# Structuring good and evil

Saint Augustine dwells upon the nature and origin of evil throughout his Confessions. Morality is an inextricable part of religion and religious doctrine, but the question seems to hold some greater weight for him beyond the teachings of the church. The question of evil “ depressed and suffocated” him, perplexed him and lead him into a series of thought experiments and spatial restructurings of the world around him (114). St. Augustine restructured the world in order to find evil – the mass or the machination – within it. For all the acclaim he later received for his abstract thought, he was instinctually a concrete, spatial thinker. Therefore, the problem of location of evil, or, similarly, of its origin, most plagued him. “ Why then have I the power to will evil and reject good? . . . Why put this power in me and implanted in me this seed of bitterness, when all of me was created by my very kind God?” (114) These are questions common to many philosophers and theologians across the years. However, Augustine, who proposes a series of answers throughout the first half of this work, ultimately arrives at an answer which satisfies him. Saint Augustine first constructs a spatial explanation for evil while exploring the sins of his instructors. These, he says, were men who considered the morality of their actions to be irrelevant, but rather who considered nothing shameful which could be spoken of gracefully. Augustine, of course, takes issue with this, saying that in behaving so, his teachers have turned away from God. “ To be far from [God’s] face is to be in the darkness of passion,” he explains (20). This statement is an accessible one: the metaphor between sin and darkness, and conversely between light and the divine, is ubiquitous in the Christian tradition. However, even as he makes this claim, he backs off of it, saying, “ one does not go far away from you or return to you by walking or by any movement through space” (20).

Clearly, then, the physicality implied in this relationship is only a metaphor for an emotional or spiritual position. Augustine seems to have no other way of explicating this emotional distance, however, since even in the Biblical story he quotes as evidence – that of the prodigal son – the sinning man has made a physical as well as a spiritual departure from his “ father”. While he places no literal caveats on this idea, Augustine fails to seem entirely convinced by it, a tone underlined by the plea found at the beginning of the following paragraph: “ Look, Lord God, look with patience as you always do” (21). He has only begun to explore this idea. The second of Saint Augustine’s speculations as to the nature of evil is much less spatial. It arises from a contemplation of his youth, and, perhaps because of this, is hardly as universal a definition of sin or evil as the one which preceded it. Here, Augustine says that his “ sin consisted in this, that [he] sought pleasure, sublimity, and truth not in God but in his creatures, in [himself] and other created beings” (22-3). The problem is simply that Augustine has mistaken the earthly for the divine. Misunderstanding this division, and thereby misunderstanding the very nature of the divine, is a problem prefigured many times in Christian theology. In the Book of Job, for instance, Job’s friends purport a fictitious knowledge of his evils. Since Augustine’s is a sin based on a fundamental misapprehension, it is unsurprising that he says that it “ plunged [him] into miseries, confusions, and errors” (23). This is a sin that begets other sins. When the fundamental tenets of a belief system are flawed, all of the ensuing trivia replicates those flaws, if subtly. What is wanting in this new paradigm for sin, however, is some sort of locale for evil. For lack of a more specific definition of evil, these statements begin to suggest that everything which presents the appearance of being good but

which is not God is evil. Thankfully, Saint Augustine returns to this idea just pages later, in the next chapter. Here, he bemoans his confused state: “ If only someone could have imposed restraint on my disorder. That would have transformed to good purpose the fleeting experiences of beauty in these lowest of things” (25). Patently, now, the evil is not in the things themselves, but Augustine has relocated it. He has named as the sin itself the disorder and confusion that he had previously believed to be simply the base of the sin. This, then, presents us with a system in which good can be salvaged from the world only through the “ restraint” of religious conviction.

Augustine’s next idea begins to show increasing shades of complexity. The passage in which he describes it reads in a rather disjointed manner, as though it is treating a vast network of ideas with extreme brevity. Although he introduces it at length, the first crucial premise he advances is this: “ Since in virtue I loved peace and in vice I hated discord, I noted that in virtue there is unity, in vice a kind of division” (67). Therefore, all virtuous acts will possess, or create some sort of “ unity,” sameness, or harmony. In what he calls “ the unity,” Saint Augustine senses truth, beauty, and rationality, but above all, good. These are similar words, and similarly structured, to the ones he uses to talk about the nature of God. Perhaps, then, within this system, good acts are committed wholly within God: motivated from within, completed within, and effectual within. On the contrary, since Augustine perceives good an evil as diametric opposites, he asserts that all sinful acts can be characterized by “ discord” or “ division.” In these very divisions, Augustine says, “ there was some substance of irrational life and the nature of supreme evil” (67). For the first time, he assigns some physical matter, as well as a haphazard consciousness, to the abstract idea of evil. This can be

read as an example of Augustine’s growing frustration as a satisfactory solution to the problem eludes him. Because he cannot explain evil, lending it both a medium of its own and a devious consciousness with which to play its tricks allows it to effectively defy explanation. In the meantime, its very fractured, inexplicable nature fits neatly into the meta-system he has constructed, where good is unified and its opposite is not. To his credit, Augustine, at the time of his writing, finds this argument false, saying that “ I did not know nor had I learnt that evil is not a substance, nor is our mind the supreme and unchangeable good” (67). This is likely the reason that he doesn’t explicate it any further. Perhaps he simply doesn’t feel as though he needs to, given that he spends a great deal of time on a related idea. From the very beginning of the text, Saint Augustine suggests a variety of physical forms for God. Some of his suggestions have a lovely insightful quality: “ We cannot think that you are given coherence by vessels full of you, because even if they were to be broken, you would not be split,” he says, to refute the idea that the earth itself is a vessel, poured full of God-liquid (4). At other times, Augustine assigns God an engineer’s role in the spatial world: he is called the “ Maker,” and in Him “ are the constant causes of inconstant things” (67, 7). Augustine would love to understand God on a physical level, but the three-dimensional realm has no patience with the contradictory statements typically used to discuss the divine: “ Never new, never old,” Augustine says of God, “ always active, always in repose” (5). When one talks in terms of concrete spaces, there is little room for ambiguity, since they are full or empty, dark and hollow or blazing with some sort of divine light. Ultimately, Saint Augustine condemns the idea of imagining God as any sort of physical form. Nonetheless, imagining God’s physicality occupies him

through much of the Confessions, and the products of this thought correspond to yet another of his suggestions on the nature of good and evil.” When I wanted to think of my God,” Augustine explains, “ I knew of no way of doing so except as a physical mass. Nor did I think anything existed which is not material . . . For the same reason I also believed that evil is a kind of material substance.” Specifically, he saw good and evil as two “ infinite” masses, though the evil mass was “ rather smaller.” These he saw as “ subtle physical [entities] diffused through space” (85). One could conjecture that, intentionally or unintentionally, ambient atmospheric morality would be absorbed into the general goings-on. Presumably, then, the morality of a thing could be judged by an instrument which would measure relative quantities of good and evil mass within it. St. Augustine acknowledges how preposterous these claims sound. He believes that the flaws in this and his other arguments arise from a flawed conceptualization of the nature of the relationship between God and the universe. The universe he imagined, permeated entirely by God, precluded the existence of evil, since all things permeated by and created by God, he intuited, would be good. Neoplatonism leads Saint Augustine to one of his final errant conceptualizations of good and evil. Here, the incorruptible, immune, and immutable become synonymous with the good and holy, whereas the corruptible, susceptible to injury, and mutable are inferior, or evil. He comes to this conclusion by comparing God with man: if God is both totally good and totally incorruptible, then man, who is not totally good, must be to some extent corruptible. It is interesting to note that, following Platonic logic more closely, “ God” would become a concept relegated to the world of ideas, a spatial position which would have posed a serious challenge to Augustine, had he chosen to

address it. As to this and the more intricate justification of his argument, Augustine passes it over, saying “ I did not know why and how, [but] it was clear to me and certain” (111). Having formulated it, he attempts to use this system of good and evil to purify himself, and, equating the heart with the pure and the mind with the susceptible, succeeds only momentarily in banishing the impure thoughts of his mind. Ultimately, he disregards the argument when it fails to provide a sufficient explanation of God’s physical location (111). Each of Saint Augustine’s hypotheses represented a clever approach to a problem that, it seemed, was ultimately without a solution. Evil could have no location in a world which was entirely of God. However, Augustine was finally able to relinquish his intuitively spatial thought at least momentarily, and it was this transgression of his nature that finally gave him the solution for which he had been searching. In that fateful moment, he seized upon an idea that functions perfectly within his paradigm: God is good, His creations are good, and only when good things are incongruous is there a need for the concept of evil. Here, intuition seems to work in Augustine’s favor: take the system in which it is good for a person to eat, and good for a person to retain property which he or she has earned. These two goods become incongruous when, in order for a person to eat, they must take food from another person, who has earned it. It then becomes necessary for something in the system – namely, the theft – to be denoted as evil. Augustine’s presentation of this idea transcends mere confidence, however. With the self-assurance granted him by his religious conviction, he states this idea as if it were incontrovertible fact. Having come upon what he considers the truth, he dismisses the rest of his suggestions as simple

indiscretions, ideas tossed out on the admittedly tortured playground of his youth.