



The Augustinian Type of Theodicy: Is It Outdated?

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Abstract

In his famous work 'Evil and the God of love,' John Hick suggests that the 'Augustinian' type of theodicy is based on an outdated worldview and ought to be replaced by what he calls an 'Irenaean' type of theodicy. This article examines Hick's claim by analyzing the views of the three main theological exponents of the Augustinian paradigm on evil namely Augustine, John Calvin and Karl Barth. It suggests that Reformed theology rethinks its linear concept of time and considers the possibility that the Fall could be an event in time with an eternal significance that works both 'backwards' and 'forwards'. The article concludes that weaknesses in the Augustinian paradigm can be resolved from within, and that no need exists for Reformed theologians to replace the Augustinian paradigm with an alternative Irenaean paradigm that reject key Scriptural teachings on creation and sin.

Keywords

evil, theodicy, Augustine, Calvin, Barth

Introduction

The reality of evil is one of the chief intellectual obstacles in the Christian faith. It arises because of Christianity's insistence that God is an omnipotent being that is at the same time perfectly good. This creates the following logical problem: If God is an omnipotent being He must be able to destroy all evil, and if He is a perfectly good being he must want to abolish all evil. Yet evil exists. Therefore God must either not be omnipotent or not be perfectly good. The theological attempt to justify God's righteousness and goodness amidst the experience of moral and natural evil and suffering in the world is called theodicy (*theo-dike*). Though it can be argued that the human has no right to justify God and that sin is in its essence unintelligible, Christianity cannot avoid the question of the existence of evil, because it is a genuine difficulty.

This article analyses what John Hick calls in his famous book 'Evil and the God of love' the 'Augustinian type' of theodicy. This type of theodicy is characterised by an understanding of evil as defection and non-being; it shares a common belief in the original goodness of God's creation and that humans were created innocent, but exercised a good will badly; and it resists any doctrine of materialist dualism that posits the existence of a form of reality that is independent of God and stands in opposition to Him. John Hick suggests that the 'Augustinian' type of theodicy is based on an outdated worldview derived from a literalist understanding of the creation narratives, and that it is impersonal and deterministic.¹ It therefore needs to be replaced with an 'Irenaean' type of theodicy. This article examines his claim by asking whether the 'Augustinian type' of theodicy is able to address the question of evil in a post-Newtonian world with an evolutionary understanding of reality. In order to answer the question, the first section will critically evaluate the views of the three main theological exponents of the Augustinian type of theodicy on evil namely Augustine, John Calvin and Karl Barth. The second section will identify apparent weaknesses in the Augustinian paradigm and attempt to assess whether these weaknesses can be addressed from within the Augustinian paradigm or whether the Augustinian paradigm, as Hick proposes, should be replaced altogether by another paradigm.

Augustine

Augustine struggled with the question of evil throughout his life. He debated the origin of evil as a Manichean, and was still arguing it with Julian at the very end.² His doctrine on God resolutely affirms two basic premises: First, that God is an omnipotent being who is able to do whatever He wants insofar as such actions are consistent with His being, and secondly, that God is a good being and therefore not the direct cause of evil whatsoever. His doctrine on creation, accordingly, maintains that God created *ex nihilo* and therefore is sovereign over all things, and He created all things good because He is a good being.

Augustine formulated his views on evil against the background of his struggle with Manichaeism. The Manicheans described evil as an ontological

¹ Cf. John Hick, *Evil and the God of love*. Second edition (MacMillan Press: London, 1977), 193-200.

² John, M. Rist, *Augustine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 261.

force that stems from matter, opposes the divine, and compels the innately good souls of human beings to sin.³ They thereby eliminated the moral dimension of evil and the personal accountability of the human being. Augustine adopted and modified the notion of evil as privation from Neo-Platonism to emphasize that evil is not a cosmic ontological principle that opposes goodness. In his view, evil is not a substance in itself, but is rather a form of defection, the absence of good and the corruption of being. It is committed by moral agents who are responsible for their own actions. God is therefore not unjust when he holds humanity accountable for their sins. Yet, even though humans are capable of moral evil, they were created ‘good’ by God. God is in no way the source of evil or the Creator of human sin.⁴ Augustine was able to reconcile his position on human accountability for sin with his view that God is not the source of evil by employing the concept of the free will of man. It provided him with a mechanism through which something that came forth from God as good, could at the same time be capable of evil.⁵ Augustine regarded the human will as a spiritual good that is necessary for living rightly, but capable of being used wrongly. A genuine free will necessarily carries with it the liability to sin. But without having freedom of choice, with its built-in liability, humans would lack the capacity to choose to live rightly.⁶

However, after 392 Augustine began to modify his original position regarding the free will as something that all human beings possess. In his polemic against Fortunatus he shifted the free exercise of will from all human beings to only the first human being, thereby abandoning a crucial element in his earlier argument for human agency in moral evil.⁷ As a consequence of the first man’s voluntary sin the whole of humankind descended into the necessity of habit and bondage to sin and death. Man’s compulsion to sin is thus caused by an initial sin. After the first sin, all humans sin involuntarily.

³ Gerald Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo. Life and controversies* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 317. William, S. Babcock, “Augustine on sin and moral agency,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16(1) (1988), 31.

⁴ Augustine, “De Civitate Dei” [City of God], in Bernardus Dombart & Alphonsus Kalb eds. *Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina XLVIII* (Brepols: Turnhout, mcmly), liber xii.

⁵ Cf Babcock, “Augustine on sin and moral agency”, 33.

⁶ William, E Mann, “Augustine on evil and original sin”, in Eleonore Stumpf and Norman Kretzmann, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 46.

⁷ Augustine, “Acta seu Disputatio contra Fortunatum Manicheum 392 AD” [Disputes against the Manichean Fortunatus], in J.P. Migne, ed. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus* (Brepols: Turnhout, 1886), XXII, Babcock, ‘Augustine on sin and moral agency’, p. 40.

Nonetheless, Augustine maintained that if there is complicity at the start, a subsequent set of forced actions can still be interpreted as the agents' own. God's penalty on humanity's sin is therefore justly imposed.⁸

Augustine developed his argument on the nature of the human's free will and original sin further in his polemic writings against the Pelagians. The Pelagians held that the human's natural faculties are created good. Humankind can therefore be without sin if it chose to be. Though humankind's mind is clouded by sin, it can be illuminated again by the Law and the Gospel. Augustine, however, insisted that the Fall of Humankind led to a total disintegration of human nature, a shift in the orientation of the will, that is, a turn from a higher state of being to a lower state of being, from God to the self, thereby making itself rather than God the principle of its existence.⁹

In *De Natura et Gratia*¹⁰ he states that man originally had a free will, but that original sin darkened and flawed man's will so that human nature itself is corrupted. Not only did the Fall lead to moral evil, but also natural evil. The Fall weakened all of man's faculties so that he becomes liable to disease, impotent to rule the desires of the body and subject to death.¹¹ Sin is therefore not something external to humankind. It is in us, part of our nature. However, this 'naturalness' is a false naturalness that is parasitic on a deeper good nature.¹²

Augustine thus combined the concepts of the free will of man and original sin in order to preserve God's ultimate power and infinite goodness, but to stress at the same time that the nothingness of privation is a power superior to any individual will or singular volition. The problem that Augustine still had to face was: How did the first evil act arise?

⁸ Augustine, "Acta seu Disputatio contra Fortunatum Manicheum", XXII, Babcock, "Augustine on sin and moral agency", 38.

⁹ Augustine, "De Civitate Dei", xiv.xiii.

¹⁰ Augustine, "De Natura et Gratia" [Nature and grace], in J.P. Migne, ed. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus* (Brepols: Turnhout, s.a.), III. "Natura quipped hominis primitus inculpate et sine ullo vitio create est, naturo vero ista hominis, qua unusquisque ex Adam nascitur, jam medico indigent, qui sana non est. Omnia quidem bona, quae habet informatione, vita sensibus, mente a summo Deo habet creatore et artifice suo. Vitium vero, quod ista naturalia bona contenebrat et infirmat, ut illuminatione et curatione opus habeat, non ab inculpabili artifice contractum est, sed ex originali peccato, quod commissum est libero arbitrio".

¹¹ Augustine, "De Perfectione Justitiae Hominis Liber" [Book on the sanctification and justification of humans], in J.P. Migne, ed. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus* (Brepols: Turnhout, s.a.), II.

¹² Cf Charles, T. Mathewes, *Evil and the Augustinian tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 74.

Augustine's answer is that the evil will is uncaused, in contrast to good will that is specifically affected by God. Evil willing is a self-originating act and therefore not explicable in terms of causes. In *De Civitate Dei* 12.7 Augustine states that evil is not a matter of efficiency but of deficiency. Trying to discover the causes of defection is like trying to see darkness or hear silence. As darkness is the absence of light and silence the absence of sound, deficient causality is the absence of cause. The cause of evil is rather the defection of the will of a being that is mutably good from the Good that is immutable. This happened first in the case of the angels, and afterwards in the human being.¹³ By not only understanding sin anthropologically as an original perversion, but also ontologically as a primordial perversion, Augustine emphasizes that evil is totally alien to God's created order. Evil is a corruption of good and can only be as long as there is something good to be corrupted. By definition it cannot exist on its own. Augustine's description of evil as a lack of being invests God with perfect goodness. If evil is the lack of being, then God cannot have willed evil, because God's will is precisely what is not evil. It is also a corollary of His emphasis on God's infinite power. Evil can because of its secondary nature never overpower God's natural order.

Augustine thus understands evil as non-being. Central to the notion of evil as 'non-being' is the understanding of evil as a kind of nothingness that had fallen away from being. Since 'nothing' has no substance of its own, it is impossible to define except over and against 'being'.

Though Augustine views the introduction of evil into a wholly good creation as fundamentally an incomprehensibly negative act, it does not fall outside of God's providence. In his doctrine on predestination Augustine states that God foresaw the human's fall before the creation of the world and planned its compatibility with the balanced perfection of the universe.¹⁴ This allows him to soften the underlying contradictions between God's omnipotence and goodness. Though God does not will evil, it is still part of His providence in that it falls under His jurisdiction and has an instrumental value for God: God brings good from evil, the existence of evil contributes to the beauty of the whole, evil serves as a warning against hidden pride. . . .¹⁵

Augustine's attempt to demythologise the Manichean view of evil deserves praise. He profoundly challenged a materialist worldview that saw the cosmos as the battlefield of the eternal forces of good and evil. His doctrine on evil

¹³ Augustine, "Dei Civitate Dei," xii.ix, Hick, *Evil and the God of love*, 59.

¹⁴ Cf Hick, *Evil and the God of love*, 69.

¹⁵ Cf Augustine, "De Civitate Dei", xi.xvii, xi.xviii.xxiii.

contain the basic premises for an authentic Christian approach to evil, namely that God is sovereign, that he created *ex nihilo*, that evil was not created by God, that God is goodness and that the human is complicit to injustice and suffering. He also overcomes the Platonic, Neo-Platonic, Gnostic and Manichaean prejudices against matter and lays the foundation for a Christian naturalism that rejoices in the world.¹⁶

The most problematic aspect in Augustine's teaching is his notion that evil is fundamentally a perversion of good that exists parasitically on the good. He essentially distinguishes between two human natures. The first nature is wholly good, while the second is a perversion of the first. Augustine derives this notion from a literal understanding of the creation narratives: God created all things in a good state. Then came a Fall that perverted the original good nature of creation and introduced evil, which exists parasitically on the original good nature. However this notion is outdated in the light of the evidence of biological history. There was no initial wholly good nature that was perverted; nature always contained a dark side. Suffering, predation, death and pain were there before the arrival of the human. A further question is whether Augustine does not diminish the power and terror of evil by describing evil as deficiency, corruption, a lack of good and as negative and privative. Is evil not more than a mere absence of good, a passive defection? Does such a definition of evil do justice to the horror that evil causes? Most victims do not experience evil as mere absence, but as a brutal, direct and malevolent force. Evil is not merely a refusal to act or an attempt to try to be independent of God that ends up in a perverted parody, but it often amounts to full resistance and revolt against God and humanity.

John Calvin

Calvin did not develop a theodicy in the technical sense and would probably object to the question on theodicy as posed by Leibniz and other philosophers. For Calvin the origin of sin and the relation of sin to God's will is a mystery. Not surprisingly, Berkhof criticises Calvin for taking refuge in incomprehensibility.¹⁷ But Calvin's approach to the mystery of evil corresponds with one of the most important premises in his theology, namely that

¹⁶ Hick, *Evil and the God of love*, 45.

¹⁷ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian faith. An introduction to the study of faith*, rev ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 221.

to know God is in essence too high for us. His majesty is hidden and remote from our sense.¹⁸ Man, therefore, has no right to search for illicit knowledge that falls outside God's revelation.¹⁹ It is precisely man's urge for illicit knowledge that caused the Fall. To seek illicit knowledge is to commit an act of vanity that denies the otherness of God and the radical distinction between God and man. Instead, we ought to be content to accept that human reason has its limits and to trust that all God's acts are good and wise.

Calvin maintains that all things, even the most minor events in life, are subject to God's will.²⁰ What appears to us externally as mere contingency or serendipity, faith recognises as nothing else than the hidden impulse of providence.²¹ In his commentary on Job, Calvin distinguishes between God's guidance in the realm of nature and history. In both realms, God directly controls and wills every event; He does not simply permit earthly occurrences, but commands the entire course of nature and history. God's providence is not merely general in nature, but He is deeply involved in the particulars of history.²² Even Satan can do nothing without the permission of God. The metaphor that Calvin often employs is that God 'bridles' Satan so that nothing is outside of his control.²³ This seemingly deterministic view of God's providence is closely connected to his understanding of God's eternal predestination. Calvin understands the predestination to be an eternal pre-creational decision of God in which He determined what He wills for every person's life. God's eternal decision is not based on some foreknowledge as if humans could contribute to their own salvation through their virtues, but it rests solely on his will.²⁴ The elect do not differ from all others except that they are protected by God's special mercy from rushing into the final ruin of

¹⁸ Ioannis Calvin, *Institutio Christianae religionis* [Institutes of the Christian Religion], ed. A. Tholuck (London: Berolini, mdcccxvi), 1.5.1.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the first book of Moses called Genesis*, vol. 1, transl. John King (Edinburgh: Calvin translation Society, 1947), 153.

²⁰ Calvin, *Inst.* I, 16.2.

²¹ Calvin, *Inst.* I, 16.9. Cf W.J. Torrance Kirby, "Stoic and Epicurean? Calvin's dialectical account of providence in the Institute," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5(3) 2003, 317.

²² Susan, E. Schreiner, "Through a mirror dimly. Calvin's sermons on Job", *Calvin Theological Journal*, 21(2) (1986), 180. Cf Jean Calvin, *Opera quae supersunt omnia* [Collected works], vol. 34, eds. Guilielmus Baum, Eduartus Cunitz, Eduardus Reuss (Brunsvigae: Schwetscke et filium, 1887), 33:75, *Inst.* 1.16.8.

²³ Schreiner, "Calvin's sermons", 181, *Inst.* 1.16.3.

²⁴ Calvin, *Inst.* III, 22.3.

death.²⁵ In His damnation of some God exhibits his anger over sin and His condemnation thereof. God, after all, has the right to bestow his grace on some and deny his grace for others.²⁶

Though Calvin often employs the term permission, especially in his sermons, he is critical of the idea that God does not will sin, but permits sin, because such a distinction limits God's sovereignty and weakens the witness of Scripture. It creates the impression that God is a spectator who creates the possibility of sin and waits to see whether man will use his freedom to sin or not.²⁷ Calvin is adamant that we may never use the concept of permission to nullify God's providence.²⁸ God's permission is part of God's active will. His permission is not a general permission, but a willing permission of every particular evil. Whatever we conceive of in our own minds is directed to its own end by God's secret inspiration.²⁹ According to Calvin, God not only foresaw the Fall, but He compelled it.³⁰ After all, He could have prevented it, had He seen fit to do so.³¹ In his commentary on Genesis 3 Calvin states:

When I say, however, that Adam did not fall without the ordination and will of God, I do not take it as if sin had ever been pleasing to Him, or as if he simply wished that the precept which he had given should be violated. So far as the fall of Adam was the subversion of equity, and of well constituted order, so far as it was contumacy against the Divine-Law giver, and the transgression of righteousness, certainly it was against the will of God; yet none of these things render it impossible that in a certain sense, although to us unknown He might will the fall.³²

Thus, though we cannot comprehend the reason for God's acts, we must be satisfied to accept the testimony of Scripture that God wills sin. That God has a definite goal for sin and uses it to reach His destination, becomes clear in the cross of Christ in which the guilt of humankind and the love and righteousness of God is revealed.³³

²⁵ Calvin, *Inst.* III, 14.10.

²⁶ Calvin, *Inst.* III, 22.6.

²⁷ Calvin, *Inst.* I, 18.1, cf III, 23.8.

²⁸ Calvin, *Inst.* I, 18.2.

²⁹ Calvin, *Inst.* I.18.2.

³⁰ Calvin, *Inst.* III, 23.8.

³¹ Calvin, *Genesis*, p. 144.

³² Calvin, *Genesis*, p. 144.

³³ Calvin, *Inst.* I, 18.4.

Even though God wills sin, Calvin states categorically that humankind may never blame God for its sins.³⁴ Sin does not occur outside of the human's will, it is no external coercive force that engulfs humankind, but it is inherently part of human nature and finds its roots in the lusts of man.³⁵ Man was created flexible and sinned voluntarily and therefore bears the quilt for sin.³⁶ The question is: How can God will sin or use sin without being the author of sin or being stained by sin? In his commentary on Genesis 3 Calvin employs the Augustinian notion of defection:

It is an impious madness to ascribe to God the creation of any evil and corrupt nature; for when he completed the world, he himself gave this testimony to all his works, that they were "very good". Wherefore, without controversy, we must conclude, that the principle of evil with which Satan was endued was not from nature, but from defection; because he had departed from God, the fountain of justice and all rectitude.³⁷

Later on he also attributes the fall of Adam and Eve to defection.³⁸ Clearly Calvin is of the opinion that God neither created man nor nature sinful or evil, but that man acted according to his own will. Yet, God did not prevent the Fall, but allowed and permitted it to serve his good purposes.³⁹ God's permission of sin does not stain God because His motive is righteous and serve the good. The metaphor that he uses in this regard is that the sun's rays make a corpse stink, but do not stink themselves.⁴⁰ Kirby rightly notes that central to Calvin's argument is an adherence to a due distinction between 'instrument' and 'end'. Calvin is able to see human sinfulness itself as an instrument of divine providence while denying, on the ground of the self same distinction that his instrumentality provides any excuse whatsoever for human misdeeds. Even if man sins from necessity he still remains a free and responsible agent, for he is acting voluntarily and not from external compulsion.⁴¹ In any case, man has no right to ask God to justify himself to human-

³⁴ Calvin, *Inst* I, 17.5.

³⁵ Calvin, *Inst.* III.5, III.23.9.

³⁶ Calvin, *Genesis*, 158.

³⁷ Calvin, *Genesis*, p.142.

³⁸ Calvin, *Genesis*, p.152.

³⁹ Calvin, *Inst* I.17.5.

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Inst* I, 17.5.

⁴¹ Cf Calvin, *Inst.* II.4.1.

kind or to give any reasons for His acts.⁴² In fact, God's will is the highest measure of righteousness. We must consider everything that God wills as righteous simply because He wills it. When we are asked why God wills something, our reply simply ought to be: because He wills it.⁴³

Calvin not only grounds the fall of Adam in the will of God, but also the results of the Fall on the human race and nature. With regard to the human race he states:

For the human race has not naturally derived corruption through its descent from Adam, but that result is rather to be traced to the appointment of God.⁴⁴

With regard to nature he states:

The Lord, however, determined that his anger should, like a deluge, overflow all parts of the earth, that wherever man might look, the atrocity of sin should meet his eyes. Before the Fall, the state of the world was a most fair and delightful mirror of the divine favour and paternal indulgences towards man. Now in all the elements we perceive that we are cursed.

For Calvin moral and natural evil proceed from the same fountain.⁴⁵ God requires that both his mercy and grace and His wrath and justice are displayed in his creatures. The corruption of both human nature and nature itself is according to Calvin an expression of God's anger and serves to punish the damned and chastise the believers.⁴⁶ Yet, in his sermons on Job, he also states that we must be cautious not to think that we can understand the justice of God. Fallen and redeemed wisdom both suffer the noetic effect of sin and stand far removed from the inscrutable and secret justice of God. History does not clearly reflect God's wisdom. We, therefore, can only find solace in the unchangeable attributes of God.⁴⁷

Though Calvin's doctrines on providence and predestination might seem harsh, he clearly had therapeutic intentions with these doctrines. He attempted to break with the commonly held Epicurean belief that history is

⁴² Calvin, *Inst.* III, 23.5.

⁴³ Calvin, *Inst.* III, 23.2.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Genesis*, 156.

⁴⁵ Cf Calvin, *Genesis*, 177.

⁴⁶ Cf Calvin, *Inst.* I.17.1.

⁴⁷ Cf Schreiner, "Calvin's sermons", 183-186.

dictated by chance. Instead the believer can find his solace in God's will and providence that remind us that everything that happens, whether good or bad, has a purpose and eventually serve God's good intentions. Yet his treatment of the subject is generally characterised by ambiguity, a continuous tension between the revealed and the not revealed, and paradoxes. He reaches an almost intolerable paradox when he states that God wills sin and permits evil but that God is not the author of sin or evil. The question is: Is such a notion really coherent? Can one who uses sin as an instrument really be acquitted from the stain of sin simply because he uses it for a good end? Would a good God ever use sin as an instrument? Calvin's direct ascription of evil to the will of God also creates other questions regarding God's goodness: Would a good God allow sin so that he can show his anger to the damned? If God "bridles" evil so that it cannot commit more evil than God allows, why would a loving God allow so much brutal, senseless and malevolent evil in the world? Calvin is so set on stressing God's omnipotence that He seriously questions God's goodness and holiness. The Heidelberg Catechism, Gallic Confession and Belgic Confession do not follow Calvin's strict logic, but the infra-lapsarian line according to which God in just punishment leaves people because of their sin in the perdition to which they condemned themselves.⁴⁸

Karl Barth

The reality of evil is for Barth a clear demonstration of the brokenness of all theological thought. It is broken in the sense that it can progress only in isolated thoughts and statements directed from different angles. We can never seize the object of evil or create a comprehensive system that explains evil.⁴⁹

Barth's approach to evil can be characterised as Christocentric. God created in order that Jesus Christ shall exist. He defines creation as the external basis of the covenant and the covenant as the inner basis of creation.⁵⁰ Creation provides the sphere in which the institution of the covenant takes place, while the covenant is the goal of all God's works. The remark in Gen 1:31 that the creation was created good, is not a description of the cosmos as such, but must be seen in relation to Christ. The creation is good because it finds

⁴⁸ Berkhof, *Christian faith*, 485.

⁴⁹ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik. Die lehre von der Schöpfung, III/III* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag), 332.

⁵⁰ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik. Die lehre von der Schöpfung, III/II* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1957), 103.

its goal and true meaning in Christ and the covenant.⁵¹ Because of Christ the created world is already perfect, despite its imperfection.⁵²

As is the case with Augustine, Barth utilises the concept of the free will of man to explain the origin of evil. God created the creation free. It therefore had the possibility of self-annulment and its own destruction. Without the possibility of defection or evil, creation would not be distinct from God and therefore not be His creation. A creature freed from the possibility of falling away would not really be living as a creature.⁵³

Sin is when the creature opposes God and the meaning of its own existence by rejecting God's preserving grace. The fault is that of the creature and not of God or the nature of creation. The fact of evil does not cast any shadow on God because it does not find its origin either in God Himself or in His being and activity as the Creator.⁵⁴ God opposes the defection and destruction of the creature because He cannot cease to be God or cease to act as the Creator and Lord of the world, and therefore of the sinful world. His reply is rather to justify and maintain Himself in relation to the sinful world by resisting and overcoming sin.⁵⁵

According to Barth evil, sin, wickedness, the devil, death and non-being exists in its own way by the will of God.⁵⁶ Nothing exists outside of the will of God. He distinguishes between God's *voluntas efficiens* and *voluntas permittens* to explain the way in which evil exists by the sovereign will of God. God's *voluntas efficiens* is that what God positively affirms and creates, while His *voluntas permittens* consists in His refraining, non-prevention and non-exclusion. God not only gives the creature its existence and being, freedom and independence (*voluntas efficere*), but also refrains from making it impossible for man to misuse its independence and freedom (*voluntas permittens*). God creates in such a way that He also permits. The *voluntas permittens* is no less *volunta divina* than the *voluntas efficiens*, yet it is only a permission, a restricted toleration.⁵⁷ The question is: Why is God's will for creation not

⁵¹ Karl Barth, *Die lehre von der Schöpfung*, IIII, 380.

⁵² Karl Barth, *Die lehre von der Schöpfung*, IIII, 389.

⁵³ Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik. Die lehre von Gott*, III/1 (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946), 566. "Ohne die so verstandene Möglichkeit des Abfalls oder des Bösen würde die Schöpfung von Gott nicht verschieden und also als seine Schöpfung nicht wirklich sein. Es bedeutet also keine Unvollkommenheit der Schöpfung und des Schöpfers, dass das Geschöpf von ihm abfallen und verloren gehen kann".

⁵⁴ Barth, *Die lehre von Gott*, 566.

⁵⁵ Barth, *Die lehre von Gott*, 566-567.

⁵⁶ Barth, *Die lehre von Gott*, 670.

⁵⁷ Barth, *Die lehre von Gott*, 671.

only a *voluntas efficiens*, a good will? Barth's precarious answer is that creation has to be constantly reminded of God's grace. God's grace depends on the existence of a divine *voluntas permittens*, and in virtue of this on the reality of disgrace, damnation and hell.⁵⁸ Barth does not see good and evil as two separate poles alongside each other, but he sees the whole of creation from the perspective of Christ. Since everything is created for Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection, everything from the very outset must stand under this twofold and contradictory determination.

Barth calls the reality that opposes and resists God's world dominion *das Nichtige*.⁵⁹ *Das Nichtige* is some kind of third factor that can neither be explained from the side of the Creator nor the creature, but can only be regarded as hostility to both. It must not be identified with the negative shadow side of creation that is the result of the creation's creatureliness, and is actually part of God's good intent. Rather it is that which is an insult to the Creator and that contradicts God's self manifestation in Jesus Christ.⁶⁰ The true nature of *das Nichtige* is revealed in Jesus Christ, because in Jesus Christ is not only revealed what is good, but also what is utterly distinct from God. The coming of Christ is a sign that God takes the challenge to Him and his Creation to heart.⁶¹ *Das Nichtige* is thus the reality that opposes and resists God and is utterly distinct from Him. It is that which brought Jesus Christ to the cross and that which he defeated there. It is not nothing, but exists in its own curious fashion; it is in no way an attribute of God or the creaturely being; we know it only through God's self-revelation; it is grounded in God's not willing and it is evil in nature.⁶² The concrete form in which *das Nichtige* is active is the sin of humanity, because in sin it becomes man's own act, achievement and guilt. Sin, after all, consists therein that the human repudiates God's grace and command.

Yet *das Nichtige* is not exhausted in sin. It is also something under which we suffer in connection with sin. Sin is attended and followed by the suffering of evil and death, which in itself only belongs to the shadow side of creation, but which now becomes intolerable life destroying things. That *das Nichtige* has the form of evil and death as well as sin shows that it is not only moral in nature, but also physical and total. As such it is superior to all the

⁵⁸ Barth, *Die lehre von Gott*, 671.

⁵⁹ Barth, *Die lehre von der Schöpfung*, III/III, 327.

⁶⁰ Barth, *Die lehre von der Schöpfung*, III/III, 334–342.

⁶¹ Barth, *Die lehre von der Schöpfung*, III/III, 341.

⁶² Barth, *Die lehre von der Schöpfung*, III/III, 416.

forces that humankind can assemble against it. Evil and death may be distinguished from sin in that evil primarily attack the creature and indirectly God, while sin attacks God directly.⁶³ *Das Nichtige* is real as such because it, too, owes its existence to God in the sense that it is that which he has not elected and not willed, but ignored, rejected, excluded and judged. It is a reality that was not created but posited, a reality that while it has no basis in itself it lives through its antithesis to God's grace.⁶⁴ In this sense *das Nichtige* is really privation, the attempt to defraud God of his honour and right and at the same time to rob the creature of its salvation and right.⁶⁵ Because *das Nichtige* has no autonomous existence of its own, it cannot possess unlimited power. It exists only through God, in the power of divine negation and rejection.⁶⁶ The conquest, removal and abolition of *das Nichtige* are entirely God's own affair. Only He can master *das Nichtige* and guide the course of history towards this victory.⁶⁷ *Das Nichtige* therefore has a paradoxical status: It is utterly inimical to God, yet God controls it.

Karl Barth makes an important contribution to the debate on theodicy by approaching the problem from the perspective of Christ. Since Christ is God's solution to suffering, any Christian debate on theodicy should start with Christ and the cross. Only in Christ a positive theodicy is possible. A natural approach to theodicy that takes its premise in human experience cannot transcend the negative dimension of evil. Barth also makes considerable effort to depict evil as something that is irreconcilable with the will of God, something that can only be the object of fear and loathing. His distinction between the shadow side of creation that are due to creaturely limitedness and evil that is enmity against God is a particular helpful construction that brings some clarity on the subject. However, there are many tensions inherent in Barth's approach to evil.

John Hick rightly criticizes Barth's notion that by willing a good creation God unwilled its opposite, which is *das Nichtige*. This view is rather speculative in nature and contradicts Barth's own resistance to speculative theorizing. By using this concept he goes beyond the data of faith and becomes entangled in the dangers of philosophical construction.⁶⁸ Furthermore, it makes no rational sense to attribute the existence of *das Nichtige* to God's

⁶³ Barth, *Die lehre von der Schöpfung*, III/III, 342-355.

⁶⁴ Barth, *Die lehre von der Schöpfung*, III/III, 375, 376.

⁶⁵ Barth, *Die lehre von der Schöpfung*, III/III, 408.

⁶⁶ Barth, *Die lehre von der Schöpfung*, III/III, 381.

⁶⁷ Barth, *Die lehre von der Schöpfung*, III/III, 409.

⁶⁸ Hick, *Evil and the God of love*, 135-136.

not-willing. Does that mean that God unwillingly brings forth evil through His creative acts?

Barth's treatment of the nature of God's will seems to be full of contradictions. In his doctrine on creation he ascribes the existence of *das Nichtige* to God's not willing. Yet in his doctrine on God he speaks with regard to the existence of evil of God's permissive will that entails that God permits evil in order that Christ should exist. The latter notion is problematic because it implies that God willed evil (even if just in a permissive way) so that He can show us grace. This raises a serious question: is God's grace dependent on evil? Apart from the fact that this hypothesis endangers the moral perfectness of God Scripture does not speak of God's grace in this way. God's grace is not presented in Scripture in objectivist categories, but is seen as God's answer to suffering and evil.

Weaknesses and Strengths in the Augustinian Type of Theodicy

The Inevitability of Sin and the Accountability of the Human

The 'Augustinian' type of theodicy contains an inherent tension between the all-encompassing will of God, the inevitability of sin and the accountability of the human being. Calvin's theology reaches a total impasse in this regard because of his supra-lapsarian grounding of sin in God's will.⁶⁹ His notion that a sinner sins necessarily because God wills sin, but that man is still responsible for its own sin is not tenable. Barth attempts to solve the impasse by describing the election as solely and totally grace in Christ. God damns and elects all humanity in Christ. Humanity thus participates in the election of Christ. The question is whether Barth's view on election takes man's accountability for sin seriously. His doctrine on election, might lead to a doctrine of universal reconciliation that is not in accordance with Scripture.

The solution to this inherent problem in the 'Augustinian' type of theodicy might exist in the concept of the original free will of man that both Augustine and Barth employ, but do not bring to its full conclusion. The notion of God's permission would indeed be problematic, as Calvin suggests, if it is used in the sense that there is a synergy between the work of God and man, but not if it is understood as expressing the way in which God gives man

⁶⁹ It must be noted that Calvin is not consistently supra-lapsarian in his view of the ordering of divine decrees.

creaturely freedom within His reign. Creaturely freedom does not endanger or limit the sovereign and omnipotent acts of God.⁷⁰ Since goodness and love are characteristics of God's being He recognises true freedom, because communication of love can only take place in freedom. God's love entails that He creates in a free decision a world that is independent of Him, thereby limiting Himself and providing space for creaturely freedom. If we do not allow for creaturely freedom we also leave no room for human responsibility and accountability.

Alvin Plantinga made an important contribution to the theodicy debate through his explication of a systematic free-will defence. He does not offer the free-will defence as a theodicy, but as a 'defence' in the face of a purely logical challenge. The premise of the free-will defence is that God wanted man to love him spontaneously and not because of coercion. God chose for a free creation that is independent of him. This logically entails that the human being has the potential to defect. Without the possibility of defection, creation would not be distinct from God and therefore not be His creation. Plantinga's argument is that a world containing creatures that are significantly free is more valuable than a world containing no free creatures at all. God can create free creatures, but he cannot cause or determine them to do what is only right, for if he does so they are not significantly free. In order to create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, he must create creatures capable of moral evil. He cannot leave these creatures free to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so.⁷¹ According to Plantinga God did in fact create significantly free creatures, but some of them went wrong in the exercise of their freedom. This is the source of moral evil. The fact that these creatures sometimes go wrong, however, neither counts against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness, for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by excising the possibility of moral good.⁷² In other words, it is possible that God cannot bring forth a good state of affairs without permitting evil.

If we follow Plantinga's free-will defence we can state that God is neither the author of sin nor wills sin, but that sin is the result of the free actions of human beings.

⁷⁰ Cf Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer, *Dogmatische Studiën. De voorzienigheid Gods* (Kampen: Kok, 1950), 167.

⁷¹ Alvin Plantinga, *The nature of necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 166-167.

⁷² Plantinga, *The nature of necessity*, 166-167.

The Fall

The rise of an evolutionary worldview due to discoveries in biology, palaeontology and physics, complicates the question of evil to a degree that neither Augustine, nor Calvin or Barth could foresee. Due to discoveries in the natural sciences we know today that the conditions that cause human disease and mortality were already part of the natural order before the emergence of man.⁷³

The traditional answer of the ‘Augustinian’ type of theodicy that there was once a wholly good creation in which man enjoyed a serene consciousness of God, but that this perfect world became distorted after the fall of Adam and that the whole of humanity inherited their guilt and a corrupted and sin-prone nature, because they stand in a corporate unity and continuity of life with the primal pair, seems to be insufficient to face the challenge of evolution theory.

As noted earlier, John Hick, suggests that the ‘Augustinian’ type of theodicy ought to be replaced by an ‘Irenaean’ type of theodicy. According to the ‘Irenaean’ view the human’s basic nature in distinction from animals is that of a personal being endowed with moral freedom and responsibility. However, the human is not as yet the perfected being that God seeks to produce, he is an imperfect and immature being at the beginning of a process of growth and development in God’s continuing providence, which will culminate in the finite ‘likeness’ of God.⁷⁴ The original human being is only the raw material for a further and more difficult stage in God’s creative work. Hick combines this view with evolutionary theory. The creation of man has two stages, namely his fashioning as *homo sapiens* through the evolutionary process, and his spiritualisation as child of God. Men can, however, not be perfected through divine fiat, but only through the uncompelled responses and willing co-operation of individuals, through a hazardous adventure in individual freedom.⁷⁵ If man has to develop, this world must become a place of soul-making.

Why can’t God create human beings that freely do what is right? Hick’s answer is that there is no point in the creation of finite persons unless they could be endowed with a degree of genuine freedom and independence over against their Maker. This does not mean that God affords the human random

⁷³ Hick, *Evil and the God of love*, 201, 249.

⁷⁴ Hick, *Evil and the God of love*, 212.

⁷⁵ Hick, *Evil and the God of love*, 255.

and undetermined freedom, but He provides the human with limited creativity and autonomy so that his character is partially formed and partially reformed in the very moment of decision.⁷⁶ In causing man to evolve in this way out of lower forms of life, God has placed His human creature away from the immediate divine presence in a world with its own structure and laws in which he has a relative but real autonomy and freedom over and against his Creator. The human did not fall into this state of being from a prior state of holiness, but was brought into being in this way as a creature capable of eventually attaining holiness.⁷⁷

For the world to be a place of soul-making it should contain real hardships and challenges. All the unjust and apparently wasted suffering in the world may be regarded as a divinely created sphere of soul-making.⁷⁸ Even animal pain is justified if it plays its part in indirectly forming the human as a child of God.⁷⁹ Yet, such suffering only receives meaning in the creature's joyous participation in the completed creation. In faith we must affirm that there will be no personal life that is unperfected and no suffering that will not eventually become a phase in the fulfilment of God's good purpose.⁸⁰ Hick's position thus has two major premises: Firstly, evil is a necessary element in our maturation, secondly, that it is finally converted into goodness by the grace of God. He grounds evil in the will of God in order to maintain these two positions.

Ironically Hick's theodicy is not free of the same inconsistencies that he identifies in the 'Augustinian' type of theodicy. By locating evil in the will of God, Hick risks setting God the Redeemer against God the Creator. On the one hand God creates through evolution and the use of suffering, yet on the other God identifies with the suffering through a fellow-suffering. It is difficult to understand why Hick gives instrumental value to something that Scripture describes as contrary and alien to the will of God, as something that stands under God's no. Is all the evil that God supposedly allows on earth, really there only for the purpose of soul-making? Would a good God allow so much suffering only for the purpose of creating mature human beings? Is the means that God supposedly use to serve His ends, the means that a good God would use? Hick has rightly been criticized for the purposive quality

⁷⁶ John Hick, *The God of love and evil*, 275-277.

⁷⁷ John Hick, *The God of love and evil*, 286-287.

⁷⁸ John Hick, *The God of love and evil*, 336.

⁷⁹ John Hick, *The God of love and evil*, 316.

⁸⁰ John Hick, *The God of love and evil*, 340.

that he attributes to evil. Meslé, for instance, accuses Hick of actually denying the reality of evil. According to Meslé, we must abandon any false comfort that bad things are really good or that evil will ultimately and inevitably be turned into good. Some suffering is truly evil and irredeemable.⁸¹ Geivett's⁸² main critique against Hick is that it would be immoral of God to cause evil and to use evil in order to create good souls. We may also ask whether Hick's notion that God sets Himself in an epistemic distance from man and then uses evil to make man enter into a relationship with him does not amount to a form of coercion? Furthermore, why would virtues earned through a process of soul making be better than virtues bestowed by God as an innate element of personhood?

The 'Augustinian' type of theodicy is more sound than the 'Irenean' type because it does not attribute evil to God. It stays true to the Scriptural motives on creation, it takes the biblical notions of a Fall and election seriously, and it emphasizes the accountability of the human being for sin. Karl Barth, furthermore, has shown that an 'Augustinian' type of theodicy is not necessarily dependent on a strictly literalist interpretation of the creation narratives. I therefore would suggest an alternative solution that stays true to the witness of Scripture and preserve the strengths in the 'Augustinian' theodicy. This is to be found, firstly, in an understanding of the Fall as an event in time but with eternal significance, and, secondly, in relating the concept of *creatio continua* to God's providence.

The notion of a Fall is increasingly rejected in theological circles, because of the already mentioned developments in natural sciences. However, if we reject the notion of a Fall we can come to no other conclusion namely that God is either the author of sin or that evil is an independent ontological reality. This is the weakness in Hick's theodicy. Understanding the Fall as an event in time with eternal significance might solve the impasse. It entails that time cannot be understood in linear terms. Theologically speaking the problem with a linear concept of time is that eternity is dissolved into time. Relativity theory in theoretical physics, furthermore, has shown that the linear concept of time that pervaded 17th century mechanistic science is deficient. It states that there is an a-temporal space-time continuum, because the metrical structure of space and time cannot be abstracted from the presence of physical

⁸¹ Robert C. Meslé, *John Hick's theodicy: A process humanist critique* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991), 19.

⁸² Douglas, R Geivett, *Evil and the evidence of God: The challenge of John Hick's theodicy* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1993).

objects, rather physical objects are accounted for as effects of the gravitational field of space-time.⁸³ There is thus interdependence between physical objects and the spatial and temporal dimensions of their existence. This notion of space time is closely connected to the 'block universe' theory. According to this theory time has an objective quality because, seen from a particular point of reference, time does not change. Past, present and future all exist simultaneously. Russell Standard,⁸⁴ therefore, distinguishes between objective time as seen from the perspective of theoretical physics, and subjective time which is time as experienced by human beings who are limited to experiencing the moments of time successively and thus cannot know the future as already existing. Standard argues that God presumably views time objectively from eternity which is beyond time. He is both in time and beyond time and knows past, present and future simultaneously, akin to the block universe as employed in theoretical physics. If we accept the notion that to the Creator all points of created time are simultaneously present, and if we understand eternity as the togetherness of past, present and future, we can state that it is possible that the events of the Fall were a reality for God before it actually occurred in a human sense, and that God could have subjected creation to the distortive effects of the Fall, even before the human being was created. This would explain how death could exist before the fall, but be at the same time the result of the fall.

It is, furthermore, interesting that Scripture seems to understand history 'forwards' and 'backwards'. Events are, at times, described as efficient although it hasn't occurred yet, or as having occurred already, but not being fully efficient as yet. There is thus not only a bouncing back in Scripture from the 'already' to 'not yet', but also a forwarding of events from 'not yet' to 'already'. A few analogies will suffice: It is generally accepted in Reformed theology that Christ's atonement on the cross is not only effective for the sins of posterity, but that the sins of the Old Covenant's members are also cleansed through his sacrifice. Even before Christ paid for the sins of the members of the Old Covenant, God grants them his grace because of Christ's work on the cross.⁸⁵ The atonement, though an historical event in time, has eternal significance and therefore applies 'forwards' and 'backwards'. The

⁸³ Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Eternity, time and space". *Zygon* 40(1) 2005, 100.

⁸⁴ Russel Stannard, "God in and beyond space and time," *In whom we live and move and have our being*, eds. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 109-120.

⁸⁵ Cf Hebr. 11.

same is true of God's election. It is said in Ephesians 1:4 that God's election of the faithful took place before creation in Christ. Even though neither Christ nor the faithful was born yet, the election of the faithful already took place in Christ as if Christ already paid for their sins. That which has not yet happen is already considered as effective. Christ's victory over evil is an example of precisely the opposite. Though Christ conquered evil on the cross, his victory is not as yet considered as efficient in the comprehensive sense. We still encounter the effects of sin and death. The full benefits of his victory will only be attained with the coming of the new heaven and earth. Thus something that has already happened in time and space is not considered as yet fully efficient.

I suggest that the Fall, as is the case with the atonement, could be understood as an event in time, but with significance for past and present. We find in the creation narratives a mixture of poetic, prosaic and metaphorical language that do not narrate historical events in a chronological order, but describe a theological line of development from order to disorder, harmony to disharmony. This does not mean that the creation narratives are not 'historical'. It is history told in a non-historical genre. God did create, He did enter into a covenant with humanity and there was a Fall that occurred when man broke his covenant relationship with God. Even though the Fall was an historical event, which is described in the creation narratives through the use of metaphors, its effects could have been efficient before it took place. Death and suffering can therefore be regarded as the consequences of the Fall, even though their existence, precede the historical event of the Fall. Such an approach would be truer to Scripture than the 'Irenaeus' type of theodicy that has no option but to reject certain Scriptural teachings on creation and sin. It would also address some of the challenges that evolution poses to Christianity, because the defective and brutal aspects of evolution can then be understood as effects of sin. Furthermore, it would make the whole supra-lapsarian versus infra-lapsarianism debate obsolete.

Evolution and Providence

The phenomenon of evolution begs the question whether we can speak of a creation that is completed as the Biblical creation narratives teaches. Though the notion of *creatio continua* is well known in Reformed theology, it has generally been understood in relation to God's original creative work and not so much in relation to God's providence. In my view, the Augustinian

theological tradition should take the notion of a *creatio continua*, first introduced by Schleiermacher, much more seriously in its doctrine on providence. An understanding of *creatio continua ex nihilo* would contradict the evidence of Scripture that God completed His creation at a definite stage. However, *creatio continua* could also be related to God's providential care and his recreative work. As stated earlier God is both in time and beyond time. He knows at every moment the past, present and future of the cosmic process and orders each successive event within the space-time continuum in terms of its impact on the cosmic process as a whole. The aim of His creation though, as Pannenberg rightly states, is obtainable only in time. Time is a necessary requirement for the formation of finite beings and a condition for the independent existence of His creatures. God gives creatures a span of time to organize their own being and acquire a more differentiated form of existence.⁸⁶ God's continuous reign over the cosmos and his sustenance of creation thus involves more than a mere preservation of the status quo, it also entails renewal in creation itself, dynamic progress in natural and cultural processes and the development of human history towards God's eschatological purpose. A static creation would be capable of no history, evolution or progress, it would revolve around itself. *Creatio continua*, in contrast, encapsulates the Biblical understanding that the creation is eschatologically oriented to the future of God, which is the destiny of His creatures and is identical with His eternal present.

The difference between God original creative acts and his *creatio continua* would be that the first calls for the origination of things into existence from nothing, whereas the *creatio continua*, amongst other things, entails the continuous evolvment of things from simpler forms to increasing complexity. Such an understanding of the *creatio continua* would not contradict scriptural evidence on the original creation, it would give new depth to the Reformed doctrine of providence and recreation and it would take the existence of biological and cultural evolution seriously. But then we must not isolate the notion of a *creatio continua* from the effects of sin. God's providential reign through *creatio continua* is also characterised by a continuous struggle with sin, suffering, chaos, the malfunctioning of evolutionary systems and randomness. The pain and suffering that co-incides with evolution is not part of a divine soulmaking scheme, but these processes are like all other worldly phenomena also contaminated by sin. Despite this, God is stronger than sin and will reach His overarching purposes with creation.

⁸⁶ Pannenberg, "Eternity, time and space", 104.

Conclusion

Though the classical ‘Augustinian’ type of theodicy is based on an outdated worldview and also contains an inherent tension between the inevitability of sin and human accountability, there is no need to for Reformed scholars to replace the Augustinian paradigm with an ‘Irenaean’ type of theodicy. Weaknesses within the Augustinian paradigm can be resolved without any drastic changes to the basic tenets of the Augustinian paradigm. This article proposes that Reformed theology rethinks its traditional linear concept of history and that it considers the possibility that the Fall could be an event within time, but with an eternal significance, that works both ‘backwards’ and ‘forwards’. Reformed theology could also deepen its doctrine of providence by making use of the dynamic notion of ‘*creatio continua*’.

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