer them. So, if no one is punished unjustly (and we must believe this if we hold that the world is governed by divine providence), then God is the cause of the evil that human beings suffer, but not the evil that human beings do. Therefore if no one is punished unjustly (and this we must believe, since we believe that the universe is governed by divine providence), then God is not the author of the evil a

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man does though he is the author of the evil a man suffers.

*EVODIUS:* Then is there some other cause of that kind of evil that we don't attribute to God?

*AUGUSTINE:* Of course there is, for evil could not occur without a cause. But if you ask what the cause is, I can't tell you, since there is no single cause. Every individual is the cause of his or her own evil deeds. If you doubt this, then consider what I just said—namely, that evil deeds are punished by God's justice. They would not be punished justly had they not been performed voluntarily . . .

## BOOK III

### 4. The Will Must Be Free

*AUGUSTINE:* I'm sure you'll remember that in our previous discussion we agreed that nothing can make the mind a slave to sinful desire except its own will. It cannot be forced to do so by anything superior or equal to it, since that would be unjust, and it could not be forced by anything inferior to it, since an inferior thing would not have the power to compel it. The only other possibility, then, is that the movement by which the will turns from the enjoyment of the Creator to the enjoyment of lesser created things belongs to the will itself. So if that movement deserves blame, . . . then it is not natural, but voluntary.

Such a movement is similar to the downward falling of a stone in that the movement of a stone belongs to itself just as the movement of the mind belongs to itself. But it is dissimilar in that the stone doesn't have the power to stop its downward movement, whereas, the mind is not moved to abandon higher things and love inferior things, unless it wills to do so. Thus, the movement of a stone is natural, but the movement of the mind is voluntary. If someone were to say that a soul "sins" because it is carried downward by its weight, I wouldn't just say that he is as stupid as a stone, but that he's simply insane. . . .

*EVODIUS:* I see . . . that what you're saying is true. There's nothing I feel so strongly and intimately as that I have a will by which I am moved to enjoy something. I know nothing I can call more my own than the will by which I accept or reject things. So, if I use it to do evil, who should that evil be attributed to if not myself? Since a good God made me, I can't do any good except by my will, and it is clear that he gave me my will for that purpose. And, if the movement of that will was not voluntary, and not in our power, a person would not be deserving praise when he turned to higher things or blamed for turning to lower things. . . .

## 18. The Recognition of Inherited Sin

*AUGUSTINE*: . . . Nonetheless, there are some acts which are done out of ignorance that are condemned and deserving of correction, as we read in sacred scripture where St. Paul says, “I obtained mercy, because I did it out of ignorance. And the prophet says, “Remember not the sins of my youth and my ignorance.” Even things done out of necessity are blameworthy when someone wants to act rightly but cannot. This is the meaning of the following passages from scripture: “I do not do the good that I will; but the evil that I hate, that I do.” “To will the good is present to me, but I find no way to do it.” “The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh; for they war against each other, so that you do not do what you will.”

All these are the result of the sentence of death passed upon human beings, for if they were not penalties, but part of our nature, they wouldn't be sins . . . Who could doubt that this is a penalty? But every just penalty is a penalty for sin and is called a “punishment” . . . It follows, therefore, that this just penalty is the result of the condemnation of human beings.

It shouldn't be any wonder that, because of our ignorance, we lack the free choice of the will to act rightly, or that we see what is right and will to do it, but can't because of the resistance of carnal habits, which has grown almost as strong as nature, because of the unruliness of our mortal inheritance. Indeed, it is completely just that we should lose what we were unwilling to use properly, since we could without difficulty have used it had we so willed to do so. Thus, we who knew what was right but didn't do it lost the knowledge of what was right. And we who had the power to act rightly, but didn't do so, lost that power, even when we had the will.

There really are two penalties that afflict a sinful soul—ignorance and difficulty. Due to ignorance, the soul is warped by error; due to difficulty, our lives are afflicted by torment. But to accept falsehood as truth, so that one errs against his will and to be unable to refrain from lust, because of the pain involved in breaking away from carnal desires—these two things are not part of the nature that human beings as originally created, but are the penalty of one who has been condemned. When we speak of the free will to do what is right, we are speaking of the freedom with which human beings were originally made.

## 19. Why This Penalty is Just

Now, let's deal with that question so often raised by those ready to lay the blame for sinning on anything but themselves: “If it was Adam and Eve who sinned, what did we poor people do to be born with the blindness of ignorance and the torment of difficulties? Why should we first wander

about not knowing what to do, falling into error, and then, when the precepts of justice begin to be revealed to us, we will to do the right thing, but are prevented from doing so, because of carnal desire?"

My response to them is brief: Keep quiet and stop muttering against God. Perhaps their complaints would be justified if there was no one who ever triumphed over error and inordinate desire. But there is one present everywhere, who in many ways through his creation that serves him as Lord, calls out to those who have gone astray, teaches those who believe, comforts the hopeful, encourages the persistent, helps the struggling, and hears those who pray.

You aren't at fault for acting out of ignorance against your will, but rather because you don't ask about what you don't know. You're not at fault because you don't bind up your own wounds, but because you reject the one willing to heal you. These are your personal sins. A person . . . must humbly confess his weakness, so that God, who knows neither error nor difficulty, may come to his aid.

When anyone out of ignorance doesn't do what is right or cannot do what he rightly will to do, these actions are called sins, because they have their origin in the first sin of free will. These later sins are the consequences of that first sin. . . . For we use the word "sin," not only for sin in the strict sense of the word—namely, that which is performed knowingly and through free will—but also that which now necessarily follows from the punishment of those sins.

Similarly, we also talk about "nature," not only in the sense of that nature in which human beings were first created, faultless in their kind, but also that nature—mortal, ignorant and enslaved by the flesh—of those of us who were born as a result of the penalty for condemnation. This latter sense is what St. Paul refers to when he says, "We were born by nature children of wrath, as were the others."