Can Nature be Red in Tooth and Claw in the thought of Augustine?  
(a case study)

Cornered? Philosophers like Hick to the left & (some) Reformed interpretaters like Wolters to the right and some patristic scholars in the middle... argue that Augustine’s taught that the alienation caused by the Fall of humans led to the fall of the physical cosmos and the introduction of chaos, animal predation, etc. into the natural world after that time.
I. A text without a context...

Vittore Carpaccio: Visione di S. Agostino
(b. 1472, Venezia, d. 1526, Capodistria)
Painted 1502, in the Oratorio della Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice

A text without a context... is a pretext

Vittore Carpaccio: Jerome — the Golden Legend and Death
in the Oratorio della Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice
Approach

I am a historian, not a systematic theologian or philosopher attempting 'the best' appropriate answer, rather a scholar looking at:

- Changing patterns and perceptions over time;
- Ways of understanding the context for a set of ideas which both particularize them giving them a real place and space within which they operated and in a sense relativize them establishing their relevance in their own place and time before one cherry picks them out for contemporary use.
- If an author intended to convey the message as received;
- Sources of an idea or approach and the particular sources for an author's ideas;
- Impact of an idea and/or an author which varies by time and place.
- Developing understanding of and a sympathy for the lost worlds which transcend our own particular, and immediate imagination, so as to be able to get into the mindset of the writers from other ages.

Discovering Augustine of Hippo

- 93 of his 94 books extant
- Delivered 4k-10k sermons (ca 950 extant)
- 299 letters extant

6th cent fresco in the Lateran: the remains of Gregory the Great’s Lateran Palace (under the Scala Sancta), Rome
Context: Augustine’s world

Chaos, Civil War & Persecutions 235 – 270
Diocletian's persecution 303
Civil War (again!) 306
Constantine & legalization of Christianity 313 on
Laws against Paganism initiated 320’s on
Council of Nicaea 323/4
Theodosius makes Christianity state religion 386
Sack of Rome by Gothic Tribes 410

Augustine’s Basic Dates

Born 354
Converted 386
Ordained Priest 391
Manichaeans Debates 386 - 401
Donatist Challenge 391 - 412
Consecrated Bishop 395/6
Confessions 397 - 401
On Christian Teaching 401 - 404 & 426
Debates with Pelagians 413 - 430
City of God 413 - 426
Died 430
Fresco of Augustine discovered on a wall below the Scala Sancta, across from the Lateran Basilica in Rome (probably in Gregory the Great’s library in the Lateran Palace)

6th Century
The oldest surviving portrait of Augustine

Manuscript: City of God Folio
St. Augustine. La Cité de Dieu
(1st vol)
Paris, early fifteenth century.
Vellum
In the collection of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Netherlands

Top left St. Augustine, top right St. Gregory the Great, bottom left St. Ambrose, and bottom right St. Jerome
Sandro Botticelli  
b. Florence, Italy, 1445,  
d. May 17, 1510  

San Barnaba Altarpiece  
(Madonna enthroned with Saints)  
1490  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Sandro Botticelli  
b. Florence, Italy, 1445, d. May 17, 1510  

The Coronation of the Virgin  
(San Marco Altarpiece)  
1490  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence  
Coronation of the Virgin with angels and St John the Evangelist, St Augustine, St. Jerome and St Eligius
Sandro Botticelli  
b. Florence, Italy, 1445, d. May 17, 1510  
Fresco of St. Augustine  
Church of Ognissanti, Florence

Claudio Coello  
b. 1642, d. 1693  
The Triumph of St. Augustine  
Spain
Gian Lorenzo Bernini  
(b. 1598, Napoli, d. 1680, Roma) 

Statue of Saint Augustine: Four doctors (adorning the high altar)  
Basilica di San Pietro, Vatican

BTW... the shape of Heavens & Planets/Earth?

- Greco-Roman, Medieval philosophers & theologians agreed  
- Erastothenes calculation of the circumference of the earth  
- Ptolemy’s armillary sphere, a model of the heavens  
- Greco-Roman & Medieval notions of perfection: spheres of course  
- Early Christian commentaries on Genesis  
- San Marco, Venice (13th c.) based on Cotton Bible, Alexandria (5th c.)  
- San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy (5th c.)

Spherical...  
...Obviously!
II. Returning to the beginning: Augustine’s Cosmology

- Preoccupation with opening chapters of Genesis
  - 5 commentaries (between 389 and 426)
  - cites Gen 1.1 more than 700 times
  - cites John 1 more than 1000 times
- Probably heard Ambrose’s Hexameral sermons
- Worked out key questions
- facio ex nihilo
- Formatio, deformatio, reformatio
- Threefold structure
  - Background- causal reasons: rationes incommutabiles
  - Gen 1- potential and order of nature: rationes
  - Gen 2- ongoing administration of nature: rationes seminale

Augustine’s Cosmology

1. Eternal Reasons (ratio) in the Word
   - Changeless blueprint
2. Unchangeable reasons in Genesis 1
   - Created immediately and simultaneously
   - “One will ask how they were created originally on the sixth day. I shall reply: ‘Invisibly, potentially, in their causes, as things that will be in the future are made, yet not made in actuality now.’” *Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 6.6.10
3. Seminal reasons in Genesis 2
   - Created over time
Unfolding Cosmos

- This cosmology provides Augustine with the means for explaining the ongoing governance of activity in nature. Not all reasons (rationes) are always evident and some are only employed for a particular purpose in time.
- Presents the structure to argue for a universe where ongoing operations are maintained by natural causes:
  - “God moves His whole creation by a hidden power, and all creatures are subject to this movement ... stars moving in their courses, the winds blow on earth ... meadows come to life as their seeds put forth the grass, animals are born and live their lives according to their proper instincts.” Literal Interpretation of Genesis 5.20.41
- Each activity requires the Creator's design, foundation and system but not a divine act to drive it. This does not prevent miracles but it moves away from the volunteerism that would attribute every activity in nature to the divine will, or caprice at that moment.

Cosmology: some key texts

- 'It is thus that God unfolds the generations which He laid up in creation [saecula] when first He founded it; and they would not be sent forth to run their courses if He who made creatures ceased to exercise His provident administration over them.' On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis (GNLI) 5.20.41; cf. 4.12.22; 9.15.27
- 'the sacred writer, therefore, was not ignorant of the nature and order of the elements when he described the creation of visible things that move by nature throughout the universe in the midst of the elements, putting first the luminaries of the heavens, then the living creatures of the waters, and finally the living creatures of earth GNLI 3.6.8
Cosmology: some key texts

“The whole course of nature that we are so familiar with has certain natural laws of its own, according to which both the spirit of life which is a creature has drives and urges that are somehow predetermined and which even a bad will cannot bypass, and also the elements of this material world have their distinct energies and qualities, which determine what each is or is not capable of, what can or cannot be made from which. It is from these base-lines of things, so to say, that whatever comes to be takes in its own particular time span, its risings and continued progress, its ends and its settings, according to the kind of thing it is. Hence the fact that beans are not produced from grains of wheat or wheat from beans, nor human beings from cattle or cattle from human beings. But over and above this natural course and operation of things, the power of the creator has in itself the capacity to make from all these things something other than what their seminal formulae, so to say, prescribe—not however anything with which he did not so program them that it could be made from them at least by him...he makes from each thing in his own time what he first inscribed in it.” On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis 9.17.32

Implications for view of nature

- Augustine presents a natural world that is created, contingent, rational, capable of being understood to some degree by humans and worthy of at least some attention.
- Nature is wholly distinct from the Creator—not enchanted or animated—yet possesses value and legitimacy. Augustine offers a theological basis for natural reason rejecting the notion that the Greeks (and any others) either lacked knowledge or where they had it, it was by theft
- And this also gives a different way of approach the problem of evil and the nature of salvation
III. Privation of Evil / The Problem

Can a privation account of evil engage with an understanding of nature which understands the latter to be 'red in tooth and claw' from the outset?

1. Both biological and physical evidence argues for, and gives massive evidence of, violence, cataclysm and loss before a historical, human fall—from Big Bang, to big dinosaurs and big saber tooth tigers (Tigers, and lions and bears....)

2. At the core of Augustine's theology and the Augustinian theological tradition, is an approach to evil marked by privation theory. Privation theory asserts a primal purity and a Fall which corrodes the originate state.

- Do these two statements cancel each other out setting up an unsustainable contradiction or hypocrisy? (Does this in effect hand Hume the tools to create his famous rejection of Christian theodicy?)

Privation: Evil as a *privatio boni*

- This term is important in multiple works

- God created substance not vices; vices are not a substance.

- Evil Is the Removal of Good, a corrosion of the originate nature, not a destruction but a perversion and a loss of its proper telos.

- Humans have a corrupted nature (*natura vitiata*) due to the original pair's volitional act which harmed themselves and thus deformed their own nature. Into which the physician enters and provides healing resolving the deformity. *Nature and Grace* 3.3 and 30.34

- This leads to a changed view on *imago dei* and the Fall
Privatio boni and decay

“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 are good they could not be corrupted. If they were supremely good, they would be incorruptible; if they were not good at all, there would be nothing in them to be corrupted. For corruption harms; but unless it could diminish goodness, it could not harm.” Confessions 7.12

“Therefore, when as a result of deficiency of being things decay, either they have not received any further being and there is not fault, (in the same way that there is no fault if, while they exist, they receive not further being), or else they refuse to be what they had the power to be if they chose. Since what they might have possessed is good, they are guilty if they refuse it.” On Free Choice 3.15.4

Privatio boni texts

- “as a result of sin, humans lost the natural state of being” On the Free Choice of the Will 3.17.5
- “evil is the removal of good” Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity 3.10
- “God created substance not vices; vice is not a substance” Enarration on Psalm 48.5
Violence, Accidents, Decay & Natural States: Nature of Non-essential, Contingent Existence

- Distinguishes darkness of the world with darkness of demonic and human evil (Ennaration on Psalm 34, sermo 1.4)
- Wickedness described as a perversion of will, not nature (Conf 7.16)
- Describes a both a poisonous viper as disagreeable and a worm, which represents rot, as both being created good; created to suit the lower order of creation (Confessions 7.16)
- Natural world bounded by time and includes change and revolution... and is perishable
  - "the very ordinary and accustomed course of nature, whereby the seasons are rapidly revolved, in all things after their kinds, however temporal and perishable...." (Ennaration on Psalm 118, sermo 27.1)
- Like Athanasius (de Incarn 4): decay is essentially a part of any contingent being / creaturely state and “the defect would not deserve blame unless it were voluntary” (On Free Choice of the Will 3.15.42)
- No where suggests that decay, violence and chaos began after the fall

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Violence, Accidents, Decay & Natural States: Nature of Non-essential, Contingent Existence

“It would be ridiculous, on the other hand, to regard the defects of beasts, trees and other mutable and moral things which lack intelligence, sense or life, as deserving condemnation. Such defects do indeed effect the decay of their nature, which is liable to dissolution; but these creatures have received their mode of being by the will of the their Creator, whose purpose is that they should bring to perfection the beauty of the lower parts of the universe by their alternation and succession in the passages of the seasons; and this is the beauty in its own kind, finding its place among the constituent parts of this world....... Consequently, in those areas of the universe where such creatures have their proper being, we see a constant succession, as some things pass away and others arise, as the weaker succumb to the stronger, and those that are overwhelmed change into the qualities of their conquerors; and thus we have a pattern of a world of continual transience. We, for our part, can see no beauty in this pattern to give us delight; and the reason is that we are involved in a section of it, under our condition of mortality, and so we cannot observe the whole design, in which these small parts, which are to us so disagreeable, fit together to make a scheme of ordered beauty.... As for those defects, in things of this earth, which are neither voluntary nor punishable; if we observe them closely we shall find that, on the same principle as before, they attest the goodness of the natures themselves, every one of which has God as its sole author and creator.”

City of God 12. 4
A Well-ordered Universe: 
Teleology in Whole and Part

- “The painter knows where to place the shades in order to beautify his paintings; and you think that God would not know where to place the sinner in order to establish order in His creation?” Sermo 301

- the continuum of being from the highest spiritual objects to the lowliest physical objects. The higher end of the spectrum offers greater degree of being without mortality, but those are just the angels, mortality—decay in its gory finality—is experienced by all lower creatures as part of their design. All together these compose an ordered, rational design in the Cosmos expressing the Creator’s will. 

Ennarration on Psalm 144.13

- The whole contains and demonstrates a beauty both gathers together and transcends its individual parts. The goodness of the whole includes the frailty of individual creatures. Conf 4.13.20; Psal 47.19.31 and 135.4-5; Conf 7.12.18

Creaturely Development

- The implementation of the rationes happen in a manner that allows new types of creatures to appear on the scene and for creatures themselves to develop and change:
  - Now, whenever a creature in its natural development in due course discloses and puts forth some perfection, this added something was previously hidden within that creature, if not in a visible and tangible corporeal way, as a tree bereft of its fruit and leaves in winter is then imperfect, or that in the early stages of growth, before bearing fruit, its nature was defective.” GNLI 2.15.30
Distinguishing between Decay & Privation

- As noted, decay and even destruction are not themselves a result of the Fall for Augustine, these reflect contingent existence.
- This being so, neither is pain itself a result of the Fall. Things that can cause pain, such as animals predatory activity, or the sun burning brightly in our eyes are not evil, and so are not a sign of a post-lapsarian corruption.
- Our reactions, our manner of handling such, though are affected by the Fall. Pain comes with creatureliness, suffering attends creatures who are evil. Pain is not introduced by the Fall but the Fall introduces new reactions, fear or anger which are a form of spiritual anguish / and a particular form of suffering—as a new response to pain:
  - “for every sinful soul there are the two punishments, ignorance and difficulty. As a result of ignorance error shames us, and as a result of difficulty pain torments us.” de Lib 3.17.52; cf. Vera religio xxi.41
  - “it is clear that everything, whether it inflicts harm or suffers harm, whether it causes pleasure or is given pleasure, suggests and proclaims the unity of the Creator.”

Conclusions

1. This offers a case study demonstrating the difference between a doctrine and the changes, alterations that can shape a doctrinal system over time, unwittingly altering the original.
2. In Augustinian terms, it is wrong to describe violent physical and biological acts in nature as evil. Evil is a direct relation to privation, the corruption within souls, not decay which is endemic within a ‘natural order’.
3. Originate purity is found in spiritual, reasoning creatures; not describing a state of physical existence in corporeal world.
4. That being said, any physical perfection is in relation to the completion projected by the rationes, so if a ratio is not yet called to manifest itself, the lack of its manifestation does not mean there is a lesser degree of good. All according to its time.
5. The discovery of a natural world harkens back long before the 12th century (also note the Venerable Bede’s work).
Conclusions

6. Augustine can allow for change and variance, except in design; I am sure the notion of emergence which allows for the rise of a mind in some sort of creature, but could have been another creature instead of hominid, would be repugnant to Augustine.

7. After the Fall, humans are alienated from creation; nowhere do I find Augustine saying that the corporeal world has itself metamorphosed into something else as a result of the Fall which also is alienated from God. In fact, the direction of his thought and numerous statements present quite the opposite view.

   • This contradicts those writers and tradition which would tell us that Augustine believed the creation is alienated from God and that decay has come into the world as a result of the Fall. They have confused the nature of the alienation as used by Augustine.

Conclusions

8. Physical phenomena, objects, and corporeal decay now torment humans and are a cause of pain but such pain is not because these come unexpectedly into a once pristine scene where such was previously absent and if one had the proper perspective, could view the whole and not just the part, one could verify their beauty and worth.

   • In other words, the fall did not produce hurricanes, animal predation or E.coli, and the like.

   • Perhaps one might say, as a result of the fall, however, humans relate to such things differently and so experience torment; fear and anguish and other such responses are moral reactions to physical phenomena and Augustine blames the fall for suddenly adding these into the human condition, not the physical pain itself.
Conclusions

9. Failure to launch: Augustine thought that if Adam and Eve would have obeyed the command, a greater grace would have been gained which would have preserved them against such decay. But this is a case of failure to receive and perfect, not alteration of cosmic nature as it is.

10. The physical world is not by nature evil for Augustine; this is a known and commented point that undergirds much of Augustinian thought. It’s implications, though have not always been understood as also means that neither animal predation nor physical cataclysms such as a volcano or hurricane should be called or understood to be forms of evil resulting from the Fall. They are part of nature’s operations and decay is a necessary aspect of any created thing. Only spiritual beings who operate under the framework of voluntary providence can experience and cause evil.

Conclusions

11. In this particular matter, the problem of evil and the implications of privation theory, this signal issue of Augustinian theology, one working in the context of an Augustinian theological system can fundamentally accept theistic evolution without worry of contradiction or hypocrisy.

12. I have not defined this as the best answer to the problem of evil, I leave that to the systematicians, but I have tried to clarify what Augustine actually thought and how his system worked, so that you have all the tools to analyze the problem.
Augustine on Scripture & Science

“There is knowledge to be had, after all, about the earth, about the sky, and about the other elements of this world, about the movements and revolutions or even the magnitude distances of the constellations, about the predictable eclipses of moon and sun, about the cycles of years and seasons, about the nature of animals, fruits, stones and everything else of this kind. And it frequently happens that even non-Christians will have knowledge of this sort in a way that they can substantiate with scientific arguments or experiments. Now it is quite disgraceful and disastrous, something be be on one’s guard against at all costs, that they should ever hear Christians spouting what they claim our Christians scripture has to say on these topics, and talking such nonsense that they can scarcely contain their laughter when the see them to be toto caelo, as the saying goes, wide of the mark. And what is so vexing is not that misguided people should be laughed at, as that our authors should be assumed by outsiders to have held such views and, to the great detriment of those about whose salvation we are so concerned, should be written off and consigned to the waste paper basket as so many ignoramuses.

Whenever, you see, they catch out some members of the Christian community making mistakes on a subject which they know inside out, and defending their hollow opinions on the authority of our books, on what grounds are they going to trust those books on the resurrection of the dead and the hope of eternal life and the kingdom of heaven, when they suppose they include any number of mistakes and fallacies on matters which they themselves have been able to master either by experiment of by the surest of calculations?”

Literal Commentary on Genesis 1.19