

The impossibility of evil without ignorance and the progression toward good



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As society's rules and ideals have changed over time, so have their definitions of evil been completely revolutionized. While today evil is something morally wrong, a violation of some universal law, it was not always seen in the same light. St. Augustine and Plato both characterized evil as simply an absence of good. Since both men equated good with wisdom, evil, the absence of good, was akin to ignorance, the absence of wisdom. In their books, *Confessions* and *Symposium*, both Augustine and Plato support the idea that evil is only possible through ignorance. They explain the transition from evil and ignorance to good and wisdom as a progression toward fulfillment, and once a higher level of understanding is reached, it becomes obvious that evil had never been necessary in the quest for what is ultimately sought, happiness. In *Confessions*, Augustine equates God with truth. The only way to find the truth is to find God, and the two are so intertwined that it is difficult to distinguish between them. "No one can tell me the truth of it except my God, who enlightens my mind and dispels its shadows," (52). Ultimately the two become one entity, and Augustine realizes, in retrospect, that he was searching for both at the same time. "... you [God], who truly are the Truth..." "Truth! Truth! How the very marrow of my soul within me yearned for it..." (60). It might be argued that Augustine knew what he was doing when he sinned as a young man. He says on page fifty that he knew it was wrong, but he did not know why he did it ("Could I enjoy doing wrong for no other reason than that it was wrong?"). There lies the ignorance. If he had really sat down and reflected upon his desires, really discovered himself and, at the same time, God, he would have realized that the sin would not make him happy. He says many times that he was ignorant, that he lacked the truth, that he had to learn how to love God.

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These are not statements of a wise man, but rather of one who did not know the harm of what he did. Once he found God and became a Christian, he stopped sinning. The closer he got to God and the truth, the wiser he became, and the wiser he became, the less he sinned. It was only because he did not realize the pain and guilt his sins would cause him to suffer later on in life that he committed them. Had he known, he would never have deviated from Christianity in the first place and saved himself a great deal of hardship. Instead he underwent a great deal of study and questioning to arrive at the point of salvation. “ So, step by step, my thoughts moved on from the consideration of material things to the soul, which perceives things through the senses of the body, and then to the soul’s inner power, to which the bodily senses communicate external facts,” (151). Only then did he understand the harmful nature of sin and evil enough to be able to give it up. In Plato’s Symposium we see a similar progression. Diotima asserts that beauty and knowledge are synonymous, and that love is simply a life-long journey in search of beauty and wisdom. Obtaining these things for ourselves is the first step. The second step is passing them on to someone else. We achieve immortality by teaching wise and beautiful things, good things, to others. Since everyone’s ultimate goal is this immortality, this glory, no one can possibly do evil unless they are too ignorant to realize what it is they search. On page 49 (In204A) she says, “ For what’s especially difficult about being ignorant is that you are content with yourself, even though you’re neither beautiful and good nor intelligent.” Ignorant people do evil because they do not realize that they could do better. It might seem, initially, that Alcibiades’s actions in the years following the Symposium might refute this idea; he was wise and still committed great sin when he defaced the statues <https://assignbuster.com/the-impossibility-of-evil-without-ignorance-and-the-progression-toward-good/>

of the gods and abandoned Athens, but Socrates makes some comments during Alcibiades's speech that indicate that Alcibiades really had no concept of wisdom or good, that he was relying on Socrates on blind faith. The wisdom of his youth was not his own but simply an imitation of a man he revered. He wanted what Socrates had, even though he did not truly understand the nature of that thing (wisdom). He showed how ignorant he was when he proposed a trade, wisdom for sex. If he had been wise, he would not have need to offer sex to Socrates in exchange for wisdom he already had, and, he would have realized that it was an unfair exchange. In response, Socrates says, "[Alcibiades] you offer me the merest appearance of beauty, and in return you want the thing itself, [gold in exchange for bronze,]" (pg70, ln218E) and "The mind's sight becomes sharp only when the body's eyes go past their prime," (pg71, ln219A). Socrates knew that Alcibiades was ignorant if no one else did. Alcibiades did not want to be ignorant, but desire alone was not enough to make him wise and protect him from the harm of evil. In another of Plato's works, *The Menos*, Socrates says "...those who are ignorant of their nature do not desire them [evils]; but they desire what they suppose to be goods, although they are really evils; and if they are mistaken and suppose the evils to be goods, they really desire goods?" (203). It is against man's nature to desire anything that is not in his best interest, and his best interest, according to Augustine and Plato, is always the good. In Augustine's case, best interest was not sinning and being a faithful follower of God to avoid guilt and the wrath of God. Once one knew about the glory of heaven, it was impossible to turn away from it. In Plato's case, anyone who could clearly see the immortality they desired would never do evil. Evil was detrimental to immortality and to the person.

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But it is necessary to realize that neither Plato nor Augustine arrived at the truth all at once. As we progress, we begin to see the truth. We always wanted happiness, but we do not know what will bring us happiness without wisdom. Rather than one earth-shattering insight, we undergo a series of epiphanies, almost like gradually waking up. Every little while we wake up a little more, arriving at a whole new plateau of reality. With each plateau we understand a little more clearly, but we realize that we are still not fully awake. With each revelation, each epiphany, we see a little more of the big picture. We see the harm we inflict upon ourselves when we do evil things, and we begin to realize what evil is. Evil may not seem to be the same thing, depending upon one's level of truth. Both Plato and Augustine said that this search for truth was a lifelong journey. Diotima talked of love of bodies, then beauty in general, then souls, then knowledge, ending in a cosmic love. The last stage is not something we can ever reach, but we must keep journeying toward it. Augustine's personal progression toward Christianity was similar. He first realized that something was lacking and began to search. He found that a series of things were not at all what he needed, then found Christianity. He did not accept it immediately, but instead studied it and took it as his own, bit by bit. Finally he became a Christian, but because he is human and on earth, he is still imperfect. He still sins. He still studies, hoping to learn more. It is part of the never-ending progression of knowledge and good. No one, according to Diotima and Augustine, can ever be completely good. And so understanding the nature of our journey is a huge step to reaching our destination. We search for happiness, and the knowledge we gain in the search causes us to leave behind our evil. This progression can be seen clearly in Confessions and <https://assignbuster.com/the-impossibility-of-evil-without-ignorance-and-the-progression-toward-good/>

Symposium, but it can also be seen today. Wisdom, good, and happiness must be actively sought, even if we can never fully possess them.

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