



JUSTYNA KROCZAK  
UNIVERSITY OF ZIELONA GÓRA  
J.KROCZAK@IFIL.UZ.ZGORA.PL  
ORCID: 0000-0002-7332-989X

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/TiCz.2025.012>

AT THE SOURCE OF THE CHRISTIAN CONCEPT OF EVIL —  
ST. AUGUSTINE AND ST. GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS. SIDE NOTES  
ON MARIAN ZDZIECHOWSKI'S WORK *PESSIMISM, ROMANTICISM  
AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY*

**Abstract.** The article attempts to review Marian Zdziechowski's interpretation of evil in the philosophy of St. Augustine and to assess its validity by re-establishing the historical intellectual context of Augustine's postulates. The latter are contrasted and compared with the statements of his patristic peers from the Greek-speaking world (the Cappadocian Fathers) and with the concept of evil in Plotinus, the preeminent philosopher of the Late Antiquity. A survey of the statements of the Cappadocians helps establish the scope of homogeneity of the Christian approach to the problem of evil, while Plotinian metaphysics of evil is retraced to recreate the necessary background for St. Augustine views that Zdziechowski omits. The concept of evil as a phenomenon that lacks substance, the role of free will in combating evil and the role of suffering in spiritual life are reviewed and discussed. Within this context the author concludes that Zdziechowski's interpretation of St. Augustine's doctrine as pessimistic is not sufficiently founded.

**Keywords:** Plotinus, St. Augustine, evil, St. Gregory of Nazianzus.

**Streszczenie.** U źródeł chrześcijańskiej koncepcji zła – św. Augustyn i św. Grzegorz z Nazjanzu. Uwagi poboczne na temat pracy Mariana Zdziechowskiego *Pesymizm, romantyzm a podstawy chrześcijaństwa*. W artykule podjęto próbę rewizji interpretacji zła w filozofii św. Augustyna dokonanej przez Mariana Zdziechowskiego oraz oceny jej

zasadności poprzez odtworzenie historycznego kontekstu intelektualnego postulatów Augustyna. Te ostatnie są zestawione i porównane z wypowiedziami jego patrystycznych rówieśników ze świata greckojęzycznego (ojców Kapadockich) oraz z koncepcją zła u Plotyna, wybitnego filozofa późnego antyku. Przegląd wypowiedzi Kapadoczczyków pomaga ustalić zakres homogeniczności chrześcijańskiego podejścia do problemu zła, natomiast plotyńska metafizyka zła zostaje prześledzona w celu odtworzenia niezbędnego tła dla poglądów św. Augustyna, które Zdziechowski pomija. Koncepcja zła jako zjawiska pozabawionego treści, rola wolnej woli w zwalczaniu zła oraz rola cierpienia w życiu duchowym są poddane przeglądowi i dyskusji. W tym kontekście autor dochodzi do wniosku, że interpretacja doktryny św. Augustyna przez Zdziechowskiego jako pesymistycznej nie jest wystarczająco uzasadniona.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Plotyn, św. Augustyn, zło, św. Grzegorz z Nazjanzu.

## INTRODUCTION

Marian Zdziechowski saw pessimism as a culture shaping factor, one of the sources of which was to be found in the tenets of the Christian doctrine of original sin and the permeation of the world with evil, as exemplified in the words of John the Evangelist: "[...] and the whole world lies in the power of evil" (1 J 5,19). The only development of this thesis can be observed in Zdziechowski's brief analysis of the problem of evil in the philosophy of St. Augustine. In his work *Pessimism, Romanticism and the Foundations of Christianity*, a record of the author's lectures to students of literary criticism, he wrote on the Doctor of the Church: "[u]nder the knowledge that everything that is, is a perfect manifestation of God, he took the eternal indifference of nature to the joys and sufferings of individuals as an image of God's relation to the world. And it was in this that the coldness of the ascetic, who detached himself from the world and people and forgot them, plunged into the contemplation of God, manifested itself in its most glaring and unpleasant form."<sup>1</sup> Apart from this, Zdziechowski rarely analyzed the phenomena or the authors that had shaped the history of Christianity and its teachings, tending to comment rather on the modern history of ideas and his contemporaries' manifestations of pessimism in Christian-

---

<sup>1</sup> Marian Zdziechowski, *Pesymizm, romantyzm a podstawy chrześcijaństwa*, vol. 1 (Kraków: Drukarnia Czas, 1915), 221.

ity, such as in Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy, as well as the social, cultural and political situation of his times, and since that situation was both oppressive and terrifying, especially after the Russian October revolution, it is little wonder that this is reflected in the mood of his work. Czesław Miłosz therefore called Zdziechowski a "historiosophical catastrophist."<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting, however, that perhaps pessimism is for Zdziechowski not a permanent state of mind but a "dark night of the soul", or as one of his monographers wrote: "pessimism is [...] a stage in the development of consciousness from negation to affirmation of being."<sup>3</sup>

Zdziechowski's analysis reveals the author's thoroughness and his careful reading of fragments of St. Augustine's works. In terms of content, his questions are full of criticism, objections and disagreement with the Augustinian theory concerning the human condition, namely that human nature is tainted. Zdziechowski questions the sense of this conception: "where is human free will if everything, even the fact that a person is good, is dependent on God's grace, and where are we to find this Divine Providence full of love if not everyone is given grace, and without it one must suffer eternal damnation?"<sup>4</sup> For the first Christian thinkers, matters connected with the issue of evil, to which Zdziechowski expressed his objections, represented fundamental questions which they resolved in a sophisticated theological and philosophical manner. I would like to use Zdziechowski's objections as a pretext for analyzing early Christian patristic solutions to the question of evil and the ideological background of this process. In order to gain a fuller picture I will also compare the vision of evil in St. Augustine's philosophy with that of St. Gregory of Nazianzus and St. Gregory of Nyssa, fathers of the Eastern Church, who wrote in Greek. This comparison is intended to demonstrate the homogeneity of the Christian (Eastern and Western) approach to the question of evil. It is therefore in the words of the Church fathers that I would like to respond to the doubts expressed by the author of *Pessimism, Romanticism and the Foundations of Christi-*

---

<sup>2</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *Prywatne obowiązki* (Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Pojezierze, 1990), 200.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Skoczylski, *Pesymizm filozoficzny Mariana Zdziechowskiego* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich 1983), 58.

<sup>4</sup> Zdziechowski, *Pesymizm, romantyzm a podstawy chrześcijaństwa*, 230.

*anity* concerning the origin of evil and the pessimism in Christianity that reveals itself in the fact that although God is good, people experience evil as something real and suffer as a result.

In an attempt to clarify and, above all, to circumstantiate Zdziechowski's criticism of the Augustinian theory of human free will and the resulting problem of the essence and origin of evil, I will start with an observation. The fact of the matter is that the undertone of St. Augustine's work (perhaps pessimistic, as Zdziechowski conceptualizes it), is bound up, among other things, with the ideological atmosphere of the times of the formation of Christianity, namely the period of late antiquity (III–VII AD). Late antiquity is regarded as a transitional era between antiquity and the medieval period, but at the same time it was a highly specific era that was important for the development of the theoretical foundations of Christianity. Christian intellectuals of this period were surrounded by Neoplatonism, which was the dominant influence in the intellectual sphere in the Mediterranean between the third and fifth centuries, and Neoplatonism was not merely a philosophical system but substantially a religious system, having a religious goal, namely salvation. We can find many Neoplatonic influences, both implicit and explicit, in the writings of the most representative individuals of the times: St. Augustine of Hippo, a representative of the Latin world, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus, a representative of the Greek world (and the Cappadocian Fathers in general). One example where such influences can be clearly seen is the problem of evil, though ultimately the Christian writers proposed different solutions which were essentially in opposition to those of Neoplatonism.

The philosophical-religious system of Plotinus is based on the metaphysics of the One, or the Superabundance (τὸ ὑπερπλήρες),<sup>5</sup> which can be differentiated from the world and from being as such. The One is to be found beyond being, but at the same time being is created in the process of emanation (or issuing forth) from the One (ὑπερερρῶν),<sup>6</sup> so everything spiritual and material has its source in the One.<sup>7</sup> It is this basic thesis that

---

<sup>5</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. Arthur Hilary Armstrong (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press 1966–1988), V.2.11.

<sup>6</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.2.1.

<sup>7</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.8.2.

leads to Plotinus's understanding of evil, which he identifies with matter.<sup>8</sup> Matter, as the last stage of emanation after the intellect (νοῦς) and the soul (ψυχή), has no power of emanation,<sup>9</sup> and in addition, at this stage any similarity to the One has disappeared altogether, and for this reason it is referred to as the primary evil (τὸ πρῶτον κακόν).<sup>10</sup> Matter (ὕλη) is produced by the lower, irrational part of the individual soul, or that part that turns to the multiple rather than to the One. Plotinus referred to this as nature, in contrast to the Soul of the All, or that part that turns upwards towards the intellect.<sup>11</sup>

Matter, as the final product of the emanation process, is ontic in nature, but the being of matter is different from the being of the Good (Οὐδὲ γὰρ τὸ εἶναι ἔχει ἢ ὕλη, ἵνα ἀγαθοῦ ταύτη μετεῖχεν, ἀλλ' ὁμώνυμον αὐτῇ τὸ εἶναι, ὡς ἀληθὲς εἶναι λέγειν αὐτὸ μὴ εἶναι).<sup>12</sup> The being of matter is characterized by lack of quality, the absence (privation) of good (ἡ ἔλλειψις τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ), the lack of idea.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore reasonable to ask how something that is devoid of quality can become the cause of evil. Well, it appears that while "qualitylessness" itself is metaphysically neutral, its consequences are evil.<sup>14</sup> Such consequences might include the destructive nature of the body, the malfunctioning of the soul, bodily defects, pain and suffering in mortal life;<sup>15</sup> yet, at the same time, the experience of evil gives a "clearer awareness" of the Good.<sup>16</sup> The logic of Plotinus' argument suggests that evil in the form of matter is opposed not to being but to Good (the One). As the antithesis of Good, evil must exist because the persistence of the Universe is based on contraries.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Plotinus' dualism appears to be less total than Plato's.

<sup>8</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.8.14.

<sup>9</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.8.15.

<sup>10</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.8.14.

<sup>11</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV.4.13.

<sup>12</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.8.5.

<sup>13</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.8.5.

<sup>14</sup> John Rist, a leading expert on Plotinus, wrote that in a certain sense, matter is non-being, and therefore in itself, it is not metaphysically evil but its effects are. It is in this sense that we are to understand the claim that matter is the primary (absolute) evil. See John Rist, *Plotinus – the road to reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 128.

<sup>15</sup> Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson, *Plotinus* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 200–204.

<sup>16</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV.8.7.

<sup>17</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.8.7.

On the basis of what has been established above concerning the philosophical-religious system of Plotinus, we can draw the following conclusions: firstly, evil/matter exists, though in a different way from the Good, which has a positive ontic nature.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, evil results from the activities of individual souls, and not from the Soul of the All. And thirdly, matter as the primary evil is metaphysically neutral; it is its effects that are negative. I believe that it was, above all, in reference to the three consequences formulated above that the late antiquity Christian thinkers, in the persons of St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Gregory of Nazianzus, constructed their theories concerning the origin of evil. Zdziechowski in his analysis of the problem, did not go as far as to undertake a study of Plotinus' philosophy. Below I will therefore consider how Christian thinkers related to Plotinus' views on evil.

# 1. THE FIRST CONSEQUENCE: EVIL EXISTS MORE AS A LACK THAN A FORM OF BEING

In contrast to the One of Plotinus, the Christian God exists as a form of being, a perfect being; in other words, one in which the essence and the existence are the same, and not something that is beyond being. The being of God, simultaneously uncreated and creating, forms the world out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. Since God is good to the highest degree, his creation that, the world in all its dimensions, must also by nature be good by virtue of its analogous state of being. In other words, in order to remain a being in its essence, it must remain good; otherwise, it would lose this feature of its being.<sup>19</sup> It is in this sense that the Platonic and Plotinian total negation of matter and its identification with evil cannot be applied in Christianity. All matter, being God's creation, is good, so matter cannot, *sensu stricto*, be responsible for evil in the world. Evil, therefore, must have a completely different nature, one without substance. At the level of being, evil appears

---

<sup>18</sup> Mieczysław Krąpiec, *Dlaczego zło. Rozważania filozoficzne* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 1995), 40.

<sup>19</sup> Krąpiec, *Dlaczego zło. Rozważania filozoficzne*, 69.

to be nothingness, so it could not have been previously created, neither is it derived from God, nor does it possess any formal or efficient cause. By defining evil as metaphysical non-being, it follows that it does not have access to the essential, constitutive parts of being. These would include, according to the classification of renowned Polish researcher Albert Krąpiec, lack of the integral and perfecting parts of a given nature that is capable of possessing them.<sup>20</sup>

Evil should therefore be classified as rather accidental in nature, occurring, in the majority of cases, due to the power human beings have over their conduct.<sup>21</sup> This power is called free will. It is, then, the actions of a concrete person that is responsible for evil. In the Christian understanding of evil, evil must therefore be considered at the level of the human condition, and not as a being in itself. In *The Enchiridion* St. Augustine states emphatically: “[...] what is that which we call evil but the absence of good (*privatio boni*),<sup>22</sup> while in his *City of God* he reiterates that [...] evil has no positive nature, but the loss of good (*amissio boni*) has received the name evil.”<sup>23</sup> Similar theses can be found in the speeches of St. Gregory of Nazianzus: “Believe that evil has no substance or kingdom, either unoriginate or self-existent or created by God; but that it is our work, and the evil one’s, and came upon us through our heedlessness, but not from our Creator.”<sup>24</sup> (Πίστευε, μὴ οὐσίαν εἶναι τινα τοῦ κακοῦ, μήτε βασιλείαν, ἢ ἄναρχον, ἢ παρ’ ἑαυτῆς ὑποστᾶσαν, ἢ παρὰ τοῦ Θεοῦ γενομένην, ἀλλ’ ἡμέτερον ἔργον εἶν. αἰ τοῦτο καὶ τοῦ πονηροῦ, ἐκ τῆς ἀπροσεξίας ἐπεισελθὼν ἡμῖν, ἀλλ’ οὐχὶ τοῦ κτίσαντος).

Here I would like to point out that in characterizing evil, Plotinus uses the following expression: ἡ ἔλλειψις τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, which can be trans-

<sup>20</sup> Krąpiec, *Dlaczego zło. Rozważania filozoficzne*, 56,76.

<sup>21</sup> Krąpiec, after St. Thomas calls these other reasons for evil unintended reasons.

<sup>22</sup> St Augustine, *The Enchiridion on faith, hope and love*, trans. Joseph Shaw (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961), 11.

<sup>23</sup> Aurelius Augustine, *The City of God*, vol. I, trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1871), IX,9.

<sup>24</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *On Holy Baptism (Oration 40)*, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, w *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 7*, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894).

lated as absence, deficiency, lack. Likewise, in the work of St. Augustine, we encounter the expressions *privatio* or *amissio boni*, in other words, again, lack or loss of something. Finally, in similar fashion, St. Gregory uses:  $\mu\eta\ \omicron\upsilon\sigma\iota\alpha\nu\ \epsilon\iota\lambda\alpha\iota\ \tau\iota\nu\alpha\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \kappa\alpha\kappa\omicron\upsilon$ , or evil has no substance. At first glance it would appear that all three have similar views on evil, emphasizing evil's imperfection or deficiency. On closer inspection, however, we see that whereas for Plotinus evil possessed a nature, an existential nature, for Christian thinkers evil meant nothing, and metaphysics was thus powerless in the face of describing evil. It is worth mentioning that to a great extent,<sup>25</sup> Plotinus presents a typically classical approach to the problem of being and non-being, namely it is treated as a semantic and analytical question.<sup>26</sup> In summing up the discussions of his predecessors, Aristotle classified non-being in the category of a potential being (non-being exists, but in a predicative, not an existential, sense).<sup>27</sup> Whereas classical Greek philosophy, from Parmenides to Aristotle, treated the problem of non-being in methodological and analytical categories, for Christianity it was a metaphysical and anthropological question.

## 2. THE SECOND CONSEQUENCE: EVIL IS THE RESULT OF THE ACTIONS OF THE INDIVIDUAL SOUL, THAT IS, THE RESULT OF HUMAN ACTIONS

In answer to the question  $\pi\acute{o}\theta\epsilon\nu\ \tau\acute{o}\ \kappa\alpha\kappa\acute{o}\nu$ , both Plotinus and the late antiquity doctors of the Church pointed to human freedom of choice, but in each case it is a specific type of freedom: freedom from abandoning oneself to passion, Plotinus would say, or freedom from sin, according to St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Gregory of Nazianzus. All three differentiated between moral evil and natural (unintended) evil. As far as moral evil is concerned, it is not God or the One that is responsible, but human individ-

<sup>25</sup> To a great extent, but not entirely. Plotinus lived in times when philosophy was becoming more mystic, so in this respect, a purely semantic approach would not have been considered satisfactory.

<sup>26</sup> Plato, *Sophist: Theaetetus, Sophist*, trans. Harold N. Fowler, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1921), 240A-D.

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysica*, trans. Werner Jaeger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 1089b.



uals who make bad choices: “souls must have their own movements”<sup>28</sup> said Plotinus. Despite this apparent similarity, there is, in fact, a fundamental difference. Plotinus’ human individuals, by virtue of the ability to construct their own soul, which, in addition to a fallen part, possesses a part that is directed towards the One, can achieve perfection, overcome the passions, reach the truth, rise up, turn back and become united (ἔνωσις) with the One.<sup>29</sup> For St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Gregory of Nazianzus, human individuals, despite being created in the image of God, cannot achieve perfection on their own, but need God’s grace. What is more, neither a sinful nor a righteous life has any influence on the workings of grace. We do not know, nor can we know, the logic of the work of God, but must simply accept that it is good: “[...] so great is His wisdom and power that all things, even those that seem adverse to His purpose, are directed towards the just and good ends and issues of which He Himself has foreknowledge.”<sup>30</sup> The consequence of accepting this thesis is the necessity of acknowledging the manifestations of individual suffering as a non-negotiable part of the general harmony. This thesis, testifying *de facto* to human misery, was for Zdziechowski incomprehensible and inconceivable and he could not accept it. He believed that it provided evidence of St. Augustine’s pessimism with the only solace being in the community life of the Church.

For the Church fathers, the question of the quality and power of human nature was a subject of disagreement not only with Plato and Plotinus but also with the heresiarch, Pelagius, a contemporary of St. Augustine. Extant evidence of their dispute is to be found, for example, in St. Augustine’s sermon *Against Pelagius* (*Sermo 348A: Contra Pelagium*) and in a letter addressed to Paulinus of Nola *On the grace of God against the Pelagian heresy*. (*Epistula 186*). According to St. Augustine, Pelagius holds that, “God’s grace and help is not given for individual actions, but consists in free choice or in the law and teaching” and “the grace of God is given in accord with our merits.”<sup>31</sup> St. Augustine criticized the Pelagian posi-

---

<sup>28</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.2.7.

<sup>29</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.9.7.

<sup>30</sup> Aurelius Augustine, *The City of God*, XXII,2.

<sup>31</sup> St. Augustine, *On the grace of God against the Pelagian heresy. Letter 186: Letters 156-210*, edited by Boniface Ramsey (New York: New City Press, 2004), 224

tion, arguing emphatically that, on the basis of the teachings of the New Testament, grace supports us irrespective of our deeds and merits; “Hence without the help of his grace we can have no piety and righteousness either in our action or even in our own will itself. *For it is God who produces in us both the willing and the action in accord with good will (Philippians 2,13).*”<sup>32</sup> We cannot attain salvation through our deeds alone. In addition, Plotinus’ postulate that human beings can be united with the One is not possible in the Christian view because the substance of creation (including human beings) is completely different from God’s unique substance (as is stated in the act of the Fourth Council of Constantinople). God retains His transcendence just as the human soul retains its nature. Human deification is possible only in the sense that it is God’s grace that enables us to take part in His plan.

Despite the above postulates it would be a mistake to conclude that God’s grace deprives us of our free will; “On the contrary, we establish the freedom of the will. For just as the Law is not obliterated by (the idea of) faith, but is established by it, so is freedom of the will by grace.”<sup>33</sup> The dialectics of God’s grace and free will outlined by St. Augustine is characterized by a subtlety, and embodies a sensitivity and ideological foundations that are different from those of Plato. Admittedly, St. Augustine came under the influence of Plato’s idealistic metaphysics and even expressed his admiration for the teachings of Plato and Plotinus in the dialogue *Against the Academicians*: “[...] the countenance of Plato, which is the purest and the brightest in all philosophy, shone forth especially in the person of Plotinus, a Platonic philosopher, who was considered so much like Plato [...] one would have to think that the latter had come to life again in the person of the former.”<sup>34</sup> Platonic metaphysics seemed to best suit the requirements for the shaping of a framework for Christianity. Nevertheless, St. Augustine was well aware of the differences between Christianity and Platonism, and ultimately it should be accepted, after John Rist, that Platonism proved to

---

<sup>32</sup> Aurelius Augustine, *On the grace of God against the Pelagian heresy*, 211.

<sup>33</sup> Aurelius Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter*, trans. William John Sparrow-Simson (London: Society for promoting Christian knowledge, 1925), 101–102 (52).

<sup>34</sup> St. Augustine, *Against the Academicians*, trans. Mary Patricia Garvey R.S.M. (Wisconsin: Milwaukee University Press, 1957), XVIII.41.

be a useful tool for St. Augustine, though not for *being* a Christian but on his path to *becoming* a Christian.<sup>35</sup> Plotinus, then, constituted for St. Augustine a special *praeparatio evangelica*. As Étienne Gilson most aptly put it: “this new Christian, looking for a philosophy that he himself was to develop, never knew any philosophy other than that of Plato and Plotinus. As this was all he had at his disposal, he was forced to use it, but without doubt, he often had to tamper with it so as to forcefully bend it to meet the requirements of Christianity.”<sup>36</sup> St. Augustine, made use of, discussed and interpreted Plato’s philosophy,<sup>37</sup> though he did not know it in the original but in the Latin translations of e.g. Cicero and Chalcidius. On the other hand, he read Plotinus in the original and even tried his hand at translating it himself,<sup>38</sup> but also used the translations of Gaius Marius Victorinus. The situation was rather different in the case of St. Gregory of Nazianzus. Although he undoubtedly had first hand knowledge of Plato, Plotinus and the Neoplatonists – after all, he had spent four years in Athens, and he had also been in Alexandria and the Palestinian Caesaria (*Oration* 43) – he very seldom referred to or commented on the specific assumptions of Platonic philosophy, and when he did, he did so very critically.<sup>39</sup> He was, then, much less of a Platonist than St. Augustine. Both Christian thinkers, however, constructed their theory of free will by developing Plotinus’ intuitions on human free choice. St. Augustine did this in his treatise *On free choice of the will*, but also in *On true religion*, *Concerning the Nature of Good*, *Against the Manichaeans*, *On order* and *City of God*, whereas St. Gregory of Nazianzus did so in his orations: *Oration 16: On His Father’s Silence, Because of the Plague of Hail* and *Oration 40: On Baptism*. The first emphasizes the mystery of evil (unintended) as suffering which can turn out to be a challenge for the sake of our moral improvement, whereas the second stresses

---

<sup>35</sup> John Rist, *Plotinus and Christian philosophy*, w *Cambridge companions to Plotinus*, edited by Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 408.

<sup>36</sup> Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960), *passim*.

<sup>37</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, XXII.

<sup>38</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, IX,17; X,14.

<sup>39</sup> An exception can be found in Theological Oration (*Oratio* 31).

the metaphysics of evil (moral) as a sin that takes us further away from happiness, truth and God.

Let us look more closely at St. Augustine's argument on free will. He claims that a feature shared by all people is their pursuit of happiness, "the happy life – that disposition of a spirit which clings to immutable goods – is man's proper and primary good."<sup>40</sup> Happiness can be achieved only by a rational mind, unrestrained and free, which is a force for good,<sup>41</sup> and not by the desires and passions, which are the cause of sin. The intellect, although free by nature, may fall into the bondage of passion when our will voluntarily turns away from the highest, unchanging good on account of an individual movement. The rational soul, because of its own weakness, displays a desire to do that which the highest and most profound Truth forbids, and so it deviates from the path of order. God does not participate in this; although he has foreknowledge of our future sins, He in no way forces us to commit them: "the power is not taken from me by His foreknowledge. Thanks to this trait of independence, we can avoid sin, for "the human soul is naturally connected with divine ideas."<sup>42</sup> As St. Anselm of Canterbury was later to point out: "freedom of choice was given to rational nature in order to keep that uprightness of will which it had originally received"<sup>43</sup>. The choice of sin gives rise to consequences – this is a trap from which we cannot escape by the strength of human nature alone. In this case, an act of God is required, His grace, which St. Augustine defines (in Gilson's interpretation) as a set of all the unmerited gifts of God whose function is to provide the means for our salvation in our downfall.<sup>44</sup> In comparison with Plotinus' view of human nature, the Augustinian human being appears to be completely dependent and helpless, with the will alone incapable of even doing a good deed.<sup>45</sup> It is Adam's deed that is to blame

---

<sup>40</sup> St. Augustine, *On free choice of the will*, trans. Anna S. Benjamin and L.H. Hackstaff (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1964), II, 19.

<sup>41</sup> St. Augustine, *On free choice of the will*, I, 1, 3.

<sup>42</sup> St. Augustine, *On free choice of the will*, III, 5, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, *On freedom of choice: Truth, freedom and evil: three philosophical dialogues*, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), 121–144.

<sup>44</sup> Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, passim.

<sup>45</sup> St. Augustine, *The Enchiridion on faith, hope and love*, trans. Joseph Shaw (Chi-

for this, but the whole of humanity must share the cost “[...] Adam would not have died if he had not sinned. His sin harmed not him alone but also the human race.”<sup>46</sup>

According to St. Gregory of Nazianzus, on the other hand, the consequences of Adam’s transgression – guilt and punishment, sin and suffering – have an educational function: “using the threat and the blow alike for our instruction, and making a way for His indignation, in the excess of His goodness; beginning with what is slight, so that the more severe may not be needed; but ready to instruct us by what is greater, if He be forced so to do.”<sup>47</sup> St. Gregory frequently indicates (in contrast to St. Augustine) that we can alleviate the consequences of sin by love and compassion after the fashion of God Himself: “Love conquers the effects of sin,” “Let us therefore purify ourselves through acts of mercy.”<sup>48</sup> Love and compassion will be strengthened by asceticism and contemplation.

In the above citations, the characteristic features of St. Gregory of Nazianzus can be clearly observed: he puts emphasis on asceticism as a new type of philosophy fortifying human will. Another Cappadocian father, a friend of St. Gregory of Nazianzus, was St. Gregory of Nyssa, who, as has sometimes been claimed, was the first Christian philosopher.<sup>49</sup> He outlines his anthropology in a similar manner to that of St. Augustine. The human being, according to St. Gregory of Nyssa, has an inherent likeness to God Himself, which is why it is the most perfect species of all creation. This similarity manifests itself, above all, in *apatheia*, freedom from passion (pathos) and alienation from all evil.<sup>50</sup> These traits became possible

---

cago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961), XXXII.

<sup>46</sup> St. Augustine, *Letter 186*, 224 (33).

<sup>47</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio 16*, trans. Charles Gordon Browne, James Edward Swallow, w *The Early Church Fathers and Other Works* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. in English in Edinburgh, Scotland, 1867).

<sup>48</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 14*, trans. Martha Vinson, w St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Select orations* (Bloomington: The Catholic University of America press, 2003), 37.

<sup>49</sup> Inglis Patrick Sheldon-Williams, *The Greek Christian Platonist Tradition from the Cappadocians to Maximus and Eriugena*, w *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, edited by Arthur Hilary Armstrong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

<sup>50</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, trans. Henry Austin Wilson, w *From*

as a result of two gifts: the intellect and free will. The mind transforms irrational impulses into those that are rational, that is into virtue, and this has the power to protect us from sin. This movement of the mind is, however, a voluntary choice of the individual soul, and just like virtue, there is nothing obligatory about it. Human beings themselves decide whether to choose sin or virtue, the blame for evil lies with the one who makes the choice. It is also for this reason that human aspiration should direct itself towards the union of both these gifts, of intellect and free will, for only then can it become possible to achieve good and virtue.

St. Gregory of Nyssa admits that free will has been weakened by original sin.<sup>51</sup> This, however, can not completely destroy, but only obscures, the image of God that is within us, so there is no justification for sin, which is always an individual choice and represents the loss of freedom and an act against our nature. In *The Great Catechism* he wrote: “[...] evil is in some way engendered from within, springing up in the will at that moment when there is a retrocession of the soul from the beautiful.”<sup>52</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, then, upheld the thesis concerning the undivided human responsibility for evil.

The writings of the Cappadocian Fathers – St. Gregory of Nazianzus, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Basil the Great – though each has its specific hallmarks, are often considered as a whole, as they complement one another in aspects of a wider theological-philosophical vision. Thus we can acknowledge that the arguments of St. Gregory of Nyssa on the subject of human free will and of evil provide a good complement to the content of St. Gregory of Nazianzus’s orations and letters. Familiar with the work of the Cappadocians, St. Augustine, in the main, follows their defense of the

---

*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 5, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893), chapter V. It is worth adding here that St. Gregory of Nyssa distinguished two types of likeness to God: primary (or source), and secondary. The first Man receives this from God at the time of creation, whereas thereafter the likeness results from imitating God in our earthly life. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily on the Beatitudes 1*.

<sup>51</sup> Gregory Of Nyssa, *Letter to Eustathia, Ambrosia, and Basilissa*, w *The Letters*, trans. Anna M. Silvas, (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007), 123-131.

<sup>52</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism,” trans. Henry Austin Wilson, w *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 5, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893).

doctrine of the Trinity, but also in relation to issues of the theodicy, there is a marked similarity in their views. Essentially, all the above-mentioned Christian thinkers present an identical approach to the problem of evil as the absence of good, which is contrary to the view expressed by Plotinus. St. Augustine developed the metaphysics of guilt and punishment, the human inheritance passed down from Adam, and underscored our powerlessness to understand God's judgements. St. Gregory of Nazianzus in his turn, emphasizes the deeper meaning and educational function of suffering and pain resulting from unintended evil (natural disasters), as well as the importance of the individual's inner struggle with despondency, the passions, imperfections and their transformation into virtues; in other words, he pointed to the process of ascetic growth (*Oration 17*).

### 3. THE THIRD CONSEQUENCE: MATTER IS METAPHYSICALLY NEUTRAL

There is a certain ambivalence in relation to matter in the work of Plotinus. On the one hand, he calls it "the primary evil" and accorded it some kind of existence; on the other hand, he claims that evil does not generate form,<sup>53</sup> form being a necessary attribute of existence. Matter was simultaneously without form yet possessing quality: "What then prevents it from being qualified by participating, by its own nature, in none of the other qualities, but by this very fact of participating in none of them being qualified, since it has a thoroughly distinctive characteristic, different from the others, a sort of privation of those other qualities?"<sup>54</sup> Plotinus's attitude to matter is situated somewhere between Christian appreciation and gnostic demonization.

At the peak of its excellence matter becomes body.<sup>55</sup> The body is situated in the soul "[...] as if a net immersed in the waters was alive, but unable to make its own that in which it is."<sup>56</sup> In the context of human beings, the body takes on a different resonance: paradoxically, the body is not an

---

<sup>53</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.1.26.

<sup>54</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, II.4.13.

<sup>55</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, III.4.1.

<sup>56</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV.3.9.



obstacle that prevents humans from attaining perfect being if they muster up the strength to live a rational and virtuous life filled with noetic contemplation. As A.H. Armstrong rightly emphasizes, Plotinus, in creating the metaphysics of the One, did not in any way mean the total depreciation of the body and its needs, but challenged the slavish desire for material things,<sup>57</sup> in other words, subjugating one's life to passions. Life should rather be devoted to matters of the individual soul, for it is part of the Soul of the All. In the *Enneads* we read: "our souls are part of the Soul of the All."<sup>58</sup> The Soul of the All, in turn, looks up and directs itself towards the One, so thanks to the power of the individual soul, we have the possibility of gaining divinity, (or union with the One) without the participation of some outer force. By contrast, Christianity diminishes the human role in favor of a personal God. St. Augustine reasons that once they have fallen into sin, humans cannot, without help, release themselves from its chains. To achieve salvation and deification they need the mysterious workings of Divine Grace. Zdziechowski referred to this situation as human misery, yet emphasizes that yearning for happiness is a characteristic human trait.

## CONCLUSION

Although Zdziechowski's questions concerning the nature of evil and the human condition are full of bitterness, it would appear that, to a great extent, his logic conforms to Augustinian thinking. The culminating argument of that logic is that deeper penetration into the pessimistic content of Christianity leads to a more profound sense of the huge tasks that humans, as God's co-workers, have in carrying out the great plan, the goal of which is the destruction of evil.<sup>59</sup> If we take this literally, we find that, in fact, it is not in keeping with the teachings of the Christian doctors of the Church, with St. Augustine at its head. Evil cannot be destroyed because it does not

---

<sup>57</sup> Arthur Hilary Armstrong, Robert Austin Markus, *Christian faith and Greek philosophy* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1960).

<sup>58</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, IV.3.1.

<sup>59</sup> Marian Zdziechowski, *Pesymizm, romantyzm a podstawy chrześcijaństwa*, vol. 2 (Kraków: Drukarnia Czas, 1915), 5.



exist, its nature is not substantial but accidental. At the level of being, evil appears as nothingness, and hence it cannot first have been created, so it cannot later be destroyed. It does not derive from God, but is initiated by human free will, which has been weakened by original sin. The cure for evil is not destruction because something which does not exist cannot be destroyed. The remedy lies in the improvement of a given nature by overcoming its deficiencies with good. And this is made possible by human nature, which is created in the image and likeness of God. Our nature is characterized by rationality and the freedom to do good. This would appear to be an optimistic, rather than pessimistic, conception.

In reference to Zdziechowski's thesis, it is worth questioning whether pessimism is, indeed, the characteristic feature of St. Augustine's philosophy. This is only the case if we equate suffering with pessimism. Yet in Christianity suffering is a necessary stage in the process of human self-improvement. As Christian teaching became more influenced by philosophy, Christian thinkers began to emphasize true knowledge – the elevation towards Truth, or God, and the authentic life of spiritual and moral improvement. Although suffering is necessary, it is neither the goal nor the result of this process. Thus, in the light of its patristic heritage and its juxtaposition with Neoplatonism, the basic idea of Christianity remains untouched by Zdziechowski's laments, which are more apt in relation to his later literary reinterpretations.

## REFERENCES

- Anselm of Canterbury. "On freedom of choice." *W Truth, freedom and evil: three philosophical dialogues*, edited and translated by Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967.
- Aristotle. *Metaphysica*, edited and translated by Werner Jaeger. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957.
- Armstrong, Arthur, Hilary and Markus, Robert, Austin. *Christian faith and Greek philosophy*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1960.
- Augustine. *Against the Academicians*. Translated by Patricia Garvey R.S.M. Wisconsin: University Press Milwaukee, 1957.
- Augustine. *Letter 186: Letters 156–210*, edited and translated by Boniface Ramsey. New York: New City Press, 2004.

- Augustine. *On free choice of the will*. Translated by Anna Benjamin and L.H. Hackstaff. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964.
- Augustine. *The City of God*. Translated by Marcus Dods. Vol. I, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1871.
- Augustine. *The Enchiridion on faith, hope and love*. Translated by Joseph Shaw. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961.
- Augustine. *The Spirit and the Letter*. Translated by William John Sparrow-Simson. London: Society for promoting Christian knowledge, 1925.
- Emilsson, Eyjólfur. *Plotinus*. London: Taylor&Francis, 2017.
- Gilson, Étienne. *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*. Translated by L.E.M. Lynch. New York: Random House, 1960.
- Gregory of Nazianzus. "Oration 14." W *Select orations*. Translated by Martha Vinson. Bloomington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003.
- Gregory of Nazianzus. "Oration 16." W *The Early Church Fathers and Other Works*. Translated by Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow. Edinburgh: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1867.
- Gregory of Nazianzus. "Oration 40." W *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*. Vol. 7. Translated by Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1894.
- Gregory Of Nyssa. *Letter to Eustathia, Ambrosia, and Basilissa: The Letters*. Translated by Anna M. Silvas. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2007.
- Gregory of Nyssa. "On the Making of Man." W *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. Second Series*, Vol. 5. Translated by Henry Austin Wilson, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893.
- Krapiec, Albert. *Dlaczego zło. Rozważania filozoficzne*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 1995.
- Miłosz, Czesław. *Prywatne obowiązki*. Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Pojezierze, 1990.
- Osek, Ewa. „Grzech jako choroba duszy w homilii św. Bazylego Wielkiego O tym, że Bóg nie jest sprawcą zła.” *Vox Patrum* 49 (2006).
- Plato. *Sophist: Theaetetus, Sophist*. Translated by Harold N. Fowler. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1921.
- Plotinus. *Enneads*. Translated by Arthur Henry Armstrong. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966–1988.
- Przyszychowska, Marta. „Czy ojcowie Kościoła przed Augustynem mówili o grzechu pierwotnym?” *Vox Patrum* 59 (2013).
- Rist, John. *Plotinus – the road to reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967.
- Rist, John. "Plotinus and Christian philosophy." W *The Cambridge companion to Plotinus*, edited by Lloyd Gerson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Sheldon-Williams, I.P. "The Greek Christian Platonist Tradition from the Cappadocians to Maximus and Eriugena." W *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, edited by Arthur Hilary Armstrong. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967.

- Skoczynski, Jan. *Pesymizm filozoficzny Mariana Zdziechowskiego*, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1983.
- St Gregory of Nyssa. "The Great Catechism." W *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. 5. Translated by William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1893.
- Turek, Waldemar. "Id non culpam, sed poenam esse iudicabam." (*Confessiones* VII 3, 5).
- Turzyński, Piotr. „Cierpienie jako droga w ujęciu św. Augustyna.” *Vox Patrum*, no. 55 (2010).
- Zdziechowski, Marian. *Pesymizm, romantyzm a podstawy chrześcijaństwa*, t. 1. Kraków: Drukarnia Czas, 1915.
- Zdziechowski, Marian. *Pesymizm, romantyzm a podstawy chrześcijaństwa*, t. 2. Kraków: Drukarnia Czas, 1915.