

“To See Darkness, To Hear Silence”: St. Augustine, Herman Bavinck, and the Incomprehensibility of Evil

Travis Ryan Pickell

MDiv student, Princeton Theological Seminary

With trademark candor the Dutch Reformed theologian, Herman Bavinck, begins his account of the origin and nature of evil as follows: “The question of the origin of evil, second to that of existence itself, is the greatest enigma of life and the heaviest cross for the intellect to bear.”¹ In his treatment of this topic, Bavinck exhibits clarity of thought, biblical acumen, a broad and deep understanding of the history of the doctrine, and a mastery of the conceptual issues involved. Still, with regard to the nature and origin of sin and evil, he must humbly accept and acknowledge the limits of his understanding. “When all is said and done, sin proves to be an incomprehensible mystery.”² Bavinck, however, was not the first to declare the utter incomprehensibility of sin and evil; he stands squarely on the shoulders of St. Augustine. This essay will explicate Bavinck’s doctrine of the incomprehensibility of sin and evil in light of its Augustinian roots.³ First, it will show how

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 53.

2. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:145.

3. Bavinck uses “sin” and “evil” as seemingly interchangeable terms. While nowhere making a clear distinction between the terms, Bavinck tends to use “sin” for highlighting the centrality of “agency” in the intrusion of evil into the good creation. This is perhaps because, for Bavinck, sin is primarily an “ethical phenomenon,” the origin of which lies in trespass of God’s law. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:138. “Evil,” then, refers to the *effects* of sin on the good

Augustine’s account of evil as privation arose over the course of his polemic with the sect of the Manicheans. Next, it will show how Bavinck, attempting to be more faithful to the witness of Scripture, tried to emphasize the positive quality of evil while still affirming its privative character. Finally, it will show why Bavinck’s conclusion—that evil is incomprehensible—is especially apt given his trinitarian realist epistemology.

AUGUSTINE ON THE NATURE OF EVIL

Early in life around the age of nineteen, Augustine encountered a book written by Cicero, entitled, *Hortensius*, which caused him to convert to a life of philosophy—the pursuit of wisdom.⁴ From that point on, a single question tormented him: *what is the cause of evil?* He wrote later, “That is a question that gave me great trouble when I was a young man. It wearied me and drove me into the arms of heretics.”⁵ These “heretics” were, of course, the Manichees.

The Manichaeic answer to the problem of evil . . . was simple and drastic. . . . They were dualists: so convinced were they that evil could not come from a good God, that they believed that it came from an invasion of the good . . . by a hostile force of evil, equal in power, eternal, totally separate.⁶

For the Manichees, both good (i.e., God) and evil are *substantial*, “two masses, one opposed to the other, both infinite but with the

creation, whereas for those outside of Christianity (e.g., the Manicheans) evil is a positive force opposed to God. Throughout this essay, I will also use “sin” to highlight fallen agency and “evil” to communicate a more general opposition to “good.”

4. Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. & trans., Albert Cook Outler (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002), 3.4.7.

5. Augustine, “On Free Will,” in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. J.H.S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), 1.2.4.

6. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 35–6.

evil more contracted and the good more expansive.”⁷ As in Pagan and Greek religions before, materiality was seen as a great evil, and the Creator God of the Old Testament “was rejected as a malevolent demon.”⁸ Through asceticism and ritualistic eating, the Manichaean follower sought to release his “good soul” from its bondage to the “corrupt body.”⁹

Augustine, of course, was not long satisfied with this dualistic answer, but he continued to wrestle with the question: whence is evil? It became the chief stumbling block to his acceptance of the Christian faith. In his *Confessions* (Book VII), Augustine recounts the major development in his understanding of the origin of evil, which ultimately cleared that path for his conversion to Catholic Christianity (in Book VIII). Through the teachings of Ambrose of Milan, Augustine had come to hear of allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures that indicated that the free will was the cause of human evil, but he could not understand where the evil inclination could come from.

If the devil is to blame, who made the devil himself? And if he was a good angel who by his own wicked will became the devil, how did there happen to be in him that wicked will by which he became a devil, since a good Creator made him wholly a good angel? By these reflections was I again cast down and stultified.¹⁰

It was in this state that Augustine came across “certain books of the Platonists,” most likely the neo-Platonic literature of Plotinus (7.9.13). These books gave Augustine insight into the metaphysical nature of “Being.” “And,” he writes, “I viewed all the other things that are beneath thee, and I realized that they are neither wholly real nor wholly unreal. They are real in so far as they come from thee; but they are unreal in so far as they are not what thou art”

7. Augustine, *Confessions*, 5.10.19.

8. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 39.

9. *Ibid.*, 36.

10. Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.3.5; hereafter cited in text.

(7.11.17). God is the One Who Is—“Being” itself. Everything that exists derives its existence from God, and yet only God can exist immutably, for if anything else were immutable, it would be divine.

And it was made clear to me that all things are good even if they are corrupted. They could not be corrupted if they were supremely good; but unless they were good they could not be corrupted. If they were not good at all, there would be nothing in them to be corrupted. (7.12.18)

Armed with this Neo-Platonic understanding of divine “Being,” Augustine returned to the problem of evil.

If, then, they [i.e., created things] are deprived of all good, they will cease to exist. So long as they are, therefore, they are good. Therefore, whatsoever is, is good. Evil, then, the origin of which I had been seeking, *has no substance at all*; for if it were a substance, it would be good. (7.12.18; emphasis added)

For the first time Augustine was able to recognize that evil is not substantial. Only that which is created by God has substance, and evil cannot be created by a good God. What is evil then? It is the privation (*privatio*) of good (being). It does not even *exist* in the strict sense of the word.

Augustine then inquires whether there is such thing as a created evil in the natural world. “To thee,” he writes, “there is no such thing as evil, and even in thy whole creation taken as a whole, there is not; because there is nothing from beyond it that can burst in and destroy the order which thou hast appointed for it” (7.13.19). And later he remarks that “there is no health in those who find fault with any part of thy creation” (7.14.20).

And what of sin, the personal aspect of evil? “I found,” answers Augustine, “that it was no substance, but a perversion of the will bent aside from thee, O God, the supreme substance, toward these lower things, casting away its inmost treasure and becoming bloated with external good” (7.16.22). Notice that, in sinning, the will does not turn toward something evil but only toward a lesser

good. “So the deed is the evil thing,” reasons Augustine, “not the thing of which the sinner makes an evil use. Evil is making a bad use of a good thing.”¹¹ This is so because there are no evil “things” in a world created by a good God—“no nature is evil so far as it is naturally existent. Nothing is evil in anything save a diminishing of good.”¹² “If sin be natural, it is not sin at all.”¹³

AUGUSTINE AND THE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF EVIL

While Augustine’s understanding of the nature and origin of evil had developed well beyond his Manichaeian days, he was still left with major conceptual difficulties. “Augustine located the source of evil in the wrong use of the will, but he had great difficulty in explaining why the will of man was perverted so as to allow evil to arise in him.”¹⁴ “He struggled to understand how evil might have arisen in rational natures which had been created good by God.”¹⁵ In other words, Augustine could not logically get Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Paradise. In an early polemical work against the Manichees, *De libero arbitrio*, Augustine developed at length the idea that the free will of the human being is the only cause of evil. And yet, after pages and pages of laborious dialogue, he is left at a stalemate:

But perhaps you are going to ask what is the cause of the movement of the will when it turns from the immutable to the mutable good. That movement is certainly evil, although free will must be numbered among good things

11. Augustine, “On the Nature of the Good,” in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. J.H.S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), 338.

12. *Ibid.*, 330.

13. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, Inc., 2000), 11.15.1.

14. Guy H. Ranson, “Augustine’s account of the nature and origin of moral evil,” *Review & Expositor* 50, no. 3 (July 1, 1953): 317.

15. J. Patout Burns, “Augustine on the origin and progress of evil,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 1 (March 1, 1988): 17.

since without it no one can live aright. We cannot doubt that the movement of the will, that turning away from the Lord God, is sin; but surely we cannot say that God is the author of sin? God, then, will not be the cause of that movement; but what will be its cause? If you ask this, and I answer that I do not know, probably you will be saddened. And yet that would be a true answer. *That which is nothing cannot be known.*¹⁶

Later, in an attempt to make Adam and Eve’s sin more intelligible, Augustine would relocate the primal sin to that of the angels—in particular, to Satan. And yet, the difficulty remains as to how a heavenly being could knowingly turn away from God, the supreme Good. Augustine attempts to speak of a “deficient cause” rather than an “efficient cause,” but to have knowledge of such a cause would be “as if someone sought to see darkness, to hear silence.”¹⁷ One is left wondering whether Augustine has embarked on “the philosophically misguided quest for a causal explanation of the first instance of willing evil;”¹⁸ whether “he should instead have left it as a ‘brute fact’ which the theologian can only point to but in no way comprehend.”¹⁹

HERMAN BAVINCK’S REVISED AUGUSTINIAN ACCOUNT OF THE NATURE OF SIN

Bavinck follows Augustine’s interpretation of the nature and origin of sin, yet he critiques it and revises it along the way. Bavinck first treats the origin of sin and then the nature of sin. For the sake of clarity, I will proceed in the opposite direction.

16. Augustine, “On Free Will,” 2.20.54.

17. Augustine, *City of God*, 12.7.1.

18. Robert F. Brown, “The first evil will must be incomprehensible: a critique of Augustine,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46, no. 3 (September 1, 1978): 316.

19. *Ibid.*, 317.

The main feature of Bavinck’s account of the nature of sin that is pertinent to the current discussion is the dialectic tension he holds between sin’s *privative* character and its *positive* character. Bavinck recounts and upholds the ancient Christian tradition of viewing sin as privation. He recognizes how Augustine’s polemic against the Manichees reinforced his denial of the substantial nature of sin. “To that extent,” he remarks, “[it is] completely correct and to be accepted without reservation. Sin is not a substance, neither spiritual nor material, for then it would either have God as its cause or else God would not be the creator of all things.”²⁰

Note that, while Bavinck does not deny the system of “Being” that undergirded Augustine’s account of evil as privation, he places its center of gravity more in the biblical account of creation than in a Greek metaphysic. Bavinck, therefore, tends to draw the antithesis between what is “natural” and what is “defective of nature” rather than between “being” and “privation” of being (3:136).

All that is natural, to the degree that it is natural, is good. Evil can therefore only be something *about* the good. There cannot be any evil at all except in something good, because it cannot be except in something natural. (3:136; italics added)

Evil always has this subordinate relation to nature—it cannot create or destroy nature, nor can it affect the essence of natural things (3:139). “In its operation and appearance, sin is always doomed to borrow, despite itself, from the treasury of virtue. . . . It is a parasite of the good” (3:139).

Bavinck, however, does not simply stop at affirming the privative character of sin. For him, “it is also clear that sin cannot be adequately described with the concept of privation. Certainly it is not a mere lack, pure nonbeing, but also an active and corrupting principle, a dissolving, destructive power” (3:137). Simply as privation of good, sin loses much of the potency with which the

20. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:137; hereafter cited in text.

Scriptural witness describes it. What matters in the description of sin is not simply that it has a negative quality, but that it is a desecration of a nature that was created to be good—what matters is the violation of the *oughtness* of creation. Therefore, Bavinck stresses the ethical character of sin (3:138–39). With regard to the metaphysical realm, sin is privation; with regard to the ethical realm, it is the active transgression of a law. Holding these two aspects of sin in tension, Bavinck speaks of sin as an “*active privation*” (3:138). And yet, the question arises, from whence does a “privation” get power to become “active”?

HERMAN BAVINCK ON THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE ORIGIN OF SIN

As a Reformed theologian Bavinck has as his starting point a high view of the sovereignty of God. God is the creator of all that is. Related to his creative power is his continued providential rule over all of creation and history. Given this idea of an omnipotent God, and given the existence of sin, one may be tempted to include sin in God’s purpose for creation. But Bavinck categorically rejects this as a confusion of the doctrine of creation with that of the fall.

What is important is that, according to Scripture, the fall is essentially distinct from the creation itself . . . it is a power that does not belong to the essential being of the creation, a power that originally did not exist, but that came by way of disobedience and transgression, that has entered creation unlawfully, and did not belong there. (3:74)

In saying this, one need not deny that God is still completely sovereign nor that God bends sin and evil toward good ends; for Bavinck argues that “all this is attributable, not to sin, but to the almighty power of God, who is able to bring good out of evil, light out of darkness, and life out of death” (3:78).

Bavinck honestly recognizes that God’s sovereignty must be viewed in relation to the question of sin. For even though “Scripture strongly distances God from all wickedness,” he writes, “[it also] firmly announces . . . that his counsel and government also extend

to sin. God is not the author of sin, yet it does not lie outside his knowledge, his will and his power” (3:59).

It will not do simply to draw a distinction between God’s *permissive* will and his *active* will, for this distinction does not make sense when one speaks about a truly omnipotent God. “After all, one who can prevent an evil, but, while quietly looking on, lets it happen is as guilty as one who commits that evil” (3:62). No, “permission” does not “get God off the hook,” so to speak. For Bavinck, God cannot be the cause of sin, but nothing can exist that is outside of his will. Therefore, “God most certainly [must have] willed the *possibility* of sin. The possibility of sinning is from God. The idea of sin was first conceived in his mind” (3:66). Like Augustine before him, the only way for Bavinck to understand this is to designate to God *deficient* causality: “Light cannot of itself produce darkness; the darkness only arises when the light is withdrawn. God, therefore, is at most the negative or incidental cause of sin; its real and positive cause is located in human beings” (3:63).

As to the human, ethical origins of sin (i.e., how to get Adam and Eve out of the Garden), Bavinck is perplexed.

With all this we have established nothing other and nothing more than the possibility of sin. How that possibility became a reality is and will presumably remain a mystery . . . the explanation eludes us, not only in connection with the origin of the first sin but over and over with respect to all sorts of human deeds and actions. . . . Every human being is a mystery, and every action is grounded in something other and deeper than the environment. To a much greater degree, the same applies to sin. Here we enter the mysterious area of moral freedom and face a phenomenon that in the nature of the case, as it concerns its origin, escapes explanation . . . it is “like trying to see the darkness or hear the silence.” (3:69; cf. Augustine, *City of God*, 12.7.1)

For Bavinck, what is important is not discovering a reason for sin’s existence that would make it comprehensible. In a good world created by a good God, sin is an utterly foreign intrusion. “Sin exists, but it will never be able to justify its existence. It is unlawful and irrational” (3:70). Sin is, at base, a paradox: “it always *had to be* there [i.e., within God’s providential purposes and rule] as something that *ought not to be* and has no right to exist” (3:74).

BAVINCK’S TRINITARIAN REALIST EPISTEMOLOGY
AND THE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF EVIL

Not only does the incomprehensible nature of sin follow from the scriptural witness, but also it fits within Bavinck’s overall account of human knowing. The final section of this essay will provide a brief sketch of Bavinck’s epistemology, explaining why it leaves no possibility for human understanding of the origin and nature of sin and evil.

In the first volume of *Reformed Dogmatics* Bavinck explores the foundations of human thought. He takes issue with the two major epistemological movements of his day: rationalism and empiricism. Rationalists, taking their cue from ancient neo-Platonists, believe “that sense perception yields no knowledge because it is focused on changing phenomena.”²¹ Perceptions can be, and often are, flawed and unreliable. True knowledge can only be found through the process of rational thought. Therefore, when the rationalist seeks knowledge, he turns inwards. This is exemplified in the philosophy of Descartes, who “found his fixed starting point in thought and from it inferred being: *cogito ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am) (1:215). For rationalists, such as Fichte, Schelling, Hegel and Kant, “the origin of knowledge is to be found in the subject” (1:215). It is not difficult to see how this philosophical stance on knowledge could devalue the importance of

21. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 215; hereafter cited in text.

sense perception, and, as with Kant, lead to an epistemological cynicism. If the true source of knowledge lies within the subject, how can one possibly trust that the world they experience corresponds to reality?

Bavinck continues: “Diametrically opposed to rationalism is empiricism . . . its starting point is always the principle that sense perception alone is the source of our knowledge” (1:219). Empiricists, such as Bacon, Lock, Hume, and Mill, deny the ability for humans to know anything that is not first perceived through the senses. Knowledge, for them, is science narrowly conceived. Only the exact sciences, such as logic, mathematics, chemistry, and astronomy can truly constitute knowledge, for only they can be observed. History, philosophy, and theology can only consist of guesses and abstractions.

While Bavinck sees truth in both positions, he ultimately finds neither tenable. Rationalism is “directly contrary to life and experience” (1:217), and empiricism categorically excludes “precisely the knowledge that is most important to human beings” (1:221). Bavinck agrees with the empiricists in that “the starting point of all human knowledge is sense perception” (1:226). “One must first live, then philosophize” (1:223). But, according to Bavinck, one must *also* philosophize; knowledge does not end in passive experience:

The primary impetus [for knowledge] therefore comes from the sensible world; it impinges upon the human mind, arouses it, urges it to action. But the moment the intellect is activated, it immediately and spontaneously works in its own way and according to its own nature. (1:226)

The problem, however, still remains: how can we be sure that the content of our intellect corresponds to a reality outside of us?

For Bavinck, the only way one can hold to such a realist epistemology is by acknowledging God as the source of all knowledge. Augustine, too, had made a similar move, but he had done so within a neo-Platonic and therefore highly rationalistic framework. He writes:

We listen to Truth which presides over our minds within us, though of course we may be bidden to listen by someone using words. Our real Teacher is he who is so listened to, *who is said to dwell in the inner man, namely Christ*, that is, the unchangeable power and eternal wisdom of God.²²

Whereas, for Augustine, all true knowledge comes from God through internal contemplation, for Bavinck, true knowledge comes from God mediated through God’s creation. “It is the same Logos,” asserts Bavinck, “who created both the reality outside of us and the laws of thought within us and who produced an organic connection and correspondence between the two.”²³ He insists, furthermore, that this is the case not only in theology but also in all of science and life:

. . . God is the first principle of being . . . all things are based on [his] thoughts and are created by the word. It is his good pleasure, however, to reproduce in human beings made in his image an ectypal knowledge that reflects his archetypal knowledge . . . in his own divine mind. He does this . . . by displaying them to the human mind in the works of his hands. . . . But that is not enough. We need eyes in order to see. . . . There just has to be correspondence or kinship between object and subject. The Logos who shines in the world must also let his light shine in our consciousness. That is the light of reason, the intellect, which, itself originating in the Logos, discovers and recognized the Logos in things. It is the internal foundation of knowledge. (1:233)

For Bavinck, all human knowledge has a trinitarian basis. God is the source of all being. It is created through his Word, the Logos. Through God’s Holy Spirit, our faculty of reason (logos) corresponds to created reality (created through the Logos). This is part of human nature, given at creation, and upheld in God’s

22. Augustine, “The Teacher,” in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. J.H.S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), 100; italics added.

23. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:231; hereafter cited in text.

providence by his common grace. “It is God alone who from his divine consciousness and by way of his creatures conveys the knowledge of truth to our mind—the Father who by the Son and in the Spirit reveals himself to us” (1:233).

Notice what happens if one tries to fit evil into this equation. If “it is the same Logos who created both the reality outside of us and the laws of thought within us and who produced an organic connection and correspondence between the two” (1:231), then evil can have no place in human comprehension. God did not create it. This is slightly different from Augustine’s “that which is nothing cannot be known,”²⁴ because Bavinck wants to hold to a more positive conception of evil—it is an *active privation*, not simply nothing. We can speak of evil’s existence; we just cannot comprehend what we are saying when we do so. We can experience evil and sin, and we can come to feel some of its power, but our rational faculty cannot truly form a concept of evil that corresponds to its reality; for, all knowledge is mediated through God’s creation. Evil, then, is incomprehensible and can never be made comprehensible within Bavinck’s epistemological framework. Therefore, he is absolutely consistent when he claims that “the impossibility of explaining [sin and evil] should be said openly and clearly: we are here at the boundaries of our knowledge.”²⁵

This essay has presented Bavinck’s account of the incomprehensibility of sin and evil. First, it explained the Augustinian roots of the doctrine of the privative character of evil and showed that Augustine, although attempting to do so, could not make original sin comprehensible. Next, it showed how Bavinck built upon these Augustinian roots, while critiquing and revising them. In an attempt to be more faithful to the Scriptures, Bavinck stressed both the positive character of sin and evil and its privative character: sin is an *active privation*. Bavinck, aware of the tension between God’s omnipotence and the existence of evil, declared sin to be incomprehensible, an utter paradox. “It is the greatest

24. Augustine, “On Free Will,” 2.20.54.

25. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:70.

contradiction tolerated by God in his creation, yet used by him in the way of justice and righteousness as an instrument for his glory.”²⁶ Finally, this essay argued that Bavinck’s conclusion, far from being simply a frustrated admission of defeat, was ultimately consistent with his epistemological framework. All knowledge, not just religious knowledge, is mediated to us through God’s creation—he created the external reality that we seek to know as well as our internal faculty of knowing. It is God who ensures a correspondence between our mental concepts and external reality. God, however, did not create evil, and therefore we cannot form a mental construct that could accurately correspond to its nature and origin. It is incomprehensible, *tout court*. Trying to understand it is like trying “to see darkness, to hear silence.”²⁷

26. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:145.

27. Augustine, *City of God*, 12.7.1.