

A Reply to My Critic

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Jonathan Yates's response to my analysis of Augustine's argument is a pleasure to read; I am tickled that my little analysis—composed to make sense for myself of a text that many of us at Villanova regularly teach to undergraduates—has elicited a response of such impressive historical and theological learning. Yates's opening sentence, of course, may be read in two ways. Either he is saying that my analysis is very thoughtful just as it is very brief, or he is saying that my analysis is as little thoughtful as it is brief. As my colleague is a gentleman as well as a scholar, I suppose that he intends the first reading, though I am happy and grateful for the possibility of the second.

I acknowledge: 1) that what is at question is, put precisely, whether evil has independent or metaphysical existence; 2) that Augustine's argument is traditional, with antecedents in Platonic thought; 3) that Augustine elaborates much the same argument elsewhere in his oeuvre; 4) that Augustine appeals to revelation in the course of his argument; and 5) that rejecting the privation theory of evil raises big questions. It should be noted, however, that what I reject in my analysis is that Augustine's argument for this theory is logically compelling. My reference to Shakespeare's *King Lear* suggests that there may be other reasons, born of the kind of reflection that literature permits, to make our own some version of the privation theory, or in any event the theses, distinct from this theory, that good has primacy over evil and that evil ultimately tends toward non-being.¹

Yet I am puzzled that Yates does not take issue with my analysis of the logic of Augustine's argument. The weak link in Augustine's argument is his unspoken premise that it is better for things to be incorruptible than to be corruptible. Yates does not claim that this link is more defensible than I estimate it to be. Yates would prefer to translate the clause "*Et manifestatum est mihi quoniam bona sunt corrumpuntur*" as,

“And it was *revealed* to me that good [things] are things that could be corrupted.” Fine—but what good does this do for Augustine’s argument? Should we also take it as revealed that to be incorruptible is in all cases better than to be corruptible?

Yates is surely right that Augustine “prioritizes faith and revelation over rationality and logic”—so long as we take this claim aright. As James J. O’Donnell nicely puts it (quoted by Yates), Augustine’s practice is “to cling to what he knows for certain, to attempt to provide explanations for difficulties, and to stand with what he knows by faith even when logical difficulties remain.” Surely many thoughtful people of faith, to this day, do the same. Yet Yates gives this “prioritization” a peculiar twist. He goes on to speak of the “prioritization...of revelation over logic” (the terms “faith” and “rationality” dropping away), seeming to suggest, if I understand correctly, that the believer may at times dispense with logic and its pesky demands of validity and soundness. Surely this is not right. Instead, to speak with O’Donnell again, the person of good faith, so to speak, who “knows by faith” should recognize “logical difficulties” when they remain. Otherwise that faith is at risk of decaying into bad faith.²

Finally, I must reckon with the possibility, I am told, that my rejection of Augustine’s argument might necessitate, almost certainly, that I abandon traditional monotheism and, by extension, traditional Christianity. Two remarks as I near the abyss: 1) A lot is riding here on what is packed into the adjective “traditional.” Does not the tradition—does not Augustine himself—bear witness to evil as a problem to which all our answers, if there is an answer other than the cross, must be themselves problematic?³ (Is there an obvious answer in Job?) Further, whether God is omnipotent is ambiguous in the Hebrew Scriptures (think of J’s God in Genesis); are theologians who have speculated that creation puts bounds on God’s power (or, perhaps more precisely, that in creating God freely undertook a limitation of divine power) orthodox/traditional or heterodox/non-traditional? 2) It seems that my colleague would have me agree that the choices come down to Augustine’s argument, on the one hand, or atheism, metaphysical dualism, heterodoxy, or metaphysical feats beyond me, on the other. To which I succumb to the temptation to reply: Are there not more

things in heaven and earth, and in the Hebrew-Christian tradition, than are dreamt of in Augustine's philosophy, at least as we have it in book 7 of the *Confessions*?

Notes

1. I take this language from Crosby (2007, 505). As Crosby nicely explains, the privation theory aligns good with being and evil with non-being.
2. See for a lively discussion of bad faith chapter 4 of Keller 2008, "Against patriotism" (71–93). Compare Crosby 2007, 490, on "why it is important to get clear about the mode of being proper to evil."
3. See Lee 2007 and Crosby 2007 for a recent disputation of the privation theory by two philosophers claiming to stand in the *philosophia perennis*. Lee replies here to an earlier paper of Crosby's. Interestingly, in his reply to Lee, Crosby adduces "the two evil daughters of King Lear, Regan and Goneril," as examples of "contentful evil" that cannot be understood in terms of privation. See Crosby (2007, 494–495).

References

Crosby, John F.

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