

Augustine and the Problem of Theological Fatalism

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IN ST. AUGUSTINE'S FOURTH-CENTURY WORK *ON FREE CHOICE OF THE WILL*, we read the "first clear expression" of the ancient problem of "theological fatalism" (Hunt 3). He presents a logical dilemma that has puzzled philosophers, theologians, and other careful thinkers for centuries. Over fifteen hundred years later, in January 1965, another thinker, Nelson Pike, published an article entitled "Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action" that initiated the contemporary debate (Hunt 22). Over the last four decades, philosophers have struggled with essentially the same issue that Augustine faced so many centuries ago. In Book III of *On Free Choice of the Will*, Evodius voices the problem in the form of a personal concern and gives us our first look at what we will call the problem of theological fatalism:

I am deeply troubled by a certain question: how can it be that God has foreknowledge of all future events, and yet that we do not sin by necessity? Anyone who says that an event can happen otherwise than as God has foreknown it is making an insane and malicious attempt to destroy God's foreknowledge...since he foreknew that the man would sin, the sin was committed of necessity.... How can there be free will where there is such inevitable necessity? (III. 4)

In his discussion with Evodius, Augustine succeeds in allaying these fears by explaining how the doctrines of divine foreknowledge and human free

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will can be reconciled. However, I feel that his explanation is insufficient at best. In this essay I will explain the potential incompatibilities of these two concepts, divine foreknowledge and man's free will, as they are expressed by Augustine. I will explore possible resolutions of the conflict and show how those offered by Augustine are inadequate. Finally, I will consider the positions taken by other thinkers and seek to find a way to successfully resolve Augustine's dilemma.

Evodius has already explained the specific problem that Augustine will attempt to solve. The whole issue revolves around the compatibility of two fairly basic concepts, which Augustine describes in the following way:

[1] God has foreknowledge of all future events.

[2] We do not sin [or act] by necessity but by free will. (III. 3)

Let us briefly consider Augustine's position concerning each of these seemingly fundamental tenets of Christianity before looking more closely at the potential problem of their incompatibility.

Omniscience seems to be a necessary and essential aspect of the Divine nature in the eyes of most believers. Indeed, Augustine's views on this fact are unequivocal. In *The City of God* he states,

For, to confess that God exists, and at the same time to deny that He has foreknowledge of future things, is the most manifest folly....But, let these perplexing debates and disputations of the philosophers go on as they may, we, in order that we may confess the most high and true God Himself, do confess His will, supreme power, and pre-science. [His] foreknowledge is infallible. (V. 9)

Augustine conceives of a God who is perfectly knowledgeable, or omniscient; He knows everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen, and He cannot be mistaken. This perfect knowledge forms part of his essential nature. His "foreknowledge is infallible"; what He knows will happen *will* happen.

Concerning our free will, Augustine's position is equally clear. He treats it as so obvious and so fundamental that basically no proof of its existence is necessary. When Evodius claims that he does not know if he has a will, Augustine tells him that he will no longer answer his questions:

Augustine: "Because I ought not to answer your questions, unless you have a will to know what you ask. And also, unless it is your will to arrive at wisdom, there is no point to discussing things of this kind with you. Finally, you cannot be my friend if you do not will things to go well for me. And surely, with regard to yourself: do you think you have no will to be happy?"

Evodius: "I yield; it cannot be denied that we have a will." (*Free* I. 7)

Evodius' reply, I think, is indicative of Augustine's own view on the matter at the time he wrote this book—there can be no question that we have a will. For if we claim there is no will, "the whole economy of human life is subverted. In vain are laws enacted. In vain are reproaches, praises, chidings, exhortations had recourse to; and there is no justice whatever in the appointment of rewards for the good, and punishment for the wicked" (*City* V. 9).

As our definition of free will, we will use one that seems to be generally accepted by philosophers who approach this problem: A person has free will if for any action *A* that person has the ability to either do *A* or refrain from doing *A* (cf. Pike 33; Zagzebski 161; Locke 237). This idea also seems implicit in Augustine's explanation of sin and free will: "Whatever be the cause of will, if it cannot be resisted, it is no sin to yield to it. If it can be resisted, and a man does not yield to it, he does not sin" (*Free* III. 18). His view, then, is that we have free will and that at any given moment we have the ability to choose between doing or refraining from doing any given action.

Having established that Augustine unequivocally accepts and teaches both that God has perfect foreknowledge of all our actions and that we are free to act according to our will, let us now examine the results of combining them. First, in the words of Augustine from *The City of God*, the problem may be laid out as follows:

If all future things have been foreknown, they will happen in the order in which they have been foreknown; and if they come to pass in this order, there is a certain order of things foreknown by God; and if a certain order of things, then a certain order of causes, for nothing can happen which is not preceded by some efficient cause. But if there is a certain order of causes according to which everything

happens which does happen, then by fate...all things happen which do happen. But if this be so, then is there nothing in our own power, and there is no such thing as freedom of the will. (V. 9)

To clarify the argument for theological fatalism that Augustine will now set out to refute, let us imagine a concrete example. Say, for example, that fifty years ago, God knew that Marty would get married on Friday. On Friday, Marty gets married, just as God foresaw. However, the question now arises, on Friday, was it possible for Marty to refrain from getting married? In other words, is Marty free on this occasion? If he is free and he exercises his ability to refrain from getting married, does this mean God held a false belief fifty years ago, since He foresaw that Marty would get married? If so, then we have contradicted our affirmation of the infallibility of God's foreknowledge. If, on the other hand, he cannot refrain from getting married, as God foresaw he would, then how can we say that he is free? By definition of free will, we contradict our assertion that man is free.

It seems, then, that we have three options. We can deny that Marty can refrain from getting married and thereby deny his free will; deny that God's foreknowledge is infallible (that God cannot be wrong); or deny that He has foreknowledge at all. In the first case, we would have to give up our freedom to choose and, in the process, our moral responsibility for our actions. In the latter two cases, we resolve the problem only by curtailing God's omniscience and reducing Him to something less than the God that we generally conceive. None of these options is an acceptable way to resolve the issue.

Clearly, this is a formidable problem that Augustine faces. In his discussion with Evodius, Augustine first reaffirms the necessity to accept both divine foreknowledge and human freedom, for denial of either one leads quickly to difficulty or even to blasphemy. Then he tries to explain why God's foreknowledge does not necessitate our actions. First, he gives the example of a man who is foreknown by Evodius to sin:

Because unless I am mistaken, your foreknowledge that a man will sin does not of itself necessitate the sin. Your foreknowledge did not force him to sin even though he was, without a doubt, going to sin; otherwise you would not foreknow that which was to be. Thus, these two things are not contradictories. As you, by your foreknowledge, know

what someone else is going to do of his own will, so God forces no one to sin; yet He foreknows those who will sin by their own will. (III. 4)

Augustine's use of the word "force" in this explanation appears to emphasize the fact that he sees no causal relationship between foreknowledge of an event and the event itself: "God forces no one to sin." The fact that I know on Thursday that Marty will get married on Friday cannot be seen as the cause of his doing so.

As a simple assertion, Augustine's explanation seems reasonable, but as a resolution of theological fatalism it seems to me grossly inadequate. For one thing, he begins by arguing simply that the foreknowledge of Evodius (or God, for that matter) does not causally necessitate the action. In other words, their knowledge of the action has no causal relationship to the action itself. While true, this point is not conclusive since the supposed necessity of the action appears to be a logical necessity rather than a causal one. By this I mean that Evodius' expressed concern, and the problem we have outlined, is not that God's (or his, in Augustine's example) foreknowledge causes people to act in a predetermined way, but that, because of God's knowledge of the event and His essential infallibility, it is logically impossible that we act in a way contrary to God's knowledge of our actions.

The problem we, with Augustine, face is not that of mechanistic, causal determinism. Rather, we are concerned for the moment solely with the implications of God's infallible foreknowledge. And, as Pike says, "the argument [for theological fatalism] makes no mention of the causes"; it does not matter if we say that God's foreknowledge is the cause of an action, or that natural events or circumstances are the cause, or even nothing at all, the "argument outlined above [for theological fatalism] remains unaffected" (35). The issue at hand is not whether we are forced, as if by some efficient cause, to sin, but whether it is necessary that we sin for the maintenance of coherence in the universe.

In the second part of Augustine's argument, instead of equating God's foreknowledge with a man's hypothetical foreknowledge, he uses our memory as an analogy for God's foreknowledge:

Your recollection of events in the past does not compel them to occur. In the same way God's foreknowledge of future events does not

compel them to take place. As you remember certain things that you have done and yet have not done all the things that you remember, so God foreknows all the things of which He Himself is the Cause, and yet He is not the Cause of all that He foreknows. (III. 4)

This part of the argument is difficult to follow based solely upon what he says here. It does seem to make sense that if the relationship of God's foreknowledge to its objects is somehow like that of our memory to its objects then perhaps there is some way out of our predicament. I see two ways of looking at his argument.

The first thing that comes to mind is the similar language used by Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy* in his later treatment of this very same dilemma:

And if human and divine present may be compared, just as you see certain things in this your present time, so God sees all things in His eternal present. So that this divine foreknowledge does not change the nature and property of things; it simply sees things present to it exactly as they will happen at some time as future events. (V. 6)

The key to Boethius' understanding of the issue is that God does not dwell within time. Rather, Boethius contends, He resides in "eternity...the complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of eternal life" (V. 6). Because He is outside time, all this world's events are as present events to Him. He observes them not temporally prior to their taking place, but from an atemporal perspective. For this reason, His knowledge of them is not, strictly speaking, foreknowledge, which implies knowledge at temporally prior moment. Boethius explains "that it is better called providence or 'looking forth' than prevision or 'seeing beforehand'" (V. 6).

We find practically the same ideas in Book XI of Augustine's *Confessions*, where he too argues for an atemporally existing, or "timeless," God. He prayerfully exclaims,

Although you are before time, it is not in time that you precede it. If this were so, you would not be before all time. It is in eternity, which is supreme over time because it is a never-ending present, that you are at once before all past time and after all future

time....Your years are completely present to you all at once, because they are at a permanent standstill." (XI. 13)

The usefulness of such a claim in the present discussion is clear; if God is not in time and therefore does not know what we are going to do before we do it, then there is no longer any incompatibility. If all history is present to God as He "looks forth" then we need not conform to His knowledge since it is based on His seeing us act as we do so. This solution, however, I find inadequate as well, simply because God's relationship to the world cannot be seen as completely atemporal. For example, if God were to reveal the future to someone, He would have to do so within the temporal framework of this life. Therefore, whereas God's knowledge was a mere "looking forth" before He shared it, it becomes foreknowledge once it is expressed within time. Augustine himself admits such revelation later in Book XI of *Confessions* when he says, "In what way, then, do you, Ruler of all that you have created, reveal the future to the souls of men? You have revealed it to your prophets" (XI.19). This revelation within time, I believe, negates the advantage gained by moving God outside time and returns us to where we were before. For even if we posit a timeless God, Augustine has already acknowledged that God reveals the future to His prophets, who are not timeless, and grants them precisely the kind of divine foreknowledge that this approach seeks to exclude.

The second way that I read the latter part of Augustine's argument concerns the causal relationship between the event and God's foreknowledge of it. What he might be construed to be saying is that not only are the events that God foreknows not caused by His knowledge, they themselves are the cause of God's knowledge. It appears that "Augustine wants to understand God's foreknowledge in such a way that it is the foreknown event that causes, explains, or accounts for his knowledge, not the other way around" (Hunt 11).

As we have established that we must deal with God in time, we can examine this hypothesis with reference to our example of Marty. What this argument holds is that the fact that Marty gets married on Friday *causes* God to believe fifty years ago that he would do so. Is this acceptable? Frankly, I am not sure. We can allow that it is a possibility, since it appears difficult to establish one way or the other. The significance of this, potentially, is that by showing that the causal direction is from the

event to God's knowledge, it is impossible that God's knowledge can causally interact with the event. This is Augustine's contention, and, as I see it, the closest he can come to refuting the theological fatalism argument. Unfortunately, as discussed earlier, the problem entails more than simple causal determinism. At best, Augustine shows that our actions are not causally necessary, but still necessary inasmuch as God foresees them. By our definition of free will, since God's foreknowledge precludes the possibility of acting other than we have been foreseen to act, we are not free.

To quickly review, despite granting Augustine several different attempts, through different interpretations of his argument, to support the compatibility of his theories of divine foreknowledge and free will, he has not been able to do so. Furthermore, without compromising one of the two tenets, it seems impossible to completely resolve the conflict. The problem is unique in that both of the premises are easily assented to by any Christian believer, yet the combination of them seems to be crushing to the consistency of the religion as a whole. Despite the centuries of thought and work on the matter, one can still pick up Augustine, Cicero, or Boethius, examine their opinions and arguments, and not be too significantly behind those who have devoted years of their lives to the subject.

It is clear from certain quotes in *The City of God* and *Retractationes* that Augustine came to loosen his grip on the reality of our free will as he approached the end of his life. For example, in *The City of God* he makes the following statement about the possibility of having to forfeit our freedom to divine foreknowledge: "Neither let us be afraid lest, after all, we do not do by will that which we do by will, because He, whose foreknowledge is infallible, foreknew that we would do it" (V. 9). He goes even further in his *Retractationes*, where he states, "I tried hard to maintain the free decision of the human will, but the grace of God was victorious" (qtd. in Hunt 7).

I believe that the situation is not as hopeless as it may appear. The key is the ability to refute the causal necessity of our actions. In his article "On Augustine's Way Out," David Hunt argues that this is sufficient to free Augustine from the argument for theological fatalism. However, Hunt's claim that he has discovered a "way out" for Augustine does not seem to reach quite as far as he wants it to, because he is forced to concede

the “absolute” or “temporal necessity” of our actions, which, as noted above, does not leave us free in the sense of being able to refrain from an action. However, I think that his conclusion can have merit as we consider the distinction made by Locke between being free and acting voluntarily. In his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* he explains, “Where-ever any performance or forbearance are not equally in a Man’s power; where-ever doing or not doing, will not equally follow upon the preference of his mind directing it, there he is not *Free*, though perhaps the Action may be voluntary” (237). In other words, when faced with a situation wherein we cannot choose between A and not-A, though we are not free, we might still be able to choose “voluntarily.” Locke gives the following example:

Again, suppose a Man be carried, whilst fast asleep, into a Room, where is a Person he longs to see and speak with; and be there locked fast in, beyond his Power to get out: he awakes, and is glad to find himself in so desirable Company, which he stays willingly in, *i.e.* prefers his stay to going away. I ask, Is not this stay voluntary? I think, no Body will doubt it: and yet being locked fast in, ’tis evident he is not at liberty not to stay, he has not freedom to be gone. (238)

In Locke’s example, the man’s decision to stay in the locked room is not “free” because technically he did not have another option within his power. However, inasmuch as he made the choice without compulsion, and without knowing that he could not leave, it was a “voluntary” choice.

The possible solution, the glimmer of hope for those of us still struggling to find reconciliation between God’s foreknowledge and our own freedom, may be found in the combination of this idea of voluntary action with Hunt’s distinction between temporal and causal necessity. Because God has absolute foreknowledge of what we are to do, we are not “free” to do otherwise in the sense that we cannot choose other than that which has been foreseen. God’s foreknowledge is analogous to the locked door in Locke’s example because it is what keeps us from being able to choose freely. However, since we never choose to go against God’s foreknowledge and challenge that inability (we never try to leave the locked room), our choices are not forced upon us and are therefore “voluntary” in the sense that Locke describes.

Applying Locke's distinction to our current situation, we can maintain both our ability to choose and our faith in our God. Strictly speaking, we cannot say that we are "free," at least by the definition that we have used throughout our discussion. However, we do see a way to preserve our ability to choose our own actions. Since God does not causally determine our actions, our liberty to choose is unaffected by His knowledge of the outcome of our choices. There is clearly no less certainty of what we will choose, but because we make those choices voluntarily, we can still be responsible for them.

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