

Augustine's Good and Evil

What are we to think of a man who tells God, "I defied you, even so far as to relish the thought of lust, and to gratify it, too - within the walls of your church, during the celebration of your mysteries."

He was a daring, in-your-face iconoclast. A wild fornicator, with many mistresses, and a bastard son. A self-confessed thief who declared "the evil in me was foul, but I loved it." How's that for modern liberation?

Those words were written in A.D. 398 by Saint Augustine, one the fullest sinners, and greatest Saints in all of Christendom, in his *Confessions*, a book I happened to read this Christmas week.

So the thought came to me that the power and the beauty of Augustine's physical and spiritual struggles, all sparked by Christ's birthday tomorrow, are still, in microcosm, the ongoing and unsettled struggles of our anti-spiritual time.

Everywhere in the churches of this secular land we see sparse congregations, grey hair, and lots of women. Our spiritually hungry youth, seeking fire, discover there mostly boredom and ashes. And yet the greatest surprise in reading Augustine, is not preachiness, not scolding analysis - but fire. His overwhelming passion. His burning emotional, sensual, and intellectual fervour.

His struggles centered on three main problems: the flesh, good and evil, and the cosmos. As a youth, he travelled to Carthage to study, where, he writes, "I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust." Sounds like a modern university.

There, he says he twisted in the chains of pleasure, and loved it, "wallowing in filth and scratching the itching sore of lust." But he soon felt submerged by pleasure, locked in a mortal struggle with his own appetites, beyond which he saw nothing. So one day he cried out half-hearted for relief, begging God, "give me chastity and continence - but not yet." He was still a young deal-maker.

And where are we today, but drowning in sensuality, submerged in it as a people. We live in a time when mainstream newspapers cannot be left open for young eyes, so filled are they with embarrassingly raw discussions and depictions of sex, and near adoration of what Augustine called the "sin of Sodom." He struggled against this sensual suffocation, in search of a higher truth.

His resolution was to argue that if there was a God, then He himself must be the highest, most

perfect love, downward from which other forms of love flowed, to the basest love of our most beastly and binding appetites. Therefore it is imperative for us not only to distinguish amongst, and rank the forms of love, but actively to repudiate the worst, and seek the best. To discriminate.

Thus having freed himself from the fetters of mere passion, Augustine shaped the moral hierarchies of the Western world - and thereby freed it to pursue the same heights. It is a world now busily repudiating his lesson in the name of egalitarian pluralism and diversity, a world that says there is nothing higher, and everything is equally good. So back into the chains we go.

Having solved the question 'What is good?' Augustine then agonized over how it is possible to have a good God and a bad world. For ten years he argued - mistakenly, he came to say - that both good and evil were substances, like things, and just as his own spirit struggled with his flesh, the good and evil God put on earth are locked in struggle.

He freed himself from this idea when he further reasoned that if God was good, his whole cosmos must be good. Therefore evil could not come from these good things, but from a misuse of the will. Evil was an idea. This conclusion, too, has shaped our moral life and our whole body of law, because it conceives of humans as moral agents, capable of good or evil by choice. This is now a corrupted legacy in a society, the schools and courts of which are more likely to teach us that all bad behaviour is a result of low income, or socialization, or abuse of some kind; that crime is not our fault, but the fault of our environment. We are back to the notion that evil springs from things.

Augustine's last struggle in the Confessions, like that of any youth straining to understand the stars, was with the existence of the cosmos itself. He undertakes an acute analysis of the nature of time, as a response to the ancient question, "If God made the universe, what existed before the Big Bang?"

His answer is that time is simply a function of moving things, such as planets and people. In itself, it does not exist, because the future is only what is not yet, and the past is only what has been, but is no longer. There is only the ongoing present. Eternity. Just what was here when the universe in time was created.

Our way of undertaking the same interrogation is to send the \$5 billion Hubble telescope into space to peer into the infinite, only to hear Stephen Hawking, the most fashionable cosmologist of our secular time, conclude on behalf of that most secular science of physics, that to know the answers to these questions will be "to know the mind of God."