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## AUGUSTINE'S TRANSFORMATION OF THE FREE WILL DEFENCE

Rowan A. Greer

Augustine's first conversion is to the Christian Platonism of his day, which brought along with it a free-will defence to the problem of evil. Formative as this philosophical influence was, however, Augustine's own experience of sin combines with his sense of God's sovereignty to lead him to modify the views he inherited in significant ways. This transformation is demonstrated by setting Augustine's evolving position against that of Gregory of Nyssa.

Truth! Truth! How the very marrow of my soul within me yearned for it as they [the Manichees]<sup>1</sup> dinned it in my ears over and over again! To them it was no more than a name to be voiced or a word to be read in their libraries of huge books. But while my hunger was for you, for Truth itself, these were the dishes on which they served me up the sun and the moon, beautiful works of yours but still only your works, not you yourself nor even the greatest of your created things....

Augustine, *Confessions* 3.6

So Augustine in his mid-forties looks back at the nineteen year old youth he once was. His reading of Cicero's *Hortensius* had persuaded him to abandon the study of the law with its dreams of a career in the imperial civil service and to become a teacher in order to embark upon the quest for truth. At least that is the way it looks to him in hindsight, and from the same perspective he sees that he had followed false paths until the child's voice heard in the garden at Milan commanded him to pick up Paul's letters and to read the thirteenth chapter of Romans. The conversion Augustine describes in Book 8 of the *Confessions* led to his resignation of the chair of rhetoric he held, to an extended retreat at Cassiciacum outside Milan where he wrote the earliest works that survive, and to his baptism in 387.

There can be no doubt that the Christianity Augustine embraced was the Christian Platonism we find in both Greek and Latin, in Ambrose and Marius Victorinus as well as in the Cappadocians. We should not, I think, imagine that Augustine first assents to neo-Platonism and then becomes Christian. Instead, it is his early conviction that Plato and his followers, were they to come to life again, would see in the church their



own message proclaimed persuasively to all.<sup>2</sup> Even the later Augustine does not abandon this perspective entirely. His lyrical description in *Confessions* 7 of what he finds in the "Platonic books" focusses upon the Platonic - or even the Plotinian - teaching about the soul. "These books" (almost certainly Marius Victorinus' Latin translations of Plotinus) "served to remind me to return to my own self." He discovers that God alone is absolute Being and Truth, while the soul exists and possesses truth and goodness only by participating in God.

In this way the void resulting from Augustine's rejection of Manichaeism disappears for him. He now sees that evil is not a substance, co-eternal with good, but instead is the deprivation of good. In other words, he now sees that the Christian Platonist ideal of contemplation and of the ascent of the soul to God is correlative with what we may call his version of the free will defence, involving as it does the idea of evil as the privation of good and so as "non-being."<sup>3</sup> To be sure, Augustine realizes that these Platonic ideas must be Christianized; and he points out that though the Platonic books conform to the prologue to John's Gospel, they lack any reference to the Word made flesh. Nevertheless, he has found a road map for his own life as a Christian. It remains for him to follow that map, a possibility given him by his conversion in the garden.<sup>4</sup>

That Augustine's conversion was to the Christian Platonism of his day finds clearest confirmation in the simple fact that his early writings contain no allusion to his later - and idiosyncratic - doctrines of original sin and prevenient grace. Let me cite some passages from *Of True Religion*, probably written in 393 and sent to Paulinus of Nola in 394 as part of what Paulinus called Augustine's "Pentateuch against the Manichees." In the treatise Augustine insists upon human freedom and does so by employing a metaphor he will later transform in terms of his predestinarian schema. The church is God's threshing floor. "On this floor everyone voluntarily makes himself either corn or chaff." (OTR vi.10) There is no question of a depravity inherited from Adam. It is only the "death of the body" that represents Adam's legacy. (OTR xii.25, xv.29) This legacy does not prevent humans from choosing the good. "[S]in is so much a voluntary evil that it is not sin at all unless it is voluntary." (OTR xiv.27)<sup>5</sup> "For divine providence has so moderated our punishment that even in this corruptible body it is permitted to us to work towards righteousness...." (OTR xv.29) To be sure, we need education and healing; but any Christian Platonist would say the same thing. The point is that the early Augustine has not yet concluded that we are born not only mortal but also spiritually dead and condemned to eternal damnation.

Similarly, the early Augustine contents himself with the usual Christian Platonist view that God persuades but never coerces. The Word incarnate "did nothing by violence, but everything by persuasion and warning." (OTR xvi.31) "His whole life on earth as Man, in the humanity he deigned to assume, was an education in morals." (OTR xvi.32) God has dispensed the two testaments like a wise physician, and we can remember that the ancients understood the doctor's work as a

persuasive art, necessarily limited by the exigencies of the disease. (OTR xvii.34) The persuasive character of God's providence expresses itself in the rewards and punishments that are consequent upon our exercise of freedom. Thus, neither the tree in paradise nor God's command not to eat of it were evil. Rather, the transgression of God's command was evil and so brought upon our first parents God's "just condemnation." That condemnation, however, carried with it something educative, sc. the power to distinguish good and evil. "When the soul has become involved in its sin, it learns, by paying the penalty, the difference between the precept it refused to obey and the sin which it committed. In this way it learns by suffering to know the evil it did not learn to know by avoiding it." (OTR xx.38) Augustine speaks of God's persuasive providence in a way that would be congenial to Origen or Gregory of Nyssa; he does not speak of God's prevenient or operative grace, a grace that cannot be resisted.<sup>6</sup>

If Augustine's early theology is Christian Platonist in character and lacks his later doctrines of original sin and operative grace, we must explain why he elaborates these later ideas. I wish to suggest that it is Augustine's increasing recognition that the Christian Platonist theology fails to fit his own experience in crucial ways that leads him towards his mature theology. Of course, he never repudiates Christian Platonism, but his novel ideas transform the view with which he begins. One can, I think, see this happening in his earliest writings. He wrote the *Soliloquies* at Cassiciacum in 386. In this work he reproduces the common idea that a period of moral purification will enable the soul to ascend to God; the soul's "eyes" will see God. But he also betrays his own despair of healing. There are dark forces within him that he can neither understand nor control, and they act as an obstacle to healing and so call into question the basic assumptions of the religious view to which he had committed himself.

If this interpretation is convincing, it follows that the first step Augustine takes is to explain his spiritual condition as the product of the Fall. The legacy of Adam involves more than mortality; it renders all humans incapable of good in any true sense. Moreover, our radical incapacity necessitates an appeal to God's sovereignty. The basic Christian Platonist pattern remains - we have been made to participate in God, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Him. (*Conf.* 1.1) But the restless heart from its birth moves away from God, deprived of good and full being. Only God's sovereign grace can reverse that movement of deprivation, and grace will finally become not only sovereign but also selective. What I am suggesting is that a double religious perspective explains Augustine's transformation of the Christian Platonist conventions. His deep sense of human incapacity, combined with an insistence upon God's sovereignty effects a sea change upon the theology he inherits. As will be seen, I wish to explain Augustine's development without appealing to the various polemical contexts for his writings. It seems to me misleading to suppose that he is a Pelagian in refuting the Manichees, and a Manichee in refuting to Pelagians.<sup>7</sup> It is, therefore, with this general assessment of Augustine's

development in mind that I wish to examine *On Free Will*. This treatise seems to me transitional, moving towards the mature view. Perhaps more important, it enables us to understand how Augustine transforms the Christian Platonist theodicy.

*Gregory of Nyssa's Christian Platonist Theodicy*

Before turning to *On Free Will*, however, let me seek to describe the view of evil that Gregory of Nyssa elaborates in his *Catechetical Oration*. We cannot claim, of course, that Augustine knew this work, even though he does seem to have read some of the Cappadocians' writings in Latin translation.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, there are several reasons for starting with Gregory's theodicy. In its main outline it articulates the view we find everywhere, even in the early Augustine's works. Moreover, Gregory clearly treats the view as one that should be taught to those preparing for baptism; the *Catechetical Oration* purports to outline the instructions catechists are to give. Thus, we are dealing with a religious view that Gregory supposes to be the church's teaching for all its members. Finally, and perhaps paradoxically, the theology Gregory elaborates presses the logic of the free will defence in a direction quite the opposite of the one Augustine will take.

The *Catechetical Oration* begins with an account of the Trinity and of creation. God created humanity so that humans could share in God's goodness. Gregory presupposes that the image of God is the created likeness that enables us to know God, who is the Good, and to translate that knowledge into virtue. Towards the end of section 5 he points out that "our present situation" does not correspond to the ideal picture he has drawn. Instead, we find that "human life is at present in an unnatural condition." He resolves the problem thus raised by treating a mutable freedom as the cause of evil (CO 5; LCC 3, pp. 277f.):

The existence of evil did not have its origin in the divine will. For no blame, indeed, would attach to evil, could it claim God as its creator and father. But evil in some way arises from within. It has its origin in free will, when the soul withdraws from the good. For as sight is an activity of nature and blindness is a privation of natural activity, so virtue is in this way opposed to vice. Just as darkness follows the removal of light and disappears in its presence, so, as long as goodness is present in a nature, evil is something nonexistent.... Since, then, it is the mark of free will to choose independently what it wants, God is not the cause of your present woes. For he made your nature independent and free. The cause is rather your thoughtlessness in choosing the worse instead of the better.

By "evil" Gregory means the evil we do and not the evil we suffer. By "free will" (*proairesis*) he means our capacity to choose, and he thinks of that capacity as the soul's movement towards good or towards evil. We do not, I think, have any notion of the will as a human faculty in contrast

to the intellect. Instead, the will is the activity of the soul or personality in choosing.

Gregory continues his argument by saying that vice and evil are not, properly speaking, the opposites of virtue and good. Rather, they are privations and so have no *independent* existence. It is in this sense, first of all, that evil is "non-being." We must add two points. First, to say that evil is the privation of good and has no independent ontological status need not mean that evil has no reality or that it is purely passive in character. "If a man in broad daylight of his own free will closes his eyes, the sun is not responsible for his failure to see." (CO 7) Gregory, in this way, can treat evil as a rebellion against the good and so leave room for the Biblical idea of sin as rebellion against God. Second, it is not only humans who misuse their mutable freedom to deprive themselves of good, but also Satan and his angels who do so. Gregory complicates the Platonist view by tying it to the Biblical story. Adam and Eve are, to be sure, responsible for their disobedience; but the temptation of Satan is an explanation of the Fall and so supplies a mitigating factor. Despite these complications we can describe Gregory's view as follows: God is not the cause of evil; rather, the misuse of a mutable freedom by angels and humans to turn from God, good, and being towards evil and non-being is the cause of evil.

The question that obviously presents itself is why angels and humans should misuse their capacity to choose the good. Gregory has nothing to say from this point of view about the angels. Unlike Augustine he fails to worry about why creatures who presumably know the good should fail to act upon that knowledge. With respect to humanity, however, Gregory has a persuasive answer. In the passage I have cited above he speaks of "thoughtlessness." Later in the *Catechetical Oration* he explains our choice of evil by using the story of Aesop's dog, who drops the real bone to seize its reflection in the water. (CO 21) The implication, surely, is that the choice of evil is really a mistake about the good. No one deliberately chooses evil (*pace* the later Augustine and Milton's Satan, who says "evil be thou my good."). Instead, our immaturity leads us to choose a specious good instead of the true good. Ignorance correlates with vice the way knowledge does with virtue. Like the child who has the capacity to walk but can learn to exercise that capacity only by stumbling, so we have the capacity to choose the good but learn to use it only by trial and error. In other words, Gregory explains evil by placing it in a narrative of human development.

One further point can be made. Immediately before his reference to Aesop's dog Gregory argues that as creatures we are always subject to change and that change takes two forms. As a movement towards the good "its progress is continual, since there is no conceivable limit to the distance it can go." If the Good is infinite, we can progress towards it forever. On the other hand, Gregory implies that since evil is somehow bounded by good, our movement towards it is limited. In this way he lays one foundation for his spiritual ideal of *epektasy* (perpetual progress in the good) and for his universalism.<sup>9</sup> In the long run everyone, even Satan, will mature and learn to walk the path that leads to infinite

Good, to God. And, of course, it is God who heals and trains freedom for this end. We must, then, turn to Gregory's understanding of God's providence.

If free will explains the origin of evil, we must ask how God responds to the evil thus introduced into a good creation. Gregory's answer to this question hinges upon the necessity of admitting that God *permits* evil. That is, if God gave the mutable freedom misused by angels and humans, we are obliged to say that while he does not cause evil, he permits it. The mother who gives the keys of the car to her sixteen year old boy does not cause the accident; but she does permit it. God's permission of evil, then, represents a voluntary relinquishment of his sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> Gregory ties this idea to an Origenist understanding of the relation of providence to freedom. Providence is not antecedent to freedom, but in the first instance simply supplies the context in which we exercise freedom. It is a general and universal divine operation, and it is persuasive in character. God's providence like a parent's love does not compel. The effect of God's providence, however, differs depending upon how we use it. Rightly used, providence benefits us; wrongly used, it has a punitive effect. And since the punishment is one we bring upon ourselves, it is justly retributive. But it is also, mysteriously, remedial. God's punishments are always healing and educative; the same Greek word means both punishment and education. In the *Catechetical Oration* Gregory employs this schema to explain Satan's fate. His punishment is justly retributive; the deceiver is himself deceived. But it is also remedial; Christ "freed man from evil, and healed the very author of evil himself." (CO 26)

Gregory, I think, sees clearly that his view amounts to a denial that God remains in sovereign control of evil. To be sure, one could argue that a self-limitation is not a true limitation; but there can be no question that God abandons his exercise of sovereignty, and equally no question that he will regain his full sovereignty only when he has *persuaded* all to be *voluntarily* subject to himself. Gregory, however, takes one further step. He suggests that, paradoxically, God's apparent loss of sovereignty may in fact be a sign of his true power. The Pauline paradox of power effected through weakness may lie behind his argument. The incarnation is God's chief remedy for evil. Just as we are not surprised by a flame that shoots upwards but regard a flame moving downwards as a marvel, so we are more amazed that God embraced the weakness of our nature than that he created the universe. (CO 24) Perhaps we can say that a sovereignty effected by persuasion has more value than one brought about by coercion.

As we shall see, many of the conventions Gregory employs and all the conclusions he draws from them pose serious difficulties for Augustine. At the human level, can we explain our choice of evil as an immature mistake about the good? Do we never knowingly choose evil? Will all be saved? At the divine level, can we admit that God abandons his sovereignty? Is providence merely persuasive? Are God's punishments always remedial? These questions lead Augustine to transform and so to obscure the view that Gregory elaborates. Gregory's theory, as

a theory, is fairly impressive. To put it in terms of the way people have usually posed the question of theodicy since the time of Epicurus,<sup>11</sup> in the short run Gregory insists upon God's goodness and the existence of evil, but denies God's omnipotence. In the long run, however, he insists upon God's goodness and omnipotence, but denies that there will be any evil. Evil is non-being not merely because it has no independent existence, but also because it has no final existence. Gregory's solution depends upon placing his theodicy in the context of a narrative. We can make the same judgement with respect to Augustine. But the stories, though both Christian, are quite different.

### *Augustine's On Free Will*

In his *Retractions* (I.ix) Augustine describes his treatise as follows:

While we were still delayed at Rome we determined to discuss the question of the origin of evil. The principle on which the discussion was to proceed was this. We were to try if possible to let rational argument, so far as we could with God's help in our discussion, demonstrate to our intellects what we already believed about the matter on divine authority. After careful reasoning we agreed that evil has no other origin than in the free choice of the will.

It seems to me that we can take this description seriously. The treatise itself begins with Evodius' question: "Tell me, pray whether God be not the author of evil." In other words, the treatise is primarily an attempt to think through and to raise questions about the Christian Platonist free will defence and only secondarily a polemical response to Manichaeism. It seems unlikely that it is one of the anti-Manichaean treatises known to Paulinus of Nola in 394, since Augustine sends it to Paulinus a year or more later. (*Epist.* 31) Moreover, even though Augustine in his *Retractions* goes on to tell us that he began the treatise in 387/388 while still in Rome but completed Books II and III in Africa after his ordination to the priesthood in 391 (possibly as late as 395 or 396), nevertheless he gives no indication that his view changes during the writing of the treatise.

For these reasons I wish to argue for two basic presuppositions. First, we cannot explain tensions and apparent contradictions in the work by appealing to a change in Augustine's views during the writing of the treatise. Second, we should not be misled by some of his other remarks in the *Retractions* so as to treat the work as primarily a treatise against the Manichees. To be sure, Augustine is embarrassed by the use of the treatise by the Pelagians to show that Augustine was "pleading their cause." He rebuts this claim by denying his views changed and by claiming that "even in these books *On Free Will* which were written not at all against them, for they did not yet exist, but against the Manichees, I have not been completely silent about the grace of God, which in their horrible impiety they are endeavouring to abolish." This retrospective

judgement says more about the later place of the treatise in the Pelagian controversy than about its original purpose. And, I think, while Augustine is correct that its argument does not support the Pelagians, he is disingenuous to suggest that its point of view can be identified with his mature view. In sum, we need to examine *On Free Will* as an exploration of the Christian Platonist free will defence, designed to uncover its weaknesses by pressing its logic.

The structure of the argument demonstrates that Augustine is willing, at one level, to accept the free will defence. Book I carefully shows that evil in the true sense is the evil we do rather than the evil we suffer and that it is the product of voluntary wrong-doing. In other words, God does not cause evil; rather the misuse of a mutable freedom is the cause of evil. Augustine elaborates this view by defining voluntary wrong-doing as a violation of the eternal law stamped upon our minds, a violation that prevents the mind from fulfilling its task as the governing principle of the body and the bodily passions. This positive exposition, however, yields a problem which Augustine addresses in I.xii.24ff. and to which he returns in III.xvii.47. What I wish to suggest is that Augustine accepts the usual explanation but believes that it fails to explain *why* humans (and angels) would misuse God's gift of free will.

Augustine is more concerned to demonstrate that God is not the cause of evil, even indirectly by giving free will. The argument of Book II insists that God exists (iii.7-xv.39), that all good things are from God (xv.40-xvii.46), and that free will "is to be numbered among the things which are good." (xviii.47-xx.54) In one sense, the argument boils down to the assertion that God's gift of free will was designed to enable us to cleave to "the unchangeable good" and so find happiness and that the misuse of the gift does not affect its goodness. At the same time, Augustine also implies that the misuse of freedom in no way compromises God's sovereignty, a point he argues in III.v.12-xvi.46. Once again Augustine accepts the free will defence as a way of denying that God is the cause of evil, but he carefully avoids speaking of God's permission of evil. A second problem, then, emerges. Granted that evil originates in the misuse of God's gift of freedom, can we maintain that God remains sovereign once evil has entered his creation? It begins to look as though faith cannot find full understanding. The argument has become so "circuitous" that it is not fully convincing.<sup>12</sup>

Let me turn to the first of the problems that Augustine's argument raises. Why do humans misuse their freedom?<sup>13</sup> In Book I Augustine repeatedly emphasizes the capacity of free will for good. The "ruling mind" cannot be compelled to desert virtue by what is superior, since what is superior must also be just. Nor can it be subverted by anything inferior to it, since what is inferior must be weak. "So our argument teaches us: Nothing makes the mind a companion of cupidity, except its own will and free choice." (I.xi.21) Nothing is so completely "within the power of the will" as the will itself; and one may, therefore, have a good will "by willing it simply." (I.xii.26) By pressing the logic of the Christian Platonist understanding of free will Augustine arrives at the following conclusion (I.xiii.29):

Hence it follows that whoever wishes to live rightly and honourably, if he prefers that before all fugitive and transient goods, attains his object with perfect ease. In order to attain it he has to do nothing but to will it.

This conclusion means that happiness is within our easy grasp, and Evodius says he "can hardly refrain from shouting for joy, when I find I can so quickly and so easily obtain so great a good."

But Evodius has been trapped, and his joyful shout is premature. Augustine's argument, I think, is made of straw. Though consistent and logical, it shatters against the realities of our world. If we can find happiness so easily, "[w]hy, then, do not all obtain it?" Clearly all people wish to be happy, but equally clearly most are unhappy. Why? Augustine answers the question as follows (I.xiv.30):

So when we say that men are unhappy voluntarily, we do not mean that they want to be unhappy, but that their wills are in such a state [*in ea voluntate sunt*] that unhappiness must follow even against their will.

What does he mean? My suggestion is that Augustine here introduces a novel distinction between "free will" (*liberum arbitrium*) and the "will" (*voluntas*). He repeatedly uses the expression "the free choice of the will," and in this way treats the relation of the two terms as correlative with motive and act. That is, "will" is a way of speaking of what motivates our "free choices."<sup>14</sup>

We can argue, further, that by "will" Augustine does not mean a distinct human faculty as though we could oppose the will to the intellect. On the contrary, he simply elaborates the Christian Platonist understanding of free will by distinguishing choice from the fundamental posture or orientation of the mind that motivates choices.<sup>15</sup> Thus, we remain able to choose happiness; but this choice is blocked and undermined by our condition and our fundamental orientation. The evil or perverse will (II. xiv.37) is, then, a way of speaking of our "penal state" of ignorance and difficulty. We are unable to know the good and incapable of doing it. (III.xviii.51-52) This is our inheritance from Adam and explains why "man [sic] cannot rise of his own free will as he fell by his own will spontaneously." What remains is to "hold with steadfast faith the right hand of God stretched out to us above, even our Lord Jesus Christ." (II.xx.54)

Even though Augustine articulates his view in somewhat different terms from those we find later in the *City of God*, the *Enchiridion*, and the anti-Pelagian writings, there can be little doubt that his problem with the free will defence has led him to a doctrine of original sin. We inherit from Adam not only mortality but also an incapacity for the good which vitiates even our choices of happiness. The Christian Platonist idea that we have the capacity of choosing good or evil now attaches only to Adam and Eve before the fall.<sup>16</sup> An obvious problem follows (III.xix. 53):

If Adam and Eve sinned, what have we miserable creatures done to deserve to be born in the darkness of ignorance and in the toils of difficulty, that, in the first place, we should err not knowing what we ought to do, and, in the second place, that when the precepts of justice begin to be opened out to us, we should wish to obey them but by some necessity of carnal lust should not have the power?

Augustine replies to this objection by appealing to those who have been "victorious over error and lust" by seeking God's help. Though we are radically incapacitated by the fall, the one capacity we retain is the ability "to turn to God, and so overcome the punishment which had been merited by the original turning away from God...." (III.xix.53-xx.55)

If Augustine's first problem with the free will defence (*why* do we misuse a mutable freedom?) leads him to a doctrine of original sin, the second problem (how can we square God's sovereignty with the existence of evil?) does not at first seem to produce so radical a step. The implication of the passage to which I have just referred is that God's help and grace are available to all who seek it. We do not yet have Augustine's later view of prevenient or sovereign grace. Here we can summon grace; later it will be only grace that can summon us. At the same time, we do find in *On Free Will* the insistence upon God's sovereignty that contains the seeds of the later view. The first part of Book III reflects Augustine's preoccupation with this theme. He begins by arguing that God's foreknowledge of sin cannot be equated with his foreordination of sin. We do not determine what we remember. Similarly, God does not determine what he foresees. (III.ii.4ff.; III.iv.9-11) God, of course, is eternal; and so "He determined once for all how the order of the universe he created was to go on, and he never changes his mind." (III.iii.6) Evodius may not be putting the point as clearly as he might, but Augustine would accept the idea that God orders the universe in a sovereign way. At the same time, we can distinguish two forms of ordering (III.v.17):

Reason judges by the light of truth, and correctly subordinates lesser things to those that are greater. Utility, guided by experience of convenience, often attributes a higher value to things which reason convinces us are of lesser rank.

While he does not make the correlation clear, Augustine appears to have this sort of distinction in mind when he speaks of God's ordering of the moral universe. "All must be contemplated in the light of the perfection of the universe." This implies that had there been no sin God would have ordered the universe according to reason, placing each being in its proper place in the whole. But the universe "is no less perfect because there is misery for sinners." Again by implication, the order of utility integrates sin into the total picture. "Hence the penal state is imposed to bring it into order, and is therefore in itself not dishonourable. Indeed it

compels the dishonourable state to become harmonized with the honour of the universe, so that the penalty of sin corrects the dishonour of sin." (III.ix.25-26)

Augustine leaves open the possibility that evil might not have entered creation. But his concern is to argue that its entrance in no way compromises God's sovereignty. God "did not make them [all natures] in order that they might sin, but that whether they willed to sin or not to sin they might be ornaments of the universe." (III.xi.32) Moreover, there "is no interval of time between failure to do what ought to be done and suffering what ought to be suffered, lest for a single moment the beauty of the universe should be defiled by having the uncomeliness of sin without the comeliness of penalty." (III.xv.44) Only small steps are necessary to take these ideas to the conclusions that Augustine will later draw. God's ordering of the universe involves the ordering of good and evil together to make up a total good. This means that evil is no longer non-being but is instead the antithesis of good.<sup>17</sup> And it explains how God, at least in the first instance brings good out of evil; he does so by punishing evil and so making it subject to his sovereign ordering of the universe. These ideas, however, are more implicit than explicit in *On Free Will*.

### Conclusion

Let me begin by seeking to summarize my argument. In *On Free Will* Augustine accepts the Christian Platonist free will defence as the faith he seeks to understand. By pressing its logic he finds two problems that do not lead him to abandon the view but that do require him to modify it. The first of these problems is *why* we misuse our freedom. His attempt to solve this difficulty leads him to a distinction between free choice and the will, as the basic orientation of the mind, and to a doctrine of original sin, sc. that we inherit from Adam not only mortality but an incapacity for the good. The second of these problem is how to reconcile the existence of evil with God's sovereignty. His solution does not deny the availability of divine assistance and grace, since the one capacity we retain after the fall is the ability to seek God's help. But he does argue that God remains sovereign even after the introduction of evil into the universe, because God by punishing evil orders it together with its antithesis good to make up a total good. The solutions Augustine offers do not, I think, reject the free will defence. But they do restrict it to Adam and Eve before the fall, and they have the effect of giving a sea change to the usual Christian Platonist view.

Within a year or two of *On Free Will* Augustine adopts his mature view of operative or sovereign grace, thus completing his mature theodicy. That view is really intelligible only when placed in a narrative context. I should describe it as follows. God created Adam and Eve "upright," capable of knowing the good and so exercising their mutable freedom so as to do the good. They had the possibility of not sinning, and by saying this Augustine means that they were created so that they could easily actualize the possibility. We cannot explain why they failed to do so any more than we can explain why the evil angels, created to

know the good, fell and failed to do the good. Indeed, Augustine sees the horror of the fall as tied to its meaninglessness and to the fact we cannot explain it. We cannot explain why Adam, knowing the good, would fail to do it; nor can we find any efficient cause of the evil will that motivated his disobedience. Evil, then, though the product of angelic and human misuse of created freedom, is in the final analysis inexplicable. But its consequence for us, who inherit Adam's penalty, is catastrophic. We are born mortal, spiritually dead and so incapable of good, and doomed to eternal death. We might suppose that God has in this way lost control of his universe. Not so. God orders evil together with good, integrating evil into the total good of the universe. And he does this by punishing evil, thereby subjecting it to his sovereignty and bringing good out of evil. Nevertheless, quite gratuitously God demonstrates his mercy by selecting some humans out of the mass of perdition for redemption. His prevenient grace frees their wills from bondage to sin and so enables them to begin to turn towards the good. Grace, therefore, is selective and sovereign. The elect remain convalescent in this life, but in the age to come they find their place with the blessed angels in the City of God where they will have the impossibility of sinning. The final picture is one of the two cities ordered together by God to make up a total good.

What are we to make of this picture? The free will defence has not disappeared, but Augustine has restricted it to an explanation of the origin of evil. And the story he has elaborated raises, I think, theoretical difficulties impossible to resolve. It is difficult to avoid concluding that human freedom has disappeared. To be sure, Augustine can argue that we retain the capacity to choose even though that capacity is now restricted to the choice of evil. But this scarcely seems convincing. If we have no capacity for the good, surely we can give no satisfactory account of the moral universe. Vice and virtue, reward and punishment become meaningless terms; and all the stock arguments used by the church fathers to defend free will come into play. Still more difficult, do we not have two contradictory theories of evil? From the point of view of its origin evil is the privation of good and has no ontological status. But in terms of God's dealings with evil, it *is* something, sc. the antithesis of good. The privation/non-being theory implies that evil need not exist. The antithesis/ordering theory implies the necessity of evil in a chiaroscuro vision of the universe. Finally, what sort of God emerges? If God's permission of evil is forced into an equation not with his good relinquishment of sovereignty but with his sovereign bringing of good out of evil by punishing it, then it is hard to see that God is good as well as omnipotent.

In sum, it seems to me that the story Augustine tells ends by obscuring the free will defence and by introducing logical and philosophical absurdities into his theodicy. At the same time, this is not what I wish to conclude. In my view, it is a mistake to treat Augustine as a philosopher. He surely is aware of the difficulties I have listed. His concern, I should argue, is not to construct a persuasive theory, but to find a way of articulating his deepest religious convictions. He finds in himself an

incapacity for good that leads him to suppose he cannot in any way help himself. But the miracle is that God has helped him, broken his chains, given him the medicine that will work for his cure in the age to come. Augustine's theology, as I think, is designed to explain this experience. Looked at as a set of theories his theology is unpersuasive and repellent. Treated as a way of arguing that though we cannot help ourselves God in Christ has helped us, his theology takes on a persuasive character despite the theoretical and philosophical problems it raises.

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## NOTES

1. The Manichees were dualists, believed in a first principle of evil, and identified matter and the body with evil. In the west they tended to appear as a dualistic form of Christianity. See the discussion in Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 46ff.

2. See *Of True Religion* iv. 6-7 (LCC 6, p. 229): "If Plato and the rest of them, in whose names men glory, were to come to life again and find the churches full and the temples empty, and that the human race was being called away from desire for temporal and transient goods to spiritual and intelligible goods and to the hope of eternal life, and was actually giving its attention to these things, they would perhaps say ... That is what we did not dare to preach to the people.... So if these men could live their lives again today ... they would become Christians, as many Platonists of recent times have done."

3. I should perhaps add that the Christian Platonist version of the free will defence depends upon arguing that God alone is absolute good. Thus, the good for creatures depends upon participation in God; evil is the privation of this participation.

4. I am, of course, thinking of *Confessions* 7.21: "It is one thing to descry the land of peace from a wooded hilltop and, unable to find the way to it, struggle on through trackless wastes where traitors and runaways, captained by their prince, who is *lion and serpent* in one, lie in wait to attack. It is another thing to follow the high road to that land of peace, the way that is defended by the care of the heavenly Commander."

5. In his *Retractions* Augustine tries to get round the obvious meaning of this passage. (See LCC 6, p. 219) His attempt to argue that his opinions have not changed seems scarcely persuasive.

6. Augustine's later view is that because of original sin humans can no longer will the good. Only God's grace can free them from their bondage to sin. Thus, grace is a sovereign act of God that comes before (is preventive of) any human movement towards good. More generally, Augustine sees grace as sovereign throughout the Christian life. Hence, the term "operative grace" can refer to God's grace both before and after election has taken place, that is, to the grace of perseverance as well as to preventive grace. The main point is that the later Augustine, at least by implication, understands grace as coercive rather than persuasive.

7. The Pelagians insisted that we must make the first move towards God, after which He comes to our assistance. This view can be taken so far as to suggest that God's grace is restricted to the law which, in principle,

humans can obey. Thus, it is easy to associate an insistence upon free will with Pelagianism and to equate the Manichaean view with a denial of freedom. An insistence upon freedom refutes Manichaean dualism, while refuting the Pelagians might seem to require a denial of freedom. The Pelagians used Augustine's *On Free Will* to refute his later view. Augustine's response in his *Retractions* is to deny that his view has changed and to say that the apparent contradiction may be explained by the anti-Manichaean purpose of *On Free Will*. Thus, Augustine is himself partly responsible for attempts to explain his thought primarily by reference to its polemical contexts.

8. See Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (London: Burns & Oates, 1970), pp. 116, 149f., 294-96.

9. By universalism I mean two things. First, Gregory is clear in stating his conviction that evil has no final existence. See, e.g. *On Making of Man* 21.2 (NPNF 2.5, p. 411): "... as evil does not extend to infinity, but is comprehended by necessary limits, it would appear that good once more follows in succession upon the limit of evil..." Gregory continues by employing the analogy of an eclipse, arguing that the conical shadow caused by the eclipse is bounded by light on all sides. Second, universalism means that all, even Satan, will be saved. Punishments after death will be remedial. See *Catechetical Oration* 26 (LCC 3, p. 204): "In this present life patients whose cure involves surgery and cautery grow incensed at their physicians when they smart under the pain of the incision. But if by these means they are restored to health and the pain of the cautery passes off, they will be grateful to those who effected their cure. It is the same with the evil which is now mingled with our nature and has become a part of it. When, over long periods of time, it has been removed and those now lying in sin have been restored to their original state, all creation will join in united thanksgiving, both those whose purification has involved punishment and those who never needed purification at all." Cf. CO 35.

10. See *Catechetical Oration* 15: "Why, then, if he [God] loved man, did he not wrest him from the opposing power and restore him to his original state by some sovereign and divine act of authority [*di'authentikes tinou kai theikes exousias*]. ...? See also *Catechetical Oration* 24: "... that the omnipotent nature [*pantodynamon physin*] was capable of descending to man's lowly position is a clearer evidence of power [*dynameos*] than great and supernatural miracles." Gregory does not deny that God's nature is almighty [*pantodynamon*], but he argues that this omnipotence at the level of redemption expresses itself in persuasive rather than coercive ways, in weakness rather than in strength.

11. As cited by Lactantius in *De Ira Dei* 13 (ANF 7, p. 271): "God, he [Epicurus] says, either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able; or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble ... if He is able and unwilling, He is envious ... if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble ... if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them?"

12. For the theme of "faith seeking understanding" see I.ii.4, I.xi.23, II.i.1, II.ii.5, II.xv.39. The "circuitous" (*in tantos circuitus disputationis*) character of the guest appears at II.xviii.47. Cf. *De trinitate* 15.28 where Augustine's conclusion to the treatise would appear to be that faith in the Trinity cannot find sufficient understanding, at least in this life.

13. Augustine does not here treat the fall of the angels. Cf. *City of God* 11.11, 12.6, 12.9 where he cannot explain why the evil angels fell. Were the angels created unequal? Did some receive more grace than the others?

14. This interpretation depends partly upon resisting the temptation to understand *voluntas* as a faculty (the will) distinguishable from the intellect. It seems to me important to remember that *voluntas* can mean "wish" or "desire." *On Free Will* I.xii.25 demonstrates that Augustine thinks of *voluntas* as an attitude, the desire of the mind: "Ev.— What is a good will? Aug.— A will to live rightly and honorably and to reach the highest wisdom. Just see whether you do not desire (*adpetas*) to live a right and honourable life, whether you do not eagerly desire to be wise (*esse sapiens velis*), or whether at least you would venture to deny that when we wish (*volumus*) such things we have a good will." *On Free Will* I.xiii.27 associates the "good will" with the cardinal virtues, which are *adfectiones animae*. Thus, the "will" is equated with the mind's desire and the good will with the virtues. *On Free Will* II.i.3 suggests that this desire motivates our actions: *si enim homo aliquod bonum est et non posset, nisi cum vellet, recte facere, debuit habere liberam voluntatem, sine qua recte facere non posset*. See also II.ii.4: *Sic nemo posset per voluntatem peccare, si voluntas data est ad recte faciendum*.

15. Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind, Volume Two: Willing* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), pp. 87 and 93f., where she argues that Augustine contrasts will and performance. She regards Augustine as "the first philosopher of the will" and begins her discussion by describing the way Augustine sees the will as divided against itself. She distinguishes Augustine's idea from Aristotle's doctrine of "deliberation" by arguing that Augustine's will is concerned with ends, whereas Aristotle is speaking of means. (p. 96) Let me cite portions of two of her summations. P. 95: "First: the split within the Will is a conflict, and not a dialogue, and it is independent of the content that is willed. A bad will is no less split than a good one and vice versa. Second: the will as commander of the body is no more than an executive organ of the mind and as such quite unproblematic...." P. 104: 'To summarize: this Will of Augustine's, which is not understood as a separate faculty but in its function within the mind as a whole, where all single faculties—memory, intellect, and will—are "mutually referred to each other," finds its redemption in being transformed into Love.' If Augustine distinguishes *liberum arbitrium* from *voluntas*, he also distinguishes both from *libertas*. Freedom refers to the healed will and to the overcoming of its division by cleaving to God. See *On Free Will* II.xii.37: "Herein is our liberty, when we are subject to truth. And Truth is our God who liberates us from death, that is, from the condition of sin."

16. Note II.xx.54 where he says he does not know the cause of Adam's choice—cf. the end of the Book III where we have immaturity as a possible explanation, but one he does not use in the earlier argument.

17. It might be possible to reconcile evil as the privation of good with evil as the contrary of good. Indeed, this would be one way to read Plotinus, *Ennead* 1.8. Here Plotinus accepts the idea that evil is privation and non-being—but not non-being in an absolute sense (1.8.3: *outi to pantelos me on*). But he wishes to get round the Aristotelian arguments that privation can only exist in a subject and so cannot have independent existence, and that existing things need not have contraries. He does so by arguing that evil as the total privation of good is the last limit of the procession of reality from the One. (1.8.7) Thus, evil, while not the equal opposite of good, is its contrary, since it is located at the lowest point in the great chain of being. Plotinus' discussion refers to *Theaetetus* 176a, where Socrates says: "Evils, Theodorus, can never be done away with, for the good must always have its contrary; nor have they any place in the divine world; but they must needs haunt this region of our mortal nature." Plotinus' argument remains in many

respects puzzling. See J.M. Rist's discussion "The Descent of the Soul" in *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 112ff. It seems to me doubtful that Plotinus is the major source of Augustine's notion of evil as the antithesis of good. E. TeSelle's observations about the theme of "order" in Augustine are helpful. See *op. cit.* p. 118: 'When Augustine uses the term *ordo* it soon loses the Ciceronian and Plotinian meanings it had in the early dialogues and comes to be employed almost exclusively in a rather different sense, probably conveyed through Varro. ... Order in this sense consists, then, in the "coordination" of component parts or the "right ordering" of one's own attention and affection.' See also his discussion of Augustine's understanding of providence (pp. 219ff.), where God's extrinsic governance includes the "Permission and overruling evil."