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Ignorance Is Not Bliss

Tommy Tsang

Abstract: *This paper⁸³ will examine the concept of evil through the lens of Saint Augustine's view of evil in Confessions and Socrates' view of evil in Meno. To do so, this paper will attempt to dissect both philosopher's argument regarding the obtainability of evil and take a logical, step-by-step approach to reach its conclusion. Ultimately, this paper will challenge Augustine's belief that it is possible to desire evil and instead argue for Socrates' belief that evil only exists insofar as we are ignorant of the good. After all, arguing for Socrates' belief on evil over Augustine's seems to be the most sensible path when taking into consideration the basis and method/validity of proof for both philosopher's argument. As a disclaimer, this paper is not attempting to define the existence of evil in a worldly or spiritual sense. Instead, this paper will attempt to break down the existence of evil insofar as it pertains to Augustine's discussion of evil in Confessions and Socrates' discussion of evil in Meno.*

In *Confessions* by Saint Augustine and *Meno* by Plato, Augustine and Socrates investigate people's capability to desire evil. Particularly, Augustine accepts the possibility that people can desire evil and suggests that this desire is fundamental in coming to terms with God. According to Augustine, we desire good when we are with God, while we desire evil when we turn away from God. In contrast, Socrates rejects the possibility that people can desire evil and instead claims that people will *always* choose what they believe to be good over what they believe to be evil. Socrates also suggests that when people do something

evil, it is actually because they are ignorant that this “something” is evil. By accepting Socrates' belief that people can only desire good, we can then challenge Augustine's belief that it is possible to desire evil and instead argue that evil only exists insofar as we are ignorant of the good. In order to defend this claim, I will first introduce Socrates' belief that people can only desire good. Second, I will summarize Augustine's belief that it is possible to desire evil. Third, I will analyze the implications of accepting Socrates' belief that people can only desire good and what it entails in regards to ignorance of the good. Fourth, I will present my first counterargument about the implications of arguing that Augustine is actually correct when he says that our evil acts are a result of our abandonment of God. Fifth, I will present my second counterargument about how some people may believe “good” is relative. Finally, I will discuss why Socrates' argument is more convincing than Augustine's argument.

In order to accept Socrates' belief, we must first understand it. As Socrates and his dialectic partner Meno discuss the nature of virtue in *Meno*, Socrates asks Meno, “Do you assume that there are people who desire bad things, and others who desire good things? Do you not think, my good man, that all men desire good things?”⁸⁴ After a series of back-and-forth dialectic in which Socrates questions Meno into thinking that those who believe bad things benefit them know that they are bad is untrue, Socrates himself concludes that, “No one then wants what is bad, Meno, unless he wants to be such. For what else is being miserable but to desire bad things and secure them?”⁸⁵ Although Socrates acknowledges the existence of evil in this excerpt, he also

⁸³ In this paper, “evil” also means “bad.”

84 Plato. *Meno*, Translated by G.M.A. Grube (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976), 77c1-3

85 Plato, 78a6-7.

asserts that people cannot desire bad things because it is innate in people's nature to not want to be miserable—and surely, misery is most easily obtained by securing bad things. With this assertion, Socrates implies that there are restraints in our free will because when we choose good, it is intentional and premeditated; when we choose evil, it is unintentional and involuntary.

Similarly, in order to challenge Augustine's belief that it is possible to desire evil, we must understand his belief. Particularly, Augustine believes that although people are innately good, evil still exists in the world and people can in fact desire evil. According to Augustine, evil comes to be when people turn away from God. As Augustine says:

*So the soul fornicates when it is turned away from you [God] and seeks outside you the pure and clear intentions which are not to be found except by returning to you. In their perverted way all humanity imitates you. Yet they put themselves at a distance from you and exalt themselves against you.*⁸⁶

Recalling a time when he turned away from God, Augustine specifically mentions a pear heist he committed in his adolescence. As Augustine recalls:

*I wanted to carry out an act of theft and did so, driven by no kind of need other than my inner lack of any sense of, or feeling for, justice. Wickedness filled me. I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality... To shake the fruit off the tree and carry off the pears, I and a gang of naughty adolescents set off late at night after we had continued our game in the streets. We carried off a huge load of pears. But they were not for our feasts but merely to throw to the pigs.*⁸⁷

86 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1991), 32.

87 Augustine, 29.

Perhaps more troubling than the actual theft itself was the fact that Augustine claimed he knew, in the midst of committing this sinful theft, that, “My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong... Now let my heart tell you what it was seeking there in that I became evil for no reason.”⁸⁸ These excerpts demonstrate that Augustine would disagree with Socrates' belief that people can only desire good and instead suggest that people can in fact desire evil when they choose to turn away from God. Additionally, while Socrates appears to reject the nature of free will because he believes it is impossible to desire evil, Augustine certainly accepts the nature of free will because he believes people possess the free will to desire either good or evil—and their relationship with God is fundamental to their desire. To Augustine, God empowers people with free will to choose their actions; when people are with God, they will use this free will to desire good actions and when people are away from God, they will use this free will to commit evil actions—sin.

If we were to accept Socrates' claim that people can only desire good, we can then challenge Augustine's belief that it is possible to desire evil and answer one of Augustine's primary questions throughout his *Confessions*, which is, “Was it possible to take pleasure in what was illicit for no reason other than that it was not allowed?”⁸⁹ Essentially, Augustine asks—is it possible to desire evil acts while knowing they are evil? As previously implied, Augustine might answer his own question by saying we can in fact desire evil acts while knowing they are evil, as this desire of evil occurs when we turn away from God. However, Socrates might say that evil acts exist from ignorance of the good. To clarify, Socrates never

88 Augustine, 29.

89 Augustine, 32.

doubts the *existence* of evil acts—he simply believes that people cannot desire them. Thus, Socrates might argue against Augustine by saying that when people commit evil acts, it is not necessarily because they have turned away from God; instead, it is because they are ignorant of the fact that their acts are evil. As Socrates says, “It is clear that those who do not know things to be bad do not desire what is bad, but they desire those things that they believe to be good but that are in fact bad. It follows that those who have no knowledge of these things and believe them to be good clearly desire good things.”⁹⁰ According to Socrates, when people commit an “evil” act, it is because they are ignorant—they believe the act to be good when it is in fact bad. For example, Socrates may mention Augustine's own infancy description, in which Augustine says:

*Was it wrong that in tears I greedily opened my mouth wide to suck the breasts?... Yet, for an infant of that age, could it be reckoned good to use tears in trying to obtain what it would have been harmful to get, to be vehemently indignant at the refusals of free and older people and of parents or many other people of good sense who would not yield to my whims, and to attempt to strike them and to do as much injury as possible?*⁹¹

Socrates might interpret this excerpt by saying infants do not desire evil even when commit evil acts such as crying until they got to suck their mother's breasts and striking at others if they did not get what they want. Instead, when infants commit these acts, they actually desire good but are ignorant of the fact that these acts were evil. Furthermore, Augustine says,

But people smilingly tolerate this behavior, not because it is nothing or only a trivial matter, but because with coming of

age it will pass away. You can prove this to be the case from the fact that the same behavior cannot be borne without irritation when encountered in someone of more mature years.⁹²

Socrates might interpret this excerpt from Augustine as additional proof of his ignorance argument; when infants grow up and are more aware of their acts, they begin to realize the evilness of crying for breasts and striking at others. Because of this awareness, these people no longer desire these acts since they cannot desire evil according to Socrates. Thus, while Augustine is ashamed of committing evil acts such as stealing pears or demanding attention as a baby because he interprets such acts as a sign that he has turned away from God, Socrates might argue that it is redundant to feel any sort of shame. According to Socrates' belief regarding the scope of our free will—that it is limited since we can *only* desire good—the shame that comes with being responsible for choosing the actually wrong thing instead of the actually right thing is unnecessary because one could not have acted otherwise since he or she was ignorant of the good. Ultimately, Socrates believes it is neither possible to take pleasure in what was illicit for no reason other than its disallowance nor desire evil acts while knowing they are evil.

As a possible counter-argument, one might say that Augustine is actually correct when he says that our evil acts are a result of our abandonment of God. These people might accept Augustine's idea of free will and reject Socrates' idea of free will as the basis to their argument that we can in fact desire evil. However, this counter-argument proves fruitless when one considers the nature in which we perceive “evil” acts. Particularly, one must ask oneself, the criteria for what makes an act evil and whether a so-called “evil” act, such as

90 Plato, 77e1-4.

91 Augustine, 9.

92 Ibid.

Augustine stealing the pear, was actually evil. As Augustine recalls his pear heist years after it happened, he says, “My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong... Now let my heart tell you what it was seeking there in that I became evil for no reason.”⁹³ Perhaps, we only perceive acts as “evil” once we look back on them—in the present moment of committing the act, we do not perceive it as evil because we are bound to Socrates' idea of free will and thus only desire good. When we look back upon an act, however, we might then realize that it was evil. Therefore, even if we commit an “evil” act, we only have our ignorance to blame since, as previously stated, we only desire the good in the present moment of committing the actual act. Perhaps the next time we think we do something "morally evil," we can look at back at Socrates' and Augustine's respective arguments in *Meno* and *Confessions* and contemplate whether we actually desired evil while committing this act or rather, whether we were just ignorant of the good.

Additionally, one could object to the whole argument in this essay by saying “good” is relative and that there is never one universally good thing. Too many varying factors, such as one's country, social class, opinion, interests, and other factors, have an influence in determining what one perceives as “good” for there to be a universal good. If two people were arguing between what is good, Socrates might say that one person is right and does know what is good, while the other person is wrong and does not know what is good. Similarly, if another two people were arguing between what is good, Augustine might say one person is right in accordance to God's will, while the other person is wrong because his or her argument is not in accordance to God's will. Still, in

both of these scenarios, both Socrates and Augustine fail to really prove anything or prove why one way of looking at the situation is better than the other way; they just state their idea of right and wrong.

Ultimately, accepting Socrates' belief that people can only desire good and challenging Augustine's belief that it is possible to desire evil may be the most logical path. After all, one may conclude that Socrates' argument on good, evil, and other matters is more convincing than Augustine's argument on similar grounds; whereas Socrates bases his argument on logic, reasoning, and psychological sense, Augustine relies too heavily on larger-than-life concepts—like supernatural forces, and God—that one cannot necessarily prove. To break down Socrates' argument, we must prove that his reasoning is incorrect. However, to break down Augustine's argument, we can just simply say, “God does not exist” and accept that as truth. Thus, if we were to accept and value Socrates' argument over Augustine's, as we have done in this essay, then we can argue that evil only exists insofar as we are ignorant of the good.

93 Augustine, 29.