Night and days in Cassiciacum: The anti-Manichaean theodicy of Augustine's *De ordine*

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In his early dialogue 'On order' (*De ordine*) Augustine dramatises a discussion of theodicy in which the Manichaean solution is clearly rejected, even though the debate ends in *aporia*. It is argued in this paper that the dialogue's dramatic setting at the villa in Cassiciacum is strongly reminiscent of Manichaean imagery and the stock motifs of the Manichaean mythological system. It is proposed in the dialogue itself, that the scenic elements (Augustine's ill health, night and darkness, the dawning day, dirt and ugliness, fighting cocks) have the character of signs which illustrate the significance of the not-beautiful and the negative in the divine order. The dialogue setting thus presents an ontological scale that leads from the levels of reduced being up to the highest being, linking night or darkness to light or day, dirt to purity, sickness to health, defeat to victory, the ugly to the beautiful. The dialogue setting becomes a semiotic system in which even the ontologically deficient forms of phenomenon always also refer to something at the highest level, namely the omnipotent divine creator. The scenic design of *De ordine* can thus be read as an extension of the Manichaean system of codes, and hence as a message also addressed to a Manichaean readership.

Introduction

Augustine in Milan – from Manichaean to 'converted' member of the 'Catholic' Church

In my article I aim to present a reading of Augustine's dialogue *De ordine* that is not diametrically opposed to what has been said so far,[1] but is, nonetheless, 'new'. As for method, my approach draws from the work of Johannes van Oort and Annemaré Kotzé on the *Confessions*, who repeatedly stress that this text must be understood in light of the fact that its author was for many years a member of the Manichaean religious community and so knew its thought and writings, and hence its codes, and that he had a readership in mind that was able to decode them (Van Oort 1994:130; Kotzé 2004, esp. 101ff.). Most recently, Jason BeDuhn has convincingly shown that, for Augustine's early writings, too, the cultural context in which the works make sense, and thus their interpretive horizon, should be understood as still strongly shaped by Manichaeism.

In 384, having lived in Rome in – according to the account in the *Confessions* – a strongly Manichaean environment (*Confessiones* V, 18–22; cf. on this Lieu 1992:173; BeDuhn 2010:144ff.; 246f.), Augustine came as Rhetor to the imperial court in Milan.[2] In the *Confessions*, Augustine makes this city the setting of his engagement with Platonic philosophy and abandonment of Manichaean doctrine, a process completed when – after fully two years – he joined the Nicene Catholic Church.[3]

Like Johannes van Oort, I assume that Augustine did not first acquire his detailed knowledge of this doctrine when he composed the first anti-Manichaean works in 388 – two years later – but, rather, as an *auditor* for many years before and during the Milan period, he had become familiar with its essential texts and so also with the elements of its myth, its terminology and its language of imagery and symbols (cf. Van Oort 2008, esp. 465f.; 2010, esp. 513).[4]

From the four works of Augustine that were composed in the autumn of 386 or the spring of 387 in Milan, I have selected *De ordine* for my study for two reasons. Firstly, in this dialogue Augustine

1. *De ordine* can be regarded as well studied: it has been edited to modern standards, most of its parts have been interpreted and it has recently been explicated in great detail in the philological and theological commentary of Trelenberg (2009).

2. According to the *Confessions*, his Manichaean friends had got him into the selection process for this prestigious position (VI, 23).

3. The protagonist of the *Confessions* – and thus the writing author – should be seen as a convert from Manichaean to 'Catholic' Christian doctrine, either to encourage a Manichaean public to take the same step (as Kotzé 2004 argues), or to dismiss the old allegations of Manichaeism against the Bishop of Hippo, addressing his opponents amongst the ranks of the 'Catholic Church' (the position of Drecoll, see Drecoll & Kudella 2011:192–196 and Fuhrer 2009). BeDuhn observes that Augustine may have left Carthage and later his position at the imperial court in Milan because (amongst other things) he wanted to avoid an accusation and a trial, respectively, which were brought against him as a Manichaean under the Theodosian laws against heresy (cf. BeDuhn 2010:137–144; 196; 219f.).

4. In what follows I understand Augustine's Milan narrative as a guide to reading the texts that arose in this context. Cf. esp. *Confessiones* IX, 8f.; about which see Van Oort (1997:246).

dramatises a discussion of theodicy in which the Manichaean solution is clearly rejected, even though the debate ends in *aporia*. Secondly, the dialogue's dramatic setting at the villa in Cassiciacum, where Augustine has chosen to set the discussion, and the figures who act and speak in it, illustrate the topic of *De ordine* in a way that – I argue – is strongly reminiscent of Manichaean imagery and the stock motifs of the Manichaean mythological system. This second aspect may seem surprising, and to my knowledge no one has read and interpreted the dialogue from these premises.

In what follows, therefore, after a short survey of the arguments made in the discussion in *De ordine* against a Manichaean solution to the theodicy question ('The discussion in *De ordine*: *Malum* in the world order'), I will try to make plausible my 'new' interpretation of the dialogue's dramatic setting ('The dramatic setting of *De ordine*, its meaning and interpretation'; 'Platonic versus Manichaean coding of the "setting text"'; 'The "place" of the "*malum*" in the world order'; 'Conclusion').

The discussion in *De ordine*: *Malum* in the world order

Augustine presents himself in the role of the teacher with his students and his mother, who, for three days have been discussing the question of how 'evil' entered or was added to the world order.[5] The young student Licentius argues vehemently that everything that happens is part of a meaningful and thus 'good' world order, which is directed by God (*De ordine* I, 11; cf. also I, 14), and that there is nothing that is opposed to this order, because the order encompasses everything (I, 15: *nihil autem esse praeter ordinem video*). When his fellow student Trygetius asks how he can then explain that a mistake (*error*) could be possible in this system, Licentius responds with the traditional argument, that everything, and thus also the departures (the 'wandering away', *errare*) from the true, beautiful and good, has a cause, and so is not opposed to the order (I, 15: *error ... non potest ordini esse contrarius*).

After this, however, Licentius notices that he has thus admitted the notion that the *malum* is also part of the *ordo*. He therefore has to say (I, 16): *et bona et mala in ordine sunt*.[6] He thus, as Trygetius objects, derives the *mala* from God, which must be reckoned to be impious (I, 17: *impium*).[7] He defends himself with the conventional argument that a harmonic whole can only be formed from opposites (I, 18: *congruentia*) and that God's justice only becomes manifest through the distinction (*distinctio*) between good and evil.[8] Therefore it is necessary that *mala* exist (*fit, ut mala etiam esse necesse sit*).

However, Licentius remains unsuccessful in this, as he may not derive the existence of evils from (the omnipotent) God. His insistence on the line that nothing happens outside the order repeatedly leads to *aporia* and finally to the abandonment of the discussion, because no one wants to admit either that evil has come into being within the order, or that it became part of the order later (II, 23).[9]

The question of how the evils in the world are to be explained is thus not answered in *De ordine*. In the course of the discussion, however, it will become clear – at least to a Platonically minded readership – that the reason why the problem, and thus the *aporia*, remains is that Licentius grants to the *mala* a real existence.[10] It is only in his later works that Augustine formulates a response to the question, basing it on the thesis that evil should be thought of as *privatio boni*:[11] All manifestations of the bad in the empirical world thus participate – if only by existing to a lesser degree – in the all-encompassing divine order of being. Nonetheless, this solution is hinted at in the argumentation of *De ordine* (II, 9f., cf. below, 'The "place" of the "*malum*" in the world order'), which thus points towards a solution that the author of the *Confessions* in fact ascribes to his first-person narrator in the years before the retreat to Cassiciacum (*Confessiones* III, 12; VII, 18f.).

The author Augustine shows all explanations are based on ontologies which grant evil an existence, as failing on account of his students' pious attitude (*pietas*), and in one passage also that of his pious mother; their reflections are based on the image of God as benign creator. Certain possible approaches, including the Manichaean dualist cosmology, are thereby excluded by Augustine from his doctrinal system, which is now oriented towards Catholic Christianity.[12]

The dramatic setting of *De ordine*, its meaning and interpretation

In the so-called Cassiciacum dialogues *Contra Academicos*, *De beata vita* and *De ordine*, Augustine places himself in the tradition of Ciceronian and Varronian villa dialogues, in which the rural setting is meant to highlight the spatial and also mental distance from the active life of the city. The localisation of some conversations in a meadow or in the shadow of a tree recalls the dramatic setting in Cicero's *De oratore* and *De legibus* or Plato's *Phaedrus* (cf. e.g. *Contra Academicos* II, 25; on this, Fuhrer 1997:217). As well as these literary reminiscences, the Cassiciacum dialogues also contain a number of scenic elements that are both explicitly and implicitly assigned a certain meaning in the course of the discussions.

5. On chronology internal to the text of the three Cassiciacum dialogues, cf. Trelenberg (2009:81f.).

6. This statement represents neither the opinion of the figure 'Augustine' in the dialogue nor that of the empirical author, as BeDuhn (2010:265) assumes.

7. *Quid enim potuit dici magis impium quam etiam mala ordine contineri?* Cf. already I, 1.

8. This is elaborated further in the next part (I, 19). On the topic of 'universal justice' see Trelenberg (2009:121–123).

9. On the logical strictness of this argumentation, cf. Fuhrer (in press).

10. *... ut mala etiam esse necesse sit* (I, 18); *sunt etiam mala* (II, 2); *semper bona et mala fuerunt* (II, 22); *... ut esset ipsum malum* (II, 23).

11. Cf. already *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum*, II, 1–8; *De vera religione* 21 and 39. Augustine goes further than Plotinus insofar as he also grants being to unformed matter, as it is part of divine creation. This is underlined by BeDuhn (2010:170–186).

12. However, only II,46 is clearly anti-Manichaean; on this, see Trelenberg (2009:348).

In *De ordine* the proem introducing the topic of theodicy is followed by a presentation of the rural surroundings in which the philosophical discussions took place (I, 5). The first-person author presents himself as suffering from stomach pains and as a 'refugee' to the *refugium* of philosophy.[13] His conversational partners are named as: Alypius (who was a Manichaean together with Augustine and who has now committed to the Nicene doctrine), Augustine's brother Navigius, Licentius (his student, the son of the Manichaean Romanianus), and a student recently released from military service, Trygetius.

The location of the first discussion is the villa's sleeping quarters; it is night and the room is shrouded in darkness. The narrative first person 'Augustinus' lies awake, however (I, 6: *cum vigilassem … vigilabam*), mulling over his thoughts and asking why the water in the pipes beneath the bedroom is making an irregular pattern of sound (*sonus*). When Licentius is scaring off mice with a wooden stick (probably by banging it on the floor), Augustine realises that his pupil is also awake (*se vigilantem indicavit*), and he poses the question of why the water is making this noise. Trygetius, too, is lying awake (*vigilabat*), and Augustine concludes that the noise of the water 'has drawn attention to the fact that it is saying something about itself' (I, 7: *aliquid de se dicere admonebat*).

In the discussions that follow, things and events in the surroundings are repeatedly interpreted as signs that 'warn' those present of something (*admonere, commonere*),[14] of things which 'lead', 'point', 'draw' the observers to something or 'command to be sought' (*ducere, perducere, trahere, se quaeri iubere*), express an 'invitation' (*invitatio*), or 'nod to' them (*innuere*).[15] In one passage, there is an explicit discussion of 'signs' (*signa*) that are inscribed into the perceptible surroundings.[16] Licentius, who wants to see manifestations of the divine order in all things,[17] draws the comparison to pagan divination practices, in which even mice are given a specific function in the process of communicating information.[18] The teacher-figure Augustine goes so far as to encourage Licentius to allegorise the psalm ('God of Strength, turn towards us and show your face to us' [Ps 79 (80):8]) that he had sung in the latrine the day before: he should understand it as the striving of man to raise himself out of the darkness and the filth and dirt of the corporeal world towards sight of the face of God.[19] Both the narrator and the narrated Augustine thus repeatedly encourage an interpretation of the scenic elements as charged with meaning and so, to some extent, suggest that the surroundings be read and interpreted as a text.

Amongst the named elements of this 'setting text', is Augustine's ill health,[20] night, the sleeping quarters, being awake, sounds, and then the dawning day (I, 22) that most clearly all have the character of signs, not least because interpretations of this kind are proposed in the dialogue itself. In his allegoresis of the latrine scene, Augustine compares the *locus* with the past night (I, 23: *nam illi cantico et locum ipsum … et noctem congruere video*); the darkness of the sleeping quarters and of the latrine stands for the error from which humans want to free themselves. The state of ignorance is compared to incapacity through illnesses (I, 24: *morbi*) and rashes (*scabies*), from which *sapientia*, like a doctor, can heal those who are prepared to undergo a strenuous cure (*patientia, perpeti*). Health is equated to light (*valetudini sanorum lucique reddantur*). Anyone who chooses to remain without knowledge of God lives like settling for alms (*tamquam stipe contenti*). However, the 'best and most beautiful bridegroom' (*coniunx ille optimus ac pulcherrimus*) wants those souls that strive for the happy life and so are 'worthy of the bridal chamber' (*thalamo suo dignas*).[21]

The sleeping quarters in Cassiciacum thus become a symbol of the state of ignorance, which those who are awake and ask questions about the *divinus ordo*, that is, souls that love truth (cf. I, 6) and strive for knowledge of God, can move past: towards the light or into the bridal chamber to the divine bridegroom.

The interpretation of the 'setting text' continues the next day. Due to the miserable weather (*caelo tristi*), they decide to continue the discussion in the baths and, on the way there, they observe two cocks fighting (I, 25). Augustine directly describes the group's gazing at this fight scene as the search of the 'eyes of lovers' (*oculi amantum*) for the 'signs' (*signa*) through which the 'beauty of reason' (*pulchritudo rationis*) draws beholders to itself and demands that they strive towards it.[22] It is stressed that both creatures, including the dishevelled, defeated cock, appear beautiful as an ensemble, and that thus the 'deformed' (*deforme*), too, contributes to the harmony and beauty of the view (*concinnum et pulchrum*). This 'spectacle' in which they take pleasure (I, 26: *voluptas spectaculi*) is thereafter interpreted as an 'invitation' to the senses (*ipsorum sensuum invitatio*) to move on to deeper reflections and to perceive the rule-governed character of the visible natural world, which is the 'imitation of that truest beauty' (*imitatio verissimae illius pulchritudinis*).

The semantic fields 'night/darkness', 'dirt', 'illness', 'struggle/defeat', 'ugliness' thus not only provide images to describe and characterise ignorance, but also illustrate the significance of the not-beautiful and the negative in the divine order. They are seen strictly in their complementarity to a

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13. That the debates are recorded in writing plays an important role, and has, on the one hand, a commemorative function, and on the other – of importance for the sick 'Augustinus' – a disciplining function. Cf. I, 5; I, 27.

14. *Commonere* (I, 9; I, 13; I, 20); *admonere* (I, 7; I, 26).

15. *Perducere* (I, 10); *ducere* (I, 26); *innuere*; *trahere, se quaeri iubere* (I, 25); *invitatio* (I, 26); *indicare* (I, 29).

16. *Signum* (I, 25); *insignire* (I, 26).

17. Also those things that are 'unusual' (a *res insolita*) and occur *praeter manifestum ordinem*, are not to be thought of as *praeter ordinem* (I, 18).

18. I, 9 (cf. I, 10: *augurium*).

19. I, 22f. On this, see Trelenberg (2009:136–139), '*eine der Schlüsselstellen für die Legitimität eines allegorischen Verständnisses von De ordine*'; cf. Fuhrer (2011:28–32).

20. *Stomachi dolor* (I, 5); cf. I, 26; I, 29; I, 33; his inner struggle, which is made clear with the reference to his regular sleeplessness (I, 6), and his prayers while weeping (I, 22), can also be linked to the metaphors of being sick and regaining health.

21. The myth of Pyramus and Thisbe, which Licentius plans to recount in poetry, is interpreted allegorically: the fulfilment of their love should be understood as the union of spirits equipped with the 'dowry' of knowledge and the beauty of virtue (*De ordine* I, 24).

22. This is expressed by the verbs *innuere, trahere, se quaeri iubere, signum dare* (see n. 18 & 19 above).

concept that is positively connoted with: those in darkness, too, can strive for knowledge; those who are in the 'filth of the corporeal world', too, can, by singing a psalm, ask God to show them his face and can be saved; those who are sick, too, can love truth; those who are defeated and deformed in a fight can be beautiful too.

The dialogue setting thus presents an ontological scale that leads from the levels of reduced being up to the highest being, linking night or darkness to light or day, dirt to purity, sickness to health, defeat to victory, the ugly to the beautiful. With these manifestations of an all-encompassing order, the dialogue setting becomes a semiotic system in which even the ontologically deficient forms of phenomenon always also refer to something at the highest level, namely the omnipotent divine creator.

Platonic versus Manichaean coding of the 'setting text'

So let us now try to interpret the scenic design of the Augustinian dialogue 'On Order' with the eyes of a reader schooled in Manichaeism, that is, with an interpretive horizon that we can plausibly suppose to correspond to that of the 'Milan Augustinus' in the year 386.[23] As a basis for the 'new' interpretation of the scenic setting of *De ordine*, I make use of the repertoire of the Manichaean imagery and iconic or figurative language (*Bildersprache des Manichäismus*) which Victoria Arnold-Döben worked out in her 1978 Bonn doctoral dissertation. Her work includes a collection of the images and motifs, through which the anthropological and cosmological doctrine of salvation and the processes of redemption from the negative situation in which people presently find themselves, are presented and explained in the known Manichaean sources.[24]

With Johannes van Oort, I assume that Augustine was familiar with the Manichaean language of imagery, symbols and motifs.[25] This leads to the position that he also knew the communicative function and epistemological significance that was accorded in the Manichaean religion to the image, or to the motif represented in the image, or to the practice of illustrating things through narratives of myths, metaphors, comparisons and symbols.

Night and darkness, day and light, being awake, sickness and pain, healing by a 'doctor', the dirt of the body, purifying, alms, bridal chamber and bridegroom, psalm-singing, struggle, victory and defeat: these all correspond to the repertoire of motifs, images and symbols of the Manichaean mythological system.

However, there is an essential difference between the interpretive possibilities of the Manichaean language of images or motifs and the Augustinian hermeneutics of the 'setting-' or 'object-text' of *De ordine*. The difference between these systems of images and motifs can be shown most clearly by the examples of the oppositions of light-darkness and sickness-health.[26] According to the Manichaean cosmology, light and the stars are manifestations of the – really existing – realm of light and of God who is at work in it. The metaphors, too, are an expression of the cosmological and anthropological situation. The motifs and metaphors of the Manichaean myth thus illustrate a state in the real, material world and actual events.

In the semantic system of Augustine's *De ordine* the scenic setting is also interpreted as the result of an act of creation;[27] however, in the interpretation of its elements as signs, it is accorded 'only' a referential function. The signs 'admonish', 'call for', 'invite' the beholders to question what causes them to be as they are, and so to recognise the order in them. They thus do not directly illustrate what they refer to. Beyond or above them is a further area, which Augustine in the continuation of the discussion terms the 'other world' (I, 32: *alius mundus*), which can only be seen by the 'intellect', and which is equated with the 'kingdom of God' (see below 'The "place" of the "*malum*" in the world order'). The process of allegorical interpretation of the scenic setting is based on the notion that the objects of the sensual world are to be understood as *symbola*, as references that can be grasped by the senses, referring to the intelligible world, to which these 'signs' lead whoever knows how to interpret them.[28]

The scenic design of the dialogue setting of *De ordine* can thus be read as an extension of the Manichaean system of codes, and hence as a message addressed also to a Manichaean readership, something that is certainly to be expected in the years 386/7 in Milan.[29] Understood in this way, the text

23. The strikingly detailed scenic design of *De ordine* has often been interpreted in scholarship on the dialogue as a means of making visible the arguments presented in the discussion. Cf. for example, Schäfer (2001); Trelenberg (2009:136–139); Fuhrer (1997:12–14); Witek (2002). Until now, however, the scenic elements have not been read in light of the reference system formed by Manichaean motifs and images.

24. Arnold-Döben refers in her introduction to Hans Jonas, who claimed that imagery is the 'logos of gnosis', and to Alexander Böhlig's concept of a 'language of symbols' with which the workings of the 'gnostic system' is explained; on this, see also Hutter (2010:16–19). However, the distinction between image and motif gets blurred in this, as Oerter (1981) cautions in his review of Arnold-Döben (1978). It is also not asked what function was to be fulfilled by the visualisation of the myth in book illustrations and wall-paintings in Manichaean religion and liturgy: the visual representations are to actualise '*im Kult den Kampf des Lichtes gegen die Finsternis und die Läuterung des Lichtes aus der Finsternis.*' On this, see Hutter (2010:14f.); Lieu (1992:175f.).

25. Cf. for example, Van Oort (2010:510–513); a sceptical view is taken by Drecoll and Kudella (2011:17f. with n. 2). Another controversial question is what significance illustrated codices or other visual representations played in North African Manichaeism. It would be of interest for the questions pursued here to know to what extent Augustine knew this tradition, but it cannot be determined and is not of direct relevance.

26. On Augustine's use of the verbal field 'light' in the *Confessions* and its Manichaean connotations, cf. Kotzé (2004:205f.). Cf. also Vannier (2004–2010:1066f.).

27. The accounts of creation in Genesis can also be understood as mythological narratives.

28. The allegoresis of the material world and actual events is known to Augustine perhaps from the circles of Platonising Christians in which he moved in Milan. However, this method is first formulated fully in the theurgy and Homer allegoresis of the late Neoplatonist Proclus in the 5th century (on this see Miller 2009:31–35). It could also be asked to what extent Augustine's thought is also already shaped by the notion that the creation, according to Genesis 1f. is the result of the divine 'speech' and thereafter of God, as Augustine later repeatedly stresses with reference to Romans 1:20, is visible in the entire creation: created nature refers to God, it 'speaks' through him (cf. e.g. *Confessiones* X, 8); or God communicates the truth through the creation.

29. Not least from the fact that Licentius' father Romanianus remained a declared Manichaean.

operates with the codes familiar to a Manichaean and thus inscribes itself into Manichaean discourse.

Augustine's 'play' with Manichaean imagery and its repertoire of motifs must at the same time be interpreted as non- or even anti-Manichaean, however, because he strictly interprets the same motifs, images and symbols as references to – or imitation of – another reality that is purely good and intelligible. He creates a new semantics and a different function for these things, and transfers them from a mythological into an ontological system. In the *Confessions* he frequently terms the Manichaean myths as 'false visions' (*phantasmata*).[30] This term is apt when the motifs, images and symbols are accorded a real existence in the world experienced by the senses.[31] Augustine, in contrast, accords them a referential function only.

The oppositions on which these complexes of images and motifs are based are not set against each other as agonistic principles, but instead the 'negative' pole is the starting point of a development towards a 'positive' goal. Night, darkness, dirt, sickness, ugliness are understood as a state or properties that already also contain the aspect of the positive. The nocturnal discussion on the question of 'evil' in the world, the Psalm (sung in the latrine) as a prayer for a turn towards God, the perception of the aesthetic of the ugly are each attempts to recognise the divine order in which everything is ordered by God and leads to God.[32]

With Jason BeDuhn, this position can be termed monistic, hierarchic (with reference to its ontology), and providential, in contrast to the Manichaean position, which is agonistic and accidental.[33] The monistic-hierarchic position begins from the notion that, in the order of being, the material, sensually comprehensible world of objects can be transcended, on the one hand through the Platonic distinction between the sensual and the intelligible world, on the other through the Judaeo-Christian notion of the divine creation, according to which even unformed matter is created by God and partakes in the good.[34] Overall this results in an 'optimistic' interpretation of the world order[35] (which Augustine only later problematises with the theory of original and inherited sin).

30.*Confessiones* III, 10; IV, 9; IV, 12; V, 16; IX, 9; cf. *Contra epistulam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti liber unus* 18f. On this, Van Oort (1995:63f., 1997:241–243, 246, 2010:532, 536), who relates the concept to the Manichaean book illustrations and picture books. Cf. also Drecoll and Kudella (2011:152–154).

31.Augustine explicitly concludes this in *Confessiones* XII, 2. On this cf. BeDuhn (2010:181) who speaks of 'dualistic imagery'. Augustine opposes the materialist interpretation of the function of light in promoting knowledge in his later anti-Manichaean writings; on this, see Vannier (2004–2010:1067 with n. 13).

32.Even Augustine's stomach pains have a positive function, in that they impose a necessary moderation on the debate (cf. esp. I, 5; I, 26; I, 33). On this, cf. BeDuhn (2010:233). It should be asked what the function could be in a Manichaean interpretation of imagery of the water under the floor, the mouse, the wood with which Licentius scares it away, and other elements of the setting.

33.BeDuhn (2010:e.g. 233), '[*Augustine's*] consistent attention to such signs suggests an indication to see the world as ordered in a way that the Nicene Christian stress on divine omnipotence closely matched, while Manichaeism, with its more agonistic themes, did not'; 'The Manichaeans recognized that a dualistic universe would necessarily produce accidental outcomes. ... Augustine clearly chooses to leave behind this sort of fatalistic indeterminism for a more secure providential order of things. ... Since that complexity entails widely divergent degrees of goodness, its coordination is by definition hierarchical' (2010:265).

34.On this, BeDuhn (2010:284).

35.Thus BeDuhn (2010:257).

The 'place' of the '*malum*' in the world order

In the subsequent course of the dialogue *De ordine*, the combination of theoretical discussion and illustrative scene-setting is continued. On the second day, Augustine takes up the role of *advocatus diaboli* and invites Licentius to defend his thesis that the *malum*, too, is part of the divine order. As the two students oppose each other in a christological and trinitarian discussion, and Licentius then asks that this exchange not be written down, Augustine tries to ascribe a referential function to the dispute (I, 29): according to him, the situation shows that the students are stricken by 'bleary eyes' (*lippientibus oculis*) and 'sick madness' (*morbi dementia*), lying in dangers (*periculis*) and 'sunk' into the depths (*demersos, demersis*). The physically sick Augustine, who in daily prayers asks God for healing, pleads with the two youths (*obsecro*), to reward him for his love with a 'good deed' (*beneficium*), by making efforts towards being good (*boni estote*).

Augustine portrays himself in a situation of physical weakness and as a supplicant pleading with the immature students. Finally, he bursts into tears (I, 30). When Trygetius proposes that the passage that exposes their ignorance be allowed to stand – as a punishment for their striving after false glory (*maneat nostra poena*) – he is supporting Augustine's attempt to turn the negative development of the discussion towards the positive, and wishes to obey Augustine's exhortation to be good.

This series of aspects that, at least apparently, could be negatively connoted is continued when Augustine's mother is included in the group discussion: as a woman, she does not really belong in a philosophical dialogue, as she herself observes (I, 31). Nonetheless, she too is assigned a constructive role: insofar as she is guided by the *divinae scripturae*, she directs her 'love of wisdom' not towards 'this world' but the 'other world', the kingdom of God, and so she is an instructive model even for the instructor Augustine (I, 32).[36]

Overstating the situation somewhat, it can be said: the discussion group is composed of a physically and psychically weakened teacher, two immature, vain and naive students, and a pious woman. However, as they all direct their efforts towards the good and the truth, and so towards God, the group stands for the possibility of raising itself out of this position by correctly diagnosing weakness, sickness and danger and using them as the starting point on the way to true knowledge. According to the hermeneutic developed in the previous day's dialogue, these negative aspects have their specific function in the well-ordered whole; they are not symptoms of the contention of powers and, therefore, a negative and harmful situation, but the object of divine providence.[37]

36.With reference to John 18:36. Cf. also *Contra Academicos* III, 42; *Soliloquia* I, 3. On this, see Fuhrer (1997:453–455).

37.This is said explicitly in II, 1 and II, 11.

In the discussion in Book II of *De ordine*, the group attempts to support with further arguments the monist, and so anti-dualist, cosmology on which this 'praise of weakness' is based.[38] This is illustrated by the comparison of *stultitia* with darkness (II, 9f.), which is not itself perceptible and consequently is not an independent substance, but which must instead be explained by the absence of light; in analogy to this, *stultitia* can be defined as lack of *sapientia* (II, 9f.).[39] Trygetius uses the comparison for his explanation that the existence of the 'fools' (*vita stultorum*), too, has its 'place' (*locus*) in the providentially ruled world order (II, 11). This is developed further with a series of other examples: the divine order assigns a *locus* also to the executioners, prostitutes, pimps and ugly parts of the body (II, 12).

The goal for both the Manichaean and the Platonic-Nicene-Christian is thus similar: the acquisition of knowledge or gnosis, which is described by light metaphors according to the shared language of images or, according to the Manichaean mythological system, is equated to the purging of elements of the realm of darkness. The motifs and metaphors are likewise comparable: sickness, strife, sinking into the depths, 'madness', folly versus wisdom, liberation from ignorance, rules for the morally good life are all identical or similar. However there is a cardinal difference in the valuation of the state of deficit that precedes the achievement of knowledge. The object of knowledge is not the binary difference between light and dark, weak and strong, foolish and wise, good and evil or bad;[40] the goal is rather the ability to recognise the good in the 'bad', wisdom in folly, strength in weakness, and light in darkness.

Conclusion

The discussion in *De ordine* on the question of 'evil' in the world had ended in *aporia*, and when – after Augustine's *oratio perpetua* – night falls, the discussion is broken off (II, 54). However, all are happy and full of hope, and this optimistic perspective is underlined by the observation that the night lamp is brought in (*cum iam nocturnum lumen fuisset inlatum*).

This motif is conventional: evening brings an end also to the discussions in Cicero's dialogues and in Augustine's *Contra Academicos*.[41] However, the reference to the scene in the sleeping quarters at the start of *De ordine* and the allegoresis of it proposed in the discussion itself (I, 23), suggest in turn a symbolic interpretation: the 'nocturnal light', which is not 'caught' in the night, but which instead illuminates it, is not documenting a struggle between *worlds of* light and darkness, but corresponds to the happy and hopeful mood of the group.

Augustine's text – like every challenging literary text – leaves much open to interpretation and does not create an unambiguous message. I thus return to the reflections on method with which I began, which Augustine raises in the context of his Bible hermeneutics. Naturally I do not mean that my interpretation can make a claim of the 'truth' that here would correspond to the intention of the author – that, according to Augustine's hermeneutic, is how a profane text differs from the text of the Bible. Nonetheless, I hope that I was able to make a plausible case for my thesis: that the empirical author of *De ordine* expected a Manichaean readership, that he therefore coded the text in a Manichaean way, but that he gave these codes a new semantics, re-coding the language of motifs, images and symbols according to Platonic-Christian ontology and theology.

Acknowledgements

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38. In this 'praise of weakness' and 'of folly,' a jab can be seen at the Manichaean claim that only the *Electi* can embark on the path to gnosis. Cf. Fuhrer (2009:385–398).

39. Cf. *De beata vita* 29f.; on which, Torchia (1994). In one group of manuscripts with the text of *De ordine*, this idea is picked up one more time and formulated as a theory of privation (II, 23); however, the passage is very likely to be inauthentic, because it thus anticipates the solution. On this, see Trelenberg (2009:259).

40. Cf. *Cologne Mani Codex* (CMC) 84, 10–17. On this, Van Oort (1999:33f.).

41. Cicero, *De finibus* IV, 80; *De natura deorum* III, 94; Augustinus, *Contra Academicos* III, 44. On this, Trelenberg (2009:373).

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