

God's Sovereignty: A Unifying Theme in Augustine's Thought

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AUGUSTINE CONSPICUOUSLY REVERSED HIS VIEWS on the nature and power of human will during his lifetime. Some critics have suggested that a lack of intellectual resolve is to blame for this apparent flip-flop, which was most evident in Augustine's polemics. Many scholars point to his numerous theological encounters against "the pagans, the Donatists, the Manichees, [and] the Pelagians" in which free will was consistently a point of discussion, and thus they portray him as "Augustine the endlessly polemical" (O'Donnell 29). During Augustine's own lifetime, Julian of Eclanum accused him of being a Manichee in his debate against the Pelagians (Scheppard 97). Others, including Pelagius, suggested that he was a Pelagian in his debate against the Manichees (Bonner, "Pelagianism" 34). One may receive the incorrect impression that Augustine was simply "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14). Perhaps worse, one may believe that Augustine conveniently altered his positions only to distance himself from those who were accused of heresy.

Both of these impressions are mistaken. Accusers contemporary with Augustine, as well as today's critics, fail to acknowledge that even in discussions of free will, the will was not the issue *most* central to Augustine's thought. Rather, free will constituted only a subsidiary, though significant, discussion to support his most firmly held conviction: a belief in God's absolute sovereignty and goodness. Augustine acknowledged that his free will defense evolved over time; however, after his conversion to

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Catholic Christianity, he never changed his position on God's sovereignty. Indeed, Augustine's maturing beliefs about God lend coherency to his reversal on free will. Hence, I will demonstrate: (1) Augustine believed that sovereignty is the most essential divine attribute, and (2) this developing conviction provides a root of consistency to his changed position on the will.

I. Augustine's Perceptions of Human Will

Select passages from Augustine's writings capture his early and late views on human will. The first statements are from *On Free Choice of the Will*, which Augustine wrote primarily in opposition to the Manichees and completed shortly after his conversion to Catholic Christianity. In this work, he argues that humans are responsible for their moral choices, choices between good and evil made according to one's own free and efficacious volition. "Hence, it follows," he writes in *On Free Choice of the Will*, "that whoever wishes to live rightly and honorably, 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" (qtd. in Babcock 36). Augustine and his interlocutor also conclude, "Nothing can make the mind a companion of desire except its own will and free choice" (I. 11). Nothing is so completely "within the power of the will as the will itself" (qtd. in Babcock 36). Furthermore, Augustine contends that there is no cause of the will beside the will, and this includes God's foreknowledge (cf. *Free* III). Hence, the newly converted Catholic claims that the will is absolutely free, uncaused, and able to choose either good or evil.

After a lifetime of polemics and Catholic apologetics, Augustine's views on the will changed radically. Through years of debating moral elitists, such as the Donatists and the Pelagians, he relinquished or refined earlier views, obviously reversing his general application of free will. One year before his death in 429, Augustine wrote *De Praedestinatione Sanctorum*, in which he stated:

Let us therefore understand the calling by which the elect are made. They are not chosen because they have believed, but in order that they may believe.... And so they were chosen before the foundation of the world, by that predestination by which God fulfilled what He had

preordained. *For those whom he had predestined, he also called*, by that calling according to His plan, and not therefore any others, but *those whom he called, he justified* (Rom. 8:30). Nor did He call any others but those whom He had predestined, called and justified, those also he glorified, by that end which has no end. God therefore chose the faithful; but in order that they might be faithful, not because they were already faithful. (Qtd. in Bonner, "Pelagianism" 30)

In this passage, it appears that Augustine denied any element of human free will. No one can be saved unless God chose them "before the foundation of the world." There is not even human initiative in righteous action. Those whom God blesses with his grace, he blesses "in order that they might be faithful," but not because they did anything to merit His grace.

Given these radically contrasting and seemingly irreconcilable views, we can see why many scholars have convincingly accused Augustine of waffling in his theology. They have ample statements from various points of Augustine's life which support their thesis. However, it would be unfair to judge the integrity of Augustine's thought by addressing this single issue in isolation from other considerations. The worthwhile question to pursue when studying Augustine's positions on the will is not simply whether his understanding of the will changed. This seems obvious. Rather, thorough assessment of Augustine's thought requires that we ask why it changed. I suggest a holistic approach. We should consider Augustine's understanding of the will only within the greater context of his theology and the encounters that instigated his responses. An analysis without this context is prone to misrepresent his thought. First, I will consider what appears to be the paramount concern in Augustine's theology: his perception of God. Second, I will identify the central issue in two of Augustine's major debates and analyze why he changed his position on the will.

II. Augustine's Perception of Deity

We need not look far to see that Augustine constantly sought to understand his God. The eloquence with which he expressed his perception of the divine may never be surpassed by another writer. Still, his writings often manifested the struggle he experienced in trying to grasp some

consistent portrayal of the Creator. Throughout his *Confessions*, he attempted a description. Early in the first book, he wrote:

What, then, is the God I worship?...You, my God, are supreme, utmost in goodness, mightiest and all-powerful, most merciful and most just. You are the most hidden from us and yet the most present amongst us, the most beautiful and yet the most strong, ever enduring and yet we cannot comprehend you. You are unchangeable and yet you change all things. You are never new, never old, and yet all things have new life from you. (I. 4)

After this somewhat paradoxical sketch of divinity, Augustine affirmed that “even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you” (*Confessions* I.4). Indeed, as one who was manifestly “gifted in speech,” even Augustine probably felt inadequate in his theological poetry. The truth is that he spent his entire life seeking out accurate propositions to understand God’s nature. This search directed his life experiences. He weighed, rejected, and incorporated numerous ideas by discussing the nature of God with his closest friends and debating the matter with his most acute rivals.

Unable to reconcile the fact of evil and other issues with his Catholic understanding of God, young Augustine was proselyted to the Manichaeen sect in which he was a “hearer” (cf. Brown 46–53). The Manichees proffered a metaphysical dualism that differed radically from the Catholic monism to which Augustine was exposed in adolescence. Catholics believed that God is perfectly good and all powerful, the sole creator of the universe *ex nihilo*, and the only noncontingent being. Manichees, in contrast, denied God’s absolute power and His creation of all things *ex nihilo*. They contended that God is not the only eternal being. This theological position allowed them to persuasively account for the existence of evil by theorizing that creation did not result from God alone, but from two opposing deities. Manichaeen creation involved influence from the supreme good, which rules over the kingdom of light, and the supreme evil, which rules over the kingdom of darkness. The good and evil entities struggle perpetually to defeat one another. Manichees further believed that this battle between good and evil plays out in humans as an inward conflict of the soul. They exonerated humans from moral responsibility because the evil in a human compels sin.

Although Manicheism contrasted with Augustine's post-Manichaean thought, the young truth-seeker was attracted by its convincing solutions to philosophical problems.

The metaphysics that so attracted Augustine to the Manichees eventually turned him away from them. During his nine years with the cult, his understanding of God must have altered immensely. In his *Confessions*, Augustine identifies the Manichees' degrading view of God as the primary reason for his departure from their cult. "I was quite sure that the theories of the Manichees were wrong"; he explains, "I could see that while they were inquiring into the origin of evil they were full of evil themselves, since they preferred to think that yours was a substance that could suffer evil rather than that theirs was capable of committing it" (VII. 3). Augustine courageously questioned and denounced Manichaean conceptions. He would not accept a doctrine that portrayed God as less than all-powerful, a God who struggles against evil in the same way humans struggle against evil. Augustine ascended to a belief that God is "incorruptible." He feared that if he were to continue entertaining the Manichaean doctrine of God, "I should myself become a cause of evil" (VII. 3). For God's power is such that "no soul has ever been, or ever will be, able to conceive of anything better than you, who are the supreme, the perfect God" (VII. 4). Augustine thus abandoned Manicheism and its convenient solution to the problem of evil even before he was able to "find [for himself] a clear explanation, without complications, of the cause of evil" (VII. 3). His belief in God's matchless nature transcended his desire to be content with his own worldview.

Augustine's understanding of God continued to develop after his departure from the Manichees, but it never again changed so radically and quickly. Out of the many propositions about God that Augustine may have entertained, James O'Donnell identifies the ones which persisted "page after page in his work" as "those...of goodness, justice, and spirituality" (28). For example, in his book *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine suggested a criterion for God's nature: we cannot believe "that any being to whom there exists a superior is God. And so all concur in believing that God is that which excels in dignity all other objects" (I. 7). Guided by this criterion, Augustine continued his search for the nature of God.

Sovereignty, which entails God's absolute control and unquestionable rule over the universe, became paramount in Augustine's mature thought. Nothing happens in God's creation that He does not

will, or at least permit, to happen. God's choices are just and final because they are from God. This attribute, sovereignty, trumped any other quality that seemed descriptive of God but somehow countered his absolute rule. Gerald Bonner observes, "[Augustine] became progressively more and more persuaded that the sovereignty of God had to be maintained against all human notions of love and justice" ("Pelagianism" 29). A scripture which Augustine often quoted affirms Bonner's claim: "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" (Romans 9:21; cf. Bonner, "Pelagianism" 35). God alone determines the order of His universe. According to His sovereign and unchecked rule, it is His prerogative to do as He pleases.

Augustine maintained that human standards are entirely insufficient to judge whether or not God acts rightly, for the world is His own creation, and He manifests His sovereign power over it by doing as He wills. For example, united with many authorities of the Catholic Church in Africa, Augustine affirmed the doctrine of original sin (Scheppard 106). This teaching purported that infants who died before baptism received some degree of punishment in purgatory. In debates against a Pelagian (Julian of Eclanum), he defended this doctrine extensively, even though it led some to question the magnitude of God's love (cf. Scheppard 97–106). Indeed, Julian accused Augustine of worshiping a "God who was a *nascentium persecutor*," a persecutor of infants (Bonner, "Pelagianism" 29). But, Augustine may have recriminated, Julian was out of place in passing judgment on how God chooses to manifest his all-powerful decree. God retains the unquestionable right not to allow *any* impure being to live in His presence. Furthermore, He manifests His sovereign rule by exercising this privilege. Augustine also maintained, of the souls whom God "willed...to be born," more would be damned than would be saved, and those who are "most justly damned" are of "no concern with the righteous God" (qtd. in Bonner 29). As early as when he wrote *On Free Choice of the Will*, the priority of God's sovereign decree was developing in Augustine's mind. In that work he affirmed, "The suffering of sinners is part of the perfection of the created order" (III. 9). Sinners enable God to express His justice by punishing them (You 8). Indeed,

“when sinners are unhappy, the universe is perfect”; their “torments... adorn the world” (III. 9).

Human notions of love and fairness clearly took second place to Augustine's emphasis on God's unquestionable rule. His firm resolve to exalt God's sovereign dominion as His most important attribute became the mold which formed the rest of his theology. The influence of Augustine's conception of God is especially clear in his positions on human will.

III. Two Polemical Encounters: The Manichees and the Pelagians

Two of Augustine's major theological debates were, *prima facie*, fundamentally concerned with the issue of free will. In his debate against the Manichees, he argued that the will is free and powerful. Later, in contrast, he dogmatically denounced the personal initiative of human will in his conflict with the Pelagians. One may prematurely question Augustine's intellectual resolve. However, under a more careful analysis of these debates, we learn that the issue of free will was only subsidiary to, although intimately connected with, the paramount matter: Augustine's theological propositions on the nature of God. In these two polemical encounters, Augustine sought to illuminate human conceptions of God's sovereignty either by affirming or denying various inferences that may be made from believing in this divine quality. For instance, against the Manichees he was logically compelled to defend God's goodness in view of the existence of evil, since he maintained that God is all powerful. Against the Pelagians Augustine argued that man may not receive merit for whatever good act he performs. God is the only being genuinely credited for any good thing, and it is only by deception that man may believe otherwise. A brief consideration of these debates will reveal that the central issues in both of them were God's sovereignty and the implications of that sovereignty.

Augustine's book *On Free Choice of the Will* was a by-product of his conflict with the Manichees. This is the source to which scholars usually turn to assess Augustine's affirmation of the free will. Even though the subject of will is a critical point of discussion, the title of his book may be misleading. His goal in writing the text was not to communicate his views on the will. Rather, he affirmed the free will because it was central

to his strategy for achieving his primary purpose: to refute the Manichees. In a set of later writings called *Retractions*, he explained the fundamental problem he perceived in Manicheism: "These men—they are the Manichees—in their wickedness and error, wish to assert the existence of a certain principle of evil, immutable and co-eternal with God" (2). In this statement, he also revealed why he wanted to refute them: their doctrine was degrading to Augustine's understanding of God. The work might have been more revealing of its purpose had it been titled "In Defense of God's Sovereignty." Or he might have called it, "Against the Manichees," similar to the title of a later polemical work.

The motivating purpose of *On Free Choice of the Will* is evident throughout the work. Augustine commenced the book's discussion by posing the central issue as a provocative question: "Is God the cause of evil?" (I. 1). Additional section headings continued this theme: "Why did God give freedom of the will to men, since it is by this that men sin?" (II. 1) and "All good things come from God" (II. 17). These issues, especially the first, address the same points that the Manichees utilized to make proselytes. Indeed, it was young Augustine's confusion over the fact of evil that initially attracted him to Manicheism. Augustine made it clear that the intent of his work was to provide alternative answers to the difficult questions and theological solutions over which the Manichees believed they had a monopoly. His purpose was not to simply articulate his views on free will. Rather, his views on free will entailed a line of defense against Manichaean doctrines which threatened Catholic perceptions of God's supremacy.

Thus, Augustine approached his encounter against the Manichees with two fundamental purposes. First, he wanted to demonstrate that his belief in the Catholic doctrine of God was rational even in light of the fact of evil. Second, he sought to demonstrate the superiority of his beliefs to Manicheism. Augustine achieved both of these purposes by strongly affirming that the human being, rather than an eternal evil entity, is entirely responsible for his own evil acts performed through his own free volition. He argued that the initiative to pursue or avoid evil is entirely within the power of the will, for which there is no prior cause other than the will itself. As a result, the sinner can blame none but himself for how he directs his own free choices.

This affirmation of moral responsibility was sufficient to contradict the Manichaean explanation for why humans do evil. If a human freely

chooses to sin and is thereby responsible for his sins, then the human may be held accountable and stand in need of repentance. Yet Manichees believed that the self is not responsible for evil acts, but that an evil entity locked inside the self overpowers the will and compels the human to sin. Seemingly inconsistently, they also believed that humans stand in need of repentance. Augustine observed that where there is no moral volition, and consequently no moral responsibility, there is no sin. Hence, on the Manichaeic view, it is absurd to insist that humans sin and need to repent.

Augustine also pointed to man's agency as the reason evil entered into the world. This position reconciled the fact of evil with God's goodness and sovereignty. He added an additional premise in order to demonstrate God's wisdom in allowing man the freedom through which he sins and without which he would not sin. Augustine declared that free will is a good, for man "cannot act rightly unless he wills to do so" (*Free II. 1*). If acting rightly is good, it follows that "he must have free will, without which he cannot act rightly" (*II. 1*). Augustine acknowledged that free will is only an intermediate good since a person could use it for evil, but, nonetheless, it is still a good. Furthermore, God did not give "us free will so that we might sin" (*II. 1*). Rather, God gave us free will so that we could live rightly. Man voluntarily uses his free will to sin. With this basic defense, Augustine argued that God can be both good and sovereign, even though He rules over a world that contains evil.

Although Augustine's strategy against the Manichees called for a human-centered discussion, he nonetheless revealed his priority by placing the power of human will within a perspective that glorifies only God. Man may choose to enter into God's grace, but God enables every good thing. No human being can genuinely be praised for the good that he does. Augustine warned, "Only hold to your firm faith, since no good thing comes to your perception, understanding, or thought which is not from God" (*Free II. 20*). This theme continued in other writings. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine observed, "No one ought to consider anything as his own, except perhaps what is false" (Preface). The only "achievements" for which man can take full credit are those which are wrong. Augustine consistently sought to praise only God, even if doing so entailed discounting man's significance.

This line of theodicy has received its fair share of criticisms and defenses (cf. Greer; Burns; Babcock). Whether or not Augustine's argument

is sound is beside our present concern. Most important, Augustine's purpose in addressing free will was not realized in the free will analysis alone. His entire purpose for even calling the will into question was to lend rationality and defense to his perception of God. Nonetheless, we must plainly acknowledge that he certainly did address the free will. Except for a few minor passages, the book consistently suggests that the views he expressed on free will apply to the entire human family. This point, if proven, seems sufficient for demonstrating that Augustine later altered his understanding of the will. However, the fact that he later restricted his views on free will did not weaken his defense. The defense remained just as strong even though Augustine reserved free will only for the first humans (Adam and Eve) and angels (Babcock 44). Affirming the free will of these beings was sufficient for explaining the entrance of evil into the world and thus for exonerating God from culpability (cf. Babcock). For Augustine maintained that, evil having entered the world, God manifests His justice by punishing evil. This punishment includes burdening mortals with difficulty in obedience and ignorance of what is right. In his dispute with the Manichees, this restriction was unnecessary for his purposes and would have only complicated matters. But in his later encounter against the Pelagians, he resorted to exactly this position.

Pelagianism developed within a splinter group of the Catholic faith under the teachings of Pelagius, a bishop from Britain (cf. Bonner, *Augustine* 312; Brown 340). Similar to Augustine's early position, the Pelagians believed in the absolute free choice of the will. They affirmed that humans are entirely responsible and accountable for their own moral choices. In fact, the Pelagian "heresy," as it was labeled, so closely resembled Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will* that Pelagius quoted from it in his work *De Natura*. However, the Pelagians exceeded the limits that Augustine could accept. They were moral elitists. Pelagians believed that man could be absolutely perfect and live in complete obedience to every one of God's commandments. Furthermore, they taught, "Since perfection is possible for man, it is obligatory" (qtd. in Brown 342). Sin should be understood as "a deliberate act of contempt for God" (Brown 350). Their battle cry was taken from the New Testament: "Be ye perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). They wanted the "Christian church" to be "an institution made up of perfect men" (Brown 348).

Augustine held Pelagianism in contempt not only because he saw it as a threat to fundamental principles of Catholic Christianity, but also as a threat to himself. While Pelagians tried to show that Augustine supported their views, the Catholic church in Africa accused them of heresy. The issue that bothered Augustine most was that their teachings rendered God's redeeming grace unnecessary to salvation (*Retractions 2*). Furthermore, their over emphasis on human initiative led to self-praise rather than praise of God. Just as Manicheism confused a correct understanding of God, so did Pelagianism, although the two theologies did so in very different ways. At the same time, the conflicts forced Augustine into an extremely awkward position. The defense he used against the Manichees to exalt God was utilized by the Pelagians in a manner that threatened his perceptions of God's sovereign rule.

When Augustine recognized the dangers of Pelagianism, "which threatened to destroy any belief in the grace of God" (Bonner, "Pelagianism" 35), he reversed his earlier view that man has initiative over whether or not he may choose to enter into God's grace. Augustine was determined to give *all* credit for good things to God, this time by emphasizing God's sovereignty in determining who receives salvation. This meant that man could not be considered meritorious for the achievement of any good thing, including the initial choice to act rightly.

Consequently, Augustine altered his understanding of human will as it applied to mortals in general. The initial choice for righteousness is not in man's power: "Unless the will is freed by the grace of God from the bondage through which it has become a slave of sin, and unless it obtains aid in conquering its vices, mortal men cannot live rightly and piously" (*Retractions 4*). Furthermore in his *Expositio in Epistulam ad Romanos* he says:

We cannot will if we are not called, and when, after the call, we have willed, our will and our course do not suffice, if God does not give strength to the runners and lead whither He calls. It is clear, therefore, that it is not of him who wills or of him who runs but of God showing mercy (Rom. 9:16) that we do mercy. (Qtd. in Bonner, "Pelagianism" 37)

This view denied the mortal's freedom to choose the good and thereby suggested that mortals cannot have genuine moral responsibility.

On this basis, Pelagians accused Augustine of not being able to shake off his Manichaeist past. They alleged that Augustine still believed that humans are not responsible for their sins. Augustine's refined view placed him in a vulnerable position. Had Augustine returned to his debate against the Manichees at the end of his life, it would have been extremely difficult for him to allege their theological inconsistency, that of denying human responsibility and insisting upon the need for repentance. The implications of his own mature position were remarkably similar.

However, we must emphasize that Augustine maintained the integrity of his free will defense. Indeed, we may argue that he did not abandon the *defense* at all. Although his views on human will in general changed radically, he maintained that Adam, Eve, and angels all enjoyed the most exquisite type of free will while they were in their pre-fallen states. Augustine still could have employed his defense with exactly the same impact as in his first encounter with the Manichees. The argument for the rationality of God's sovereign rule and goodness was just as sound after his conflict with the Pelagians as it was during his debate with the Manichees. By relinquishing his views on the scope of human freedom in his dispute against the Pelagians, Augustine did nothing to jeopardize his perception of God as the sovereign ruler. Indeed, his purpose was to strengthen this perception by showing that there is no good thing for which God does not have total responsibility. When faced with abandoning one of two theological positions, Augustine chose to deny mortal will rather than diminish in any way his carefully sought portrayal of God. His praise of God simply transcended his concern for man.

Conclusion: The Unity in Augustine's Thought

The satisfying result that we may take from the foregoing analysis is that Augustine did not arbitrarily waver in his theological positions. Rather, from his conflicts with the Manichees, throughout his final debates with the Pelagians, Augustine was single minded and focused on glorifying God in every attribute that might be assigned to Him. Readers of both his free will defense and his subsequent alteration of that defense must realize that Augustine's views on free will resulted from a much larger theological framework. Confusion and misunderstanding of Augustine's theology result from considering in isolation from other

matters the arguments that Augustine used to support his deeper purposes. Seeking out his more fundamental purposes assists in clarifying his ideas. I have argued that one of these purposes consisted of Augustine's unwavering resolve to attribute only the most dignified qualities to the Creator, and, above all, to defend the rationality of affirming God's sovereign rule. This approach lends greater coherency to the whole of Augustine's astoundingly complex thought.

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