

I remember in philosophy class the lecturer was talking about the Augustinian concept of evil. It's a concept I immediately dismissed based purely on intuition. While I believed there is no inherent, objective, Ideal evil, something I maintain to this day, my rejection was rooted in an area of intuition alien to my moral relativism. Rather than relying on my pure intuition, this piece is a reassessment of the Augustinian concept.

First, an actual definition must be presented. In his *Enchiridion*, Augustine writes the following:¹

“All of nature, therefore, is good, since the Creator of all nature is supremely good. But nature is not supremely and immutably good as is the Creator of it. Thus the good in created things can be diminished and augmented. For good to be diminished is evil; still, however much it is diminished, something must remain of its original nature as long as it exists at all. For no matter what kind or however insignificant a thing may be, the good which is its "nature" cannot be destroyed without the thing itself being destroyed. There is good reason, therefore, to praise an uncorrupted thing, and if it were indeed an incorruptible thing which could not be destroyed, it would doubtless be all the more worthy of praise. When, however, a thing is corrupted, its corruption is an evil because it is, by just so much, a privation of the good. Where there is no privation of the good, there is no evil. Where there is evil, there is a corresponding diminution of the good. As long, then, as a thing is being corrupted, there is good in it of which it is being deprived; and in this process, if something of its being remains that cannot be further corrupted, this will then be an incorruptible entity [*natura incorruptibilis*], and to this great good it will have come through the process of corruption. But even if the corruption is not arrested, it still does not cease having some good of which it cannot be further deprived. If, however, the corruption comes to be total and entire, there is no good left either, because it is no longer an entity at all. Wherefore corruption cannot consume the good without also consuming the thing itself. Every actual entity [*natura*] is therefore good; a greater good if it cannot be corrupted, a lesser good if it can be. Yet only the foolish and unknowing can deny that it is still good even when corrupted. Whenever a thing is consumed by corruption, not even the corruption remains, for it is nothing in itself, having no subsistent being in which to exist.

From this it follows that there is nothing to be called evil if there is nothing good. A good that wholly lacks an evil aspect is entirely good. Where there is some evil in a thing, its good is defective or defectible. Thus there can be no evil where there is no good. This leads us to a surprising conclusion: that, since every being, in so far as it is a being, is good, if we then say that a defective thing is bad, it would seem to mean that we are saying that what is evil is good, that only what is good is ever evil and that there is no evil apart from something good. This is because every actual entity is good [*omnis natura bonum est.*] Nothing evil exists in itself, but only as an evil aspect of some actual entity. Therefore, there can be nothing evil except something good. Absurd as this sounds, nevertheless the logical connections of the argument compel us to it as inevitable. [...]" (*The Enchiridion of Augustine*, Ch. 4)

¹ Summary of this argument after the extract.

This passage is hard to understand, at least nowadays, so the core of his argument is as follows:

- As all-good, God created nature as all-good accordingly.
- The moral-quality of things can be changed. The change of the moral-quality of something that is all-good necessarily leads to it becoming less good; more evil.
- Where there is no deprivation of good, there is no evil: evil relies on good's absence. Furthermore, where evil exists it corresponds with a deprivation of the good.
- If the deprivation is complete, there is no good left: the thing is wholly evil.
- Evil—therefore—exists not as a thing itself, but as a thing contingent on good.

In this sense, evil is not as much its own thing but is rather the absence of good (“privatio boni”).

² It is this shortening of the concept, evil as the absence of good, that was explained to us.

Backing up this simplification, the following analogy: just as darkness is the absence of light, evil is the absence of good; darkness is to light as evil is to good.

It is from this understanding one can see the immediate, intuitive flaws: namely, that there are actions that seem to be evil in-and-of-themselves. Actions such as murder,³ considered evil, originate from humans—as imperfect moral agents—and are therefore there exists evil that doesn't rely on good.

Let us now, however, return to the analogy. Suppose a light source—easy enough. Now suppose I block it with my hand. Am I not, through my own action, creating darkness? This is where intuition falls short: I can be the independent creator of something and that something is still reliant on something else entirely.

Even then, this intuitive objection fundamentally looks at the problem in the wrong way: it's looking at it through a deontological lens. Deontology is the word in philosophy that describes moral philosophies that give moral value to actions in-and-of-themselves, not the effects of those actions (which is broadly known as consequentialism, though there are other alternatives). This deontological view fails to view the argument charitably as the argument is fundamentally consequentialist: it view the morality of an action as determined by how it influences the moral-quality of the external world. With this in mind, we can look at murder—and other immoral acts—as evil in that it deprives the good of the world around the murderer, not in that murder is evil in-and-of-itself.

² There are some extra steps he takes, but in order to not have the quote consume the entire essay I miss them out. Essentially, he says that good and bad cannot at the same time exist, and therefore that evil is the absolute absence of good. If this is still unclear, I recommend you read through the [full chapter](#).

³ Murder in the sense of immoral killing, not necessarily to do with legality; murder in this sense is necessarily immoral by definition.

Having shown that this concept works within the wider context of his ideas of moral objectivism and an all-good God, I now seek to adapt it in a way that fits in more with my wider context of moral relativism in the face of God. Strictly, I am agnostic, though recently I'm finding myself leaning more towards theism. However, my philosophy describes a God that lacks moral authority: so, whether or not God exists, God cannot be the source of good. It is us, as independent moral agents, who define our own good and evil in the face of God's good and evil.

With this in mind, in which ways is the Augustinian conception of evil useful? Rather than describing a state of things, we can adapt it as a framework more than anything else. It is useful in that it provides a path in making the subconscious moralising concrete. It may seem trivial that it is made concrete, but it is only through the establishment of a concrete framework that the abstract, nebulous morality can be made malleable.

Why, however, must we make morality malleable? To understand this, one must first understand where morality comes from. Core to capitalism are two sets of things: the base and the superstructure. The former, which primarily shapes the latter, is largely the means of productions and the relations to production; the latter, which primarily maintains the former, is the things like art, culture, law, and so on.⁴

It is easy to consider these things as independent, however they are interconnected. The sum of the superstructure is socialised to us: core to this socialisation, morality. Hence, bourgeois morality ideologically maintains the base—the solid, economic base of capitalism. Hence, it is only through malleability, and therefore through a framework, of morality that we can negate it in such a way it stops maintaining capitalism.

Why, then, the is evil-is-the-absence-of-good approach useful? It is useful not as the end-product, so to speak, of the moral framework; rather, it is useful at analysing the different conclusions with different premises.

First and foremost, it is a consequentialist approach. Deontological approaches are themselves a part of reactionary morality: rather than seeing the individual as itself a part of the wider world, it sees it independent of the external. Consequentialist approaches, on the contrary, see an individual as the way they interact with the external world. Furthermore, deontology doesn't care about improvement of the wider world, it's only concerned with the inherent morality of actions; distinctively, consequentialism seeks to improve the world. In this sense, consequentialist approaches cease to maintain capitalism when capitalism is demonstrated to be immoral, even using capitalism's own moral principles. This is not true of deontology.⁵

⁴ The determination is not as unidirectional as base determines superstructure alone; in reality, both influence the other in different ways and to different degrees. Superstructure does, for instance, somewhat determine the base, but it is far stronger in the converse.

⁵ For instance, capitalism constrains the individual; authenticity is drastically limited and hindered. Where the act of making revolution, as inherently violent in practice, might be *deontologically* immoral, it is instead viewed as moral when seen *consequentialistically*.

The first premise is that as God is all-good, the natural state is itself all-good. This is, of course, contested by my morality: God dictates no objective moral philosophy and therefore cannot say what of nature is good, and certainly cannot say that it is objectively good. In this sense, there is no inherent polarity to the good/evil scale, which contrary to the Augustinian interpretation.

With this established, we can move onto looking at good and evil as independent categories. This raises the question: if they are independent, why think of good and evil as as a single scale? In this sense, there are two approaches: the one-axis approach and the two-axis approach. In the former, we have a simple good/evil scale where on the one side there is good and, on the other, evil; in the latter, good and evil are separated into distinct, individual scales. If we were to lack an external, observable world, perhaps this question would be unanswerable; however, we have the privilege of observation and therefore can choose accordingly.

Consider the act of socialising land: this would be good for those without land, but it would be bad for landowners. Perhaps this could be shown by having some middle-of-the-road value—neither wholly good nor wholly bad. This, however, is limiting: is something like this, which has negative consequences, comparable to something that is middle-of-the-road without any negative consequences? In practice, the unification of axes into one obscures important information: the two-axis approach is best.

Using the centuries-old philosophy which worked in the context of its reactionary morality, we have advanced the revolutionary moral framework. It seems clear now that, in order to fully understand the moral character of an action, a two-axis approach is required in lieu of an objective default.