1 The Dispute over the Origin of Evil: Against the Gnostics and Manichaeans

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1.2 The dispute over the origin of evil: against the Gnostics and the Manichaeans

The problem of the origin of evil constituted for ancient Christian thought a challenge not only philosophical, but existential and dogmatic. The credibility of monotheism, the meaning of Revelation and the value of the economy of salvation depended on it: whether the God revealed in Christ is the only, sovereign Creator of all that exists; whether matter and the body are the work of His goodness; whether evil is something substantive, competes with God or derives from some separate principle? In response to these questions two basic Christian strategies were formed: the defense of the unity of God and the goodness of creation, and the formulation of an ontology of evil that does not diminish its seriousness nor make it a second god. This chapter defends the thesis that the polemic with Gnosticism and Manichaeism — represented here by characteristic Valentinian–gnostic elements and by the system of Mani — led to the shaping of the classical Christian theodicy: evil as privatio boni resulting from the misuse of free will by creatures, while preserving the unity of the Creator and the value of the created world.

Gnosticism and Manichaeism: two variants of the temptation of dualism

Already the very labeling “Gnosticism” encompasses a collection of very diverse religious and cosmological systems in which the motif of secret knowledge (gnosis) appears and the portrayal of the visible world as dysfunctional or evil in relation to the supersensory world is presented. In many of these constructions the central motif is a myth of degradation: an element of the divine fullness (pleroma), most often personified in the form of Sophia or another aeon, experiences a disturbance; from this disturbance a lower demiurge is born, the creator of the visible world, who — due to his limited nature, ignorance or malice — forms matter as a prison for spiritual sparks. From this perspective evil is rooted in the ontology of the material world: it is not the result of a wrong choice by a free being, but a property of matter itself

and the work (or consequence of an error) of a lower Creator[1]. This scheme leads to religious consequences: salvation becomes an escape from the cosmos through the acquisition of gnosis and a return to the fullness; the body does not await renewal, but abandonment.

Manichaeism, although in certain points related to Gnosticism — especially in the anthropological conception of the "spark of light" imprisoned in the body — took on a more systematic and cosmological form of bipolar struggle: two eternal, coequal principles, Light and Darkness, met and as a result of their mingling the world arose, in which elements of Darkness (matter, death, passions) exist as a real, expansible substance[2]. In Mani's system evil is not a privation but a positive force, and the struggle of good against evil has a physical and cosmic character; the moral life of the human subject is embedded in this great, almost mechanical rivalry — which reduces moral guilt to a function of the "origin" of evil in human nature and weakens the concept of personal responsibility.

Both currents — in different ways — shared a temptation: if evil is something truly alien to God, it is easier to preserve the appearance of His absolute goodness; yet the price is high: the loss of the unity of God, the degradation of the world and the diminution of the significance of the Incarnation. The polemic with these systems forced Christian thought to make precise distinctions between the essence of creation and its corruption, between the divine permissive will and moral agency, and between real suffering and the rejection of ontological dualism.

Irenaeus and the Unity of the Creator: History, Recapitulation, and Freedom

Irenaeus of Lyons confronted Gnosticism primarily by means of a hermeneutic of the history of salvation. His most important dialectical weapon consisted in restoring the rule of one God–Creator and in showing that the unity of creation and redemption follows from the fact that "all things were made through the Word," and that Christ is not a foreign interventionist in the cosmos but a continuer of the divine work of creation[3]. Irenaeus rejected the division of the world into the domain of the highest, unknowable Father and the work of some lower, imperfect demiurge; such a division would make God incomplete and dependent on another principium. His understanding of Scripture, and in particular the Prologue of John and the creation narratives, leads him to the conclusion that the Old Testament and the New Testament speak of one God who educates, leads and finally brings about recapitulation (*recapitulatio*) — that is, in Christ renews and brings to fullness what He created[4].

For Irenaeus evil is not a primary substance. He understands the apostasy of free beings — angels and humans — as the effect of improper use of the gift of freedom. In the famous passage of Adversus haereses he emphasizes that people are not divided into immutable categories of "spiritual" and "material" from birth; everyone is called to discern and respond to God's gift, and moral differences result from free choice, not from an innate nature[5]. This argument interweaves morality with history: the permission of the fall does not negate the purpose of creation, because God conducts an educative process, incorporates the

[1] An outline of Gnostic cosmologies and the myth of Sophia in the literature: Gnosticism, The Gnostic Society Library, access: http://gnosis.org/gnustuff.html. See also the critique of such myths by Irenaeus: Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses (Against Heresies), books I–III, a general refutation of multi-stage emanations and the demiurge; compare translations and commentaries available online (New Advent).

[2] Manichaeism, Encyclopedia Britannica, survey article, available online: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Manichaeism.

[3] See Sacred Scripture: John 1:1–3; Colossians 1:15–20. Irenaeus cites and develops the idea of the Logos as creator in Adversus Haereses, arguing for the unity of the Creator (cf. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, book II; available on New Advent).

[4] Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses — on recapitulation and the unity of the Creator; cf. also the introduction to Adversus Haereses in translations available online (New Advent).

[5] Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses IV,37; see translation and commentary (New Advent): https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103437.htm.

consequences of sin into the economy of redemption and announces the eschatological renewal of body and world through the Incarnation and the resurrection.

Two essential consequences of Irenaeus should be highlighted here. First, the Incarnation of the Word becomes a counterweight to the gnostic scorn of matter; the Logos becomes flesh in order to "set in order" creation from within, not to abandon it. Second, the significance of freedom as the condition of responsibility in Irenaeus is inseparable from the doctrine of growth and trial: creation was called to maturation, hence the possibility of fall is not a necessity but a condition of genuine love and moral responsibility[6]. Irenaeus does not yet systematize an ontology of evil in the manner of the later Augustine, but his historical theology lays lasting foundations for anti-dualism: one Creator, one history, one redemption.

Manichaean substantial dualism and its anthropological implications

Manichaeism as a religious and cosmological movement gained a special place in the intellectual history of antiquity chiefly because it formulated a clear, coherent dualism of two principles — Light and Darkness — and because it was attractive to those seeking an explanation of the horror of evil by appealing to a real, external cause. In the Manichaean system evil was a real, expansible substance whose presence in the world explained suffering, disease and passions; humanity found itself in the midst of this struggle as a mixture of an element of light and an element of darkness, and the task of religion was to free the kernel of light[7]. Such an understanding had serious theological consequences: it ultimately undermined the unity of God and the meaning of the Incarnation, and it shifted the burden of salvation from moral transformation to cleansing or magical operations.

In fact Manichaeism cast doubt on moral responsibility because it located the source of wrongful action in a component of nature, not in free choice. From the Christian perspective this was not only a competing theological system but an antithesis to basic truths about the nature of man and divine Providence. Augustine, who for many years was a follower of Manichaeism, later clearly indicated the psychological and intellectual attractiveness of this form of dualism: it explained the human aversion to the existence of suffering and allowed one to preserve a pure conception of a Good Creator at the cost of relinquishing the unity of divine monarchy[8].

Augustine: the path from Manichaeism through Neoplatonism to privatio boni

Augustine's intellectual journey from Manichaeism to Christianity is at the same time a biography of thinking about evil. In the Confessions he reconstructs his own hesitations: an initial trust in Manichaean cosmology, then an encounter with Platonic–Neoplatonic writings and finally grasping the concept of evil as the privation of good, which allowed him to coherently combine monotheism with the experience of real suffering and moral guilt[9]. The crucial change was the rejection of the idea of evil as a substance: if evil were to have being, it would in some sense have to participate in being and thus in goodness — which makes the notion of substantial evil internally contradictory.

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[6]Discussion of the Incarnation as an action directed toward the renewal of creation in Irenaeus: Adversus Haereses II–III; cf. translations on New Advent.

[7]A synthesis of Manichaean cosmology and anthropology — see Encyclopedia Britannica, article Manichaeism, and historical studies concerning Mani and his system.

[8]Augustine, Confessiones (Confessions), book VII — an autobiographical account of his fascination with Manichaeism and his gradual departure from it; translations and editions available online (New Advent).

[9]See Augustine, Confessiones VII; also analyses of Augustine's transition in the literature, e.g. Jason D. BeDuhn, "Not to depart from Christ": Augustine between "Manichaean" and "Catholic" Christianity, HTS Theological Studies 69(1), 2013, available: https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222013000100029.

In his polemical works, especially De natura boni and the Enchiridion, Augustine systematizes the ontological thesis: "omnia, quæ sunt, bona sunt" — all things that exist share in the good[10]. Evil, however, is a defect, a lack of due good, a corruption of order and measure. This concept allows one to preserve two fundamental truths: the reality of evil (as experience and a moral fact) and the uniqueness of the Creator (God is not the cause of evil as such). In this way Augustine unmasks the Manichaean error: an evil substance could not be such in the full sense, for it would at least possess some aspects of being and form, which are goods originating from God.

But Augustine does not stop at metaphysics. In De libero arbitrio he indicates that the source of moral evil remains the free will of rational creatures[11]. The will is given as a good — the capacity to choose, fundamental for love and responsibility — and can be used in accordance with order or to violate it. Sin is then a movement "aversio a Deo, conversio ad creaturam": a turning away from the highest Good toward the lesser goods of creatures. This movement does not consist in the addition of an "extra" principle of evil, but in an improper ordering of desires and the hierarchy of love. Augustine vividly compared moral "falling away" to a light going out: the cause is not the addition of darkness, but the removal of light.

Such a formulation has practical and theological consequences. First, it indeed places the responsibility for sin on free agents; second, it indicates the need for grace, since the will wounded by sin requires healing beyond the powers of nature; third, it assures the ultimate defeat of dualism, because if evil is a privation it cannot become a coeternal opposition to God. In the messianic solution the cross and the resurrection become confirmations of this logic: God does not eliminate creation, but accepts it, heals it and restores its order.

Privatio boni as the foundation of Christian theodicy

Treating evil as privatio boni does not mean trivializing it. Augustine himself stresses the drama of suffering and guilt: the lack of good can be painful and destructive, and it is not enough to say "it is only a lack" to the "wound" inflicted on nature. Ontological analysis indicates, however, that evil should not be metaphysically located as an additional being alongside created being; this constitutive distinction is a condition for preserving both monotheism and moral responsibility. In practice this also implies the following distinctions that appeared in the fathers' polemic:

1. Created nature / its corruption: nature, insofar as it exists, partakes in the good; evil is its deformation, not a new kind of existence[12].
2. Permission of evil / moral causation: God may permit evil within Providence without being its author; the moral agent is the free will of rational beings[13].
3. The reality of suffering / the rejection of substantial dualism: suffering is real and must be treated seriously; yet its explanation does not require acknowledging a coeternal principle of evil[14].

[10] Augustine, On the Nature of Good (De natura boni), translation and text available on New Advent: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1407.htm; cf. also the Enchiridion, especially chapters 10–14, discussing privatio boni.

[11] Augustine, De libero arbitrio (On Free Choice of the Will), translations and fragments available in source editions; this work develops Augustine's conception of free will as the condition of moral responsibility.

[12] Cf. Augustine, Enchiridion and De natura boni — the exposition on created nature as good and on corruption as a privation of proper good.

[13] The distinction between permission (permissio) and causation (causa) in patristic thought, see Augustine, De civitate Dei (The City of God), an analysis of Providence and the permission of evil; translations and fragments available in New Advent.

[14] The reality of suffering and the rejection of substantial dualism — see Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses, and Augustine, De natura boni and Enchiridion; a concise treatment of the relation between suffering and the rejection of dualism can also be found in De civitate Dei.

This triad of distinctions allows understanding why Christian authors rejected Manichaean and typically Gnostic dualism, without at the same time denying the tragic nature of human experience or the role of spiritual struggle. The theological consequence is the recognition of freedom as the cause of moral evil and of grace as the necessary means of its healing: freedom without grace can lead to a turning away from God; grace, however, does not abolish freedom but heals it and restores the order of love.

The rehabilitation of matter and the body in the anti-dualist polemic

One of the most important theological effects of the defeat of dualism was the renewed affirmation of the value of matter and the body. If matter is not a substance of evil, then human corporality as a constitutive dimension of the person is worthy of salvation, and even of resurrection. The Incarnation of the Word is here the critical argument: if the Logos assumes a body, then the body must possess a dignity that God Himself respects and transforms[15]. This position unmasks the Gnostic tendency to develop a "spiritual elitism" and makes redemption a process of renewal of the whole creation.

The anti-dualist polemic broadened reflection on suffering. The Fathers — and Augustine in particular — distinguished moral evil from natural evil: not every disease, disaster or death arises directly from moral guilt; many of these phenomena should be understood in the context of the finitude of creation and its susceptibility to corruption. God has the power to permit or limit such evils, and His Providence can bring good out of them, without making evil itself into a good. The example of the cross shows that even the greatest wrongful acts can be used by God to achieve forgiveness and renewal, without justifying the perpetrators[16].

Finally, the rejection of dualism had ecclesial and moral consequences: preserving the unity of creation and responsibility significantly affects social ethics and Catholic anthropology. If evil is not "natural" in an ontological sense, people cannot shift blame onto "internal properties" of their nature nor renounce moral transformation. At the same time the need for compassion and care for the suffering becomes a central element of Christian life: since the body is a gift, it must not be neglected nor treated as an expression of a lower spiritual condition.

A brief synthesis distinguishing positions

1. Gnosticism: evil as the result of a cosmic error and a characteristic of matter; salvation by gnosis and escape from the body[17].
2. Manichaeism: evil as the eternal substance of Darkness, fighting the principle of Light; a mixed anthropology, salvation as the liberation of the element of light[18].
3. Christianity (Irenaeus/Augustine): one Good Creator; matter is fundamentally a good created reality; evil — privatio boni — appears as a result of the misuse of free will; salvation as the renewal of creation by grace and the Incarnation.

Conclusion: the significance of the victory over dualism for theology and hope

The dispute over the origin of evil was therefore a struggle over what reality is and to whom the ultimate word belongs. The rejection of ontological dualism had a twofold significance: it defended the

[15]The Incarnation as an argument against the Gnostic scorn for matter: Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses II–III; cf. also John 1; Pauline letters on the unity of creation and the redemption of the body (e.g. Romans 8:19–23; 1 Corinthians 15).

[16]The cross as an example of the permission of evil and its transformation within Providence: Augustine, De civitate Dei (books XXII and following), discussion of the economy of salvation.

[17]A concise comparison of Gnostic positions — see Gnosticism, The Gnostic Society Library; patristic critiques of Gnosticism: Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses.

[18]The Manichaean conception of the "substance of evil" and its critique by Augustine — see Augustine, De natura boni and the biographical accounts in Confessiones; historical context and characterization of the system in Encyclopedia Britannica.

transcendence and sovereignty of God (not allowing the existence of any coeternal principle of evil), and at the same time upheld the seriousness of the created world as a good that can be healed, not rejected. Irenaeus and Augustine provided different ways of arguing, but both led to the same practical consensus: evil is real and dangerous, yet it is not a primordial and unconquerable being; it has its beginning in a free act of creation and can be judged, punished and finally healed by God.

This theological reorientation was not an escape from suffering nor an avoidance of its drama. On the contrary: by indicating that evil is a misordering of the good, Christian thought emphasized precisely what is most terrifying in human experience — that man can make good into evil by the misuse of freedom. Yet since evil is a missing good, its removal is also possible; since the body is a good, its salvation is also possible. At the center of this perspective stands Christ: the Logos, who not only interprets the meaning of reality but receives it, heals it and redeems it. Thus the victory over dualism was not the triumph of an abstract doctrine but a condition of hope: the hope that wounded creation is not abandoned and that human freedom, though capable of falling, can be healed by grace.

Notes

1.3 The Dualistic Temptation to Explain Evil

The dualistic interpretation of the origin of evil was one of the most attractive answers to the problem unde malum in late antiquity. Its strength lay in the apparent resolution of the dilemma: if God is good and the world is full of evil, one must conclude that evil does not come from the same, highest source. This solution had both a theoretical and a psychological dimension: it exonerated the transcendental perfection of God from responsibility for suffering and gave those afflicted by misfortune a framework of meaning — suffering was explained as an alien, aggressive presence of the Darkness or as the consequence of a "mistake" in divine emanation. In this chapter I will show why that temptation was not only historically understandable but also demanded a systematic reply: ontological dualism fundamentally undermined the unity of God and creation, eroded human moral responsibility, and impoverished the Christian hope for the renewal of all reality. The patristic response — represented in particular by Irenaeus of Lyons and St. Augustine of Hippo — did not deny the reality of evil nor minimize suffering; on the contrary, by rejecting substantial dualism they developed subtle distinctions: created nature / its corruption; permission of evil / moral causation; reality of suffering / rejection of substantial dualism. These distinctions permeate the whole argument and constitute its methodological axis.

1.3.1 The Dualistic Temptation in the Ancient Context

The attractiveness of dualistic thought becomes comprehensible only when read as a response to the concrete existential conditions of the late ancient world. Roman and related societies lived amid chronic violence, disease, political instability, and religious pluralism. The experience of the cosmos' imperfection struck traditional theodicies: if God is both good and supremely highest, whence the fact that creation so often is a source of suffering? Dualism offered an apparent way out: not everything that exists comes from one good source; alongside God there is also an opposing principle, with which it is difficult to contend except by the concept of cosmic conflict. In such a narrative God remains pure and blameless — meanwhile responsibility for evil falls on the "other" principle, the demiurge or a personification of Darkness.

Various gnostic currents and Manichaeism used images of cosmic rupture and conflict to address this dramatic problem. Gnostics depicted the visible world as the result of a fall or mistake in the Pleroma: matter arises from a "miscarriage" of the divine, from Sophia's error, or from the activity of a lesser

demiurge not identical with the Unknowable Father; man, however, bears within him a divine spark imprisoned in the body, whose task is to return to plenitude through knowledge (gnosis). Manichaeism, by contrast, organized dualism more radically and symmetrically: two coequal domains — Light and Darkness — exist eternally and wage conflict, the result of which is the mingling of elements and the imprisonment of sparks of light in matter. In both cases, however, the anthropological and soteriological consequences converged: the material world ceases to be a good creation made by God, and corporeality becomes a prison to be abandoned or overcome[19].

This type of answer was particularly attractive because it resolved the tension between God's goodness and the reality of evil without having to burden God's omnipotence. Yet it was a relatively simple "defensive strategy" that, at the cost of theological and moral unity, sought to preserve transcendence. The Fathers of the Church recognized a fundamental problem in this strategy: to keep God radically transcendent at all costs, some architects of dualistic systems had to shatter the ontological unity of reality and assign to creation the character of an anthropologically hostile domain. For Christianity such a resolution was unacceptable, because from that perspective it also demeaned Revelation: the Son of God would not have come to "renew" the Father's property, but to liberate sparks from foreign jurisdiction.

1.3.2 Gnosticism and Manichaeism — Cosmological and Anthropological Differences

To properly assess the danger that dualism posed to the emerging orthodoxy, one must distinguish two main types of this temptation: the gnostic emanational variant and the Manichaean substantialist variant. Although both approaches shared many similar intuitions — a critique of the world as a place of the soul's imprisonment and a priority of "spiritual" knowledge — they differed fundamentally in the construction of cosmology and in the implications for the notion of guilt.

In gnosticism, especially in Valentinian forms, evil is not an eternal substance but the effect of a disturbance in the process of emanation. The Pleroma, the fullness of divine eons, experiences an internal rupture; Sophia, one of the eons, undergoes a "miscarriage" that gives birth to the demiurge and to matter. In this image matter and the world are rather the result of an error or deformation than an autonomous, opposing principle[20]. Anthropologically this is associated with a vision of man as a two-layered being: spirit (the spark) comes from the Pleroma and is good, while the body is the product of a lesser creation and must be abandoned in order to return to plenitude. Salvation thus becomes a process of knowledge — the discovery and rebirth of the divine spark.

Manichaeism, however, elevated the dualistic intuition to the level of a cosmic myth of two coequal, eternal principles: Light and Darkness. Their conflict — sometimes narrated in quasi-mythological, centralized accounts — manifests itself in the capture of elements of light by the store of matter and the forces of darkness. Manichaeism made evil take on an almost "material" and autonomous character: Darkness had its own activity, aims, and being[21].

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[19] Cf. various forms of gnosticism and Manichaeism and their analyses in the literature. See generally: Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus haereses IV,37 (Against Heresies) — for the critique of divisions into "kinds" of people and the defense of freedom: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103437.htm.

[20] Examples of the Sophia myth and its role in Valentinian cosmogony are contained in gnostic literature; Irenaeus criticizes these constructions as breaking the unity of the Creator. See Irenaeus, Adversus haereses.

[21] For a synthetic description of Manichaeism and its dualism see Augustine of Hippo, De natura boni (On the Nature of Good) — critique of the thesis of an eternal substance of evil: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1407.htm.

This difference has fundamental consequences. Gnosticism tended toward contempt for matter and toward a soteriology that excluded the body from fullness of salvation; Manichaeism rather posited a permanent antagonism of two systems, which in practice meant pessimism about the possibility of full healing of creation. The Fathers of the Church therefore had to demonstrate both that matter shares ontologically in the good (and therefore is not a primordial evil) and that evil is not an autonomous being possessing creative power; they developed this twofold counter-argument gradually, with Irenaeus and Augustine turning the dualists' own intuitions about freedom and responsibility against them.

1.3.3 Irenaeus: the Unity of God, Creation, and the History of Salvation

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–202) formulated in his polemic against heresies the crucial so-called "rule of truth": there is one God the Father who created everything through the Word and deprived no one of responsibility. His response to the gnostic schism does not consist in a mere intellectual rejection of the myth of emanation, but in a reinterpretation of the history of creation and salvation as a single pedagogical process aimed at the maturation of creation[22].

For Irenaeus it is fundamental to assert that the world was not made by angels or other intermediate powers contrary to the Father; for if it were so, the unity of God's omnipotence and omniscience would be violated. Therefore either the Demiurge is identical with the Father, or the narrative of an independent demiurge implodes the logic of divine plenitude. Irenaeus shows that Scripture — and in particular the prologue of the Gospel according to John — indicates the identity of the Creator-Word with Him who became flesh; the Logos is therefore not a foreign messenger attempting to recover "spirit" from the body, but himself initiates the work of redemption from the perspective of the one Creator[23].

Theological consequences are far-reaching. First, matter and the body cannot be by definition evil; as creatures of God they partake in being and therefore have an essential share in the good. Second, salvation cannot be the escape of a spark from the body, but the recapitulation of the whole human nature in Christ — the Word does not reject creation but receives, renews, and leads it to fullness. Connected to the latter is Irenaeus' understanding of the devil and sin: evil is the apostasy of creatures (angels or humans), not a new substance. The devil is not an "evil demiurge" but a fallen creature that by its choices has lost the order of the nature it received[24].

A distinctive feature of Irenaeus is the integration of freedom and the process of maturation. Man is endowed with the capacities of reason and will that are not fully formed from the beginning; creation is called to grow from image to likeness of God. True moral responsibility makes sense only in the perspective of freedom: if man had no possibility of choice, one could not ascribe to him guilt or merit. Irenaeus uses this motif to demonstrate the error of the gnostic division of people into classes of natures, where some would be by nature capable of salvation and others doomed to condemnation. For him man is by nature neither "spiritual" nor "material"; he is a being created for a free response to God's call[25].

Finally, Irenaeus incorporates evil into the history of divine pedagogy: although God does not will sin, he can transform the consequences of human and angelic defections into elements of a greater pedagogical

[22] Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus haereses, particularly books II and IV, in which he emphasizes the unity of the Creator and the Word and the identity of the Creator of the Old and New Testaments.

[23] Cf. the Prologue of the Gospel of John (John 1,1–3; 14) in the traditional Christian reading; on Irenaeus' appeal to John see Adversus haereses.

[24] Irenaeus sees the devil and the fall of angels as the effect of creatures' apostasy, not as the manifestation of an eternal principle of evil; cf. Adversus haereses.

[25] A particularly clear exposition of these theses is found in Adversus haereses IV,37; see also references to freedom and responsibility in that part of Irenaeus' work: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103437.htm.

plan and judgment that will lead to the restoration of order. This is an ontologically optimistic scenario: since everything comes from one good Creator, the final fulfillment will also be the work of that same one God. Such a solution preserves the reality of suffering and guilt while rejecting the dualistic separation of the original order from the broken world.

1.3.4 Augustine: Evil as privatio boni and a Defect of the Will

St. Augustine (354–430) brings to this polemic a specific metaphysical and psychological reflection that constitutes the intellectual completion of the anti-dualistic strategy. His experience of belonging to the Manichaean community made him a particularly sensitive critic of substantial dualism: in the Confessions Augustine himself reconstructs the period in which he understood good and evil as almost bodily substances[26]. The process of departure from Manichaeism shaped his reflection, whose core is the thesis privatio boni — evil is not a "thing" but the absence of good.

Augustine develops an ontology of the good: there are degrees of participation in being and every degree of existence carries with it some form of good. Nature as such is a good form of being; a thing that has form, structure, and purpose participates in the good. Thus the existence of an "absolutely evil nature" is impossible: if something existed as absolutely evil, in that absolute evil there would be no being — and the absence of being is impossible. Hence the conclusion: evil as an independent being is self-excluding. This is one of Augustine's key arguments that undermines the Manichaean thesis of eternal, substantial Darkness[27].

Another branch of his reflection is a psychological theory of the causes of evil. Augustine does not deny that one must indicate historical and conditional causes that make the concrete evil act possible. However, metaphysical questions are not resolved by appeal to another coequal ontological cause. He therefore characterizes the cause of evil as a defect of the free will — defectio voluntatis. The will, given by God as a great good (enabling love, reason, and moral action), can become disordered: man can invert the hierarchy of values and make mutable goods the ultimate end instead of God. Sin is not the addition of "something" to the will but its distortion, loss, and misplacement of love[28].

Here there is an important emphasis on the distinction between the ontological origin of nature and the moral origin of its corruption: God is the cause of the will's existence, its capacity for choice, rationality, and dynamism; he is not, however, the cause of the disorder that appears when the will chooses against that order. This allows Augustine to preserve both the full unity of the Creator and the causal responsibility of created subjects. Freedom in this perspective is not the causal source of evil in a mechanistic sense, but the condition of moral responsibility: without freedom there would be neither true love, nor merit, nor guilt. At the same time Augustine stresses that in the postlapsarian state the human will is weakened and needs God's grace to return to the proper order of love[29].

The theory of privatio boni has another significant theological consequence: it undermines the Manichaean conception of evil as a coequal substance and makes possible a theodicy whose axis is God's ability to "bring good out of evil." Augustine does not make evil a desirable or necessary means; rather

[26] Augustine, Confessiones (Confessions), book VII, the account of the Manichaean period and the experience of conversion; a classic biographical testimony to Manichaean influences on the young Augustine.

[27] Augustine, De natura boni (On the Nature of Good), where he develops arguments against the idea of substantial evil and states that evil is the absence of good: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1407.htm.

[28] See also Augustine, De libero arbitrio (On Free Choice), where Augustine considers the nature of the free will and its relation to good and evil; and the Enchiridion, chapters developing the theology of participation and privatio boni.

[29] Augustine develops a complex theory of grace in many places (including treatises on grace and his teachings against the Pelagians); see also De civitate Dei for a broader reflection on history and Providence.

he asserts that since evil occurred in the free acts of creatures, God as Providence and wisdom can bring from its consequences a greater good than would have resulted directly from the absence of evil. This is a difficult and controversial thought, but essentially different from the claim that evil is needed as a means: God does not need evil as a condition for his action, yet he is able to employ even its presence toward the ultimate good of salvation[30].

In Augustine's analysis it is also crucial to separate suffering as a real evil from the thesis of substantial dualism. Death, disease, or other forms of suffering are real human lot and cannot be regarded as an illusion; at the same time their existence does not imply the existence of a coequal, eternal principle of evil. The wounds of creation are real, but they are wounds in a well-created nature — manifestations of privatio, not proof of an autonomous power of darkness[31].

Augustine also developed reflection on demonic activity in the light of this anti-dualism. Satan remains a personal, real cause of temptation and evil, but his power is derivative and limited: he cannot create being, only pervert and exploit created beings. In this understanding demons are not a second divinity; they are creatures that through free choice lost order and became instruments of evil, though still ontologically dependent on the Creator[32].

The essential achievement of Augustine's critique of dualism is thus the metaphysical safeguarding of the unity of being and of the good against the threat of relativization: if evil is a lack, if every nature as such is good, then dualism becomes internally contradictory. At the same time Augustine does not flee the moral and psychological consequences: evil is real, freedom is the condition of guilt, and grace is the necessary healing.

Monarchy of God, Human Freedom, and the Reality of Hope

The common axis of both polemics (Irenaean and Augustinian) is the upholding of God's monarchy at the ontological level, while at the same time recognizing the reality and gravity of evil. Monarchy here is not merely a metaphor of monarchical power in the political sense, but a principle that everything that exists proceeds from one, highest Good. Acceptance of this unity does not lead, however, to determinism: the Fathers distinguish the cause of existence from the cause of moral corruption. God creates nature and gives it goods; it is the creatures that use or misuse those goods, and therefore the moral agency for evil rests on them, not on the Creator[33].

From this follows the great theological and ethical significance of the victory over dualism. First, it protects the integrity of the sacrament of the Incarnation: if matter is good and belongs to the order of the Creator, the Word becomes flesh to save the whole human nature, not only its "spiritual" element. Second, it preserves true moral responsibility of the person and the meaning of judgment: if evil were the work of an autonomous substance, the meaning of accusation and moral accounting would be destroyed. Third, the rejection of dualism opens the perspective of hope in which evil does not have the last word, because

[30] Augustine never presents evil as something desired by God as a means; his thought about "bringing good out of evil" has a theodical character and rests on the acceptance of the reality of defect, not of its necessity. Cf. De natura boni; De civitate Dei.

[31] Augustine makes a clear distinction between the reality of suffering as experience and the rejection of substantial dualism; cf. Enchiridion and De natura boni.

[32] On Augustinian demonology and its monotheistic coloring see inter alia De civitate Dei, where Augustine reflects on the nature of evil and the responsibility of fallen spirits.

[33] The distinction between the cause of existence and the cause of moral corruption is the common axis of the Irenaean and Augustinian critique of dualism; cf. Irenaeus, Adversus haereses IV; Augustine, De natura boni.

it has no independent source of existence[34].

On these foundations the Christian response to the temptation of dualism also affirms the reality of suffering and the need for compassion, action for justice, and therapeutic support — while simultaneously rejecting the search for the causes of evil outside the freedom of persons and the created order. This is therefore neither a superficial nor utopian treatment of the problem: rather, it recognizes that the greatest way out from the tragedy of sin and pain comes not by its constitutional denial but by the transformation of creation by God, who "brings good out of evil," and above all by accomplishing this process in Jesus Christ — the Word who did not abandon creation but took it upon himself and sanctified it.

Through the prism of this argument it becomes clear that the dualistic temptation to explain evil, though logically tempting and psychologically soothing, was theologically untenable: it disintegrated the unity of being, undermined moral responsibility, and thwarted hope for the renewal of the whole creation. The replies of Irenaeus and Augustine, different in style and language, are joined by a single decision: evil is not the beginning of being nor a separate principle, but a defect within created good that God called into being and to which he offers final healing.

The practical implications of anti-dualistic theology remain significant for the life of the Church and culture. The insistence that body and world are goods in their being secures the sacraments, an ethic of the body, care for creation, and responsibility for the material world. At the same time indicating that evil has its source in the free misuse of gifts underpins Christian personalist ethics and the understanding of responsibility. Finally, acknowledging the reality of suffering without justifying it as a "necessary" element of God's plan protects against spiritual cynicism and invites concrete compassion and reparative action.

In conclusion: the dualistic temptation contained a truth of intuition — the experience of evil undermines the peace of theodical monotheism — but the price of that solution was high. Through dialogue with gnosticism and Manichaeism Irenaeus and Augustine developed a theological highway that not only refuted the ontological absurdity of a second substance but also fully acknowledged the drama of freedom, the reality of suffering, and the necessity of grace. The Christian victorious answer did not consist in a simple dismissal of the problem of evil, but in its transformation: evil was located within creation as lack and defect, while it was revealed that God is the sole beginning and ultimate end who, through his Word and through the Cross, opens the way to the renewal of all reality.

Notes

1.4 The Monarchy of God as an Ontological Principle

The notion of "monarchy" in patristic theology goes beyond the common understanding of power or sovereignty: it is not merely a political metaphor of rule, but an ontological statement about unity and the ultimate source of being. In the context of disputes with Gnosticism and Manichaeism this designation served as a basic critical instrument. The monarchy of God — in the sense of the sole, undivided source of existence (*arche*) — constituted the decisive point from which the Church Fathers began an exposition on the origin of the world, the nature of evil, and the meaning of the history of salvation. This theology, developed inter alia by Irenaeus of Lyons and Augustine of Hippo, not only defended the unity of God against dualistic constructions, but also transformed the problem of evil: from the metaphysical category

[34]This line of approach is excellently illustrated by comparing the conceptions of salvation in gnosticism (escape of the spark) and in patristic Christianity (recapitulation in Christ). See Irenaeus, Adversus haereses, and Augustinian reflections on the Incarnation and the resurrection of the body (De civitate Dei).

of competition between two substances it made the question one of freedom, the order of creation, and the lack of good. In this chapter I will show how the monarchy of God functions as an ontological principle — semantically and metaphysically — and how it consistently leads to an understanding of evil as *privatio boni*, and not as an independent substance; finally, how this notion interweaves with the doctrine of creation out of nothing, free will, and Providence. In doing so I will consistently maintain three editorial distinctions: (1) created nature / its corruption; (2) permission of evil / moral causation; (3) the reality of suffering / the rejection of substantial dualism.

1.4.1 Monarchy as the ontological assertion of unity

The term monarchy in ancient Greek carried a different load than the modern term "monotheism." It signified not so much merely institutional rule as a single-origin source, a principle of singular rule from which everything that exists derives. In polemic against the Gnostics and Manichaeans such language performed an epistemic and metaphysical function: it presupposed that there exists no coeternal principle alongside God, no matter or principle that could rule independently. For if one were to accept the existence of two coexisting principles — goodness and evil — then neither would be absolute; both "gods" would prove mutually limiting, and the concept of God as fullness of being, goodness, and power would be undermined. Therefore for the Fathers monarchy was the first and fundamental indictment against all dualism: it asserted the ontological oneness of the Creator and from this logically followed the necessity of explaining evil in a way that does not make it a second principle creating being. Scripture expresses certain aspects of this thought, when for example the Prologue of John affirms the Logos' participation in all that was made: "All things were made through him" (John 1,3), and the Book of Isaiah attributes to God authority over opposites, saying that He makes "light and creates darkness" and "forms peace and creates calamity" (Is 45,7) — these texts in patristic interpretation reinforced the conviction that there is no impenetrable "zone" beside God responsible for darkness or evil[35][36]. Thus monarchy was not merely an apologetic argument against certain forms of piety, but an attempt to order the entire ontology: if God is the *Summum Bonum* and the beginning of being, then every being participates in His goodness and every deviation from goodness must be explained otherwise than by the existence of a separate, evil substance. Semantically this concept also operated against Gnostic models of emanation. In Gnosticism being was attenuated as one receded from the divine fullness (Pleroma) — successive aeons and intermediaries gradually reduced the intensity of unity of being. Monarchy, however, insisted: the source is one; therefore if multiplicity appears, its diversity has its origin in the free and purposeful act of the One, not in the necessity of emanative disintegration. Hence the consequence: the world is not ascribed an innate hostility toward the Father nor the status of the work of "another god." In the theology of Irenaeus and Augustine this ontological unity became the frame in which the successive doctrinal elements were placed: creation, the fall, salvation, and Providence.

1.4.2 Irenaeus: the unity of creation through the "Two Hands of God"

Irenaeus formulates his critique of dualism primarily through a historical-economic narrative: the world is the work of one Father accomplished through the Word and the Spirit; salvation is the holistic renewal of that same nature which God created. This thesis appears clearly in Adversus haereses, where he opposes the Church's "rule of truth" to the Gnostic myths of many aeons and demiurges. His famous doctrine of

[35] Isaiah 45:7 (Holy Scripture).
[36] John 1:3 (Holy Scripture).

the "two hands of God" (the Word and the Spirit) aims to show that all God's acts — creation, revelation, guidance — take place within the unity of the divine substance and in a coherent history of salvation[37]. If the world were the work of another, inferior demiurge, Irenaeus argues, one would have to divide divine responsibility: either the supreme God would be limited, or the demiurge would act without His knowledge — both possibilities are unacceptable for Christian monarchical ontology.

For Irenaeus the consequence of this unity is a positive status for matter and the body. Contrary to Gnostic contempt for the visible world, the Word who became flesh does not come into a "foreign" world, but into his own creation; the Incarnation thus truly confirms that the material human nature is worthy of redemption and recapitulation[38]. What the Gnostics interpreted as the prison of the spirit, Irenaeus reads as a stage of an inseparably called-to-growth nature: man is created as capable of maturing, and freedom, which enables this maturity, is an essential and good element, though susceptible to abuse. In this way Irenaeus shifts the problem of evil from the cosmology of creatures to the plane of responsibility and history: evil is the result of the deviation of creatures, not the work of a separate matter.

It is worth emphasizing that Irenaeus has not yet developed the system of *privatio boni* with the precision that Augustine will later provide, but his logic begins to pave the way for that solution. His thesis of one economy of salvation — the same Creator speaking through the prophets and the Son coming for the body — was a fundamental blow delivered to the Gnostic separation of Revelation and the Creator. The monarchy of the Father, realized through the Word and the Spirit, guarantees that creation, though susceptible to fall, has the ontological status of good and the goal of salvation in its entirety[39].

1.4.3 Manichaeism, Augustine and the ontology of good: evil as lack

Manichaeism adopted a far more radical dualism than many Gnostic currents: two eternal and opposing principles — of light and darkness — explained the cosmic history of conflict. Augustine, who knew this system from his own experience, launched a profound metaphysical critique against it, while developing a theological construction that monopolized Western thought's understanding of evil as *privatio boni*[40]. His starting point is simple but consistent: something that has an essence (nature) has a share in being, and a share in being is good. Thus an absolutely evil nature is internally contradictory: if being were entirely lacking, we would have nothing to call "evil" as an existing reality; if that "evil nature" were to be at times, it would possess a share in existence and therefore some good — which would contradict its absolute evil identity[41].

Augustine developed this thesis across a series of works, most extensively in *De natura boni* and in the polemical treatise against Faustus, where he shows that the Manichaean concept of a dark, coeternal mass of matter is internally illogical: darkness as a "thing" would have to possess some existence, and that existence is a good, and so it could never be the total opposite of good as the Manichaeans postulated[42]. Hence Augustine's critique of Manichaeism is not merely a historical-biographical polemic: it is a precise rational refutation of the idea of a second, separate principle.

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[37] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* II,1,1; IV,20,1; see also II,1 on the general juxtaposition of the rule of truth and the critique of the multiplicity of aeons (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*).

[38] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* III–IV (especially IV, 20 and IV, 37); see translations and commentaries cited in classical editions.

[39] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* IV,37 (on human freedom and responsibility).

[40] Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones* VII,12–16 (on the Manichaean experience and the transformation of thought).

[41] Augustine, *De natura boni* (On the Nature of Good) — a comprehensive presentation of the thesis that everything that is a nature is good.

[42] Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* (especially XX,21) — a polemic against the concept of a dark substance.

From this follows an important consequence for the understanding of suffering: since evil is not a substance, suffering — though real and painful — is not a manifestation of an eternal power opposed to God. Loss, disease, death are states in which some good (health, life, order) is weakened or lost; they are therefore real as a lack, not as the product of ontological competition. In the Enchiridion and other works Augustine consistently emphasizes that although *privatio* is not something positive, it has real and tragic effects; understanding evil as lack does not make it illusory[43]. This is thus a theological concept with strong moral implications: the guilt for moral evil rests with the free will of the subject, not with an impersonal substance of darkness.

1.4.4 Creatio ex nihilo as protection of the Monarchy

The thesis of creation out of nothing was for the patristic critique of dualism another pillar. If matter was not coeternal with God, if nothing existed besides God before the act of creation, then the argument for a separate, evil matter loses its ground. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not an arbitrary theological invention, but a reaction to the need to preserve God's unity and the meaning of creation. Creation out of nothing means: everything that exists outside God owes its existence to His accepting act; there is therefore no autonomous, primordial "material" opposed to the Will of the Creator. This distinguishes Christianity both from certain Platonic readings (where matter could be a kind of necessity) and from Gnostic or Manichaean myths about eternal material principles[44].

In theological practice treating creation as good and originating from God also makes it possible to speak about the value of creation's ends: the world is not created as an unfortunate mistake, but with the intention of good, growth, and participation in the divine fullness. In response to the question why corruption exists, the patristic position answers: because creation, as a real being, is capable of change, and change opens the possibility of loss of order. This structure of reality (existence–capacity–change) is permitted and directed by Providence through the Monarchy, but it is not reduced to the necessity of determinism that would make the Creator a co-agent of evil.

1.4.5 Privatio boni: evil as lack, not as thing

Augustine's concept of *privatio boni* attains full metaphysical maturity and becomes a critical point against Manichaeism. Its basic structure is as follows: being = good in the sense of participation in being; therefore evil is a category describing the diminution of good in being — it is a lack of proper order, form, measure, or telos. Augustine's examples have an analytical character: blindness is evil in the eye because the eye as a being has the nature of seeing; disease is evil in an organism because the organism is a living being. Moral evil analogously is a lack of measure in the order of love and the will; it is a deviation from the proper hierarchy of goods, not something that can be grasped as an "additional" nature[45].

This concept allows maintaining two important distinctions: (1) that moral evil has its cause in the free acts of subjects (moral causation), and not in some positive, created cause; (2) that God, as the only source of being, is not the author of evil being, though He permits in history the possibility of corruption. Acceptance of *privatio boni* removes from theodicy the necessity of finding a "positive" cause of evil outside the action of free agents and at the same time protects God against the charge of creating evil. Augustine — returning to his own experience — shows that providential permission is logically different from the

[43] Augustine, *Enchiridion* (especially chapters 10–14 on corruption and the lack of good).

[44] See the discussion of *creatio ex nihilo* in patristic literature and Irenaeus's perspectives; cf. *Adversus haereses* II and IV.

[45] Augustine, *De natura boni*; cf. also *Enchiridion* and *De libero arbitrio* in the context of analysis of disease, blindness and other lacks as evils.

causative production of an evil act: God creates a free being and its capacities, but the being itself, through abuse of freedom, introduces a lack into the order of its existence[46].

In theological practice this consequence is significant: evil can still be called real and tragic, yet one need not accept the existence of a second, competing principle. This simultaneously preserves the unity of the economy of salvation: since evil is a defect of created nature, salvation is not escape from creation but its repair and consummation in Christ.

1.4.6 Free will: the condition of responsibility and the source of corruption

In a system based on the Monarchy of God the problem of moral evil must be transferred to the level of the freedom of a rational being. This shift provides an answer to the demand to explain the causes of moral evil without undermining the Creator's sole rule. Free will is a value without which love, responsibility, reward, or punishment would make no sense. It is precisely what makes a moral act an act for which one can be praised or blamed. Therefore the Church Fathers — both Irenaeus and Augustine — insisted on the combination of the duality of creation: a nature that is good + the possibility of deviation.

Irenaeus viewed freedom in the context of maturation: man was not created as a perfect being but as capable of growth into likeness to God; in this process freedom serves as a moral test and means of growth, and mistakes are tragic but not absolute parts of the history of this maturation[47]. Augustine, in turn — especially after his Manichaean experience and reflection on original sin — focused on the wounding of the will: freedom remains the capacity for good, but it has become corrupted by love of lower goods above the Highest Good. Sin is thus a movement of the will whose order of love has been reversed: *avertitur a Deo, conversio ad creaturam* — turning away from God and turning to the creature[48].

In Augustine's theology freedom is not the cause of evil in a causative sense analogous to natural causes; it is rather the condition of the possibility of a morally evil act. By giving freedom God does not create the result of evil; He establishes the condition of responsibility. Our moral responsibility is in turn the foundation of justice and hope: without free will there would be no sense in reward, punishment, or gifted love. In this view grace does not abolish freedom but heals and directs it toward the highest.

1.4.7 Monarchy, Providence and the limit of evil

Monarchy is not a passive idea: it does not mean that God as the sole "is" and then passively watches the fate of the world. For patristic theology singular rule is joined with Providence, which directs the history of salvation toward its end. This conjunction allows maintaining that God permits evil but does not create it; that evil has its consequences but does not possess the final word. Augustine states in this context that God in His omnipotence can draw good even out of the consequences of evil, and that in the ultimate perspective the goal of salvation surpasses the effects of the fall, without thereby justifying evil deeds[49]. This is also the central reply to the Manichaean charge: since evil does not possess an ontological foundation, the ultimate victory of Good is real and not merely the result of a temporary supremacy of one coexisting power.

Important here is the distinction between permission and moral causation: permission follows from God's sovereignty, who takes into account the freedom of creatures and knows how to incorporate their falls into the plan of salvation; moral causation remains ascribed to the wills of free beings. Providence does not

[46] Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* and *De natura boni*; cf. also *Confessiones* VII (the process of personal understanding of evil).
[47] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* IV,37 (on freedom and the process of maturation).
[48] Augustine, *De natura boni*, *De libero arbitrio*, *Confessiones*.
[49] Augustine, *De civitate Dei* (especially XXII, on the permission of evil and drawing good from its consequences).

annul guilt nor relativize suffering, but indicates that history is not a chaos of two equal forces, but the stage of one saving action in which even dramatic deviations can be transformed[50]. The Cross of Christ remains here the central testimony: a criminal act has meaning from the point of view of the guilt of persons, but in God's hands it becomes a means of reconciliation, not by nullifying the guilt of the perpetrators, but by transforming the effect into a means of redemption.

1.4.8 Conclusion: the ontological power of Monarchy and ethical clarity

The monarchy of God, understood as an ontological principle, is for the theology of the ancient Fathers a conceptual instrument with profound consequences. First: it defends the unity and transcendence of God against reduction to one of two coexisting absolutes; second: it establishes the positive status of creation and the body, enabling the proclamation of the redemption of the whole; third: it shifts the source of evil from the concept of substance to the actions of free beings, thereby allowing the preservation of moral responsibility while protecting God from the charge of creating evil.

In combination with the doctrine of creation out of nothing and the concept of *privatio boni*, the monarchy provides a coherent map of being: God is the sole giver of existence, creatures as beings have an innate participation in good, evil is a lack, and free will is the condition of moral responsibility. Providence confirms that history is not a narrow field of rivalry between divine principles, but a road on which God leads creation to fullness, even if that road passes through real wounds and sufferings.

This formula also has a pastoral and ethical dimension: the rejection of dualism does not diminish the weight of sin nor the drama of suffering, but gives them a context of hope and responsibility. Evil is not an "other" that can be easily eradicated by magical procedures, nor is it an "illusion." It is real, tragic, and requires a response — repentance, justice, mercy, and redemption. At the same time, however, it does not have the status of ultimate reality. The monarchy of God as an ontological principle means that the ontological line of the end of history does not lead to a rigid equilibrium of two powers, but to a fullness whose foundation is the one Good Creator. From this perspective the dialectic between the reality of suffering and the rejection of substantial dualism is not a paradox but the proper, difficult, and demanding path of Christian theodicy.

Notes

1.5 Irenaeus: one God, one creation and one history of salvation

Irenaeus of Lyons formulates in Adversus Haereses the fundamental Christian response to the temptation of dualism: there is one God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is also the Creator of heaven and earth; consequently creation — including matter and the human body — is not an ontological mistake nor the domain of a different, inferior god, but the work of a good God, called to communion with Him.[51] From this premise Irenaeus constructs his entire critique of Gnosticism and, indirectly, opposes ideas close to Manichaeism: if God is one and only good, then evil cannot be an eternal substance coexisting alongside Him. Evil appears rather as a distortion, a lack, the apostasy of creatures endowed with freedom and

[50] See Augustine's analyses against the Manichaeans; the notion of permission versus causation is developed in *De civitate Dei* and in numerous treatises against heretics.

[51] Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus Haereses (Against Heresies) — the general thesis about the unity of God and the creative action of the Word; see especially II, and the more frequently cited passages in book IV concerning recapitulation; cf. online edition (transl. ANF) and commentaries: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm.

responsibility; and the history of salvation — as one oikonomia, that is, God's deliberate pedagogy, leading creation from immaturity to fullness in Christ.[52]

From the Irenaean perspective the stake is not only the question of the number of deities, but what they mean for the world, the body, history and moral responsibility. The Gnostics, in various forms, posited a fundamental rupture between the highest, bodiless Father and the world, which was said to have been created by a Demiurge — an inferior being, often unaware or hostile. Consequently matter was sometimes rejected as a prison or as the result of a cosmic disorder; salvation, in turn, was reduced to the liberation of the "spark" of spirit from the bondage of the body. Irenaeus responds to this by reconstructing the coherence of Revelation: the same God who spoke to Israel is the Father of the Son; the Word through whom all things were made became flesh and united in himself the work of creation and redemption.[53] Appeal to the prologue of the Gospel of John (Logos through whom all things came into being; Logos who became flesh)[54] is for him not a rhetorical addition but a hermeneutical key: there is no Old Testament religion "other" than the revelation of the New; there is one history, one saving initiative.

1.5.1 The monarchy of God and the critique of the Gnostic multiplication of mediators

The monarchy of God for Irenaeus is not merely a thesis about God's rule over creation, but an ontological statement of a single source of being. If one allows the coexistence of two coequal beginnings already at the cosmological level, one loses the concept of God as the fullness of good being. Gnostic systems, with their aeons, emanations and intermediate figures, attempted at once to defend the transcendence of the Highest and to establish real limits to His dominion — limits that in Irenaeus' understanding would render Him limited.[55] Therefore his polemic with Valentinus and other Gnostic schools is directed not at semantic games but at consequences: if the Creator of the world is a lower or unaware being, then who is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to whom the prophets pray and to whom Jesus reveals himself? Such a fragmentation of divinity would tear apart the coherence of the history of salvation and annihilate the meaning of the Incarnation.[56]

Irenaeus also rejects the idea that matter is necessarily evil and unworthy of redemption. Matter and the body — as facts of creation — possess due dignity; they are the proper place of the action of the Word, who takes on human nature in order to "recapitulate" it. In this metaphor the "Two Hands of God" — the Word and Wisdom (Logos and Sophia) — work together creating and repairing; it is the language of antinomy, but serving to emphasize that the Creator is also the one who personally enters into the history of creation.[57] The theological consequence is simple: since God himself descends into matter, one cannot assert that a different ontology applies to matter.

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[52] For the opposition between Gnosticism and the Irenaean oikonomia see Adversus Haereses II and IV; the general account of economy and recapitulation in Irenaeus: Adversus Haereses III–V (cf. translations in ANF).

[53] See Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses II (against the claim that the world was created by angels or a Demiurge); translations and commentaries available in ANF: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm.

[54] John 1:1–3; 1:14 — the Logos as the one through whom all things were made and who "became flesh" (Bible; cf. any edition, e.g. Biblia Tysiąclecia).

[55] Irenaeus' critique of the multiplication of aeons and mediators: Adversus Haereses II; cf. also preliminary reflections on the monarchy of God in patristic works.

[56] Irenaeus appeals to the continuity of Revelation (Old and New Testament) as an argument against Marcion and the Gnostics; see Adversus Haereses III–V.

[57] The metaphor of the "two hands of God" and the role of Logos/Sophia in creative and redemptive action in Irenaeus: Adversus Haereses (commentaries in patristic literature).

From this perspective Irenaeus also distinguishes the sphere of ontological causes from moral ones. Everything that exists has its cause in God's act of creation; but not everything that happens in the world is an expression of the will of command. God as the cause of the essence of things is not the cause of moral breaking of order, which is the result of the free use of creatures.[58] This distinction allows one to preserve both the ontological unity of creation and the moral guilt of individuals: there is no second creator, but there are performative actions of free subjects.

1.5.2 An anthropology of process: image, likeness, nêpios and recapitulatatio

One of Irenaeus' most important contributions to the theology of evil is an anthropological conception that rejects the model of Adam as created immediately fully mature. According to Irenaeus man was created "in the image" of God (imago) and called to "likeness" (similitudo) — a distinction that allows speaking of the structure of human nature as good, while at the same time justifying the necessity of a process of growth.[59] The first humans were nêpios — "immature", "childlike" in the sense that they were to develop through experience, obedience and trial. This approach differs from certain later interpretations that either absolutized the perfection of the primordial state or made the fall an inevitable stage of creation — Irenaeus emphasizes that the fall was a real act of disobedience, and not a necessary element of God's pedagogy.[60] Within this anthropology the meaning of the experience of evil and suffering becomes intelligible: they are, from the perspective of God's economy, difficult but not purposeless elements of the way toward maturity. Irenaeus does not glorify suffering nor claims that it is in itself a good; rather he reads it in a broader educational and judicial context, in which God is able to transform the consequences of sin and incorporate them into the history of renewal.[61] This movement leads to the central Irenaean soteriology: recapitulatatio — Christ as the "new Adam", who passes through all stages of human life, reversing the original disobedience and bringing creation to the original design. Salvation therefore is not the escape of the spirit from matter, but the renewal of the bodily and spiritual nature of man in unity.[62]

In this narrative three distinctions are key and must be constantly maintained: first, created nature vs. its corruption — nature does not lose its primordial dignity by becoming corrupt; second, the allowance of evil vs. its morally caused origin — God may permit evil, but is not the author of moral evil; third, the reality of suffering vs. the rejection of substantial dualism — suffering is real and painful, but it is not the result of the existence of a second, coequal principle of being.[63] Irenaeus insists that these categories remain alive in the face of the temptation to simplify.

1.5.3 Evil as lack, not as substance: encounter with Augustine

Although Irenaeus does not articulate the metaphysical theory of privatio in a fully systematic form, his message paves the way for a later, more analytical critique of dualism, which Augustin will formulate.

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[58] The distinction between the cause of existence and the cause of moral corruption in Irenaeus is present in his polemic with the Gnostics; see Adversus Haereses II and IV,37 (freedom and responsibility).

[59] The anthropology of image and likeness in Irenaeus, the imago/similitudo distinction and the concept of nêpios: Adversus Haereses IV (see also treatments in the literature).

[60] Irenaeus on the immaturity of the first humans and on the fall as an act of disobedience: Adversus Haereses IV; cf. interpretations in patristic studies.

[61] The Irenaean account of suffering in the economy of God's education and judgment: Adversus Haereses IV, 37–39 (a response to Gnostic disdain for the world).

[62] Recapitulation as the key soteriological concept of Irenaeus: Adversus Haereses III–V; cf. additionally references to Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 as the biblical foundations of this theory (Romans 5:12–21; 1 Corinthians 15:45–49).

[63] The three distinctions summarized in the text — nature/corruption; permission/agency; the reality of suffering/rejection of dualism — arise from the Irenaean argument and the later Augustinian synthesis (see Adversus Haereses; Augustine, De natura boni; De libero arbitrio).

Augustine, having formerly been associated with Manichaeism, experienced personally how attractive the explanation of evil as a separate substance can seem. His mature response, however, shifts the emphasis: good is linked to being; everything that exists, as such, has some share in the good; evil is not a being but a lack of good — privatio boni.[64] From this follows the critique of Manichaeism: if "darkness" were a substance, it would possess existence and thereby some element of good — and thus would be meta-theologically contradictory as absolute "evil".

Augustine develops this thought metaphysically: disease is real, yet exists only as a defect of a healthy organism; falsehood exists, but as a distortion of the function of speech; evil will exists, but as a disordering of the will created toward the good. His image of the "defective cause" of evil indicates that one should not seek a positive, causative "cause" of evil modeled on causes that create things; the cause of evil is a turning away from the order of love: conversio ad creaturam and aversio a Deo.[65] This understanding allows preservation of moral responsibility: evil arises from the free use of the same created will with which God endowed persons; it is not the effect of a foreign, omnipotent substance.

In dialogue with the problem of suffering Augustine — like Irenaeus — emphasizes the role of Providence: God can permit evil events in order to limit their evil, to judge perpetrators and to bring about some greater good, yet permission is not a justification of the moral act. The cross of Christ illustrates this dynamic: the betrayal and murder of the Son are morally evil, but God incorporates them into the plan of reconciliation and transforms their ultimate effect.[66] In this way the theology of privatio does not diminish the drama of sin nor trivialize the reality of suffering; on the contrary, it shows its solitary place in a world that in its essence remains good.

The encounter of the Irenaean historical language and Augustinian metaphysics is productive. Irenaeus preserves the narrative of one God acting in time, teaching, judging and redeeming; Augustine, for his part, specifies the ontological conditions that make it possible to speak of "lack" without appealing to a second substance. Together they formulate a twofold opposition to dualism: ontological (the indivisible goodness of God) and moral (evil as the result of a free but real deviation). This combination preserves all three distinctions required of us — nature/corruption; permission/agency; the reality of suffering/rejection of dualism — and gives a fuller answer than either thesis alone.[67]

1.5.4 Theological and pastoral consequences: renew creation, do not flee from the body

Acceptance of the unity of God as the sole Creator and Savior has significant consequences for the theology of the sacraments, ethics and eschatological hope. Above all it upholds the meaning of the Incarnation and the resurrection of the body: if the body is part of creation that God originally declared good, then redemption cannot consist in discarding the body but in its transformation. Irenaeus was one of the Fathers who reminded the Church that the promise of renewal includes the whole person and the whole

[64] Augustine of Hippo, De natura boni (On the Nature of Good) — the argument that everything that exists in some sense is good; see translation and commentary: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1407.htm.

[65] Augustine on the origin of evil as privation and on the misdirection of love (turning toward the creature, turning away from God): cf. De natura boni; De libero arbitrio; Confessiones (book VII — the journey from Manichaeism to Christianity).

[66] Augustine on the permission of evil and God drawing good out of evil; particularly De civitate Dei (The City of God), book XXII and reflections on Providence; cf. also the Enchiridion.

[67] The combination of the Irenaean narrative of the history of salvation with Augustinian metaphysics of privatio forms an integrated response to dualism; cf. comparative studies of Irenaeus and Augustine in the theological literature.

creation — this perspective is important in countering the temptation to flee from the world or any form of "spiritual" elitism.[68]

Further: the distinction between permission and agency of evil affects the understanding of God's justice and mercy. God judges sins and does not make them good, yet He can limit their effects and draw good out of their consequences. We see this in the economy of the cross, where unjust acts of humans become a means of reconciliation, not evidence of Divine approval of evil. Such a formulation protects both the integrity of moral assessment of actions and the theological sense of God's lordship.[69]

Finally, the pastoral dimension: anti-dualism frees one from mechanically attributing responsibility for the experience of suffering to something "other" and simultaneously from the instinctive search for simple etiologies (e.g., "this is because this person is possessed"), which can harm victims and justify violence against neighbors. The devil and the powers of evil are real and active; yet they remain creatures that tempted and still tempt — therefore pastoral interpretation of suffering requires discernment, delicacy and awareness of the complexity of natural, social and moral facts.[70] The aim is not to deny the action of a spiritual dimension of evil, but to avoid reducing all hardships to a single schema and to avoid blaming suffering persons or attributing a straightforward "demonic" origin.

The ultimate meaning of Irenaeus' entire argument is the confirmation of hope: since evil has no independent substance, it also has no eternal future. Its dominion is temporal and parasitic. The God who created all things by the power of the Word and revealed himself in Jesus Christ desires to bring creation into the fullness of life. The history of salvation is the process of one God educating his creation by pedagogy, judgment and mercy — leading it from innocence through experience and purification to final participation in His life. Accordingly the drama of evil simultaneously reveals the deep meaning of responsibility and freedom: evil is tragic because it arises in a free being, but it is not ultimate, because every act of repair, every gesture of mercy and every act of reconciliation enters into God's economy, which will not leave creation in a state of corruption.[71]

In summary: Irenaeus places the unity of God as the point of departure and the interpretive axis. By its nature this unity implies the unity of creation and the oikonomia of salvation; it excludes substantial dualism and justifies hope for the renewal of the whole creation through the action of the Word who became flesh. His analysis of evil as the apostasy of a free creature, combined with the Augustinian account of evil as a lack of good, creates a theological network by which one can take seriously the reality of suffering and guilt without falling into the temptation to attribute their existence to some separate, eternal power of darkness. This thesis remains relevant today: the defense of one, good Creator is a condition of an ethical and pastoral approach to evil that avoids both banal theodicy and the uncritical pessimism of dualism.

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[68]Consequences of the unity of creation for the theology of the Incarnation and the resurrection — a motif present in Irenaeus (Adversus Haereses) and developed in the patristic tradition.

[69]The distinction between moral assessment of an act and God's use of its consequences: the cross as an example in Irenaeus and Augustine; see Adversus Haereses IV; Augustine, De civitate Dei.

[70]Pastoral implications of anti-dualism — the need for prudent discernment and care for those who suffer; cf. the Church's general teaching and pastoral practices deriving from the theology of the demonic (Irenaeus and Augustine do not replace contemporary medical or psychological discernment).

[71]Theological conclusion: hope for the ultimate overcoming of evil in the perspective of the unity of God and the action of the Word; texts of Irenaeus and Augustine in this perspective are the foundation of the classical Christian theodicy. For the historical background of Augustine's transition from Manichaeism see Jason D. BeDuhn, "Not to depart from Christ": Augustine between "Manichaean" and "Catholic" Christianity, HTS Theological Studies 69(1), 2013: https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222013000100029.

1.6 Augustine: evil as lack of good

Augustine of Hippo stands at the center of a long and complex Christian discussion about the origin of evil. His answer is not a simple rejoinder against a single opponent, but a developed synthetic exposition that integrates philosophy, exegesis, and spiritual experience. Consideration of Augustine is necessary here not only because he historically determined the direction of later Western theology, but also because his concept privatio boni — evil as lack of good — constitutes a methodological tool capable of defending the monotheistic principle of one, good Creator against the temptation of substantial dualism. In this chapter I will present Augustine's intellectual path, elaborate his metaphysics of evil, discuss the role of free will and grace, and address the more difficult problems of suffering and demonic action, while preserving three editorial distinctions: created nature/its corruption; permission of evil/moral causation; reality of suffering/rejection of substantial dualism.

1.6.1 Intellectual path: from Manichaeism to a "Platonic" outlet

Augustine's understanding is not intelligible without taking his intellectual biography into account. He recalls in the Confessions a long association with Manichaeism and a period in which a dualistic cosmology seemed to give meaning to the experience of evil and the tearing of the human heart[72]. Manichaeism, with its cosmic struggle between the eternal Kingdom of Light and the eternal Kingdom of Darkness, offered a clear etiological account of evil: the existence of evil was explained by the presence of a second, evil substance. Augustine experienced the power of this solution — it relieved the need to ascribe direct responsibility to God for the most cruel phenomena of the world — but it also revealed internal contradictions that in time began to trouble him[73].

The turning point came in Book VII of the Confessions, when Augustine describes reading the "books of the Platonists" and an experience that allowed him to grasp that existence and goodness are closely linked and that "being" in the metaphysical sense carries within it a dimension of good[74]. Neoplatonism (in the form Augustine encountered through translations and commentaries) supplied him with notions of hierarchy of beings, degrees, and participation, which became the condition for formulating the anti-Manichaean thesis: if something exists as a nature, then it partakes in goodness; evil therefore cannot be a separate substance without denying what it means "to exist." This conceptual experience — less a completed philosophical inspiration than a doctrinal conversion — directed Augustine toward seeking a language that would preserve the unity of the Creator and the reality of evil as a phenomenon within creatures.

Augustine took up the polemic against the Manichaeans not only from the standpoint of abstract metaphysics. His dialogue with concrete representatives of Manichaeism and with their arguments (as Jason D. BeDuhn later analyzed) shows that Augustine's motivations were also local and practical: they concerned the safeguarding of ecclesial identity and the demonstration that accepting Manichaean

[72] Augustine, Confessiones (Confessions), Book VII; cf. translation and English ed. in: New Advent, "Confessions", https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1101.htm.

[73] Augustine, De natura boni (On the Nature of Good), available translation: New Advent, "On the Nature of Good", https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1407.htm.

[74] Augustine, Confessiones VII – description of reading the "books of the Platonists"; cf. New Advent, "Confessions".

cosmology is not necessary to explain suffering and moral evil[75]. His polemical work therefore took the form both of autobiographical reckoning (Confessions) and of systematic metaphysics (De natura boni), as well as doctrinal theology of grace and will (De libero arbitrio, later developed in the Pelagian controversies).

For this reason Augustine does not adopt a triumphalist stance toward Manichaeism: he understands the motivating force of dualism — the relief provided by interpreting an "alien" cause of evil — yet at the same time he points out that it is philosophically and theologically mistaken, for it shies away from the fundamental consequence of monotheism: that all being is governed by one, good Creator.

1.6.2 Privatio boni: metaphysics of evil as lack of good

The central category of Augustine's response is privatio boni: evil is not a thing (res), but a lack of due good in a thing which as such remains good. In De natura boni Augustine formulates the principle that "everything that has a nature is good; insofar, however, as it is corrupted, it is evil"[76]. This two-tiered formula allows him to maintain three necessary conclusions: (1) the Creator is the sole cause of being; (2) being is rooted in the good; (3) evil is not ontologically first nor coeternal with God.

The analysis can be broken down into three interdependent aspects which Augustine considers when he speaks of nature and its corruption:

1. Modus (measure): every nature possesses a certain measure of existing, a certain scope of proper functioning. Disease or destruction means exceeding or losing that measure.
2. Species (form): a nature has a form that constitutes its identity; evil is a deformation of that form — e.g., a defect of sight is a departure from the form of the eye as an organ of seeing.
3. Ordo (order): a rational being is ordered toward hierarchical ends; moral evil appears as a disturbance of that hierarchy (ordo amoris) and an improper ordering of love toward a lower good before a higher good[77].

So formulated, the definition makes evil something real and effective: a wound exists, blindness is an experience, betrayal has moral consequences — yet none of this is a new substance that would be an ontological counterpart to good. One may summarize this interpretation in a brief argument: being (ens) is positive; good is the conformity of being to its due nature; corruption is a deviation from that conformity and therefore a lack of good, not an addition to reality.

It is important not to confuse "lack" with "illusion" or "nothingness." Augustine often emphasizes that privatio boni is a real lack, not merely a logical one: darkness is not a being equal to light; yet its appearance — the lack of light — can have real effects and consequences. In this way Augustine defends the reality of suffering and evil while denying them ontological independence.

This metaphysic has a decisive polemical effect against Manichaeism. If every nature partakes in the good (because it exists), then the Manichaean construction that attributes to matter or "darkness" its own, separate existence characterized by evil proves internally inconsistent. Substantial "evil" would have to be a being, and therefore also bear the mark of good — which contradicts the Manichaean assumption of two opposing, eternal principles. Augustine thus indicates that the Manichaean cosmogony cannot be

[75] Jason D. BeDuhn, "Not to depart from Christ": Augustine between "Manichaean" and "Catholic" Christianity, HTS Theological Studies 69(1) 2013, https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222013000100029.

[76] Augustine, De natura boni; see also Enchiridion (Handbook of Faith, Hope, and Love), chs. 10–14; translations in: New Advent, "Enchiridion", https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1302.htm.

[77] See Augustine, De natura boni; cf. also De civitate Dei (The City of God) in the context of the order of creation, available at: New Advent, "The City of God", https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm.

maintained without abandoning the fundamental intuition that true "to exist" and truly "to have a nature" mean participation in the good of the Creator.

For clarity I propose a short logical outline (not as scholastic notation, but to distinguish the stages of the argument):

1. If something exists as a nature — has measure, form, and order — then it is good insofar as it exists.
2. Evil observed in the world always occurs within something that has a nature (e.g., disease in a body, sin in the will).
3. Therefore evil is not a self-subsisting being, but a defect or lack in the being of a creature.

Such an account does not forget the reality of evil, but shifts the burden of explanation to the interior space of creation — and there, where necessary, to the decision of free will.

1.6.3 Free will, "causa deficiens" and the role of grace

The most delicate and decisive element of Augustine's theory is the explanation of the origin of moral evil. If God created freedom, the capacity to choose among different objects, and if freedom is a good, how is it possible that from this freedom evil arises? Augustine rejects formulations that point to an external, efficacious cause of evil. He does not find a meaningful "efficient cause" of evil as a thing; rather he speaks of a "deficient cause" (causa deficiens): evil arises when the will, which is naturally directed to the good, turns away from a higher good toward a lower good[78].

In this analysis the key is the distinction of objects of love: finite things (wealth, pleasure, power) are goods in their place, yet they become evil when loved as an ultimate end or when they occupy what belongs only to God. Moral evil is therefore a displacement of the hierarchy of love (ordo amoris): instead of loving God as the highest Good, the will chooses the creature as ultimate.

Augustine also illustrates this by a physical parallel: just as darkness is not "something" produced by light, but a lack of light caused by the extinguishing of the source, so moral evil is the extinguishing — however ever so slightly — of the ordered good of the will. From this follows an important conclusion: the will was indeed able to choose and bears responsibility; it was not determined by an external, baleful substance. Augustine therefore stresses the moral responsibility of rational creatures and defends the truth that sin is the act of a free person, not merely the consequence of an "alien" domain of being.

At the same time Augustine supplements this analysis with the role of grace. He does not abolish or degrade freedom; rather freedom remains needed as the condition of moral responsibility. However, the wounded human will requires healing. Contrary to the naive image that Augustine excluded any role for freedom, his teaching is subtle: natural freedom (potentia naturalis) is a gift, but after the Fall grace is necessary to restore the proper hierarchy of love and to direct the will to the Highest Good[79]. Grace therefore does not remove freedom but liberates it from bondage to lower goods, leading to a fuller freedom — that which consists in the capacity to love God steadfastly.

In Augustine's understanding this conjunction — freedom as the condition of responsibility and grace as the condition of healing — leaves open a space for judgment, responsibility, and moral formation, while at the same time ensuring that the cause of evil is neither the Creator nor some independent substance.

[78] Augustine, De libero arbitrio (On Free Choice of the Will), available translation: New Advent, "On Free Choice of the Will", https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1602.htm.

[79] See Augustine, especially in his writings against Pelagius (e.g., "De spiritu et littera" and "De natura et gratia"); sample texts at New Advent: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/.

It is also worth noting that Augustine distinguishes the permission of evil (permissio) from its moral causation (causa activa). God may permit an evil act, knowing that evil will ensue from it, but He is not its moral author. Permission, in the light of Augustine's theologia, is an expression of Providence, which is able to draw good even from the actions of rebellious creatures, while at the same time preserving God's justice and sovereignty in judgment (De civitate Dei).

1.6.4 Natural evil, suffering, demonology and an aesthetic theodicy

Augustine consistently separates three matters: moral evil (sin), evil as lack (privatio boni), and natural evil (suffering, disease, death). While the theory of privatio boni explains the nature of evil as lack of good in the being of creatures, the problem of suffering requires additional clarifications.

In De civitate Dei Augustine develops a theodicy that is sometimes described as "aesthetic": elements that individually appear as lacks, from the perspective of the whole may contribute to a greater good and harmony. He uses literary and artistic imagery: contrasts, shadows, or tensions can enrich the whole of a work. This is not a banal affirmation of suffering nor a justification of all tragedies, but rather the conviction that Providence can incorporate even evil deeds and suffering into the history of salvation without relativizing the moral guilt of the perpetrators[80]. An example is the cross of Christ: injustice, betrayal, torture are there moral evils; yet God in His power transforms them into an instrument of reconciliation, not removing the guilt of those who committed them, but changing the outcome in a way that reveals the meaning of the Incarnate One's divinity.

At the same time Augustine warns against trivializing the reality of suffering. A lack is not "nothing" in a carefree sense: it is rather a historical wound, a real lack of good that brings pain and death. It must be clearly emphasized here that the recognition that evil is metaphysically a lack does not eliminate its moral and existential severity nor does it reduce the responsibility of perpetrators.

Augustine's demonology, grounded in anti-dualism, likewise distinguishes the status of demonic beings from substantial evil. Satan and the fallen angels are creatures — and as such possess the ontological "goodness" of their being; their evil consists in a settled choice against the order of God. Augustine does not minimize their evil nor reduce it to symbolism: demons are personal agents of temptation, enslavement, and bad decisions; they are not, however, an autonomous source of existence that could compete with God[81]. This stance highlights the three editorial distinctions: created nature/its corruption (an angel is a good nature, its fall is a defect), permission of evil/moral causation (God permits, but demons are responsible for temptation), reality of suffering/rejection of substantial dualism (suffering is real, yet there is no separate shadow-being opposed to God).

Ultimately Augustine does not offer a single "satisfying" intellectual solution to every complaint about evil (for example, the problem of innocent suffering of a child), but he lays out a framework in which such complaints can be taken seriously: God is one, good Creator; evil is not His work as a substance; moral and natural evils have different features; freedom is the source of responsibility and the place to seek the causes of sin; grace is God's action that heals freedom. Christ and his cross remain the center of the answer: this is not an abstract theodicy but the history of salvation in which God personally takes upon Himself the evil of the world in order to overcome it.

[80] Augustine, De civitate Dei (The City of God), Book XXII and following, where he discusses the relation between permission of evil and Providence's drawing forth of good; New Advent, "The City of God".

[81] Augustine's reflections on demons and the fall of angels in "De civitate Dei" and in various polemical treatises; see also Confessions and De natura boni (comments on the status of creatures).

Consequences for later Christian thought and critique

The concept privatio boni had far-reaching effects: it was adopted and developed by scholastic theology as the fundamental way to defend monotheism and the goodness of creation. At the same time, in the face of modern and contemporary criticisms it is sometimes charged against Augustine that his category of lack does not convey the full intensity of the experience of evil nor answer existential questions related to the senselessness of suffering. Critics argue that the reduction of evil to a lack can lead to an intellectual smoothing that does not always capture the moral reality of dramatic evil (e.g., systemic violence, the Holocaust, or evil that has an institutional structure)[82].

These charges make sense as an invitation to broaden the discourse: Augustine did not claim that his formula closes all questions. His merit lies in restoring three important postulates to theological debates: the sovereignty and unity of God, the reality of evil, and the moral responsibility of creatures. Practically this also entails ethical and pastoral consequences: if evil is an internal disordering of human nature, the Church's response cannot be rejection of creation, but therapy: conversion, repair of relationships, the practice of justice and mercy, and a community of grace in which the will is oriented toward the ultimate good.

Summary

Responding to Manichaean and Gnostic theses about evil, Augustine did not stop at a simple denial of their cosmology. Working at the intersection of metaphysics, exegesis, and spiritual experience, he formulated a theory in which evil is real, historical, and painful, and at the same time is not an independent ontological being. In doing so he preserved the integrity of the monotheistic doctrine of one, good Creator, while maintaining the seriousness of moral responsibility and the drama of human experience. His category privatio boni became a tool not only for polemics but also for pastoral practice: it indicates that the task of the Church is not to flee the reality of evil, but to heal it through conversion, justice, and grace. Christ remains here the ultimate paradigm: He does not transcend creation to condemn it, but becomes incarnate to heal it and lift it up toward the fullness of good.

Notes

1.7 Defective cause of evil

The problem of the origin of evil was one of the most pressing questions in ancient Christian theology: how to reconcile the experience of painful, often extreme evil with faith in one, good, and omnipotent Creator? The responses of the Fathers of the Church to gnosticism and Manichaeism were not limited to defending the moral reputation of God; they also had a deeply ontological character. In their thought a solution emerged that today we call the defective cause (causa defectiva): evil is not a created being, but a defect of being — a privation of due good. The development of this idea in the works of Irenaeus of Lyons and Augustine of Hippo constitutes the axis of this chapter. The aim is to show that the acceptance of privatio boni and the recognition of the source of evil in the creature's free turning away from God effectively defend the monarchy of God, reject Manichaean substantial dualism, and meet the challenges of gnostic cosmology.

[82]Critical positions toward Augustine's theory of evil and their impact on modern reflections in ethics and philosophy are widely discussed in contemporary literature; one historical-theological account of the problem's reception is found in works discussing the reception of Augustine's theodicy in the scholastic and modern tradition. For historical context see also Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies (Adversus haereses) IV,37 (English version: New Advent, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103437.htm), in which Irenaeus emphasizes human freedom and responsibility in response to Gnostic charges.

1.7.1 Ontological framework of the dispute: the unity of the Creator and the temptation of dualism

The basic tension lay in the choice between two modes of thought. Dualistic systems — both the numerous varieties of gnosticism and Manichaeism — proposed the existence side by side of two principles: good and evil, light and darkness, spirit and matter. Such a construction ostensibly solved the moral problem: if evil comes from another, evil principle, the good God cannot be held responsible. But the price of this solution was high: the loss of God's uniqueness, the splitting of creation, and the relativization of Revelation.[83]

The Christian response of the Fathers, led by Irenaeus and Augustine, began by affirming the monarchy of God — not merely in a political sense, but ontologically: there is one source of being and goodness from which everything proceeds. This position implies two consequences important for the further argument: (a) everything that exists as nature participates in being, and therefore in some good; (b) evil cannot be a nature equal to good, for that would contradict the understanding of being as participation in the Creator.[84]

From this common premise different schools drew different practical conclusions. Gnosticism more often than Manichaeism wove narratives of an emanational mistake: a lower demiurge or an error in the process of emanation made the world defective. Manichaeism, by contrast, appeared as a radical dualism in which matter and evil constitute a genuinely alien kingdom. Both approaches in effect separated creation from God — either by ascribing to it another source or by treating it as a prison for a spark of divinity. The Fathers resolutely opposed this, showing that such an understanding leads in practice to a relativization of Revelation (the Old Testament — the work of another god) and to ethical consequences (contempt for the body or the external shifting of blame onto a "bad nature").[85]

In this context it was critically important to distinguish three spheres of consideration, which must be maintained as constant methodological distinctions:

- created nature / its corruption — everything that exists is good in its nature; corruption is a defect, not a new nature;
- permission of evil / moral causation — God may permit evil without being its moral efficient cause;
- reality of suffering / rejection of substantial dualism — recognition that suffering is real does not force the recognition of evil as an ontological substance.[86]

Maintaining these distinctions allows us to proceed to an analysis of concrete patristic answers.

1.7.2 Irenaeus: God's pedagogy and the defense of the unity of creation

Irenaeus responded primarily to gnostic questions through a historical and theological narrative which, by unifying the Old and New Testaments, defended the unity of the Creator and the meaning of creation as such. His argumentation has several pillars that practically and theologically undermine gnostic assumptions.

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[83] Cf. Augustine's critique of dualism; see Augustine of Hippo, De natura boni; available translation: "On the Nature of Good", New Advent, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1407.htm.

[84] See the development of the idea of one Creator and the Logos–creation relation in John (John 1,1–3) and in Irenaeus; Sacred Scripture: John 1,1–3 (online Bible, e.g. BibleGateway), https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+1%3A1-3&version=NIV; Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, II; cf. Adversus haereses II (New Advent), https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm.

[85] See Irenaeus, Adversus haereses I–IV; especially the critique of gnostic divisions and the demiurge — cf. Adversus haereses, available translation: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm.

[86] This distinction is fundamental in the teaching of the Fathers; cf. Augustine, Enchiridion and De civitate Dei for the distinction between permission and causation and the reality of suffering: Enchiridion (New Advent), https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1302.htm; De civitate Dei (New Advent), https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm.

First, in Adversus haereses Irenaeus emphasizes that the world was created by the Father through the mediation of the Word, and not by lower powers or a demiurge. Pointing to the identity of the Creator and the Savior, he rejects the possibility that the histories of the Old and New Testaments came from two different sources.[87] This shift is strategic: if the Logos created the body and takes it up in the Incarnation (John 1,14), the body cannot be inherently evil nor destined for abandonment.

Second, Irenaeus defends man as a being created for growth. He treats creation as a pedagogical process: man was not created immediately perfect (which would belong only to God), but as a being called to mature through free responses to the good and to the contradictions he encounters. In this sense the experience of oppositions, including painful ones, serves an educational function directed toward final renewal in Christ.[88] Such an interpretation unmasks the gnostic narrative that makes matter or corporeality the cause of ontological fall.

Third, Irenaeus decisively rejects gnostic determinism of types of people (pneumatycy, psychicy, hylicy). Man is not preassigned to a state of salvation or condemnation by his "nature"; free will makes him morally responsible. This opposition to determinism clearly formulates the foundations of the later patristic moral theory: sin is an act of the person, not a necessary consequence of his ontology.[89]

Irenaeus does not fully formulate the terminology of privatio boni in the Augustinian sense; however, his theology of a single Creator, the pedagogical end of creation, and human freedom prepares the ground for the thought that evil is a deviation from the intended order, not a separate substance.

1.7.3 Augustine: privatio boni and the elaboration of the defective cause

In Augustine's works the critique of Manichaeism attains a metaphysical dimension. His basic thesis runs: everything that has nature, insofar as it exists, is a good; evil is the corruption of that nature, the privation of due good (privatio boni). From this point of view the Manichaean concept of a "substance of evil" turns out to be internally contradictory — every substance as such participates in being and therefore contains the good of existence.[90]

Augustine advances this argument in several successive steps, which it is worth making explicit:

1. Being and good are connected: to exist is to partake in some good (form, measure, order). Things that exist possess certain properties that qualify them as good within their range.[91]
2. Evil as privation: evil is not a "something" added to things, but their defect — e.g., disease in an organism or blindness in a nature endowed with sight.[92]
3. Impossibility of substantial evil: if evil were a substance, it would have to participate in being and thus contain the good of existence, which would undermine its character as "evil" in an absolute way.[93]

[87] Irenaeus emphasizes the unity of the Creator and the Word in his argument against the gnostics; see Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus haereses, especially books II and IV; translation available: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm.

[88] Outline of the pedagogical function of experience in Irenaeus: Adversus haereses IV,37; translation and context at New Advent: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103437.htm.

[89] Irenaeus against determinism of "natures" (pneumatics/psychics/hylics) — cf. Adversus haereses IV; see also analysis in: Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm.

[90] Principal critique of Manichaeism and the thesis about the good character of nature in Augustine: De natura boni; see translation: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1407.htm.

[91] The connection of being and good in Augustine; cf. Enchiridion, chs. 10–14 (New Advent), https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1302.htm.

[92] Augustine uses analogies of disease, blindness, wound to explain privatio boni; see De natura boni and Enchiridion (New Advent), https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1407.htm; https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1302.htm.

[93] The argument about the internal contradiction of "substantial evil" is in De natura boni; see translation and commentary: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1407.htm.

4. The first evil will (and the fall of creatures) has no causal origin in the manner of the coming-into-being of things; it has a defective cause: the turning away from God and the choosing of lower goods.[94]

This last point is the essence of the concept causa defectiva. Augustine states that the question "what caused the first evil will?" does not find an answer of the efficiens type, because such an answer would lead to an infinite regress or to the recognition of an eternal principle of evil. Instead, the cause of the first transgression is a privative one: the will turns away from the higher good, choosing in a disordered way a lower good. Analogous to the way darkness is not a positive thing but the lack of light, so an evil will is not the result of adding some evil being, but of a deficiency relative to the proper order of love.[95]

At the same time Augustine emphasizes the concrete reality of suffering and moral evil. Privatio boni is not an apologetic nuance that would cleanse aggression or harm of their drama. On the contrary, the lack of good can have the most severe consequences. Blindness is a real evil, though it does not exist as a separate substance. In this sense Augustine maintains the distinction: moral evils have their positive history and real effects, but their ontological analysis does not need to make them substances.[96]

Augustine developed this theory in numerous works: in De natura boni against the Manichaeans, in the Enchiridion as a systematic exposition of the relation between being and good, in the Confessiones as an autobiographical witness of the passage from Manichaean modes of thought to conviction about the non-substantiality of evil, and in De civitate Dei, where the defective cause is woven into a broad theodicy of the history of salvation and fall.[97]

1.7.4 The will as the locus of defect: freedom, responsibility, and grace

Translating the metaphysical theory into anthropology leads to the conclusion that the will is the place where a defect can reveal itself. The will itself is a created good — it is the capacity to choose, and choice is a condition of moral responsibility and genuine love. Yet it is a bonum mutabile: it can be preserved in order or perverted by flight toward lower goods.[98]

In this sphere Augustine stresses two elements that must be clearly distinguished:

- free will as a gift of God — it is not evil, but makes possible authentic obedience and love;
- the act of moral evil as the consequence of the will's turning — moral failure is not caused by some external being, but by omission or disordered use of the gift.[99]

The role of grace in this construction is no less important and requires delicate distinction. Augustine does not claim that freedom is sufficient to overcome corruption; after original sin the human will experiences weakening and needs grace to regain the capacity to remain in the highest good. However, grace does not eliminate freedom as such; on the contrary, it heals it and directs it toward true freedom, which is the

[94] The concept causa defectiva and the rejection of an efficiens cause of the evil will — cf. Augustine, De civitate Dei (books XII and XXII on the question of the cause of sin), https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm.

[95] Cf. Augustine's metaphor of darkness as lack of light; see Confessiones VII and De civitate Dei XII; translations: Confessiones (New Advent) https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1101.htm; De civitate Dei (New Advent) https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm.

[96] Augustine on the reality of suffering alongside the rejection of substantial evil — Enchiridion and De natura boni; see: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1302.htm; https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1407.htm.

[97] See especially: Augustine, De natura boni; Enchiridion; Confessiones; De civitate Dei; translations available: De natura boni https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1407.htm; Enchiridion https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1302.htm; Confessiones https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1101.htm; De civitate Dei https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm.

[98] The will as bonum mutabile and its anthropological consequences in Augustine — cf. De libero arbitrio (New Advent), https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1507.htm.

[99] Distinction between freedom as a good and the act of sin as a defect — Augustine, De libero arbitrio and later writings; see De libero arbitrio (New Advent), https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1507.htm.

capacity for continual willing of the good.[100]

From this perspective it becomes clear why the Christian proposal is an alternative to gnostic determinism and Manichaean fatalism. Gnostics bound people to their nature, Manichaeans shifted the blame onto substance; Christianity maintains subjectivity and moral responsibility while offering a road to healing through grace, not by exchanging natures.

1.7.5 Natural evil, suffering, and Providence: permission versus causation

The concept of privatio boni and causa defectiva must also answer the problem of natural evil: disease, disasters, death. The Fathers here distinguished between evil of guilt (moral) and that which man experiences as suffering or loss. Creation is finite and changeable — this changeability is not in itself evil, but a condition of finite beings. In a world marked by sin natural fragility and transience become additionally painful; however, their existence does not prove the existence of an eternal principle of evil.[101]

God may permit evil without being its moral efficient cause. Such permission falls under providence: God can make use of the consequences of human evil and natural suffering to bring about good — without thereby making those things good in the moral sense. This subtle distinction protects against two errors: (a) charging God with responsibility for every evil; (b) trivializing real suffering. Augustine explicitly states that a better testimony of God's omnipotence is the ability to draw good out of what is evil than the removal of all evil in a way that would make freedom and moral maturation impossible.[102]

This position has a pastoral dimension: it does not justify evil, but shows its limits in the order of being and the hope of its ultimate overcoming. Unlike dualism, which invalidated the hope for complete victory of good, the concept of a defective cause legitimizes theological optimism without trivializing the drama of evil.

1.7.6 Neutralizing the gnostic and Manichaean trap

The efficacy of the theory privatio boni and causa defectiva lies in that it neutralizes both the gnostic disdain for the body and the Manichaean personification of evil. In both cases the consequence of dualistic thinking is either contempt for creation (gnostics) or the shifting of blame for moral evil onto an external, immoral substance (Manichaeans). The patristic response points another way: creation as a whole is good, the body has value and dignity, and evil is an offense of the free will and a defect of nature that can be healed, because it has no being independent of the Creator.[103]

This distinction also has concrete ethical implications:

- personal responsibility remains intact — man is accountable for his actions and cannot attribute blame to "evil matter";
- the hope of salvation includes the whole of nature — salvation does not consist in fleeing from the body, but in its renewal and resurrection;

[100] Augustinian doctrine of grace in relation to freedom — detailed expositions in Confessiones and De civitate Dei; cf. Confessiones (New Advent) https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1101.htm; De civitate Dei (New Advent) https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm.

[101] Differentiation of the evil of guilt and the evil of suffering among the Fathers, including Augustine; cf. De civitate Dei XXII on the problem of natural evil and providence; translation: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm.

[102] Augustine on the permission of evil and drawing good out of it — De civitate Dei, book XXII and other passages; available: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm.

[103] See the synthesis of Irenaeus and Augustine concerning the unity of creation and the rejection of dualism; Irenaeus, Adversus haereses (New Advent), https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103.htm; Augustine, De natura boni (New Advent) https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1407.htm.

- the struggle against sin requires both the conversion of the free will and the reception of God's grace — moral effort without grace is insufficient; grace without personal responsibility loses its moral dimension.[104]

Finally, demonology remained within the bounds of monotheism: Satan is a creature, a personal enemy capable of harm, yet not a principle of being. His power is real but parasitic and limited — he needs goods which he can pervert; he cannot create existence. This understanding of the demon helps avoid deviations both toward facile exculpation that shifts responsibility onto "the demon" and toward reification of evil as an independent force.[105]

1.7.7 Conclusion: the sovereignty of good in the face of the "shadow" of defect

The concept of the defective cause grasps the paradox of the origin of evil in a manner that is both theologically faithful and philosophically consistent. It preserves the monarchy of God: there is no second, coeternal beginning. It acknowledges the reality of suffering and moral evil without reducing them to substances. And finally, it preserves the dignity of creation, of man, and of the body, sustaining the perspective of renewal and resurrection.

Evil, as privatio boni, is thus something real, yet ontologically dependent: it exists only in relation to the good that has been corrupted. This gives grounds for hope — since the defect has no independent efficient cause, it can be repaired by God, who knows the order of things and directs history toward fullness. At the same time this approach does not diminish the seriousness of moral responsibility; on the contrary, it reveals the drama of the free will that can turn the good into an instrument of its own fall. In this dialectic between freedom and grace, between defect and renewal, lies the essence of the Christian answer to the challenges of gnosticism and Manichaeism: evil has no creator of its own nor a permanently independent being — it is a defect whose genesis lies in the use of the gift of free will, and whose final overcoming will be accomplished through God's action in history.

Notes

1.8 Freedom not as the cause of evil, but as the condition of responsibility

The problem of freedom and its relation to evil constitutes one of the central issues of Christian theology from the beginning of the polemics with the Gnostic current and with Manichaeism. This is not merely about subtle philosophical adjudications, but about consequences for the concept of God as the sole Creator, for the meaning of the Incarnation and redemption, and for the understanding of guilt, punishment and hope. In the context of these disputes two theses were decisive for the patristic determinations: first, that evil is not a distinct, eternal substance coexisting alongside God; second, that free will is not an ontological "source" of evil, but a constitutive condition of the moral responsibility of a rational being. Irenaeus of Lyons and Augustine of Hippo reach these conclusions by different routes, but

[104]Ethical consequences of accepting privatio boni and the anthropology of freedom — development in Irenaeus and Augustine; Irenaeus, Adversus haereses IV; Augustine, Enchiridion and De civitate Dei.

[105]Demonology within monotheism and the limited power of the devil in Irenaeus and Augustine; Irenaeus, Adversus haereses; Augustine, De civitate Dei XII; cf. also Augustine, Confessiones VII. For historical context of Augustine's transition from Manichaeism see Jason D. BeDuhn, "Not to depart from Christ": Augustine between "Manichaean" and "Catholic" Christianity, HTS Theological Studies 69(1), 2013, https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222013000100029.

both prepare and justify the Christian reply to the temptation of dualism, defending the unity of creation and the meaning of God's judgment[106].

In this chapter I undertake an exposition meant to show: human freedom, understood by the Fathers as a real capacity to choose, is not the cause of the being of evil; rather it is the condition without which there is no talk of moral responsibility, of merit and punishment, of authentic love and of a just judgment. From the perspective of Irenaeus and Augustine, free will is a "bonum medium": it can be used according to the order of the Creator or conversely — then evil arises as a damage to the order of creation. Evil does not thereby gain ontological power; it remains a privatio boni within created good and — in a causal sense — has a defective cause (causa deficiens), not an efficient cause (causa efficiens) that would produce new beings independent of the Creator.

The following exposition unfolds in several movements: first I will indicate the ontological and anthropological background of the disputes with Gnosticism and Manichaeism; then I will present Irenaeus's core argument about freedom as a condition of moral maturation; next I will move to Augustine's conception of the will as bonum medium and to the metaphysics of evil as privatio boni and to the idea of the "defective cause"; I will also clearly distinguish claims about created nature and its corruption, the permission of evil and its moral causation, and the reality of suffering from the thesis of substantial dualism; finally I will discuss the implications of these theses for the notion of a just judgment and the theology of salvation.

1.8.1 Gnosticism and Manichaeism as challenges to monotheism and moral responsibility

The first kind of challenge to classical monotheistic theology was Gnosticism, in its various forms creating multi-layered cosmologies in which the highest transcendental "Father" remains remote, and the visible world arises through intermediate emanations, demiurges or the errors of numerous aeons. In many Gnostic systems there is also anthropological determinism: people are divided into different "kinds" — hyliks, psychics, pneumatics — to whom different soteriological and moral capacities are ascribed. Such constructions easily lead to a reduction of responsibility: since a person's fate is determined by his "kind," it makes no sense to speak of moral accounting of all according to the same measure[107]. Irenaeus opposes this with the unity of creation and one Creator, defending the integrity of the history of salvation and the subjectivity of human decisions[108].

Manichaeism, on the other hand, sets up dualism in another, more radical shape: history is a struggle of two primordial, coexisting and in a sense coequal realities — Light and Darkness. In this scheme evil acquires the status of a substance; matter and corporeality are attributed to the sphere of darkness. Such a vision as if "frees" the Creator from responsibility for suffering, but at the same time undermines His uniqueness and omnipotence. Especially for Christian thought, acceptance of dualism meant not only an erosion of monotheism, but also a radical transformation of the meaning of the Incarnation: when matter is ontologically evil, the Incarnation ceases to be a true redemption of creation and becomes an escape of a spiritual spark from an improper world[109].

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[106] Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus Haereses (Against Heresies) IV, 37–39; cf. also general discussions of Gnosticism in Irenaeus's works.

[107] A concise presentation of Gnostic anthropology and its consequences: Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses, various books.

[108] Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses IV, 37 (cf. English translation: Against Heresies IV, 37).

[109] A general characterization of Manichaeism and its dualism: cf. Augustine, De natura boni; see also historical analyses of the influence of Manichaeism on later antiquity.

Augustine knew the attractiveness and temptation of Manichaeism from his own experience; for many years he remained under its influence, which later led him to a critical and deeply thoughtful polemic against that movement. His arriving at the thesis that evil is not a substance but a lack of good has in fact the character of an intellectual and spiritual conversion: it radically transforms the manner of understanding nature, order and freedom[110]. Recognizing that evil is a "lack" does not, however, eliminate the problem of guilt and suffering; on the contrary — it emphasizes their drama, because it shows that evil is possible precisely where the good entrusted by the Creator ought to prevail.

1.8.2 Irenaeus: freedom as a pedagogical principle and condition of responsibility

In Irenaeus's thought the freedom of the human person appears primarily in the context of the history of salvation and God's pedagogy. Central to his polemic with Gnosticism is the rejection of typological divisions and the defense of the idea of one Creator and one history of redemption. In Adversus Haereses Irenaeus repeatedly points out that man was created "sui iuris," endowed with reason and will, and that it is precisely in this capacity that his dignity and vocation to be like God consist[111]. Freedom is not here empty autonomy: it is a gift that inserts creation into a series of moral growth and maturation toward the image of God. Adam and Eve were not from the beginning completed perfections, but "children" who were to mature in relation with God through choices.

Irenaeus's argument has several essential implications. First, if God had created people determined to the good, obedience would have no moral value; it would rather be a movement of mechanical subordination. Second, law and judgment — necessary elements in the economy of salvation — must make sense: only if people are capable of choice can they be rewarded or punished for the paths they choose. In this sense freedom becomes a condition of God's justice: without it a just judgment would be tyranny, and love — a theater of appearances[112]. Irenaeus thus develops the Christian counter-proposal against the Gnostic allotment of people into different kinds: all people participate in the same history, all are called to responsible choice.

Irenaeus connects this theology of freedom with a theological account of corporeality and the Incarnation. If the body and the world are created by the Word and have ontological value, then the Redeemer's task is not the spirit's escape from matter, but the recapitulation and healing of the whole human nature. Thanks to this, freedom does not prove to be a tool of world-destruction, but a link by which creation can respond to the mercy of the Creator and grow toward fullness[113]. It is also important that Irenaeus does not glorify the possibility of sin; the fall of the first humans is a real disobedience and a tragic event, but it is not inscribed in the principle of creation — it is its misuse.

Irenaeus's theology of freedom therefore has a pedagogical and ecclesiological dimension: freedom is a gift to be formed in history, and the Church and the sacraments are part of God's economy of healing this gift. Against Gnostic determinism Irenaeus thus defends subjectivity and responsibility, showing at the same time that the possibility of evil is intrinsically linked with the possibility of good — without freedom there would be neither love nor true conversion.

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[110] Augustine, Confessiones (Confessions) VII — an account of conversion and reflection on the Manichaean experience.

[111] Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus Haereses (Against Heresies) IV, 37; cf. available translation and commentary.

[112] See Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses IV — arguments against typological determinism and for the value of moral choice.

[113] Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses — the argument about the unity of creation and the meaning of the Incarnation (cf. the Prologue of John and Irenaeus's interpretation).

1.8.3 Augustine: the will as bonum medium; evil as privatio boni and causa deficiens

Augustine tackles the question of freedom and evil with a different emphasis and greater metaphysical precision. His Manichaean experience and his readings of Neoplatonist and Christian authors incline him to formulate an account that permanently influenced Western theology: evil is not a being, but a lack of due good (privatio boni). Consequently there is no positive, causative origin of the coming-into-being of evil as such; the cause is "defective": it is the turning away of the will from the higher good toward the lower, a hierarchical disordering of love[114].

In the treatise De libero arbitrio Augustine poses the question about the rationality of the gift of freedom: since the will can choose evil, does this not prove that the gift contributed indirectly to the advent of evil? Augustine's answer is twofold. First, free will — as the capacity for moral choice — is good, because it makes possible true obedience, love and merit. Second, misuse of this capacity does not make it a bad gift, just as misuse of the eye does not make the eye something bad[115]. Freedom is a bonum medium: not the highest good (which belongs only to God and is the summit of moral life), but a necessary instrument of the participation of created beings in the goodness of God.

Augustine further develops the argument that any nature, insofar as it is a nature, contains good within itself; when something becomes corrupted, this is a damage to that nature, not the introduction of a new, evil substance. This argument appears, among others, in De natura boni and the Enchiridion, where Augustine consistently demonstrates that an absolutely evil "thing" cannot exist, because a "thing" always denotes some participation in being and accordingly in the good of existence[116]. This position exposes the internal contradiction of Manichaean dualism: a "substance of evil," in order to be a "thing," would have to have being and form — and thus also the good of existence — which would undermine its absolute evil.

The next step in Augustine's argumentation is the idea of the defective cause. Asked about the "beginning" of the evil will, Augustine rejects the possibility of indicating a positive, generative cause of evil: either this would lead to an infinite regress, or to recognizing another eternal source of evil. Instead he points to external and internal conditions, causes — upbringing, inclinations, bodily pleasures, events — which create the context in which the will chooses disorder. But the act of evil itself is above all a movement of deficiency: a lack of proper orientation toward the highest good. In this sense the cause of evil is a lack; evil "arises" when the free will withdraws from the proper hierarchy of goods[117].

Augustine also elaborates a subtle distinction between liberum arbitrium and libertas. Liberum arbitrium is the natural capacity of choice that a person retains even after the fall; it is that which makes him responsible. Libertas, however, is freedom from internal bondage to sin — the capacity to remain in the good, which a person receives and strengthens by grace. This distinction allows one to understand how Augustine can at the same time maintain that man is responsible for sin (because he retains choice) and that he needs grace for authentic rebirth and perseverance in the good[118].

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[114] Augustine of Hippo, De natura boni (On the Nature of Good) — the thesis privatio boni; Enchiridion — similar motifs; De libero arbitrio — reflections on freedom.

[115] Augustine, De libero arbitrio (On Free Choice of the Will) — discussion of the gift of freedom as essential for responsibility; cf. also the Enchiridion.

[116] Augustine, De natura boni; Enchiridion — the argument that every nature as such contains the good of coexistence.

[117] Augustine, De libero arbitrio; De natura boni — the idea of the defective cause (causa deficiens) and the reversal of the hierarchy of goods.

[118] See Augustine, De libero arbitrio and passages in Confessiones concerning will and grace; the distinction liberum arbitrium / libertas is present in Augustine's writings.

As a result Augustine's theology of freedom protects both the truth about moral responsibility and the absolute goodness of God: God creates free subjects who can err; but when they err, their evil does not have the status of a coeternal being nor the status of positive "creatures" in a positive sense. Evil remains as a defect of order, which God can judge and heal, without being its author.

1.8.4 Three theological distinctions: nature/corruption; permission/causation; reality of suffering/rejection of dualism

To avoid simplifications and misinterpretations, it is necessary to observe three distinctions that constantly run through the argumentation of Irenaeus and Augustine.

1. Created nature / its corruption. The Fathers firmly maintain that nature as such is a good — since it exists, it participates in being, and this is good. Corruption (corruptio) is not an ontological attribute of nature, but its damage: it is a state arising from a disordered use of natural capacities. This distinction undermines the dualistic dichotomy of "good spirit" — "evil matter" and justifies hope for the redemption of the body and creation[119].
2. Permission of evil / moral causation of evil. Patristic texts distinguish God's permission of evil from causing it in a moral sense. Providence may "permit" the activity of evil free agents, use their deeds in the history of salvation or limit their effects, but this does not mean that God is the author of moral evil. Permission is a form of God's wisdom and governance of finite reality, not an expression of participation in evil. This subtle dichotomy is necessary to preserve the sense of God's justice and at the same time the reality of human moral responsibility[120].
3. Reality of suffering / rejection of substantial dualism. Accepting that evil is a "lack of good" does not relativize or deny the reality of suffering. Augustine and Irenaeus repeatedly emphasize that disease, violence, demonic bondage and death are real misfortunes for persons. At the same time they reject the idea that suffering comes from a separate, ontological substance of evil. This creates a theological space in which one can genuinely lament suffering and at the same time defend the unity of creation and the sovereignty of God[121].

Maintaining these distinctions also enables one to recognize the role of the devil: not as an eternal principle of evil, but as a created being, fallen and therefore capable of doing evil by instigating and tempting. His action is real and personal, but parasitic — he needs good that he can distort. This expresses the classical anti-dualistic patristic demonology[122].

1.8.5 Freedom and justice: freedom as the condition and "safety device" of God's judgment

The significance of freedom for theology also has a judicial and eschatological dimension. If a person did not possess a real capacity for choice, then the concepts of guilt, merit, punishment and reward would lose their foundation. Both Irenaeus and Augustine stress that God's justice requires subjects capable of responsible decisions — otherwise divine judgments would become arbitrary. In De civitate Dei Augustine

[119] The distinction nature/corruption in Irenaeus and Augustine — cf. Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses; Augustine, De natura boni.

[120] The distinction between permission and causation of evil in patristic writings; see Augustine, De civitate Dei and De libero arbitrio.

[121] Augustine and Irenaeus on the reality of suffering: cf. Augustine, Enchiridion; Irenaeus — the defense of the body and the history of salvation.

[122] Anti-dualistic demonology in Irenaeus and Augustine: the devil as a creature, a fallen creature, not an eternal principle; cf. Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses; Augustine, De civitate Dei.

contemplates the greatness of God's judgment and the meaning of historical punishments and rewards; his reflection presupposes the existence of free choices that are subject to evaluation[123].

At the same time freedom taken in the Augustinian perspective does not mean autonomy from grace. Augustine often points out that the natural capacity of choice (liberum arbitrium) after the fall does not guarantee a person's durable perseverance in the good; grace is needed for the will to recover the fullness of libertas. This tension between freedom and grace secures against two deformations: against Pelagianism (an excessive trust in the power of the natural will) and against deterministic fatalism (denial of responsibility). In this way freedom becomes a "safety device" of judgment and at the same time the horizon of grace, which gives that judgment the meaning of renewal and final healing[124].

1.8.6 Practical and theological consequences: responsibility, hope, prayer

Maintaining that freedom is not the cause of evil, but the condition of responsibility, entails concrete theological and pastoral consequences. First, it protects the dignity of the person: man is not reduced to a passive instrument of forces beyond him. Second, it confirms the sense of ethical admonition and reproof: people have a real possibility of choosing the good, though they need grace and formation. Third, it shows the importance of prayer and the sacraments as means by which God repairs and directs freedom toward the highest good.

In the context of suffering and natural evil the thesis of privatio boni calls for compassion, not speculatory trivialization. If evil is a lack of good within good creation, then renewal requires process and God's action, which often proceeds through longer historical signposts. The Church as a community of poverty before the mystery of evil is called to care for the suffering and to proclaim the hope that God will ultimately lead good out of suffering, without justifying that suffering as a good in itself[125].

One should also emphasize the practical implication of the anti-dualist stance regarding demonology. Since the evil spirit is a creature, not a principle, the fight against him requires above all the recognition of human responsibility, moral formation and sacramental life. It is not permissible to automatically lay the blame for every personal evil at the devil's door nor to reduce the victim to the role of a "carrier" of evil power. At the same time the reality of the personal action of evil cannot be underestimated: it requires seriousness in spiritual combat and pastoral care, but not magical or medical instructions, which the Church does not give in place of proper caregiving and treatment[126].

1.8.7 Conclusion — the unity of the monotheistic answer and the meaning of freedom

Both Irenaeus and Augustine converge on a common conclusion: freedom is not the ontological source of evil, but the indispensable condition of responsibility. This conclusion has its justification both in anthropology (man as a rational and free being) and in the metaphysics of the good (nature as participation in being). Rejection of dualism preserves at the same time the bond between creation and God, enables

[123] Augustine, De civitate Dei (On the City of God) — reflections on God's judgment and the necessity of freedom for its justice.

[124] Pastoral and theological context of the distinction between freedom and grace: Augustine, De libero arbitrio; Confessiones; Enchiridion.

[125] The theological consequences of privatio boni for pastoral and social practice — derivations from the writings of Irenaeus and Augustine.

[126] Editorial warning: avoid medical, psychological or exorcistic instructions; in discussions of demonology one must distinguish personal responsibility and the reality of the action of spirits.

the full meaning of the Incarnation and the eschatology of the body, and leaves room for the seriousness of suffering and moral guilt.

In practice this theology reminds that freedom is a gift that can be used well or badly; it is a "bonum medium" whose misuse does not make it bad as such. God is not the author of evil; He is the one Creator who called into existence a world that is good, though finite and capable of corruption. His sovereignty does not abolish the causal autonomy of creatures, but embraces and surpasses it, using permission and judgment to ultimately bring victory of good out of evil — which in Christianity is realized in the history of Jesus Christ, His cross and resurrection. Understood thus freedom remains therefore not only the condition of responsibility, but also the context of hope: the human subject is called by God to responsible participation in the restoration of creation.

At the same time, by observing the distinctions: between nature and its corruption; between God's permission and the moral agency of creatures; and between the reality of suffering and the rejection of substantial dualism — we preserve both the seriousness of the problem of evil and fidelity to the monotheistic and Christological answer of the Church. Freedom, in the light of this answer, is neither a pretext for evil nor a guarantee of its necessity; it is a gift that can make man capable both of fall and of rising, and ultimately — of participation in the redemption of the world.

Notes

1.9 Natural evil, suffering and the order of creation

The problem of the origin of evil occupies a central place in Christian thought, since it touches at once the theology of creation, anthropology, soteriology and theodicy. In confronting gnostic and Manichaean explanations of evil the Church Fathers had to maintain three basic distinctions, which will be consistently preserved here: (1) the distinction between created nature and its corruption; (2) the distinction between God's permitting of evil and its being morally caused by free creatures; (3) the affirmation of the reality of suffering without resorting to a substantial dualism that would make evil an autonomous principle of being. In this chapter I will show how Irenaeus of Lyon and Augustine of Hippo — each in his own vocabulary and from a different intellectual place — answered claims that natural evil and suffering are proof of the weakness, ignorance or malice of God the Creator. Their common thesis reads: the world as such is good, and what we call natural evil exists as defect, transience or permission built into the order of creation, which is meant to be the scene of moral and spiritual formation of the person and of the broader history of salvation.

1.9.1 The dualistic temptation and its varieties

In antiquity a natural intellectual temptation in the face of the problem of evil was to introduce some form of dualism: if God is entirely good, and yet the world is full of suffering, perhaps there exists beside Him another, malign principle that is responsible for evil. Gnosticism and Manichaeism adopted this shortcut as a reaction to the painful experience of evil, but they formulated it differently. Gnostic systems, though diverse, more often constructed multi-layered cosmologies in which the Pleroma and its eons contrasted with lower beings and demiurgic mechanisms, and the material world was sometimes the result of an error, the fall of Sophia or the action of a demiurge who was less than the highest Father. Manichaeism, by contrast, formulated dualism more radically and cosmologically: two eternal principles — Light and Darkness — fight for dominance, and materiality is essentially associated with the realm of darkness.

Both responses had an apparent advantage: they protected the transcendence of God and avoided ascribing evil to Him. Yet they had serious consequences for the understanding of creation, revelation and salvation. If matter were by nature hostile to the spirit or if an eternal principle of darkness existed, then the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection could not be the true universal act of redemption of body and world. Therefore the Church Fathers, adopting the monotheistic principle of the one monarchy of God, developed responses that defended simultaneously: (a) the goodness of creation as such and (b) the reality of suffering as tragic but non-ontological evil. This position did not trivialize suffering nor diminish the problem of moral guilt; on the contrary, it recognized its dread, but refused to grant it the status of a substantial, competing reality.

It is worth noting immediately that theological unity of God does not exclude the permitting of evil. The Fathers clearly distinguished the cause of existence from the moral cause: God is the cause of the existence of everything that exists, nevertheless the fact that disorder appears in free creatures is the result of their free action, and not a direct act of the Creator[127][128]. This subtle distinction remains one of the decisive points of dispute with dualistic systems.

1.9.2 Irenaeus: the pedagogy of difficulty and the unity of creation

Irenaeus formulates his polemic against the gnostics on the basis of a historico-economic interpretation of revelation: there is one God, one creation and one history of salvation that runs from creation to fullness in Christ. For Irenaeus the stake was to testify that the Old and New Testaments speak of the same God, who acts consistently through the Word; that the Logos is the one "through whom all things were made," and that His incarnation confirms the value of the body and matter, not their contempt[129][130].

From Irenaeus's perspective evil is therefore not an ontological property of matter, but the effect of the free apostasy of creatures. In his narrative man was created as a being capable of growth (infans), endowed with reason and will, but not with immediate perfection. God did not make the first humans perfect, because that belongs properly only to God; man was to grow in likeness to the Creator. Suffering, limitation and the possibility of falling are in this perspective a "pedagogy of difficulty": the background on which freedom can prove itself and virtue be worked out. Without the resistance of matter and without the possibility of experiencing the consequences of choices, virtue and authentic love would be impossible, and moral responsibility — illusory[128][129].

Irenaeus sharply rejects the gnostic dichotomy of humans into classes incapable or capable of salvation. For him every human has been given the "image" (imago) of God and is called to "likeness" (similitudo), which, however, is attained by a historical process. In this perspective the world is not a prison for the spirit, but a "womb" or workshop in which education to fullness takes place. This answer preserves both the dignity of matter (against gnosticism) and the reality of responsibility (against deterministic interpretations). Irenaeus does not yet formulate in a systematic way the theory of privatio boni, as Augustine later will, but he prepares the ground: since God created everything as good, evil cannot be something equal to created nature; it is rather a deviation, apostasy or defect in the history of creation[128].

[127] Holy Scripture: Gen 1:31; John 1:1–3, 14.

[128] Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies (Adversus haereses); cf. among other things the argument about the unity of the Creator and the necessity that the Logos be the creator of the visible world (cf. IV,20–25) — available in a classical translation and edition: New Advent.

[129] Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus haereses IV,37; see also references to the Incarnation of the Logos with respect to matter in the context of the renewal of creation (Adversus haereses III–V).

[130] Augustine of Hippo, De natura boni (On the Nature of Good), in which he argues that every nature as such is good, and that evil is the lack of that good; the text is available in collections of Augustine's writings (e.g. New Advent).

Irenaeus's critique of the gnostic structure of thought also has a pastoral and ecclesial dimension: gnosticism reveals a basic inconsistency with the Christian proclamation that God "made all things good" and that the Logos entered into the flesh to renew the whole creation. The Incarnation, in his understanding, is the ultimate sign that body and matter have a place in the economy of salvation, and the cross and resurrection become the key to understanding the meaning of suffering in the perspective of redemption[129].

1.9.3 Augustine: privatio boni, hierarchy of beings and the defective cause of evil

Augustine's mature response accepts and develops many intuitions of earlier Fathers, but does so in the language of a metaphysics of participation. His basic claim is that every nature, insofar as it has being, is a good; evil, however, is not a positive substance but a lack of the due good — privatio boni[130]. This theoretical move is aimed at the Manichaean dualism: if "darkness" were a substance, it would have being and therefore participation in the good of existence; to claim that evil is necessarily a substantial thing leads to an internal contradiction.

Augustine develops this thought consistently: existence and form, measure and order — all of these are goods originating from the Creator. Disease, death, hatred are real, but they are the reality of a defect with respect to a nature that once had (and has) primary goods. Blindness is evil for one who has the capacity to see; lying is evil because speech exists with the possibility of saying the truth; the fall of the will is evil because the will is created to love the highest good. Hence the conclusion: evil has no autonomous being; it is parasitic upon the being of other things[131].

Augustine's theory has concrete anthropological and soteriological consequence. Since moral evil arises from the free turning of the will away from the higher good toward the lower, one cannot simply posit a prior real "something" of evil that infected the will from outside in the same way God causes existence. The cause of the fall is "defective": there is nothing positive in it that would cause sin in the same ontological sense in which God causes being. The question of why the free will chose wrongly is a question about a lack of order rather than about the presence of an alien substance[132].

This Augustinian distinction corresponds well with practical experience: the victim of violence or a natural disaster experiences real harm, not an "inhabitation" by another being. Augustine therefore can acknowledge the weight of suffering without turning it into the basis of ontological dualism. His metaphysics, however, permitted a stronger emphasis on the effects of the fall upon the human will and on the necessity of prevenient grace — which distinguishes him accentually from Irenaeus, who emphasized more strongly the pedagogical dimension of creation and the stagedness of maturation.

Augustine's notion of God's permitting of evil is particularly important for the problem of natural evil. God could have not permitted evil — by destroying freedom or by rendering creatures incapable beforehand of turning away — yet he remains faithful to his nature: he gives beings the possibility of authentic being and loving. Providence operates in a world in which the permitting of evil is always limited and ultimately subordinated to the end of drawing good out of its effects, rather than using evil as a necessary means

[131] Augustine, Enchiridion (Handbook), chapters 10–14 — a development of the idea of evil as privatio boni and of the reality of suffering while rejecting substantial dualism.

[132] Augustine, De libero arbitrio (On Free Choice), especially in the work where he analyzes the nature of freedom and the mechanics of the fall of the will; cf. also Confessiones (Confessions), Book VII, the account of personal experience with Manichaeism and the discovery that evil is not a substance.

to achieve good[133]. In this thought lies the warning against the view that God "needs" sin to manifest his wisdom; rather God can transform and include in his plan what creatures have made evil.

1.9.4 Ordo rerum, aesthetic theodicy and the limits of a rational answer

One of the most characteristic Augustinian motifs is the notion of ordo rerum — the order of things — which helps to show that even transience and change make sense in the context of the whole. Augustine compared the world to a poem or music, in which pauses, changes and dissonances are not ends in themselves but contribute to the harmony of the whole. This does not mean that every individual calamity is "good" in a moral sense; rather it means that from God's perspective finite elements of the world co-constitute a structure in which transience can have a teleological justification[133].

Such an approach eases the reply to the Manichaean charge of "the cruelty of nature." If nature were evil in its very essence, its structure could not serve any positive end; it would be only an eternal source of suffering. If, however, it is created and good, and its transience and "wildness" are expressions of finitude, tragedies need not imply the presence of a distinct criminal demiurge. At the same time Augustine does not domesticate the fact of suffering: the drama of the suffering remains a real ethical and spiritual challenge that cannot be aestheticized or instrumentalized.

In this perspective one must also maintain the discipline of distinguishing between "permitting" and "causing." God permits certain events in history, but that does not mean that he morally caused them. The example of the cross is key here: the agony and death of Christ were morally evil acts committed by humans; yet by the mystery of Providence God made them a means of redemption. Such incorporation of evil into the history of salvation does not make evil good; it does not annul the responsibility of the perpetrators; rather it shows that God can participate in human suffering and draw new goods from it, without renouncing judgment and justice[129][133].

In practical theodical discussion two mistakes should be anticipated: (1) minimizing suffering by denying its reality; (2) absolutizing suffering so as to make it proof of the existence of an equivalent darkness. The Fathers avoid both extremes, acknowledging both the reality of evil and its privative (non-ontological) character.

1.9.5 Christology, demonology and ethical consequences

A common theological element of Irenaeus and Augustine is the christological completion of the answer to natural evil: the Logos who created the world enters that world to renew it. In Irenaeus's account the Incarnation is a denial of the gnostic contempt for the body; in Augustine's account it is at once a metaphysical and moral confirmation that creation is not an independent principle of evil. The cross and resurrection not only show the meaning of suffering in the history of salvation, but according to both authors constitute the point at which God takes upon himself human weakness and transforms it.

The Fathers' demonology remains consistently monotheistic: Satan and evil spirits are creatures who by a free decision lost their relation to the good and became agents of evil; they are not co-eternal principles of reality. This understanding has important practical consequences: demonicity is not an ontological explanation for natural evil, although personal evil (the tempterlike action of spirits) can be a real factor in the history of sin and suffering. It also means that a pastoral approach cannot reduce all suffering to demonic operations nor burden the suffering person with the stigma of inherent "evil"[128][130].

[133] Augustine, De civitate Dei (The City of God), where he discusses the idea of ordo rerum, the admission of evil in the Divine plan, and that God is able to bring good out of the abuses of free creatures.

From a theological point of view it is also important to distinguish between love (caritas) and cupiditas: Augustine develops this category as the central explanation of the moral turning of the will. Sin is a degraded hierarchy of desires: instead of loving God as the highest Good, the will is directed toward permissible finite goods in a disordered way. This model helps to understand why evil may appear not so much as the effect of an alien substance but as the implosion of the order of love in a rational creature[132].
The ethical consequences of this understanding are twofold. First, recognizing that moral evil is the result of disordered freedom underscores the necessity of responsibility and moral transformation; second, the awareness that natural evil is not the work of a separate substance permits a perspective of hope: since evil has no independent being, it can be judged by God and destined for transformation. Both elements motivate Christian practice of renunciation and mercy: the call to inward conversion and the simultaneous engagement to mitigate the effects of suffering and injustice in the world.
For pastoral theology this also means that toward the suffering one must not formulate simplified accusations about "the effects of personal sin" nor automatically ascribe guilt to demons. Genuine care unites recognition of the reality of spiritual struggle with empathy and concrete help, always remembering the central role of redemption in Christ and the call to justice and social repair.

1.9.6 Synthesis: against the gnostics and the Manichaeans — theological consequence of monotheism

In sum, the polemic against gnostic and Manichaean explanations of evil leads to several enduring conclusions that unify the thought of Irenaeus and Augustine, despite differences of emphasis:

1. God is the one, indivisible source of being; hence everything that exists shares in the good of existence and cannot be per se evil[128][130].
2. Evil is not a substance; it is a diminishment, lack or disorder with respect to the good, and in particular with respect to the highest good, which is God[130][131].
3. The free will of creatures is the condition of moral responsibility and at the same time the source of possibility of apostasy; the cause of the fall has a defective character, not an efficient one in the ontological sense[132].
4. Natural evil and suffering are real and painful; their presence is not, however, proof of the existence of a second, independent god. Suffering is incorporated into the history of creation and can be subjected to Divine Providence, which draws good from it, without excusing the perpetrators of evil[133].
5. The christological Incarnation and redemption confirm the value of creation and indicate the ultimate way of transforming evil: not by fleeing the world, but by its renewal and recapitulation in Christ[129].

Such an approach protects the unity of revelation and the sovereignty of God, confirms the dignity of creation and requires of human beings interior responsibility for their deeds. At the same time it acknowledges the drama of suffering and introduces hope: since evil has no solid, independent foundation, it cannot block God's ultimate plan. This is the Christian response that rejects both the gnostic contempt for the world and the Manichaean affirmation of an equivalent dualism, proposing instead the way of transformation, judgment and ultimate healing through the Son-God-Man.
Assuming these premises, theology can remain at once honest toward the experience of suffering and faithful to the monotheistic formula of faith: there is no other God besides the one who loves, judges and redeems. Evil is real and painful, yet it is not absolute; it is the wound of creation which God in Christ receives and heals, leading history toward fullness.

1.10 Satan as a creature, and not a principle of evil

The problem of the origin of evil constituted in ancient theology one of the most decisive fields of dispute. This is not a matter of academic curiosity or of purely speculative subtlety, but of the very meaning of the profession of faith: whether the God revealed in Holy Scripture is the sole source of being, or whether alongside Him there exists another, coeternal principle responsible for darkness and destruction. Within this debate it was crucial to distinguish two seemingly similar but fundamentally different ways of formulating the problem: whether evil is a substance (a principle) ontologically equal to good, or rather constitutes an internal corruption of created nature. In classical Christian theology — especially in the thought of Irenaeus of Lyons and Augustine of Hippo — the dominant answer is: Satan is a creature, and evil is not a second, independent principle, but a defect of the free act of creation; God remains the sole origin of being and of good[134].

The following chapter develops this thesis on several mutually related levels: ontological (creatio ex nihilo and the goodness of creation), historical-polemical (Irenaeus's response to Gnosticism), metaphysical (Augustine's argument about privatio boni), biblical-patristic (exegesis of texts regarded as descriptions of Lucifer's fall), and eschatological (the limits and end of the power of evil). At each stage three distinctions required by this study will be sustained: created nature / its corruption; permission of evil / moral causation; reality of suffering / rejection of substantial dualism.

1.10.1 1. Creatio ex nihilo and the ontological goodness of creation

The foundation of the Christian response to the temptation of dualism is the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo: everything that exists apart from God was called into being by Him and has no independent cause of its existence outside the Creator[135]. This assertion has consequences far beyond the question of the chronology of the beginning of the world. It means that existence, form, order and every capacity given to a nature are in a certain sense a participation in the good that God, being absolute Good, communicates to creation. If therefore something exists as a nature — even in its finitude and weakness — it bears within itself a basic dimension of good. This presupposition rules out the hypothesis that matter, the body, or any sphere of creation is by nature "dark" or ontologically inferior. Consequently one must not treat the body merely as the prison of the soul nor matter as a source of irrevocable evil; rather they are a created good that can be used in an ordered way or trampled by free beings.

Accepting one, sovereign origin of being also has a defensive significance against Manichaeism. If there were two independent beginnings — a kingdom of light and a kingdom of darkness — it would not be possible to speak of God as the closed, sovereign cause of everything. The monarchy of God in the Christian sense is not merely a political metaphor: it is an ontological affirmation of the unity of the source of being[136]. By maintaining that everything that is participates dependently in Divine being, Christianity shifts the problem of evil from the level of cosmic substance to the moral and existential level: evil appears

[134] Cf. Deut 32:39; Gen 1:1–31; Jn 1:3. See also the development of the doctrine creatio ex nihilo in patristics and the Middle Ages; in this chapter we emphasize the theological consequences, referring to the classic texts of Irenaeus and Augustine.

[135] Cf. Jn 1:3; Rom 11:36. The doctrine creatio ex nihilo is often invoked in polemic with Gnosticism; Irenaeus and other Fathers stress that the world is the work of the Logos (cf. Adversus haereses).

[136] See Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus haereses (Against Heresies); cf. also the general argumentation against the pride of demiurges in patristic works[137].

[137] Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus haereses IV,37 (cf. available translations and commentaries). Irenaeus defends the unity of the Creator and the identity of creation as the work of the Word; see also quotations and discussions in modern commentators.

where creation does not keep the due order of good, and not as something that belongs to the primordial architecture of being.

This distinction (created vs. its corruption) also allows for preserving the reality of both suffering and moral guilt. Since creation is a good, suffering — though real and morally painful — does not force the conclusion that there exists a separate substance of evil. The reality of suffering coexists here with the principle that evil is not ontologically primary; it is rather a moral and ontological deficit that requires theological explanation and a moral response.

1.10.2 2. Irenaeus of Lyons: the devil as apostate and motivated by envy of man

Writing at the end of the second century in direct polemic with various Gnostic currents, Irenaeus develops a theological argument that defends the unity of creation and the meaning of the Incarnation. His starting point is simple yet strategic: if the Word (Logos) participates in creation and became flesh, then the material world is not the fruit of an error, of a Demiurge, or of an unconscious emanation[137]. In Adversus haereses Irenaeus stresses that there is one God who by his Word created all things and that the Old and New Testaments speak of the same God. This resolution implies that evil does not originate from a separate demiurgical power, but appears within one creation as its deviation from its original destiny.

A specific thread in Irenaeus is the portrayal of the fall of an angel not as a metaphysical necessity but as an act of apostasy marked by envy towards the place God destined for man. The devil — in this view — is not a cosmic "shadow-god," but a creature which of its own will rejected the task entrusted to it and undertook activity contrary to the Creator's plan[138]. Irenaeus uses this image to demonstrate that both humans and angels received freedom and are capable of falling; man is not predetermined to one of these "natures," as some Gnostics asserted, but is morally responsible for his choices[139].

Irenaeus's interpretation has several important consequences. First, it emphasizes the solidarity of the history of salvation: Christ does not come to the body as to a foreign domain, but in order to recapitulate and renew what is the work of the Word. Second, it denies the Gnostic legitimization of the body and matter as irredeemable — if creation is essentially good, salvation must include the body and the material world, which becomes one of the theological arguments for the true body of Christ and the future resurrection of the body. Third, Irenaeus shifts the problem of evil to the field of freedom and responsibility: evil is the consequence of the misuse of a gift, not the existence of an alternative being.

This approach also has significant pastoral and moral virtues: it does not absolve man of guilt, but on the contrary confronts him with the seriousness of decision. If sin is the result of the rejection of grace and love, then purification and renewal do not consist in escaping from matter but in conversion and the recapitulation of creation by Christ[140].

1.10.3 3. Augustine: privatio boni and the metaphysics of lack

Augustine, raised partly in Manichaean thought and converted to orthodoxy, brings to the debate on evil a tool that will become the foundation of later medieval theodicy: the concept privatio boni — evil as the lack

[138] Irenaeus treats the devil as an apostate who "departed" from his original vocation; cf. Adversus haereses IV,37. See also the discussion of the motif of envy in his account of the angelic rebellion.

[139] Adversus haereses IV,37; see also Irenaeus's discussion of freedom and moral responsibility.

[140] Cf. particularly Irenaeus's chapter on recapitulatio in Christ, where he emphasizes that the Incarnation has significance for the whole human nature and for the salvation of the body.

of good[141]. His reasoning begins from the metaphysical assumption that being is good: a nature, insofar as it exists, has form, measure and order, which should be read as participation in the absolute Good. From this viewpoint it is impossible for things to exist that would be entirely devoid of good; if that were the case, they would be nothing and one could not speak of them in an ontological sense. Evil therefore is not a new substance but a defect — as disease is a defect of health, and blindness a defect of the capacity to see[142].

For Augustine the consequences are decisive in the polemic with Manichaeism. If "darkness" were a substance, it would also have to possess some share in being, and thus in good; this would lead to the uncomfortable conclusion that evil as such has some kind of "being" derived from God or that God is not the sole, good source of existence. Augustine therefore rejects Manichaean dualism, showing the internal contradiction of its premises and formulating the thought that evil is a lack of due good, not an ontological entity[143].

Another important aspect of Augustinian thought concerns the so-called "defective cause" of evil. Augustine does not find a positive causal agent of evil; it cannot be explained as something that was added to nature and made it evil. The first act of unrighteousness is rather a movement of the will from a higher good toward a lower good — that is, it is not an act of the emergence of some new quality, but a choice of mis-order. Thus understood, the will can be directed toward creatures (wealth, pleasure, power, the acclaim of others) and make them the object of ultimate love, displacing God from that place. Sin is therefore a reordering of love, a mistaken hierarchy of values, not the product of an objective substance of evil[144].

In this perspective Augustine preserves three essential distinctions: (1) created nature remains good as such — its corruption is an added moral fact, but not a new nature; (2) God may permit evil in the sense of permission (permissio) without being the moral agent of that evil; (3) suffering is real and often tragic, but its ontological foundation should not be sought in postulating a second, substantial pole of reality. Augustine likewise emphasizes that God's permission of evil is not a justification of sin and that Providence has the means to ultimately judge and overcome evil, without loss of his sovereignty[145].

1.10.4 4. Exegesis of Isa 14 and Ezek 28 in the patristic tradition: demythologizing the rebellion

In the patristic tradition the key material for thinking about the fall of the angels were the prophetic texts — above all the passages of the book of Isaiah (Isa 14:12–15) and Ezekiel (Ezek 28:12–19) — which the Fathers read not only as a critique of earthly kings (Babylon and Tyre) but also as multilayered descriptions of the rebellion of spiritual beings. The Fathers, in an allegorical-typological spirit, read these texts as clues for understanding a prehistorical rebellion. The use of motifs such as the fall from heaven, the striving to exalt oneself above God, or the loss of original glory contributed to the formulation of the image of Lucifer — a

[141] Augustine of Hippo, De natura boni (On the Nature of Good); cf. Enchiridion; Confessiones. The argument about privatio boni is central to his critique of Manichaeism.

[142] Cf. Augustine, Enchiridion; De natura boni. Augustine uses metaphors of light and darkness, health and disease, to show that evil is a lack of good, not a substance.

[143] Cf. Augustine, On the Nature of Good (De natura boni). See also critical discussions of this polemic in historical-theological literature.

[144] Cf. Augustine, De libero arbitrio (On Free Choice of the Will) and Confessiones (especially Book VII, reflection on the Manichaean experience).

[145] Augustine distinguishes the permission of evil and moral causation; cf. De civitate Dei and other anti-Manichaean treatises.

being who because of pride and the desire for self-perfection became the symbol of opposition to God[146]. This patristic exegesis functions to "demythologize" pagan imaginations about chaos and dragons. Instead of treating the powers of darkness as autonomous primordial forces, the Christian interpretation anchors their activity in the history of creation: these are created beings which by their choice transformed the nature they received into instruments of evil. Thus the angelic fall becomes part of a single story whose center remains the one God and his economy of salvation, not a conflict between two independent poles. In this way the prophetic texts operate in patristic thought as literary-theological tools to show that the beginning of evil has a moral, not cosmological, character[147].

It is worth stressing again the distinction between nature and will. The figure of Lucifer in the Fathers' interpretation is not another nature, but a being which — bearing within it the created good of existence — by choice became the contrary of its vocation. This allows one to preserve the reality of demonic action (tempter, deceiver, imitator of good), while at the same time avoiding the elevation of evil to the status of a second deity.

1.10.5 5. The eschatological limit of evil: the restriction of Satan's power by Providence

The acceptance that Satan is a creature and not a principle has eschatological consequences. If evil has no ontological independence, its power is temporal and dependent on the grace and will of the Creator. In a dualist system the conflict could theoretically continue forever, because each side would possess its own, independent source of existence. In Christian theology, however, God's victory over evil is not only morally necessary but ontologically possible: evil has no capacity in itself to construct a new, irreversible structure of being[148].

This does not mean minimizing the reality of evil or trivializing suffering. On the contrary: since evil is an abuse of good, its injury is all the more painful and all the more seriously demands God's response and repair. Providence does not remove human responsibility; judgment, punishment and the restoration of justice remain real dimensions of divine action. Augustine repeatedly stresses that God, being wise and merciful, permits evil not because he needs it but because he is able to draw good out of experienced evil. This permission, however, is always within the limits of a supreme purpose — healing and the ultimate triumph over evil[149].

What practical implications follow from this eschatology? Several levels may be indicated:

1. Antidualism strengthens hope: since evil is a defect, not an entity, victory is not merely a utopian vision but the logical consequence of the ontological hierarchy of being.
2. Antidualism protects sacramentology and anthropology: since the body and matter are God's good, the sacraments and the resurrection of the body make sense as the real renewal of creation.
3. Antidualism maintains moral responsibility: sin is an act of a free creature and as such is subject to judgment; one cannot cast it onto a "substance" of evil without invalidating justice.

[146] The patristic reading of Isa 14 and Ezek 28 as descriptions of the fall of the angels is widely attested; cf. anonymous interpretative traditions among the Church Fathers and commentaries on these books.

[147] The prophetic texts (Isa 14:12–15; Ezek 28:12–19) were used in patrology multilayeredly — as a critique of concrete kings and at the same time as a typology of the fall of spiritual beings.

[148] The contrast between a dualist eschatology (a lasting conflict of coequal forces) and the Christian eschatology of God's victory is a leading theme in polemics with Manichaeism; cf. Augustine, De civitate Dei.

[149] Augustine develops in City of God the thought that God can bring good out of evil and that the permission of evil is within Providence; cf. De civitate Dei.

1.10.6 Conclusion of the argument: the unity of God's monarchy and the gravity of evil

Juxtaposing the thought of Irenaeus and Augustine we obtain a complementary theology: Irenaeus emphasizes the historical and economic dimension of evil (apostasy, economy of salvation, the motherhood of the Incarnation), while Augustine brings it to metaphysical clarity (privatio boni, participation in being, absence of substantial dualism). Both approaches cooperate to move the burden of explanation of evil from the ontological plane (a second, coequal source) to the moral and volitional plane (evil as a turning away from God). Thanks to this it becomes possible simultaneously to acknowledge the reality of evil and to defend the one, good cause of being.

In practical theological reflection this exegesis means a prudent approach to demonic factors and to suffering: when we face personal evil, we should recognize moral and psychological causes, avoid automatically demonizing every difficulty, and trust that evil, though threatening and real, has no ultimate right to being before God. In liturgy and morality belief in one, sovereign Creator admonishes us not to seek the fault of creation where the only ultimate source is God; at the same time it reminds us of the seriousness of free choice and of the need for the grace that heals the corrupted will.

Thus — summarizing in three points consistent with the requirements of this work —: (1) created nature is prima facie good; its corruption is an act of the will, not a new ontological substance; (2) God permits evil in the sense of permission, but the moral causation of evil lies with free creatures; (3) suffering is real, yet it does not justify adopting a substantial dualism, because it does not possess its own, independent ontological foundation[150].

In the light of this theology Satan is dramatically real — as a personal, deceiving adversary who exploits good in order to fall — but ontologically dependent: his existence and capacity to act derive from created being and therefore remain within the bounds of Divine Providence. This gives Christianity both theoretical coherence and moral seriousness: evil is neither trivialized nor invested with divine dignity; yet it remains subject to judgment, penalty and ultimate overcoming by the One who is the beginning and the end of all things.

Notes

1.11 The Unity of Both Responses

The thesis of this chapter is as follows: the unity of the responses of Irenaeus of Lyons and Augustine of Hippo to the question "unde malum?" does not consist in the identity of their theodicean systems, but in a shared anti-dualistic foundation and in the complementary mutual enrichment of their emphases — the pedagogical and historico-economic approach in Irenaeus and the metaphysical-anthropological explanation in Augustine. Both responses defend the unity of the Creator, the goodness of creation, and the responsibility of the free will, and thus oppose not only gnostic emanations but also Manichaean claims of eternal dualism. Considering their unity requires a renewed emphasis on three editorial distinctions: (1) created nature / its corruption; (2) permission of evil / moral causation; (3) reality of suffering / rejection of

[150]Jason D. BeDuhn, "Not to depart from Christ": Augustine between "Manichaean" and "Catholic" Christianity, HTS Theological Studies 69(1), 2013 — a biographical and contextual analysis of Augustine's transformation and the role of his Manichaean experience in his critique of dualism. For historical context on exorcisms and representations of evil spirits in the Gospels, see Michèle B. Badé, "Jesus' Authority Over Evil Spirits: Healing Demoniacs in the Gospel of Mark" (supplementary material).

substantial dualism. These distinctions will accompany the presentation and the synthetic harmonization of the positions of both Fathers.

1.11.1 The Distinction of Adversaries and Fundamental Anti-Dualism

The starting point must be historical and conceptual: Irenaeus and Augustine combated different forms of dualism, which however shared the temptation to separate evil from the divine order. Irenaeus directed his polemics primarily against the Gnostics, who employed myths of emanation and a demiurgic explanation of the cosmos; in their conceptions the highest God remained distant, and the visible world was the result of an error or the action of a lower being (the Demiurge), wherefore matter and the body are sometimes regarded as intrinsically evil. Augustine, by contrast, in the early period of his life was under the influence of Manichaeism, which maintained a radical, often symmetrical dualism of two eternal principles — Light and Darkness — and presented the world as the arena of their conflict[151]. The distinction of these adversaries is necessary: Gnostic systems often multiplied hypostases and aeons, explaining evil by a failure of the emanational order; Manichaeism, however, absolutized the antagonism, making evil a coeternal substance alongside light. Pointing out these differences does not serve merely historical reconstruction; it is theologically significant because it allows us to understand which concrete claims about the unity of God and the value of creation Irenaeus and Augustine considered dangerous and had to oppose.

Both responses begin with an affirmation of the monarchy of God as an ontological principle: there is one, supreme, infinitely good Creator, against whom there is no second, coeternal counterprinciple. Such a monarchy is not merely a political metaphor but an ontological thesis: if beside God there were another, independent principle, neither of those beginnings would be absolute. This reasoning lies at the basis of the rejection of all substantial dualism both in Irenaeus and in Augustine[152]. From this position both formulate a critique of views that make evil an entity parallel to good. Consequently they also affirm the good ontology of creation: as created by the One, everything that exists in a broad sense is good, although it may be subjected to corruption.

Irenaeus formulates this thought in the perspective of the economy of revelation: the Word that created everything cannot be separated from the creation that became His "possession," and the Incarnation of the Logos is an unambiguous denial of the Gnostic contempt for matter[153]. Augustine, in turn, captures a similar thought in metaphysical categories: being, insofar as it exists, has a share in the good of existence; evil cannot be a substance, because a substance would have being, and being is good[154]. Both conclusions lead to the same anti-dualistic thesis: evil does not have an autonomous, eternal status. It is important to emphasize that this anti-dualism does not trivialize the power of evil nor deny the reality of suffering — on the contrary, it poses the question of its place within the homogeneous economy of creation.

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[151] Jason D. BeDuhn, „Not to depart from Christ": Augustine between "Manichaean" and "Catholic" Christianity, *HTS Theological Studies* 69(1), 2013. The article discusses the influence of Manichaean experience on Augustine's biography and thought and points to the necessity of reading Augustinian writings in the context of this dialogue — available online: https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222013000100029.

[152] See Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* (Against Heresies), dealing multifacetedly with the problem of the multiplicity of aeons and demiurges; for example, counter-arguments against emanational and demiurgic myths are found in various books of the work. Irenaeus emphasizes the unity of the Creator and of the Word.

[153] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses* — see inter alia Irenaeus's reflections that stress the identity Word-Creation-Salvation (cf. especially the books dealing with the Incarnation and the critique of Gnostic cosmology).

[154] Augustine of Hippo, *De natura boni* (On the Nature of Good). Augustine argues that existence is a measure of good and that evil should be understood as the lack of good, not as a positive substance.

1.11.2 Freedom, Responsibility, and privatio boni

The second pillar of the harmonization of both responses is the notion of free will as a condition of moral responsibility and as the arena in which evil appears. Irenaeus recalls that man was endowed with the capacity to choose and that his moral condition is not determined by a kind of nature, but by a response to the good given by God; in this way he opposes Gnostic classifications of people according to ontological types[155]. Irenaeus's account is strongly historico-anthropological: man is a "child" created to grow into the likeness of God, and the presence of trial and the possibility of fall are linked to the pedagogical economy of that growth. In this sense evil appears as a disturbance of the maturation process — real and grave, yet not primordial.

Augustine transforms this intuition into a broader moral metaphysic. His key category — privatio boni — explains evil as the lack of good, not as a positive being. Everything that exists possesses form, measure and order; the damage of these properties is evil. The will as the capacity of choice is a created nature and therefore good; its "corruption" does not consist in the addition of a bad substance, but in a defect in the order of love: the will turns away from the supreme good toward a lower good, which Augustine describes as a disordering of the hierarchy of loves[156]. In this way Augustine rejects both the Manichaean material dualism and simple determinism: God gives freedom and is the source of being, yet sin is the consequence of a disordered use of free will.

The three editorial distinctions appear here clearly and must be consistently maintained. First: created nature / its corruption. Both Fathers consistently affirm the primordial goodness of nature: the body, reason, the will are good gifts of the Creator; evil consists in their corruption, not in their negation as beings. Second: permission of evil / moral causation. God may permit evil in his governance of history without being its moral cause; the moral agent of sin is, however, the creature that chooses against God. Third: reality of suffering / rejection of substantial dualism. It must be acknowledged that suffering is real and often deeply undeserved by the victims, while at the same time one cannot infer from it the existence of a second, coequal being of evil with God.

Augustine's thought about the defective cause of evil is helpful here: it does not demand the search for a positive "first cause" of evil, because such a cause would lead to an endless regress or to the acceptance of a second deity. Instead Augustine indicates that the first falls result from an internal turning aside of the will — a movement that is a lack of its proper orientation[157]. This explanation does not make evil an "illusion." The will can become corrupt with serious and lasting effects; however these effects do not confer ontological independence upon evil.

Irenaeus and Augustine come close to one another here: the former shows the developmental character of human being and the necessity of God's pedagogy, the latter specifies the ontological limits of evil and points to the category of lack as logically necessary to preserve the unity of being. Their combination yields a fuller response: freedom is a condition of genuine good, yet its misuse produces real injuries that will require the action of healing Providence.

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[155] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* IV,37 — against Gnostic divisions of people into permanent classes of nature, Irenaeus recognizes the capacity to choose as a constitutive element of the human condition.

[156] Augustine, *Enchiridion* and *De natura boni* — basic texts in which he formulates the theory of privatio boni and analyzes the disordering of the hierarchy of loves as the essence of sin.

[157] Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* — reflections on free will, responsibility and the nature of evil; Augustine distinguishes the efficient cause of a thing from the "cause" of moral evil as a lack of order.

1.11.3 Providence, Permission, and the Teleology of Salvation History

Another aspect of the unity of both responses is the way they conceive divine Providence. Both reject the reduction of Providence to arbitrary determinism and at the same time cut off the route of a dualistic logical "banishment" of God from certain fragments of reality. In Irenaeus Providence appears as the orientation of the process of maturation of creation: God, being a pedagogue, permits experiences and trials in order to shape his people by them and to lead them to full maturity in Christ. This permission does not mean that God causes evil deeds as such; rather He integrates their consequences into his economy of judgment, punishment and mercy[158].

Augustine develops this perspective, formulating the conviction that God permits evil because with full sovereignty and wisdom He can draw good out of evil; permission is therefore evidence of Providence, not its denial[159]. This statement, often misunderstood as a justification of evil, has for Augustine a theological dimension: since freedom could be abused, Providence constantly opposes the absolutization of the consequences of that abuse and at the same time embraces them within a salvific end. The most dramatic example is the cross: the act of the greatest violence against the Son of God becomes by the power of Providence the means of redemption and the recapitulation of the whole creation[160].

In this context three orders of action must be distinguished: (1) ontological creation — God as the one, good, creative beginning; (2) moral undertakings of free creatures — acts that have moral weight and consequences; (3) the economy of Providence — the manner in which God uses, limits and transforms the consequences of free acts, leading them toward their goal. Maintaining this division is necessary so as not to confuse divine permission with moral causation; God may allow certain events, yet He does not make them morally good nor is He causally responsible for them.

Irenaeus emphasizes here the dynamics of salvation history: the Incarnation of the Logos means that God does not "withdraw" from matter but enters into it in order to heal it. Christ recapitulates human history — He comes as One who passes through human stages and includes them in his ministry of redemption[161]. Augustine, for his part, stresses the metaphysical foundations of renewal: since evil is a lack, a restorative act by the completion of good is possible; grace does not eliminate responsibility but heals the will, restoring its proper hierarchy of love.

Both perspectives also indicate practical consequences for a theology of suffering. Acknowledging that suffering is real requires theology to exercise compassion and just judgment. At the same time the rejection of substantial dualism strengthens hope: suffering is not the effect of domination by some unconquerable power of evil, but a permission that ultimately can be integrated into the plan of divine Providence. This is not a trivial theodicy; it is a wounded and difficult conviction that God can make use even of the gravest consequences of evil for redemptive ends, without thereby removing the guilt of perpetrators or beautifying evil.

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[158] Irenaeus develops the notion of God's pedagogy and an educative history in the context of the economy of salvation; see passages of *Adversus haereses* concerning the role of experience and judgment in salvation history.

[159] Augustine, *De civitate Dei* (The City of God) — reflections on Providence, the permission of evil and the drawing of good from evil by God's omnipotence; see also indications concerning the relation between freedom and Providence.

[160] See Irenaeus and Augustine on the cross as a paradox of God's action: the cross remains a morally malicious act of human beings, yet in God's plan it becomes a means of redemption; Irenaeus uses the category of recapitulation, Augustine — the economy of Providence and the theology of grace.

[161] Irenaeus, the concept of anakephalaiosis (recapitulation) — the Word taking on flesh and leading to the renewal of creation.

1.11.4 Soteriology: Recapitulation and Healing in Christ

The culminating locus of unity between Irenaeus and Augustine is their understanding of Christ as the center of the solution to the problem of evil. Irenaeus formulates the well-known concept of anakephalaiosis — recapitulation — according to which Christ, the "second Adam," reworks and completes the history of creation through his obedience, suffering and resurrection; it is He who by his body renews the human condition and introduces into history the final victory over the breach of freedom[162]. Understood in this way recapitulation remains consistently anti-Gnostic: there is no escape from the body here, but its transformation and sanctification.

Augustine, who in The Ontology of the Good and in pastoral writings expresses a profound realism regarding the damage to the human will, understands Christ in a therapeutic and ontological dimension. Christ is the One who comes to heal the will, to restore the order of love and by sacramental participation in His life to incorporate man into the fullness of good. For Augustine grace is necessary because the effects of the fall affect our capacity to persevere in good (though they do not completely negate freedom). Christ does not abolish freedom to replace it with fatalism; on the contrary, He gives it toward a greater, healed freedom[163].

This soteriological unity has important doctrinal implications: salvation is not an escape from creation, nor its rejection, but its renewal. In the face of Gnostic tendencies to divide, Irenaeus emphasizes the continuity Word-Creation-Salvation; against Manichaean imaginings of two coequal principles Augustine demonstrates that since evil is a defect it can be repaired and that God, being the highest good, can indeed bring the whole to a final victory over corruption. The Christology of both not only intellectually demonstrates the absence of dualism but existentially overcomes it: God in Christ undertook history in all its complexity to bring it to fullness.

It is also worth noting that both perspectives leave room for punishment, justice and judgment. Redemption does not negate anyone's responsible choice nor does it eliminate the necessity of judgment. Irenaeus speaks of God's punishment and mercy as elements of pedagogy; Augustine explicitly defends divine judgment as a necessary order of justice (while simultaneously holding to the possibility of drawing good from sin)[164]. Salvation is therefore a process that unites the restoration of freedom with divine justice — not its elimination.

1.11.5 Theological and Ecclesial Consequences of the Unity of Both Responses

The complex unity of Irenaeus and Augustine brings with it several lasting consequences for Christian theology, which it is worth enumerating and briefly discussing:

1. Defense of the unity of Revelation and the value of creation. If the Word became flesh, every anti-corporeal dualism loses its legitimacy. This has liturgical, sacramental and eschatological consequences: Christian hope includes the resurrection of the body, not merely the liberation of the "spirit" from matter.
2. The reality of sin as a responsible act of the free will. Sin is not the effect of an alien substance nor a simple determinism of nature; it is a choice, hence its moral gravity and the possibility of judgment. At

[162] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, where the notion of recapitulation is one of the key terms of his soteriology.

[163] Augustine, *Confessiones* (Confessions) — the autobiographical testimony of the passage from Manichaeism to Christianity; and theological writings showing that grace heals the will without negating its responsibility.

[164] Irenaeus and Augustine in their writings also develop the doctrine of God's judgment; see the above references to *Adversus haereses* and *De civitate Dei*.

the same time there is a need for grace and for the healing of the will, which enriches the understanding of the sacraments and pastoral care.

3. The rejection of substantial dualism does not eliminate the problem of suffering. Suffering remains real and often undeserved; however theology has a foundation of hope: since evil is a lack, and not a being, Providence can limit and heal it without compromising divine justice.
4. The centrality of Christ as recapitulation and healing. In ecclesial practice this means that the interpretation of history and the experience of evil must be made in the perspective of the cross and resurrection — not through abstract speculation but through sacramental and communal experience of grace.
5. The theological imperative to critique ideologies that either "displace" evil from human responsibility or, conversely, blur divine justice — requires both philosophical reason (conceptual analysis) and pastoral sensitivity (accompanying the suffering). Irenaeus and Augustine together show that intellectual explanation and practical care must go in parallel.

From these consequences also follows an important warning against syncretism: identifying all forms of "dualistic" thought under a single label both historically and terminologically leads to simplifications and to injurious interpretations of actual adversaries. Irenaeus and Augustine show that the critique of dualism must be precise and targeted — against specific Gnostic and Manichaean theses — while at the same time theologically and pastorally coherent.

Conclusion

The unity of the two responses of Irenaeus and Augustine is therefore a concordant unity, not an identical one. Irenaeus contributes a historico-pedagogical narrative in which evil is a disturbance of the process of maturation of creation and the apostasy of free creatures; Augustine supplies metaphysical and anthropological tools to demonstrate that evil does not possess ontological autonomy but is a lack of good and a corruption of the order of love. The combined understanding safeguards the unity of God, the goodness of creation, and the justice and mercy of Providence. Importantly, this unity does not minimize the tragedy of sin nor relativize suffering; on the contrary, it shows that the real wounds of freedom and nature can be incorporated into God's plan of redemption, which is not a triumphalist "smiling" over evil but the suffering of salvation, whose center is the cross and the resurrection of Christ. In the face of Gnostic and Manichaean temptations to bifurcation, this coordinated response of the Fathers constitutes a lasting and just defense of the monotheistic vision of creation, responsibility and hope.

Notes

1.12 The theological significance of the victory over dualism

The victory of Christian theology over Gnostic and Manichaean dualism was not merely a triumph of doctrinal discourse; it constituted a profound transformation in the way the Church understood God, the world, and the human person. The restoration of the unity of the Divine monarchy, the rehabilitation of matter as a good of creation, the formulation of evil as privatio boni, and the defense of human moral responsibility in the face of free will — these elements together shaped the Christian paradigm of theodicy and anthropology. This chapter seeks to show that overcoming dualism not only defended the traditional monotheistic vision, but also enabled constructive engagement with the world: ethical, sacramental, and culture-forming. The argument moves from ontological foundations toward practical consequences,

maintaining the distinction between created nature and its corruption, between divine permission of evil and its moral causation, and between the reality of suffering and the rejection of substantial dualism.

1.12.1 The monarchy of God against the fragmentation of the deity

One of the fundamental disputes with Gnosticism was the question of the identity of the Creator. Gnostic systems, in various versions, employed a schema of multiple beginnings: above the world there existed an unknowable, supreme God, while the visible cosmos was attributed to a lower demiurge — often ignorant or even hostile. Such a division revised the relation between creation and Transcendence and led to a radical dichotomy: the higher spiritual sphere against the lower material sphere. The Fathers of the Church, and in particular Irenaeus of Lyons, opposed this with a consistent defense of the "monarchy" of God: the unity of the source of being and authority, which knows no co-beginnings nor external limitations[165].

Irenaeus argues that if the world were created by some lower, relatively independent power, then the highest God would not be either omniscient or omnipotent; and if the lower creator acted with His consent, one could not consistently maintain the distinction between Creator and creation[166]. From a theological standpoint this conclusion is crucial: the one God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ is the same who brought being into existence. The identity of Creator and Savior forms the axial point of the Christian reply to dualism — salvation cannot be a struggle against an "other" God, but must be the reconstruction of the world by the Son, who is the Logos and the agent of creation (cf. John 1,14; Gen 1)[167].

The monarchy of God has an ontological and a practical dimension. Ontologically it ends the possibility of co-beginning logics; practically it safeguards against theological isomorphism in which the faithful might ascribe to the Old Testament and the law a principal, severe demiurge, and to the Gospel only a partial liberation of spiritual sparks. Irenaeus emphasizes the coherence of both Testaments: the history of salvation is one, and Christ, by "recapitulating" the history of humanity, does not alienate it from the Creator, but repairs and leads it toward fullness[168]. This reading restores the integrity of Scripture and protects against a theology that would justify the rejection of the world as a domain alien to ultimate Good.

In the discussion with Manichaeism a similar thread takes the form of a denial of two eternal principles. Manichaean cosmology balanced the kingdom of Light and the kingdom of Darkness, which made the principle of evil a real and autonomous reality. The defense of the monarchy of God thus also meant undermining this symmetry: one cannot accept two co-eternal, independent beginnings of reality without renouncing classical theism, which recognizes God as the absolute source of being[169]. This move is the first step toward further determinations — about the goodness of creation and about the character of evil.

1.12.2 The ontological goodness of creation and the rehabilitation of matter

Gnostic views of matter as a prison for divine sparks or as the result of a cosmic mistake led to material nihilism: the body and the material world lost the status of good, becoming at best a necessary evil or an

[165]Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus haereses — a general critique of the multiplication of aeons and intermediaries and a defense of the unity of God the Creator; see especially the general argument and the exposition of the cosmological consequences of polytheism (English translation available online: Against Heresies, New Advent).

[166]Ibid.; Irenaeus emphasizes the internal inconsistency of systems that separate the highest Father from the God of the Old Testament (see Adversus haereses).

[167]Sacred Scripture: Gen 1:31; John 1:14. Biblical texts as the source of the fundamental argument about the goodness of creation and about the Incarnation of the Word (cf. the Bible, various translations).

[168]Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus haereses — the concept of recapitulatio and the unity of the history of salvation (translation and commentary available online; cf. Books II–IV).

[169]Outline of Manichaean cosmology and its implications for monotheism; cf. J. D. BeDuhn, "Not to depart from Christ": Augustine between "Manichaean" and "Catholic" Christianity, HTS Theological Studies 69(1), 2013 — biographical remarks on the Augustinian context and the force of Manichaeism's attractiveness in religious practice.

obstacle to spiritual development. The Christian alternative, however, rests on the biblical declaration that God saw the creation and deemed it "very good" (Gen 1,31). This simple yet fundamental thesis became the starting point for the defense of the sacramental and eschatological meaning of matter.

Irenaeus defends the visible world by appeal to the logic of the Incarnation: the Word not only communicates knowledge, but enters the history of creation as a body. In this way the body is not so much "imprisoned" as called to healing and transformation. The rehabilitation of matter thus has a christological dimension: if the Logos takes on a body, then materiality as such cannot be ontologically evil[170]. This reverses the Gnostic scenario, in which salvation is the escape of the spirit from matter; Christianity proclaims the salvation of the whole human person and of the whole creation.

Augustine develops this insight in philosophical language: if a given thing exists, has an essence and an order, then it also partakes in goodness — existence itself is a certain form of good. Therefore matter cannot be ontologically evil by definition, since in that case it would be deprived of existence[171]. This reasoning not only rejects Manichaean dualism, but also shields against a pessimism that would render human activity toward the world morally pointless. The rehabilitation of matter opens a space for ethical responsibility: since the world is good, care for its order and beauty becomes an expression of participation in God's plan.

In practical terms this theology leads to several consequences: the sacramental practice of the Church (participation in the Eucharist, the blessing of material things), an ethic of culture (sacred art, building), and the understanding of the body as an object worthy of love and care. Rejection of the world is not the Christian dominant; on the contrary, Christianity calls for the transformation of matter and its orientation toward fullness, not for its rejection.

1.12.3 The nature of evil as privatio boni and free will as the source of moral evil

A key intellectual breakthrough, which constituted one of the decisive instruments in the critique of Manichaeism, was formulated by Augustine: evil is not a separate, substantial thing but a lack of good — privatio boni. From this definition follow three important implications: first, evil does not have ontological parity with good; second, the existence of evil presupposes the existence of good which can be lost or deformed; third, moral responsibility cannot be transferred to a "substance of evil," but rests upon the free will of the agent of the deed[172].

Augustine arrives at this conception by philosophical-theological reasoning: everything that has nature has some order, form, and end — and these are goods. If some property is "corrupted," it means it has lost its due order. Disease of the eye, falsehood of speech, injustice of will — all these phenomena must occur "in" some being that retains its status of being despite the defect. In this way one eliminates the need to appeal to an independent substance of evil, whose existence would undermine the uniqueness of God as the absolute source of being[173].

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[170] Irenaeus understands the Incarnation as the real assumption of a body by the Logos and therefore opposes docetism by affirming the full incarnation of the Son — cf. Adversus haereses; see also references to the Prologue of John (John 1:14).

[171] Augustine of Hippo, De natura boni (On the Nature of Good) and Enchiridion; the argument that existence is participation in good is developed in Augustinian works (English translations available online, New Advent).

[172] Augustine, De natura boni; Enchiridion — the formulation privatio boni and its metaphysical implications; see also Confessiones (*Confessiones* as testimony of Augustine's personal intellectual process).

[173] Augustine analyzes examples of various forms of evil as damages to the goods of creation (e.g., disease, blindness, lying) — cf. Enchiridion, De natura boni; translations available online (e.g., New Advent).

This metaphysics of evil harmonizes with another fundamental distinction: between God's permission of evil and the moral causation of evil by creatures. The Fathers maintained that God, as sovereign Creator, permits the existence of freedom and the complexity of creatures, which entails the risk of abuses. This permission consists in sustaining creatures as true agents in the causal and moral order; it is not, however, the cause of the moral act of apostasy. In other words, God does not do evil in a moral sense; he permits freedom, which makes possible the arising of evil as a lack of good[174].

The defense of free will against Manichaean determinism therefore has a twofold meaning. First, it enables the ascription of responsibility — without freedom there would be no just praise or punishment. Second, it preserves the meaning of grace: if man can genuinely turn away from God, then grace, which heals and directs toward God, is needed and significant. Augustine does not deny the importance of grace; on the contrary — he shows that without it natural human freedom remains vulnerable to lasting wounding. Yet the fact that free will can become a source of evil does not mean that God is its author — rather, it is the condition of responsibility and the moral sense of the history of salvation[175].

To order the argumentation, one can distinguish the following stages of Augustinian reasoning against Manichaeism:

1. Every existing nature participates in good (existence = a certain form of good).
2. Evil is not a separate nature; it constitutes a damage, lack or disorder in a nature (privatio).
3. Free will is a created nature and can become corrupted by the inversion of the hierarchy of loves.
4. God creates freedom, not evil; permission is not moral causation.
5. God's grace is necessary to heal the will, yet does not remove its responsibility.

This sequence strengthens the theological foundations of the monotheistic answer: since evil is a lack and not a coequal substance, God does not compete with any "other God," and the events of salvation lead to the recovery of goods lost through sin.

1.12.4 The Incarnation and soteriology: the rejection of docetism and the rescue of matter

Christology became the surest proof and practical test of antidualism. If matter were by nature evil, then the Incarnation of the Word in a human body would be either impossible or apparent (docetism). The real taking on of a body by the Son is, however, a radical sign that God not only acknowledges the world as permissible but wills to renew it from within[176].

Irenaeus highlights this logical consequence in his doctrine of recapitulatio: Christ assumed all stages of human life — birth, growth, suffering, death — in order to "sum them up" and renew them. This is not merely a symbolic act; it is an ontological fact: through the Incarnation God really enters into matter to transform it. Hence the Gnostic idea of salvation as the "liberation of the spark from the prison of the body" appears as heresy, which diminishes the significance of the body and makes true economy of redemption impossible[177].

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[174] The distinction between God's permission of evil and the moral causation by creatures: an issue present in patristic writings and in Augustine — cf. De libero arbitrio; this is also discussed in De civitate Dei in the context of Providence.

[175] Augustine, De libero arbitrio; Confessiones — self-reflection on his own connection with Manichaeism and the path to understanding free will and the role of grace. Note the autobiographical and dialectical context in his polemic with the Manichaeans (biographical remarks: BeDuhn, 2013).

[176] The Christological conclusion against docetism: John 1:14; Irenaeus and later Fathers interpret the Incarnation as a criterion for evaluating the theology of matter (cf. Adversus haereses).

[177] Irenaeus, Adversus haereses — the doctrine of recapitulatio: Christ as the one who "sums up" human history in order to renew it.

Christian soteriology, formed by the victory over dualism, therefore signifies the salvation of the whole person — body and soul — and, in a broader perspective, the renewal of creation. The resurrection of the body here is a consequence: since matter has ontological value and was assumed by God, its final transformation is part of God's plan. The Gnostic desire to "lift the spirit" to a pure sphere without the body would be contrary to this theological logic.

Practical consequences are manifold: liturgy, sacraments, care for bodily life, and an eschatology that presupposes renewal rather than annihilation of the world. Christian hope thus becomes hope for the cosmos, not for escape from it.

1.12.5 Personal evil, suffering and the limits of dualist demonology

Antidualism does not deny the reality of suffering, the experience of personal evil, or the activity of evil spirits. On the contrary: it highlights their seriousness, because here evil is the internal risk of real freedom of creatures. Satan and the demons are creatures — fallen angels — whose freedom turned against the Creator. Their action is real and cannot be trivialized, but it does not possess an independent ontology competing with God[178].

This distinction has important practical pastoral effects. Experienced evil is not automatically explained by an "alien substance" nor is it a reason for moral abrogation of guilt. Where personal evil appears in the life of a person (e.g., in moral enslavement), the Church does not reduce responsibility to a "reigning nature of darkness." At the same time it recognizes the reality of demonic influence and the need for spiritual and communal intervention, without a simplistic demonization of the suffering person[179].

Augustine also points out that many forms of natural suffering are not the direct result of the personal sin of particular individuals; they rather constitute the consequence of the finitude of creation and of the inclusion of the world in the history of the Fall. Because moral evil intensifies chaos and degrades relational order, natural suffering in a fallen world acquires a new, often moral dimension. God may permit suffering without being its author, and at the same time act within it: limit evil, support the suffering, and through trial shape souls toward fuller trust and engagement with Him[180].

1.12.6 Cultural, ethical and eschatological consequences of the victory of antidualism

The victory of antidualism was not merely an abstract adjudication. It enabled the development of sacramental theology, the constitution of Christian morality, expressed not in rejection of the world but in its transformation, and the building of a culture that treats matter as a bearer of religious meaning. The conviction of the dignity of the body and of creation influenced sacred art, the theology of work, moral medicine and institutions of care. In an eschatological perspective the certainty that evil is not a coequal principle gives hope for God's final victory and the renewal of all that was created.

Theologically, antidualism preserves the fullness of monotheism: God remains the sole foundation of being, his omnipotence and goodness are not weakened by the presence of evil, because evil has no being of its own. At the same time this apologetic is not an excuse from moral accounting: man is answerable

[178] Christian demonology as monotheistic: Satan and the demons are creatures and do not possess an independent ontological being; cf. Irenaeus, Augustine (De civitate Dei) and patristic discussions on the fall of the angels.

[179] A guideline regarding pastoral practice: the distinction between personal evil and medical/psychological conditions; a reminder that one should not automatically attribute responsibility to the suffering person for demonic action (editorial principles of the study).

[180] Augustine, De civitate Dei (book XXII and other passages) — reflections on the permission of evil in the economy of Providence and on the possibility of drawing good out of evil through God's action (translations online, New Advent).

for choices of the will; history is the scene of a dramatic test of freedom; salvation is an act of God who enters the world and transforms it, not flees from it.

Finally, the victory over dualism also reveals a deep practical rigor of mercy: since guilt and suffering are not justified by a simple etiology of an "alien substance," the Church must undertake the complicated work of discernment, judgment and assistance. Therefore its activity must combine the truth about freedom and responsibility with real compassion and practical care for the wounded.

The victory over dualism was thus a fundamental step: it restored the integrity of creation and redemption, gave meaning to human morality and suffering, and at the same time strengthened eschatological hope. Christ, who was sent by one Father, assumed human nature to heal and exalt it — and this is after all the fullest theological refutation of every temptation to split reality into two irreconcilable beginnings.

Notes

1.13 Selected bibliography

- Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones*; *De libero arbitrio*; *De natura boni*; *Enchiridion*; *De civitate Dei*.
- Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses*, especially Books II and IV.
- Jason D. BeDuhn, "Not to depart from Christ": Augustine between "Manichaean" and "Catholic" Christianity, *HTS Theological Studies* 69(1), 2013.
- Sacred Scripture: Gen 1–3; Job 1–2; Isa 45:7; John 1:1–18; Rom 5–8; 1 John 1:5–2:2; Rev 12; 20–22.