

Augustine on the origin of evil: myth and metaphysics

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We know vividly from the *Confessions* that Augustine's struggle to conceive of the boundless reality of God turns on what he imagines evil to be. His considered view of the matter, that evil exists only as a "privation of the good" (*privatio boni*), a form of non-being, is a Neoplatonic commonplace.¹ But Augustine puts his own stamp on the bare metaphysics. He speaks in *City of God* of the split within the angelic ranks between the angels who fall into themselves and eternally darken their minds and those who hold steady to the deliverances of divine light; he speaks of Satan, the perverted light-bearer and father of lies, who shows up in Eden in a serpent's guise and seduces the woman into a fateful transgression; he speaks of Adam, her mate and the model of a human sinner, who sees through the serpent's deception but grievously underestimates the cost to him and his race of his obscurely motivated disobedience.

In *Confessions*, the privative nature of evil is intimated in Augustine's Adamic need to bring his flesh and spirit into some sort of sane conjunction. At a critical point in the Genesis story of creation and parting – a story of trouble in a garden paradise (Gen. 2:4b–3:24) – Adam finds himself having to choose between flesh and spirit (Gen. 3:6): his partner, the flesh of his flesh, has eaten fruit from the tree of knowledge; she offers him a taste of what his divine maker, the breath of his breath, has associated with death. Adam takes his taste, defies his God, and, by Augustine's reckoning, condemns all of his descendants to a mortal life and a life lived out of interior conflict: from now on there will be no easy choice of spirit over flesh. At the beginning of *Confessions* 8, the book where Augustine details his time of anguish in a garden retreat, he tells us that while he loved the

¹ Plotinus, the third-century Platonist whose writings were to revolutionize Augustine's conception of God, famously identifies evil with matter (see esp. *enn.* 1.8, 2.4), but the Plotinian notion of materiality is one of consummate deprivation: not solid stuff or indeed any kind of subject, but a beckoning, formless nullity, foreign to goodness. For an illuminating entry into the intricacies of this notion, consult Gerson 1994: 191–98. For a clear statement in Augustine of the *privatio* thesis, see *conf.* 3.7.12.

fleshless God of pure spirit, he still found himself tightly tied to his origins in a woman (*adhuc tenaciter conligabar ex femina; conf.* 8.1.2); he still wanted to embrace, with some part of himself, the life that takes in sex and death. The deprivation to which his recalcitrant desire attests has two aspects to it: like Adam before him, Augustine lacks the experience of what it means to be fully human and not feel compelled to make a choice between flesh and spirit; also like Adam before him, Augustine's deprivation is, in some way, his own choice. Augustine believes that all Adamic beings – or all human beings, that is, save Christ (who is Adamic only on his mother's side²) – have deprived themselves of a perfection that no human being, again save Christ, has ever experienced.

In *City of God* Augustine adds an angelic gloss to the Adamic plot. Before Adam ever makes his fateful choice of flesh over spirit, renegade angels abandon the heavenly chorus, fall into self-obsession, and make for hell, the infernal counterpart of God's celestial city. When the most self-obsessive of these renegades intrudes upon the earth and uses a serpent's tongue to tempt Eve into trading life for knowledge (or what she will see as greater life), he ends up playing two distinctive roles in Augustine's exegesis. On the one hand, Satan is a character in a story of human redemption. He begins the story by leading the original progenitors of humanity into sin and death; Christ, his antitype, will end the story by leading a number of their descendants (the number of angels lost) back to innocence, albeit this time an incorruptible one. On the other hand, Satan stands in for the absoluteness of sin itself, for the sin that exists prior to temptation and so makes the temptation to sin possible. Satan himself isn't tempted into sin; he needs no offer of flesh before he will act to corrupt his own spirit. His sin demonizes him, situates his self-corruption always in the "before" of any story of redemption. Not even Christ can alter the priority. And yet if, as Augustine will argue, it is the sin in Adam and Eve that leads them to fall into sin (see esp. *civ. Dei* 14.13), how are humanity's progenitors not demons themselves?

There is a heady mix of myth and metaphysics in the *City of God* account of evil's origination. I aim in this essay to sort things out and then revisit Augustine's commitment to the *privatio* thesis: his supposition that evil is an absence, only a shadow of something real, and so not a thing of its own

² From his mother, Mary, Christ inherits the mortality that comes of original sin but not the concupiscence. He is never truly tempted to subordinate his eternal spirit to the desires of his mortal flesh; throughout his life on earth, his holy father's will reigns supreme in him. It may have reigned similarly supreme in his mother, whose humanity Augustine finds only slightly less exceptional than Christ's; see *nat. et gr.* 36.42.

kind. Admittedly the specter of irretrievably fallen angels, working with Satan to sow misery into creation, suggests an evil that is by nature more than privative. An absence is not an agent, and still Augustine invites us to imagine perpetually unsettled beings who are always seeking to subvert the good: where does an absence get the legs for that? But I am not going to be arguing that Augustine tells a story about good and evil that just flatly contradicts his preferred metaphysics. The truth is more involved. His narrative ingenuity, much on display in *City of God*, sustains two subtly different readings of the *privatio* thesis. One I will call the “presumptive” reading; the other the “preemptive.”

The presumption behind the presumptive reading is that God, being absolutely good, never acts to diminish goodness either in himself or in the beings whom he has created.³ This is a presumption with complex and not always clear implications, but one implication it clearly cannot have for Augustine is that God never creates beings with less than absolute goodness. Such an implication would, in effect, drive a wedge between being perfectly good and being procreative, leaving God sublimely self-enclosed and alone. The alternative is to assume that the perfectly good God creates beings whose less than absolute goodness admits of a relative perfection. Neither angels nor human beings can, as creatures, have the perfection of their creator, but there are better and worse angels, better and worse human beings. The bad angels, having become demonic, are categorically bad; the bad human beings are all bad because of sin, but in the earthly plane of time and transformation, it is often hard to tell saints and sinners apart (*civ. Dei* 1.35).

There is also the calculation of the relative merits of angelic and human goodness, but that calculation does not play into Augustine’s question of evil’s first foothold. There the concern is with what makes relatively perfect beings imperfect. If the presumption is that God cannot be the answer, then that makes corruption the business of lesser creators. Some of the original angels have deprived themselves of their original goodness; they have created deprivation where before there was none. Analogously all human beings, by way of their solidarity with Adam, the paradigmatic sinner, have invented their own form of alienation from God. Self-corrupting human and demonic creators have together been corrupting the broader material order, translating internal deprivations into external forms of harm.

³ I refer to Augustine’s sublimely immaterial God as a “he” in recognition of Augustine’s reverence for God as the eternal Father. I write the pronoun in the lowercase – “he” rather than “He” – in order to suggest what this form of reverence leaves unresolved.

I will set out the further terms of Augustine's presumptive reading of the *privatio* thesis in the section of my essay I call "metaphysics." I mean to signal by this designation a stark contrast with a more narrative rendering of evil's emergence, a myth or story of a character's loss of innocence. (And by "myth" I mean a peculiarly telling story, the story behind many stories, and not just a fanciful tale.) Augustine really has no story to tell about how a good angel goes bad; he has instead a metaphysical mystery that he tries to dress up as a story. The crux of the desired story, the transition from good to evil, turns out to be impossible to relate. For it is not out of goodness that an angel goes bad; it is not out of anything. It is out of nothing, in fact, or, more precisely, it is out of not being God. An angel, like any creature, is good being of God; is capable of having its goodness undone (*posse deficere; civ. Dei* 12.8) being other than God and of nothingness (*ex nihilo*). Satan is the angel who, failing to recognize his own beauty in the blinding divine light, seeks out the perspective of darkness, of decreation, where his ties to God and to all others will have come undone. But if the presumption behind the presumptive reading is right, no deprivation comes from God: Satan must have first rejected his gift of self-knowledge before chasing after an empty, illusory, and unsatisfying alternative.

When Augustine uses the angelic fall to frame the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent, his disposition is to depict Satan as the paradigm of sin, human and demonic, and not simply as an agent of temptation. The assimilation of Adam's sin to Satan's brings out the chief liability of the presumptive reading: that it renders all sin irredeemable. Consider Satan's loss of grace, his demotion from being Lucifer, the light-bearer. His condition is irredeemable not because he is a uniquely horrific transgressor, but because he retains his capacity to reject whatever grace has been given him; he remains, as an independent contractor of deprivation, forever unstable in God. How would an Adam, sinning like a Satan, be any different?

In the section of my essay that I call "myth," I look carefully at the opportunity Augustine gives himself to tell a different story about Adam – one that differentiates human sin from its demonic parody. The bare narrative difference is obvious: Adam has a partner in sin, the woman, Eve, "the mother of all that lives" (Gen. 3:20); Satan sins unprompted by a demonic counterpart and without need of external encouragement. There is no woman, no lure of the flesh, in Satan's story – no solidarity in sin (hell being truly the antithesis of a city).

Augustine pays attention to the different roles that Adam and Eve play in bringing about the first human sin largely because of what Paul has to say about the matter in his first letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 2:13–14): "For Adam

was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was and became a transgressor.” In other words, Eve actually believes the serpent when he tells her that eating from the tree of knowledge is a good thing, a way to become more like a god, while Adam knows full well that the serpent is lying. But not wishing to abandon his partner to her folly, Adam joins Eve in her transgression. More so than in his two earlier forays into Genesis – the commentary against the Manichees (*Gn. adv. Man.*) and the great literal commentary (*Gn. litt.*)⁴ – Augustine in *City of God* resolves to align his take on Adam’s transgression with Paul’s. The significance of this resolve is that Augustine’s Adam acts out of a privation and does not only create one. Eve’s transgression separates her not only from God but also from her human partner, and Adam feels his separation from her as a loss. He disobeys God and risks death in order to be with her again. Certainly it remains open to Augustine to refit his Pauline Adam to a Satanic mold, discount this Adam’s love for Eve as a motive for his sin, and leave him nakedly God-defying. This tack returns Augustine to his presumptive reading of the *privatio* thesis, but it also distances him from Paul and his best chance of understanding the origin of evil in light of a story.

The “preemptive” reading of the *privatio* thesis avoids resolving myth into metaphysics. It sticks with a story, still in the making, about the transformation of human sin into the love of God. Adam chooses the flesh of his flesh over the breath of his breath – the woman over God – and his act of transgression, in keeping with both readings of it, preemptive and presumptive, remains inalienably his own. It is no part of the preemptive reading simply to move the onus of sin back to God and render Adam an innocent victim; Adam does lose his innocence, but his loss, freed from the framework of the presumptive reading, is no longer essentially damning.

Consider the inner life of his transgression, the question of Adam’s motive. The presumptive reading presumes that at the end of the analysis, an Adam looking in on himself will have run out of reasons for his desire to transgress: he just sins, and that’s it. The preemptive reading preempts this conclusion and leaves open the question of what Adam’s sin finally means. When he chooses the woman over God, Adam transgresses, but he transgresses against the God whom he has conceived to be antithetical to his love of a beloved’s flesh. Perhaps this is a naïve conception on his part, one he

⁴ Some chronology: *Gn. adv. Man.* dates from 388; Augustine works on *Gn. litt.* over an extended period of time, from 401 to 415. He writes *civ. Dei*, Books 13 and 14, several years after the completion of *Gn. litt.*, likely between 418 and 420. For detailed chronological charts of Augustine’s life, works, and historical context, see Brown 2000, the new edition.

needs to outgrow; he still knows too little about spirit to be assuming that his God is not also her son too, the mother of all that lives.⁵ On the preemptive reading, Adam acts to create a deprivation in his self-knowledge, but the deprivation is not his ultimate motive. He may discover, God willing, that he has been moved by God to seek God.

Augustine's angelology in *City of God* is too thin to sustain a preemptive reading of the angelic fall. He gives us far too little to conceive of the God that a fall of angels portends. The forgiveness of a Satan has to remain, then, inconceivable. But in the Adamic drama, it is relatively clear what God will have to have become to allow an Adam forgiveness: his mother's son. In the weighty matter of the origin of evil, my argument will be that we learn most from Augustine when we favor his Christology over his angelology and let *City of God* stand as testimony to the limits of presumption.

I METAPHYSICS

When Augustine speculates about human life in Eden prior to the first sin, he underscores its perfection (*civ. Dei* 14.10): Adam and Eve enjoy an untroubled love (*amor imperturbatus*) both for one another and for God; theirs is a fellowship lived out of trust and honesty (*fida et sincera societate*); they take great satisfaction from it, and it never ceases to be available to them (*non desistente quod amabatur*); consequently they have no trouble not giving in to sin – their avoidance of it is serene (*devitatio tranquilla peccati*). On the last point, Augustine further speculates that it cannot be fear of death that keeps Adam and Eve from eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge. Fear is not a tranquil emotion but a source of agitation, especially when mixed with curiosity and carnal desire, and Augustine insists that Adam and Eve are free from agitation of any kind. Indeed they have the sort of intelligent and inwardly stable happiness that worldly philosophers post Eden – the Stoics especially – try vainly to achieve.⁶

⁵ I am suggesting that Eve in the garden is both human and divine: the man's female counterpart, and so subject to Adamic anxieties about who God is and what God wants, but also the female image of God, or that aspect of divinity that is friendly to mortal life and its transformative possibilities. My suggestion is not Augustine's view of the matter – his Eve is a fallen woman and only that – but I submit that my suggestion is best in keeping with Augustine's sense of the redemptive power of incarnate spirit.

⁶ Augustine's discussion of Edenic life in *civ. Dei* 14.10 forms part of his broader reflection in Book 14 on the psychology of human happiness and its earthly limits. In his estimation, pagan philosophy, epitomized by Stoicism, promises more than it can possibly deliver: a virtual restoration of the original peace of mind that was lost after Eden. See Wetzel 1992: 98–111 for more on Augustine's polemical construct of Stoicism.

With their psychologies thus perfected, it becomes impossible to determine what would move an Adam or an Eve to sin. These two human originals have everything they need to be disposed to find steadfast obedience to God their heart's desire. But this is just Augustine's point. If they have everything they need – the internal resources especially – and they sin anyway, then nothing that God has withheld from them can possibly be the motive for their transgression. It is not because they feel deprived of the good of the fruit of knowing that they sin. The only good that this fruit represents, as Augustine tries to make clear (*civ. Dei* 14.17; *Gn. litt.* 8.6.12), is the good of never having disobeyed God. And this is a good that Adam and Eve have already been enjoying in abundance, being such richly endowed creatures. When they break trust with God, eat from the tree, and settle into a faithless self-awareness, something in them will have misconstrued what knowledge is and what knowledge has to do with life. That something comes from them and not from God, and, given the fullness of their lives, it is a something that amounts to little more than their sheer willingness to be deprived: it is little more, that is, than the nothingness towards which it tends.

The problem for Augustine's exegesis – putting aside for now the perplexity of an essentially deficient motive – is that he has a better candidate for the fruit of knowing than the ironical good of never having disobeyed. (Obeying God is a plausible enough good, but when its goodness is made out to be the fruit of knowing, the divine prohibition against eating makes for a blind and impoverished obedience.) The lure of the fruit of knowing is the lure of a divine life. The serpent tells the woman that she is “not doomed to die” if she eats, that she and her partner “will become as gods” and know good and evil as a god does; she in turn looks longingly at the tree, whose fruit has now become for her “good for eating” and a “lust to the eyes” – an erotic offering.⁷ Augustine assumes in his exegesis that the serpent is lying and that Eve, having let her lust for life get the better of her judgment, falls for the lie. But even Augustine's undeceived Adam has a plausible motive for wanting to add more vitality to his life. Like his partner, he begins his existence in a body of clay. If he does not eat regularly from the tree of life, that clay body will age and die; in and of itself, it is mortal stuff (*civ. Dei* 13.23; cf. *Gn. litt.* 6.21.32). Adam's refined spiritual mind,

⁷ It is also worth noting that when the serpent suggests to the woman that God (Yahweh) has forbidden her to eat from all the trees in Eden, she quickly identifies the tree “in the midst of the garden” as the only forbidden item (Gen. 3:1–3). She never mentions the tree by name. In Gen. 2:9, we are told that both trees, life and knowledge, are “in the midst of the garden.” The implication of her ambiguous reference to the forbidden tree is that knowledge and life look the same to her. For my translation of Genesis, I am using Alter 1996.

unclouded by lust, will have told him that he is destined for a better incarnation, one that brings the source of his life's vitality more intimately into conjunction with his flesh. But Adam cannot simply give up on his flesh in order to abide more fully with spirit, for he is essentially an incarnate being: hence his dilemma when his partner, the flesh of his flesh, exchanges knowledge for life and bids him to do likewise.

Adam's mortality is a tricky subject. There is a clear sense for Augustine in which Adam is already mortal before he ever partakes of his partner's fruit and enters into the doom of death. He is mortal by virtue of his flesh. But Augustine also wants to insist that Adam's original mortality is somehow less doomed than the mortality that comes to him and his descendants when he joins with the woman and weakens the human condition.

Augustine cues his sense of the difference between the two mortalities to Paul's distinction in first Corinthians (1 Cor. 15: 44) between an animal body (*corpus animale; sōma psychikon*) and a spiritual one (*corpus spiritale; sōma pneumatikon*). Paul uses the distinction to mark the difference between the first Adam and Christ, the second, and also to suggest the miraculous transformation of an earth-born body into immortal, resurrected flesh. The spiritualized body of a resurrected saint has no need of physical sustenance; it is sustained by divine light, much as an immaterial angel in heaven is. But unlike the angels, the saints in heaven all begin in earth-sown bodies; and that kind of body, Paul says (1 Cor. 15: 35–36), has to die before anything spiritual can take its place. Augustine agrees, but he also wonders whether this was always so. Imagine an Adam who never sins. What becomes of this Adam's animal body? The answer is that he and his partner, the woman, here presumed sinless as well, both move tranquilly from animal to spiritual existence, without having to undergo a death – a violent sundering of soul from body.⁸ Adam's animal body, according to Augustine, once had a miraculous capacity to morph directly into spirit (*civ. Dei* 14.10; *Gn. litt.* 6.23.34).

And so the big difference for Augustine between original mortality and what follows is that original mortality is provisional. Adam and Eve are of mortal clay, but as long as they have access to the tree of life, whose fruit is sacramental for them (*civ. Dei* 13.20), they not only do not die; they transform. They become spiritual beings, still embodied (albeit lightly),

⁸ The sundering is violent because in an incarnate soul – which is what Adam or any human being is – the soul is incomplete apart from the body. Death violates the natural affinity between soul and body; it always counts, for Augustine, as an unnatural evil (see, e.g., *civ. Dei* 13.3, 13.6). For further explication of this seemingly anti-Platonic stance of his, see Cavadini 1999.

still dependent on a source of life, but no longer needing to make that source a part of themselves. Where before they had to eat; now they are free to contemplate. But when the still animal Adam and Eve violate the conditions of their provisional mortality and lose access to the tree of life, two things happens to the human experience of mortality: death becomes a necessity, and the difference between spirit and flesh becomes an antagonism (making for an especially confusing experience of sex). Death is necessary not because Adam's descendants have been denied a source of life, but because the source to which they do have access – Christ on a cross, a tree of human artifice – requires their death. It requires it because of the sheer depth of human resistance to transformation. We are the ones who turn difference into antagonism and put Christ upon the cross.

To read Augustine as claiming anything less radical than that is to miss the point of his two mortalities. Suppose, as did Pelagius and many of his sympathizers, that there is only one kind of mortality, that it is natural to the human condition, and that had Adam resisted temptation and kept to his virtues, he still would have died at some point of natural causes (cf. *Gn. litt.* 6.22.33). If the supposition is granted, then spiritualized flesh is no longer a human possibility, or at best it is an unnatural possibility that is less a boon to human advancement than a loss of natural beauty. Since the idea of a spiritual body is largely defined by the idea of what it is not – a body that eats and has sex, commingles and transforms – it can seem a curiously dispirited notion to interpreters who value a limited but, for that very reason, keenly felt life.⁹

Here it is important to understand that, for Augustine, a spiritual body is not a good whose deprivation we can experience or whose supplement to our happiness we can readily imagine, if at all. When Adam joins Eve in sin, he is unambiguously animal in his flesh; consequently he is in no position to lose by sinning a sublimity of body that he has yet to possess. It is not a spiritual body (or the idea of one), then, that can define for Adam his redemption (*Gn. litt.* 6.24.35). Adam loses his faith in Eden, not his spirit. At some point he ceases to trust in his maker's ability or perhaps willingness to lay hold of a human life, wrest it out of transgression, and refigure it into something new. It might have gone otherwise for Adam – hence the unnaturalness of his death. His descendants, by contrast, are born locked into an animal self-image. To break from it, they will need more than a

⁹ Nightingale 2011 looks at Augustine's "transhuman" ideal of life first in Eden and then in heaven and basically concludes that his transhumanism is not human enough. See especially her epilogue on "mortal interindebtedness."

mediator who lives an exemplary life of virtue and dies a heroic death; they will need one who meets them in death, where no self-image can go.

Augustine finds himself committed both to the transformative possibilities of a graced humanity and to the original perfection of Edenic life. As I have been trying to suggest, this is not the easiest of conjunctions for him to sustain. How can Adam start off as a being who has it all and also be a being whose perfection awaits him? Augustine's exegetical hurdle is the apparent imperfection of Eden. When a sensual Eve offers Adam the forbidden fruit of knowing, she makes him vividly aware that he lacks the incarnation he is ideally meant to have: his spirit has yet to experience full communion with the flesh of his flesh, with her. In Augustine's Pauline terms: Adam has an animal body, not yet a spiritual one. Here is a lack that can be plausibly construed as the deprivation that moves Adam to sin. If Augustine wants to stick to the presumptive reading of sin's beginning – a reading that rules out divinely created imperfection – he needs to identify the original perfection that Adam has willfully abandoned. It will have to be a perfection that secures for Adam his essential humanity, in all of its fullness. The only plausible candidate for this is perfect faith in God's goodness. But what does it look like to have and lose that?

Augustine's attempt at an answer takes him into angelic speculation. At some point in the history of angels (though it is hard to say what time means here), "deserter angels" (*desertores angeli; civ. Dei* 13.24), Satan chief among them, turn from the light of God and enter into the darkness of their separate selves. Meanwhile the angels who do not desert maintain their faith in God's unwithholding goodness and secure their place as the first citizens of the heavenly city. It is in the contrast between the deserter angels and their steadfast counterparts that Augustine seeks his biggest clue to Adam's defection.

As Augustine reads Genesis, angels come to be, and then come to be split in their ranks, within the brief compass of two verses from the Priestly creation narrative. In the pause between "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3) and "God divided the light from the darkness" (Gen. 1:4), he finds matter for an entire angelic epic (*civ. Dei* 11.9, 11.19–20, 11.33). It starts with a luminous creation, light from light, and quickly lapses into shadow and darkness. The deserter angels, having become loyal only to self, mix darkness into their original light, and God, with ruthless judgment, divides the light from the darkness and seals the antithesis between angels and demons. The former are the proven first citizens of heaven, the latter their airy spiritual parodies, left to languish and vent in the sublunary sky, the lowest part of heaven (*infimum caelum*).

The light at issue here is obviously not the physical effluence of celestial orbs (Gen. 1:14–19), not the light, that is, that makes for eyesight. Augustine's angels precede sunshine, moon-glow, and the cold light of the stars. Their light is divine wisdom itself, the second person of the Trinity; such wisdom is the bodiless intelligence that calls matter out of nothingness and into beauty and accords a created mind sufficient wit to get in on the act. The angels are not of the same essence as uncreated wisdom (or there would be no question of an angelic fall), but they are exquisitely attuned in their angelic nature to the logic of creation. They know, when they are mindful of God, that there is nothing to creation but love. Augustine likens such knowledge to the breaking of day, a "morning" knowing (*et fit mane; civ. Dei* 11.7); it contrasts with being more directly focused on the distinctiveness of creaturely life, a crepuscular mode of knowing that Augustine identifies with the first advent of evening (*facta est vespera*).

The intimacy between being morning and evening knowing is both fundamental and precarious. It is impossible to refer a creaturely love to God apart from some awareness that one is irreducibly a creature and not God. But too much focus on that distinction tends to distort the extent of creaturely independence and lends the false impression that the self, when rendered into an abstraction, is still a something. Evening yields to night, a loss of knowing. In Augustine's exegesis of the first six days of creation (Gen. 1:3–31), night is not God's doing; only evening is: "Night never falls," he writes, "while the Creator is not forsaken by the creature's love. Accordingly, when Scripture enumerates those days in order, it never includes the word 'night'" (*vocabulum noctis; civ. Dei* 11.7).¹⁰ The angels who create night for themselves arrogate selfhood from God and end up becoming less self-aware than they were before. But this is not a nightfall that they are willing to see. They continue to cling to an empty center, all the while imagining that they embrace a self there; the tighter they cling, the more violent their passion for deprivation becomes.¹¹

In their fallen condition, the deserter angels are more like storm-systems than organized selves. But before they ever begin to unravel psychically, they act out of the same God-given integrity that any other angel has.

¹⁰ Augustine's claim is not that the word is never used in the narrative but that it is never used in the formula that announces the creation of each new day: "And it was evening and it was morning, [first through sixth] day." His exegesis puts a premium on the difference between *vespera* (evening) and *nox* (night). For a provocative reading of the significance of Augustine's exegetical strategy in *civ. Dei* 11.7, see Pranger 2006: 113–21; esp. 120–21.

¹¹ Augustine has more to say about demonic psychology in Book 9 of *City of God*, where he takes on Apuleius, a fellow African and a pagan Platonist, and tries to discount the polytheistic path to human wholeness. (The gods turn out to be fallen angels.) See *civ. Dei* 9.3, 9.5, 9.8–9.

Augustine briefly entertains the notion that there must be a difference here – perhaps the deserters were, from the start, more insecure – but he is inclined not to think so (*civ. Dei* 11.13): “It is hard to believe that the angels were not all created equal in felicity at the beginning, and remained so until those who are now evil fell away from the light of goodness by their own will.” There is equal felicity among the angels, then, but apparently not equal enough. The nagging perplexity of the presumptive reading comes to the fore: what inclines some perfect beings, but not others, to break from God and seek their own self-generated light? Augustine will claim that pride (*superbia*) is the beginning of sin (*civ. Dei* 12.6, 14.13; cf. *Ecclus.* 10:13), but this is to define sin, not account for it. Let sin be defined as a form of illicit self-assertion. There is nothing present in the original psyche of one angel but not in another that can account for pride.

The most that Augustine will claim about the cause of an evil will – a will to sin – is that it is deficient (*deficiens*), not effective (*efficiens*). He neatly encapsulates what he means by this in the following passage (*civ. Dei* 12.7):

For to defect from that which supremely is, to that which has a less perfect degree of being: this is what it is to begin to have an evil will. Now to seek the causes of these defections, which are, as I have said, not efficient causes, but deficient, is like wishing to see darkness or hear silence. Both of these are known to us, the former by means of the eye and the latter by the ear: not, however, by their appearance, but by their lack of appearance.

The imagery is both striking and misleading. The issue is not how we see darkness, but whether we cause the darkness that we know by not seeing. When it comes to sin, Augustine imagines us to have a spoiler’s power, prototypical in the deserter angels, to defect from God and pursue imperfection. We move towards the nothingness in creation *ex nihilo*, trade in eternal perfectibility for endlessly diminishing returns, and model for God what is means to be God-bereft and wed to non-being. The moral for Augustine of all this ironic self-assertion is that we are solely culpable for our barren inventiveness; God, meanwhile, is free to judge.

The problem with the moral is what it seems to imply about the fracture in creaturely desire. If an angel or an Adam can come to love a nothingness that, as it were, predates creation, then there is no divine self-offering that can secure even an unfallen angel’s desire, let alone the longing of one of Adam’s conflicted heirs. Any offer of life will be dogged by a prior and perversely desirable deficiency.

The logic of deficient causality, fitted first to angels, perpetually threatens to undo a world of purely spiritual beings, where transparency is the rule.

It poses the same kind of threat in an Adamic setting, where flesh veils spirit and makes a muddle of motive. The question that I intend to pursue now is not whether the logic can be rendered more solidifying in one or both of those contexts, but whether Augustine has, in his narrative musings, left himself some alternative to Adam's angelization.¹²

2 MYTH

When I refer to Adam's angelization, I refer to Augustine's tendency to assimilate Adam's spirit to that of a deserter angel: an angel able not to sin who sins anyway, and for no good reason. The assimilation is wholly in keeping with what I have been calling a presumptive reading of evil's origination. At heart this reading is a form of moralism. It aims to keep the moral fault lines between God and creaturely defectors from God absolutely clean. God is not the slightest bit responsible for defection and the misery and chaos it causes; the creaturely defectors are altogether culpable. Fundamentally for this form of moralism, defection is a turn away from the good and not a choice of a lesser good over a greater; thus the analysis of sin, whether angelic or human, must always come down to deficiencies. Deficiently motivated defectors choose deficiency; anything else is anathema. There is to be no bleed of goodness from God to the defectors, no good the desire for which can excuse or mitigate the guilt of defection.

It is when Augustine is most concerned to justify the damnation of sinners that he is most apt to absolutize sin and discount temptation. With sin so conceived, I am never led into sin; it is always my sin that leads me into temptation. In *City of God*, Augustine speaks of sin as a secret transgression; "It was in secret," he writes (*in occulto; civ. Dei* 14.3), "that Adam and Eve began to be evil." He means by this that before Adam is ever tempted to be with the woman and not with God, he secretly wills himself to be receptive to a God-bereft life. Similarly for Eve, before she is ever tempted to believe the serpent's lies, she secretly wills herself to be receptive to a God-bereft knowledge. All this willing is in secret, and necessarily so, because by the time we have something evident to notice – some dramatic realignment in a relationship – it is already too late to catch the moment of

¹² MacDonald 1999 makes a plausible general case for thinking of inattentiveness, as opposed to ignorance or weakness of will, as the deficient cause of a moral lapse. But in paradisaical contexts (Eden, heaven), where inattention to God suggests something sinister – namely, a love of deprivation – the question of cause continues to nag.

sin's inception. The turn that counts comes prior to even a self's relationship with itself. And so although Augustine is somewhat notorious for his insistence on the sexual transmission of sin and the resultant "sin-heap" of infected souls (*massa peccati*; *Simpl.* 1.2.16), sin, by the logic of deficient causality, is the least catchable of contagions. I sin singularly within me, you sin singularly within you; there is no common sin for us to share. In that regard, there is really only ever one original sinner, and each of us is it.

But still Augustine has to preserve some role in his theology, in fact a large one, for temptation as it is more traditionally conceived. He needs to be able to speak sensibly of an Adam who is able, in the face of temptation, to preserve his innocence; otherwise, mere susceptibility to temptation is going to be evidence enough for an irredeemably corrupt disposition. The logic of deficient causality, when pressed into the service of a presumptive moralism, leaves Augustine with only one of two possibilities: either a world in which no one is tempted who is not already damned, or one in which everyone at all times lives untried. The one world is hell; the other is decreation, or God reduced to solitude. There is no foothold for a Christology in either possibility, no way to bring God down to earth.

Deficient causality should by now seem ill conceived to any hopeful heir of Adam. But can Augustine really do without it and still be able to account for creaturely responsibility for sin, the *sine qua non* of any theological moralism?

The great metaphysician of morals, Immanuel Kant, gives us reason to think that Augustine's dilemma may be both unavoidable and beyond resolution. In his late work, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, his defense of a theological moralism, Kant attempts to account for the possibility of moral personality. He tries to explain, that is, how it is possible for rectitude to be restored in a person who has willed contrary to the categorical demands of the moral law. Though not normally given to mixing biblical exegesis into his critical philosophy, Kant makes an exception in *Religion*. There he is keenly interested in how the Scriptures, if read to accord with a moral hermeneutic (e.g., the presumptive reading of evil), can suggest the appropriate limits of a critical analysis.

Take the case of the serpent in the garden. Kant underscores the abruptness of the serpent's insertion into the Genesis narrative, where before harmonies have been the rule: male and female, God and humanity, heaven and earth. The serpent connives to subvert these harmonies and turn them into antagonisms. He does this by tempting Adam (through Eve) to disobey God's command, here construed as the moral law. Kant's moral hermeneutic inclines him, like Augustine, not to make deception the cause of Adam's

lapse; this means, for Kant (and for Augustine as well), that Adam retains his disposition to reason even as he gives into the temptation to subvert the rational order, the order of God's good creation.

The secret of a reasoner who reasons against reason is not amenable to further analysis, and this limit, thinks Kant, is precisely the point of the serpent's unprecedented appearance. It is Scripture's way of signaling an aporia. For no narrative that includes a first sin – an original turn from good to evil, plenitude to privation – can begin at the beginning. The first sin always shows up as an interjection, a disruption of narrative time. It is the sins to follow (if following makes any sense here) that speak to a struggle over time against temptation; they are the half-heartedly incarnate things that both fuel and frustrate a hope for redemptive closure. Here is Kant on the logic of sin's depiction:

The absolutely *first* beginning of all evil is . . . represented as incomprehensible to us (for whence the evil in that spirit?); the human being, however, is represented as having lapsed into it only *through temptation*; hence not as corrupted *fundamentally* (in his very first predisposition to the good) but, on the contrary, as still capable of improvement, by contrast to a tempting *spirit*, i.e., one whom the temptation of the flesh cannot be accounted as a mitigation of guilt. And so for the human being, who despite a corrupted heart yet always possesses a good will, there still remains hope of a return to the good from which he has strayed.¹³

This is still the logic of deficient causality. Notice why it simply cannot be a logic of redemption. If the temptation of the flesh mitigates guilt, then there must first be guilt to mitigate. That guilt returns the “tempting *spirit*” to its human host, and once again Adam is hopeless.

I bring Kant to the discussion of Augustine principally for two reasons. Because Kant is so much more intent than Augustine is on a demythologized moralism, Kant's concessions to mythology powerfully suggest the limits of a metaphysical approach to evil. It turns out not to be philosophically otiose for an Augustine or a Kant to become preoccupied with the intricacies of the Genesis narrative. Our sense of the origin of evil may not, after all, be so independent of our inability to finish a story that has a doggedly obscure and perhaps irreducibly symbolic beginning. Once this is recognized, Kant's other offering stands out. Because his reluctantly mythologized moralism is still a moralism, Kant shows us what habits of exegesis tend to sustain moralism. One habit in particular does most of the work. Kant pays no attention to the different roles that Adam and Eve respectively play in framing the first sin. Eve disappears into his Adam, and Adam, the

¹³ Kant 1793/1998: 65, original emphasis.

mysteriously self-subverting reasoner, directly violates the law of his own highest nature under a veil of temptation.

The closest analogue in Augustine to this Kantian exegetical practice is his decision in his early allegorical interpretation of Genesis, written against the flesh-hating Manichees, to relegate Eve to the unthinking senses (*Gn. adv. Man.* 2.14.51). He gives Adam the part of pure reason. Reasonable Adam is susceptible to unmanly overthrow by his sensual wife, but he is naturally and ideally in a position of rulership over her. When allegorical Adam and Eve get together, we get one individual: a well-functioning Adam.

In his later commentaries, where Augustine aims to be more literal and less allegorical, his Adam, who is as animal in his flesh as Eve is in hers, comes to have a sensuality of his own.¹⁴ Adam no longer subsumes Eve; he relates to her. When she parts from him through transgression, he feels distress as well as longing. He cannot bear the thought of abandoning his partner to her separate fate. In Augustine's extended literal commentary, it is not lust or any ignoble feeling that moves Adam to rejoin with her, but "a kind of friendly benevolence" (*amicali quadam benevolentia*; *Gn. litt.* 11.42.59). This same Adam reappears in *City of God*, expecting from his maker, if not exoneration, at least some sympathy for the difficulty of his choice (*civ. Dei* 14.11).

The choice to dramatize Adam's choice, relative to *Eve's* transgression, is the exegetical practice of Augustine's that is least likely to sustain the moralism that he and Kant mostly share in common.¹⁵ This is not to say that Augustine cannot fight against the drift of his choice and find his way back to moralism. Take, for example, his insistence in *City of God* on an "undeceived" Adam (*non seductus*; *civ. Dei* 14.11, cf. 1 Tim. 2:14). He does

¹⁴ Unlike some readers of Augustine on Genesis, I do not believe that Augustine ever thought of Adam as having spiritualized flesh. Whether he is interpreting Genesis allegorically or literally, he consistently thinks of Adamic life in Eden as probationary: the man and the woman begin with unproven spiritual promise and some version of an animal body. The most that can be said of their somatic status in *Gn. adv. Man.* is that their animality is vaguely more ethereal than it is later on. Augustine criticizes himself (*retr.* 1.10.2) for having once been too delicate in his affirmation of Adam's original animality, but not for having entertained a quasi-Plotinian fall of an immaterial soul, undividedly male and female, into a man and woman of mortal flesh. For contrary readings of *Gn. adv. Man.*, see Teske 1991, who outfits Adam and Eve with celestial bodies, and O'Connell 1991, who combines their spirits within a single, archetypal, trans-historical soul.

¹⁵ In his poignant "Letter to Augustine," Connolly 1991: 151–52 blithely dismisses the importance of Eve to Augustine's reading of the fall. In this, he shows himself to be one of the many modern interpreters who are prepared to overstress Augustine's moralism and assimilate him, in effect, to the Kant of *Religion*.

not mean absolutely undeceived. After having managed not to play the serpent's fool, Adam straightaway becomes his own; he deceives himself into thinking that his sin is venial and easily forgiven. Augustine says of this Adam that he is "unacquainted with the divine severity" (*inexpertus divinae severitatis*; *civ. Dei* 14.11). Bear in mind that Augustine's God is severe, not out of anger (as if God's feelings could be hurt), but out of the strict imperative of justice that expresses who God is. Adam cannot transgress against divine justice without having first separated himself (in secret) from the being that makes an order of the good possible. For an Adam already thus deprived, the choice of Eve over God is one of pure pretence. A choice of any good would have served as well – maybe Adam just likes the taste of apples – and no choice of good would have been forgivable. Undeceived Adam isn't seduced by Satan because he doesn't need to be: his lack of acquaintance with "the divine severity" is damning enough.

Moralism is always available to Augustine in his reading of Genesis. This is because it is not, strictly considered, a reading; it is the presumption of a reading. What if we suspend the presumption and allow Augustine's Adam the substance of his human motivation? The story might go something like this.

Part I: Adam does not wish to be separated from the flesh of his flesh. His animal flesh does not in fact dispose him to seek self-enclosure; Eve is distinctive to him, a separate beauty, and not merely a means to extend or sustain the sameness of himself. He is good with her, and otherwise bad, bereft (*Gen.* 2:18). He assumes that God, who knows the true meaning of good and bad, will understand, will forgive him for his choice.

Part II: It is also true that Adam, like an angel about to fall, cannot quite believe that trust in God's goodness is all that knowledge of God can possibly be. He takes his taste of knowledge out of trust, but also mistrust, and it is the mistrust that soon begins to show. He hides from God, fearing retribution and death. When God calls him out, Adam is evasive and self-veiling: "The woman whom you gave by me," he explains (*Gen.* 3:13), "she gave me from the tree, and I ate." Augustine readily sees the sin behind the veil (*civ. Dei* 14.11; *Gn. litt.* 11.35.47): Adam is giving over his responsibility to Eve and to God, the two sources of his life, and offering up his partner as sacrifice; he imagines that he is lessening his own punishment. Having tested his trust in his divine father in order to be with Eve, "the mother of all that lives" (*Gen.* 3:20), Adam has done anything but affirm his renewed partnership with her. Within the frame of his mistrust, his transgression looks shamefully naked. God soon drives Adam and the woman, still

unrecognized (despite her being named), from the garden, to block their access to the tree of life.¹⁶ One beginning is over.

The two parts of the proposed story are not neatly chronological. Adam's mistrust does not succeed his trust and take its place; it is superimposed upon it. The trust and the mistrust go together and seem to occupy the same psychic space, suggesting – falsely – that there have always been two stories to tell about him: one of damnation, the other of redemption. The truth is that there has only ever been one story to tell. The other story isn't even a story; its narrative ambitions disappear within a sinkhole of deficiency. But undoubtedly the redemptive turn in Adam's story is every bit as radical and hard to believe as Augustine and Paul have made it out to be, maybe even more so. Where a moralist sees in Adam a mistrust of perfection and an inexcusable loss of moral faith, a saint has to confront a more unsettling possibility: that Adam's mistrust is the face of his faith, revealed in darkness – like the sun in eclipse. The faith is still there, but dangerous to behold.

Consider original knowledge, good and evil. The God of pure spirit, as an object of human knowing, is always a withdrawal, an absence of presence, a second death. That is the evil part of knowing – the deprivation – and it is the part that Adam tastes first. But the good news is that he remains, while in the doom of death, wholly a part of the divine knowing. That is why not having a spiritual body has never been a source of deprivation in Eden. It does not suddenly become one when Adam sees darkness and suspends the generosity of his animal flesh. Outside the garden he will look not for new flesh but for a renewed knowledge, through her, the mother of generosity, of the sinless original – mortal and redemptive, Christ's flesh. Returning to the good part of knowledge is only a matter of time; indeed it is the very meaning of time.

In *City of God*, we find Augustine, the Genesis exegete, at his moralistic peak. He tries his level best to fold Adam and Eve within a single sin, whose paradigm is fleshless and Satanic. But ultimately the saint surpasses the moralist, and we are left less with the unforgiving logic of self-willed deficiencies and more with the shifts in relative goodness that make for a story of redemption. I say this not to sanctify Augustine – he hardly needs

¹⁶ Scripture (Gen. 3:24) speaks of the expulsion from Eden of the *adam* – not, that is, Adam as the distinctively male part of the original human couple, but as the creature formed from earth (*adamah*) and enlivened with divine breath. Alter 1996 is a good source for the nuances of Biblical Hebrew; see, for example, p. 5, n. 26. I often use the name “Adam” to refer to the first man, but I am keenly aware of its primary denotation. Similarly I take “Eve” to refer to the first woman, the man's counterpart, and also to the mother of all that lives.

me for that – but in recognition of what may be a part of the logic of sanctification: that the saint shows up when the moralist begins to relearn the meaning of perfection.

3 PRIVATION

In my attempts both to interpret and extend Augustine's thinking about the nature and origin of evil, I have not abandoned the *privatio* thesis. I accept his acceptance of the broad thesis that evil is basically a privation of goodness, or, in theological language, an absence of God. The thesis holds true even for positively demonic agents of deprivation. Also I have not entirely abandoned the analysis of deficient causality that Augustine so tightly associates with the *privatio* thesis. But while I agree that it is not possible to give a good reason for a privation, apart from a prior privation, I have resisted Augustine's inclination to absolutize deficient agency. If the conditions are perfect for the flourishing of my best self, and I can still be moved to will my self-corruption, then I am not just a deficient agent; I am irredeemably deficient.

But if it were simply the case that responsible agents never will deficiently, then evil in a providential order would be an illusion. I am more inclined to think, in keeping with Augustine, that God makes a good use of sin. And so while we do sometimes will deficiently, we do not thereby have a special power of agency that is unique to us and sealed off from God. We are not literally in the deprivation business. Having to give over this last, rather pathetic, shred of autonomy leaves us perpetually open to self-revision, but such openness, all moralism aside, is itself a form of responsibility. In the face of evil, we are called to be better citizens of a *corpus permixtum*, an entangled body, and not archeologists of an abandoned perfection. This means no less than to venture compassion where explanation has failed. The more lies beyond my competence to envision.