

Augustine on God, Free Will and Evil

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of Augustine's doctrine of free will and evil from his early work *On the Free Choice of the Will* to his mature work *The City of God*. While Augustine initially attributes the origin of evil to the misuse of human free will in order to defend God's justice, this early position faces philosophical inconsistencies—especially regarding divine foreknowledge, the nature of free will, and its compatibility with grace. In *The City of God*, Augustine reformulates his position by emphasizing divine predestination and introducing a historical-philosophical framework, wherein God permits evil temporarily to fulfill a greater good in the divine order. The paper argues that this doctrinal evolution reflects not only Augustine's polemical and exegetical needs, but also an inherent philosophical movement toward greater internal coherence. Nevertheless, Augustine's mature doctrine also raises new theological and existential dilemmas, such as the limited scope of salvation and the burden of moral uncertainty under predestination.

1. Introduction

The origin of evil¹ is a philosophical and theological problem that plagued Augustine throughout his life. Since the pear theft incident when Augustine was a child, this problem had been driving Augustine's thinking and first led him to neo-Platonic philosophy, then to Manichaeism, and finally Christianity (Brown 2013).² Even after converting to Christianity, Augustine didn't stop reflecting on this problem and modifying his answer to it. Where does evil come from? Should God be responsible for it? Should we blame it on humans' free will? If evil comes from free will, then can we get rid of evil through free will? Augustine must respond to these questions in order to understand evil.

Usually, Augustine is viewed as a Christian theologian of "free will" and scholars tend to believe that it is a typical Augustinian doctrine to blame the origin of evil on free will and hence argue that God is not responsible for it (Brown 1978; Willows 2014). However, a more careful examination of Augustine's writings in different periods shows that this reading is oversimplified.

¹ The origin of evil is different from the Christian concept "original sin." In saying "the origin of evil", I mean "where evil comes from."

² See Augustine's self-statement in his *Confessions*, especially II.6.

On the Free Choice of the Will (FW), one of his typical early works, is distinct from City of God (CG), his mature magnum opus, in the doctrine of free will and evil. For example, although in CG Augustine doesn't abandon the view that evil comes from free will and even extends this doctrine to the evil of the fallen angels, he now puts the issue of the origin of evil into a larger picture of grace and predestination. When God creates *ex nihilo*, God has precisely predestined that some would be saved with grace and others not. Also, God has already foreknown that Adam and Eve will sin by misusing their free will, and the sin will be inherited by all mankind (except Jesus) until the Last Judgment. Augustine doesn't elaborate on these doctrines in FW. It is fair to claim that the role of free will is very different in CG compared with his earlier works. At least, Augustine feels reluctant to accept the free will defense simply, unless it is put forward together with God's grace, foreknowledge and predestination.

It is obvious that, in his later years, Augustine was not satisfied with what he said in FW and felt obliged to move towards a more mature doctrine in CG. But why? It is traditionally believed that the transformation in Augustine's view on evil and free will should be primarily attributed to the change in his polemical opponents. When writing FW, Augustine needed to refute the Manichean dualism of good and evil. In contrast, when writing CG, his main polemical opponents include both Manichaeism and the Pelagians, who to a large extent owe the chance to be saved to our own efforts, instead of grace from God (BeDuhn 2012; Van Oort 2020). With the doctrine of predestination, Augustine could avoid attributing the possibility of abstaining from evil to free will, and thereafter refute the Pelagians (Evans 2021). Moreover, it is also widely acknowledged that, in addition to polemical purposes, Augustine's turn to predestination has its exegetical purposes (Patte and TeSelle, 2003; Harrison, 2000). In particular, he wants to interpret the famous passage in Romans on foreknowledge and predestination: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Romans 8:29-30).

Indeed, it makes a lot of sense to explain the transition in Augustine's doctrine of the origin of evil and free will in terms of polemical and exegetical purposes. Nevertheless, in the last several decades, scholars are no longer satisfied with the above "external" readings and try to look for clues internal to Augustine's thoughts. Rowan Greer, for example, argues that Augustine's transformation of the free will defense has its inherently consistent intent. This intent, according to Greer, doesn't lie in "constructing a persuasive theory" philosophically, but in "finding a way of articulating his deepest religious convictions" (Greer 1996, p. 482). In other words, the self-affirmation of Christian faith is the internal clue to the transformation of Augustine's thinking. Jesse Couenhoven, also looking for an internal explanation for Augustine's transformation, believes that Augustine becomes more and more doubtful about the free will defense because he feels reluctant to accept the world picture that may result from simple free will - a world full of "mysterious and inexplicable" human choices (Couenhoven 2007). This reading gives a psychological explanation for the change in Augustine's thinking.

Nevertheless, neither the external readings (including the polemical one and the exegetical one) nor the internal readings (including what Greer calls "his deepest religious convictions" and Couenhoven's psychological reading) pay much attention to the inherent movement of Augustine's philosophy. By saying "inherent movement of Augustine's philosophy", I mean how Augustine notices the internal dilemma and contradictions in his prior philosophical doctrines, arguments, concepts, etc., and then moves towards more consistent philosophical doctrines, arguments, concepts, etc. With regard to free will and evil, in what sense can the transformation of his doctrine be considered the result of the movement in his philosophy? To explore this problem, in

the next part of this essay, I will first provide a brief analysis of Augustine's discussion of free will and evil in FW and the inherent inconsistencies in this early doctrine. After that, in Part 3, I will talk about how the reformulation in CG responds to the problems inherent in Augustine's early view. Finally, I will discuss what new problems Augustine's reformulation in CG leads to.

2. Evil and Free Will in Augustine's On the Free Choice of the Will

2.1 Augustine's Doctrine in On the Free Choice of the Will

At the very beginning of the dialogue in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, Evodius raises the problem of "whether God is not the author of evil" (FW, 1.1.1). Augustine's answer, of course, is no. To support this answer, he must demonstrate that the origin of evil is something other than God. According to what is reached by Augustine and the interlocutor as the consensus at the end of Book I, all sins emerge "when someone turns aside from divine and genuinely abiding things and towards changeable and uncertain things" and we do evil - which Augustine defines as the privation of good - "out of free choice of the will" (FW, 1.16.35). This is certainly the standard Augustinian understanding of evil. However, based on these conclusions, Evodius raises a further question, which recapitulates, or, so to speak, sharpens the question he raises at the beginning of Book I:

However, I ask whether free choice itself, through which we are found guilty of having the ability to commit sin, ought to have been given to us by him who made us. It seems that, if we lack it, we would not be bound to sin. My fear is that in this way god will also be reckoned as author of our evildoings. (FW, 1.16.35)

As Evodius points out, everything in the world, including our free will, is created by God. And, at the same time, evil comes out of free will. This is easy to make Evodius (as well as us readers) wonder whether God is the author of evil. After all, if God had not gifted human beings with free will when they were created, then human beings would not do evil.

Faced with this challenge, Augustine responds with three main points as follows. First, Augustine insists that all things created by God (including free will) are good. Second, without free will, human beings can't lead a righteous life. (FW, 2.18.47) And thus, third, God's purpose in endowing us with free will is to enable us to live righteously, rather than enable us to do evil. Therefore, we human beings, instead of God, should be responsible for our abuse of free will and the evil we do. To support his argument, Augustine compares free will to our hands and feet. A body without hands or feet misses much good. However, hands or feet can be used for evil. Yet, even so, we should not blame God for giving us hands and feet. Instead, we should blame those who do many disgraceful things with their hands and feet. (FW, 2.18.48)

However, this argument doesn't stop the interlocutor from raising further questions: Has God ever foreknown that human beings will abuse free will and do evil? If no, then God is not omnipotent, which is unacceptable to Christians. If yes, then human beings are destined to do evil, as what God has foreknown will surely happen in the future. In saying so, the interlocutor implies that this possibility is likely to exonerate human beings, as our will in this case is not free (FW, 3.2.14). In response to this dilemma, Augustine argues that the claim that "God foreknows everything that will be" is not inconsistent with the claim that "We sin not by necessity but by the will" (FW, 3.3.6). According to Augustine, God foreknows that we will do evil by no means indicates that God forces us to do evil. The cause of evil still lies in one's free will, rather than God: "God foreknows all the things of which he is the author and yet is not the author of all the

things He foresees. He is not the evil author of these things; He justly exacts retribution for them.” (FW, 3.4.11) In other words, God’s foreknowledge of evil doesn’t indicate God’s predestination of evil.

Towards the end of the book, Augustine depicts a world-view that appears to be perfect, and he claims that the existence of evil not only doesn’t conflict with this perfection, but rather fulfills it: “it is not possible that a human being of any kind is created who is superfluous with respect to the surrounding universe and the well-ordered interconnection of Creation as a whole throughout time and space, where not a leaf on a tree is created superfluously” (FW, 3.23.66). In the world picture that Augustine depicts, all created things, including those good ones and those evil ones, are necessary for the good order and perfection of the world. Evil doesn’t harm the justice of God. Instead, it testifies to the justice of God. We can notice that Leibniz’s doctrine of theodicy owes a lot of debts to Augustine’s understanding of evil in this book.

2.2 Challenges to Augustine’s Early Doctrines

Eloquent as Augustine is in FW, the world picture he provides and his doctrine of free will and evil are still faced with a number of challenges. First, are the intelligent beings who have free will necessarily able to do evil? When Augustine defends God’s endowment of human beings with free will, he argues that human beings need free will in order to lead a righteous life. For this purpose, God gives us free will even though he foreknows that some of us may abuse our free will and do evil. (FW, 2.18.47-49) In arguing so, Augustine implies that the abuse of free will by some people is the necessary cost for other people to live a righteous life through free will. In other words, as long as one has free will, which Augustine believes is an intermediate good (FW, 2.19.50), his/her free will inevitably opens both the possibility of doing evil and the possibility of doing good. However, this understanding of free will lead to the questions as follows: (1) Can God do evil? If the answer is no, then does God have free will? (2) Even if we disregard the case of God, the dilemma doesn’t disappear. Are other intelligent beings, such as angels, who certainly have free will, able to do evil? These two questions will force Augustine to reformulate his doctrine of free will and develop a more sophisticated one in later writings. At least, Augustine has to acknowledge that “one’s having free will” doesn’t necessarily result in “one’s being able to do evil.”

If Augustine acknowledges this, then a second challenge arises. If free will doesn’t necessarily lead to being able to do evil - or, so to speak, there are at least two kinds of free will, one with the possibility of doing evil, one without - then why does God endow human beings with the former one, instead of the latter one? Indeed, Augustine may argue that all things created by God serve certain purposes and that not all defects would be worthy of blame (FW, 3.15.42). However, when God created human beings, why didn’t He eliminate their ability to do evil and at the same time preserve their free will? Therefore, on the one hand, Augustine can’t deny that there is a great deal of evil in the world. On the other hand, Augustine can neither attribute evil to God nor to another god, and he needs to explain why God didn’t create a world without evil. These requirements close off almost all theoretical possibilities. The only way out for Augustine is to argue that the evil in world is merely temporary and God uses the temporary evil to serve for a much greater good that will come in the future. As we will see, this is exactly the strategy that Augustine adopts in CG.

The third challenge is the one made by the Pelagians. To refute the dualistic Manicheanism, Augustine puts a lot of emphasis on the role of free will, which runs the risk of neglecting God’s grace. However, according to the most fundamental Christian teachings, whether one can abstain from evil and be saved depends on nothing but God’s grace. In other words, human free will and virtue cannot sway His will or decide who can be saved. Therefore, the inherent tension between

free will and grace in FW also drives Augustine to reformulate his understanding of free will and evil.

To briefly sum up, even if Pelagius and his followers had not attacked Augustine's doctrine in FW and other early writings, there are a number of philosophical inconsistencies inherent in Augustine's early understanding of free will and evil. These inconsistencies drive Augustine to revise his doctrines in his mature writings. In the next part, I will study Augustine's new doctrine of free will, evil and predestination in CG. After that, I will explore how these revisions alleviate the inconsistencies in his early writings as well as how they lead to new consistency problems.

3. Evil, Predestination and Free Will in Augustine's City of God

3.1 Predestination and the New Understanding of Free Will

As numerous scholars have pointed out, Augustine puts much more emphasis on predestination in CG and other mature writings than in his early writings. Augustine now claims that, when God created the world, He had already predestined who among his people would be saved and become a member of the Heavenly City: "For God chose those nations before the foundation of the world, to deliver them from the power of darkness and to translate them into the kingdom of His dear Son, as the apostle says" (CG, 20.7). Therefore, fundamentally, the citizens of the City of God are saved not because their free will leads them to God and makes them do good. Instead, they are saved because God's grace enables them to believe in Him and do good. In short, it is not their good will or virtue that enables them to be saved, but it is the fact that they are predestined to be saved that endows them with the good will and virtue. To put it in John M. Rist's words, Augustine argues that "salvation is independent of man's fallen will; it is a matter of God's omnipotence" (Rist 1969, p. 437). The human will and virtue cannot influence God's decision, or, so to speak, God's distribution of His grace among people.

This doctrine of predestination, in fact, redefines the word "free" in the concept of "free will." After Adam was expelled from Eden due to the original sin, we fallen human beings cannot do good or save ourselves with our free will if God doesn't endow us with His mercy. As a result, our free will per se actually doesn't provide us with the freedom to do good. Instead, we fallen humans' free will is free only in the sense that we have the freedom to do evil, or, so to speak, the freedom to sin (Rist 1969, p. 424). Yet, this understanding of free will is not as negative as it seems to be at first glance. After all, without free will, it would be impossible for God's grace to make sense. For example, God may endow someone with His grace in the way that this person wills to believe in Him. This surely needs human will to undertake God's grace. Therefore, using the terminology of contemporary philosophy, we can neither view Augustine's doctrine in CG as deterministic nor as anti-deterministic. Augustine falls between these two extremes and should be regarded as a compatibilist. On the one hand, our free will, depraved as it is, has the freedom to do evil or to sin.³ On the other hand, our free will doesn't have the freedom to do good or to determine whether one can be saved. These are predestined by God.⁴

Thus, in CG, there are three kinds of free will, each with a distinct meaning of "freedom." The first and the second are respectively embodied in God and in Adam before he sinned:

For the first immortality, which Adam lost by sinning, consisted in his being able not to die;

³ Therefore, it is unfair to claim that human beings are completely the animated puppets of God. See Rist (1969), especially his critique of Gilson's deterministic reading of Augustine (Gilson 1967, p. 320, note 66).

⁴ Scholars have debated a lot about whether Augustine is a compatibilist and in what sense he is a compatibilist. See Ayer (1954), Frede (2011), and Willows (2014).

but the last will consist in his being not able to die. So too, the first free will consisted in his being able not to sin, and the last will consist in his being not able to sin. Thus, man will then be just as unable to lose the will to godliness and justice as he now is to lose the will to happiness. Thanks to sin, we were unable to hold on to either godliness or happiness; but when we lost happiness, we did not lose the will to happiness. Certainly, God Himself cannot sin; but are we therefore to deny that God has free will? (CG, 22.30)

(a) God, angels and those who enter the Heavenly City after the Last Judgment are “not able to sin” and hence free from doing evil. This type of free will is, of course, the best of the three. (b) Adam before he sinned could be “able not to sin.” He had the freedom to do evil or not to do evil. This type of free will is not as good as the first one, but it is better than the third one. (c) As for the third kind of free will, it is embodied in human beings after Adam sinned. As Augustine argues, the sin of Adam and Eve was “so great” that “human nature was changed by it for the worse” (CG, 14.1). Thus, the third type of free will is the worst of the three. We fallen human beings have the freedom to do evil. Besides, with God’s grace, we have the freedom to do good.

This new and more sophisticated understanding of free will in CG is intended to neatly keep a balance between free will and God’s predestination. With this doctrine of free will, Augustine blames the origin of evil on free will and attributes salvation to God’s grace. And most importantly, he doesn’t eliminate the importance of free will when he puts much emphasis on predestination. Therefore, in CG, Augustine partly solves the problem his early doctrine of free will in FW has. However, what we have discussed so far has not yet fully responded to another problem mentioned above, namely why God didn’t create a world without evil from the very beginning. Using our classification of free will in CG, we can reformulate this question as: Why did God endow the first man with the second type of free will instead of the first type? We will focus on this problem in the next section.

3.2 Evil and Augustine’s Philosophy of History

As we can see, at the time God created the first man, He gave Adam an intermediate level of free will. After Adam sinned, the free will of all human beings (including Adam, Eve and their descendants) corrupts and is worse than that of Adam before he committed the original sin. This situation will continue until the Last Judgment. At the Last Judgment, the chosen ones will be “revived” and “restored to life” by the “omnipotence of the Creator” (CG, 22.20). After the revival, their free will is no longer able to do evil and is even better than that of Adam before he sinned. Therefore, human will goes through a process of moving from an intermediate level to a worse level and then to a better level. Correspondingly, the condition of human beings undergoes a similar process: first it got worse, and then it suffers for a long time until the Last Judgment, and finally it will get better, even better than what it was at the very beginning.

Here what we call “a long time” indicates the entire history of the world, from the past to the present and the present to the future, from the creation of world (i.e., the very beginning of time) to the Last Judgment (i.e., the very end of time). Augustine’s philosophy of history in CG, or, so to speak, his narrative of the history of the world in Books 11-22 in CG, is his solution to the theodicy problem. Before the Last Judgment, no one can fully understand the divine providence of the supreme God and make sure whether s/he is destined to be a member of the heavenly city. As a result, neither the temporary prosperity of evil people nor the temporary misfortune of good people indicates the divine providence.⁵ The evil done by the former is merely a temporary evil

⁵ Augustine states this argument over and over again in *CG*. For example, see *CG*, 1.8.

and it indicates their abuse of their free will. Moreover, the evil in the world tests and tempers the chosen ones, strengthens their faith in God, and hence prepares them for future entry into the heavenly city. In this way, God makes use of evil for purpose of good. Temporary evil is used to promote a much greater good.

Furthermore, human beings need to experience all these evils so as to realize the greater good that God had in mind when He created the world. As Rist correctly points out, Augustine puts much emphasis on the Christian doctrine that human beings are created *ex nihilo*. And, therefore, man's nature, as "the nature of a created thing", is inherently inferior to that of God and is not "bound to be good" (Rist 1969, p. 442). In other words, when God created Adam, He had already endowed Adam with grace and given the best that Adam could have as a created being. However, if human beings are to attain higher good and enter the heavenly city, then this is not enough. God permitted the fall of human beings because he foreknew that good will be made from this evil, namely, good human beings will be chosen and fulfill the spaces of fallen angels in the heavenly city:

God foreknew that man would sin by forsaking God and transgressing God's Law; yet

He did not deprive man of his freedom of will, for He foresaw, at the same time, the good that He would bring forth from man's evil. For out of this mortal progeny, so deservedly and justly condemned, God is by His grace gathering together a people so great that, from it, He will supply and fill up the place left in the beloved Heavenly City by the fallen angels. Thus, that City will not be defrauded of its full complement of citizens; indeed, it may, perhaps, rejoice in a yet more numerous body of such citizens. (CG, 22.1)

Therefore, the fact that human beings fell and then some of them are saved and entered the heavenly city is good for human beings and for God's overall project. For human beings, many of us will be able to be a member of the heavenly city and attain higher good than what Adam had before he sinned. For God's overall project, there will be enough citizens in the heavenly city. With this arrangement, God brings good out of evil and the good that is attained now is even more than the good attained if all the existence of evil had been eliminated in the first place.⁶ All the good will be fulfilled at the Last Judgment, or, so to speak, at the end of history. That God temporarily allows evil to exist will bring about greater good in the future is Augustine's final solution to the theodicy problem in CG. And this solution must be fulfilled in the progress of history. A dimension of time - which his free will defense in FW lacks - is indispensable to this solution in CG. This is probably why the constructive part of CG is basically Augustine's narrative of human history.

4. New Consistency Problems in Augustine's Doctrine in City of God?

4.1 Why doesn't God save more people?

To deal with the inconsistencies inherent in his early doctrine of free will and evil, Augustine relies more and more on predestination. According to Augustine, when God created the world, He had already predestined who would be saved and how many human beings would be saved. This leads to further questions: Why does God save this person rather than that one? Why doesn't God save more people? One answer might be: God chooses people randomly and He stops choosing more people when the City of God is full. This answer, obviously, is ridiculous. However, unfortunately, Augustine himself doesn't give a satisfactory answer in CG. And whenever Augustine finds it impossible to give a satisfactory answer, he asserts that the divine providence

⁶ This is also how Augustine explains the existence of the fallen angels: "And He foreknew that, in their pride, some of the angels would indeed wish to be self-sufficient for their own blessedness, and hence would forsake their true Good. Yet He did not deprive them of the power to do this; for He judged it an act of greater power and goodness to bring good even out of evil than to exclude the existence of evil." (CG, 22.1)

of God is mysterious and always just and that we should not judge His divine providence with our human reason. If we have to come up with an alternative answer on behalf of Augustine, then the only answer might be: God has no duty to give human beings more grace and therefore we should not blame God for this; we should be satisfied with what we have.

4.2 The Fall of Human Beings and the Empty Seats in the City of God

As noted above, Augustine argues that God doesn't exclude temporary evil - which comes from free will - because He foreknows that in the future it will lead to greater good, namely, having more citizens in the City of God. This statement is easy to arouse a further question: Does it imply that God indulges evil to run rampant in the world in order to fill up the City of God? Augustine has already anticipated this question and he gives a response to it in CG:

“If anyone says that there would have been no intercourse or procreation had Adam and Eve not sinned, is he not saying that it was necessary for man to sin in order to complete the number of the saints? For if they would have remained alone by not sinning - because, as some believe, generation would not have been possible for them had they not sinned - then, clearly, sin was necessary if there was to be a number of righteous people instead of only two. But if it would be absurd to believe such a thing, we must believe instead that even if no one had sinned there would have come into being a number of saints sufficient to fill that most blessed City: as large a number as is now being assembled, through God's grace, from the multitude of sinners, so long as the children of this world beget and are begotten.” (CG, 14.23)

Here Augustine insists that it is absurd to believe that “it was necessary for man to sin in order to complete the number of the saints.” According to Augustine, God has predestined the number of citizens in the heavenly city and there would still be enough saints to fill that city if no one had sinned.

However, what Augustine claims here is inconsistent with what he asserts later in Book 22 Chapter 1. Suppose God has another way to fill the City of God, would human beings be in a better situation than what they are now? If the answer is yes, then why didn't God stop Adam from abusing his free will in the first place? If the answer is no, then Augustine's argument in Book 14 Chapter 23 doesn't make sense. It seems Augustine doesn't have any easy way to solve this dilemma.

4.3 How should human beings live?

If we accept Augustine's doctrine of predestination, free will and evil for the time being, then how should human beings live? After all, if the list of citizens in the heavenly city is predestined, then why do we need to strive for entering into the heavenly city? Should we live as godly and virtuous a life as possible? Strictly speaking, these questions don't indicate any inconsistency in Augustine's doctrine in CG. Instead, these questions suggest that the way of life that Augustine's doctrine leads to might be problematic, or at least disturbing and uneasy. Indeed, Augustine and his followers can argue that, in this life, there may be many indications of salvation, such as piety, virtue, and even wealth.⁷ However, none of these indications can assure us that we are the chosen ones. We are bound to be restless in this life. Readers of the Confessions can easily notice that Augustine himself led such a restless life.

5. Conclusion

This essay studies the movement of Augustine's thinking from FW, his early writing, to CG, his mature writing. In FW, Augustine blames evil on human free will and argues that God is not responsible for evil. However, the inconsistencies inherent in this early doctrine of evil and free

⁷ At least some Protestants believed that wealth is the indication of salvation. See Max Weber's classical studies in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

will drives Augustine to reformulate his theory and develop a more sophisticated understanding of free will in CG. In his revised doctrine, Augustine puts more emphasis on predestination and figures out his philosophy of history. Although this new doctrine alleviates problems in his early view, it leads to new consistency problems and points to a restless way of life.

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