AUGUSTINE AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF MORAL ACTION

Jones Irwin

Abstract

Situated historically at the beginning of the medieval period, Augustine's thought expresses itself as one of the most influential metaphysical systems of the entire history of philosophy. Such a privileged status has often served to occlude some of the more radical implications of Augustinian thought. Paradoxically, it is precisely this radicality which has led to a resurgence of interest in Augustine, most particularly amongst twentieth century Continental philosophers such as Jacques Derrida. Through a careful analysis of Augustine's thinking concerning morality, my paper seeks to draw out the metaphysical and epistemological values which lie at the basis of Augustine's disavowal of the possibility of human virtue. On my interpretation, Augustine is unequivocally arguing against the conception of 'the freedom of the will'. Moreover, this position is, on my reading, consistently held by Augustine from his earlier to his latest writings. Here, I am arguing against the dominant view that this radical 'immoralism' is merely a late development in his thinking.

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I. Introduction

This paper arose from questions concerning the "ethics" of Augustine's thought. Succeeding the Platonic justice of the *Republic* and preceding the 'natural law' morality of Thomas Aquinas, Augustine's thinking on "ethics" seems less easily categorisable.

This paper seeks to address precisely this enigmatic dimension in Augustine's thought, which remains unpalatable to many but which also has led to a rather unlikely revival of interest in Augustine amongst contemporary philosophers such as Jacques Derrida. [1] The essence of this radicality, I will claim, is its subversion of moral autonomy and its affirmation of the impossibility of strictly moral action, and this will be the topic of my paper.

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This central topic is intrinsically related to several other issues, most notably the question of "continuity" in Augustine's thought. Though the question of "continuity" in Augustine's thought may appear to be merely of academic interest, it rather moves beyond this initial site. The standard interpretation of Augustine posits a definite discontinuity in his thinking, which moves from a relatively humanist and positive phase to an ever more bleak and pessimistic critique of humanity. Other interpreters, such as Alistair McGrath (in his *A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*), question the dating of the break but maintain the thesis of a fundamental discontinuity.

In this paper, however, I will claim that there exists a powerful continuity in Augustine's thought, and additionally that this is a matter of more than mere chronological or pedantic interest. Rather the thesis of "continuity" can only be asserted through a reinterpretation of the very meaning of Augustine's project, early to late. I will return to this point below.

II. On Free Will

Although Augustine's critique of moral virtue reaches its fullest expression in the *City of God*, the germ of this approach is contained in Augustine's earlier work, in particular, in his conflict with the Pelagians. It is here, in the "Pelagian controversy" over the exact relation between grace and merit, that one can see most clearly the development of Augustine's later philosophy of the person, his view of the possibility of "virtue" and the link between these elements and his wider metaphysics. However, there is an important qualification to be made in this context. The importance of the anti-Pelagian texts in Augustine's discussion of virtue

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has led some commentators to dismiss their content as merely polemical, i.e., to dismiss his critique of virtue as merely contextual, an overstatement of the case. As Alister McGrath has pointed out, however (*ibid*., chapter 6), it is not correct to suppose that Augustine's theory of virtue is simply a reaction against Pelagianism. Rather, an almost identical view of virtue can be found in the earlier letters written to Simplicianus (dated late 396/early 397), while the debate with Pelagius did not break out until early in the following century. Augustine therefore developed what was to become his later theory of virtue in a non-polemical context.

I will firstly seek to place Augustine's later moral theory in the context of earlier works like *On Free Will*. These early works can be seen as placing a great emphasis on the almost "unrestrained freedom of the human will". Read in a literal fashion, these early texts appear inconsistent with the later critical view of the freedom of the will, which begins with the letters to Simplicianus and is radicalised from thereon. In giving an analysis of *On Free Will*, however, I will be keen to address Augustine's own views on this matter of philosophical development. According to Augustine's own overview of his development (in the *Retractations*) there is no discontinuity between *On Free Will* and what follows—it is simply a matter of a different context and a different emphasis. Our reading of *On Free Will* will thus be guided by a constant comparative method which will seek to analyse the possibility that this early text is not as affirming of "free will" as one might think (and is thus possibly more continuous with the later work).

Having looked at this text, we will shift our focus to what is generally seen as the transitional stage in Augustine's thought, that of the Pelagian controversy and a more explicit critique of virtue—here again the context provided by the *Retractations* will serve as a useful

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hermeneutic support. Finally, in terms of the development of Augustine's work, we will look at the concluding phase of his thinking, which seems to lead him towards an ever bleaker and more relentless attack on the possibility of virtue, most notably in the shocking—from an ethical perspective—*City of God*. The central question which will constitute the backdrop to all these analyses will be: is there an Augustinian turn away from virtue or is it rather that implicitly, in his early work, and explicitly, in his later work, Augustine maintains a suspicion and distrust of a self-sufficient humanity, especially when it comes to morals and the possibility of ethical life?

Let us begin then with an analysis of the early text *On Free Will*. Here, as always with Augustine, context is crucial. This text is keen to affirm the freedom of the will and to assert that the human will is a "good thing" [section 49]. But this emphasis is contextualised by Augustine's aim in the text, which is to criticise the Manichees and in particular their assertion that evil in the world is due to the work of an Evil Being, co-equal with the goodness of God. In contradistinction to this heretical view, Augustine wishes to emphasise the responsibility attaching to humanity for the creation and maintenance of evil in the world. To this end, it is incumbent upon Augustine to assert the origin of evil, not in some Manichean evil divinity, but rather in the day-to-day ordinariness of the human will. Augustine clarifies the background to this discussion retrospectively in the *Retractations*:

> We undertook this discussion [i.e. the text *On Free Will*] because of those who deny that evil is due to free choice of will and who maintain that God, if this is so, deserves blame as the Creator of every kind of thing. Thus they wish in their wicked error—they are the Manichees—to introduce a being, evil in nature, which is unchangeable and coeternal with God (Book 1, chapter 9, section 2).

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The primary aspect of the Augustinian critique of the Manichean concept of evil relates to the negative effort to distance God from any responsibility for evil. However, just as crucially, there is the parallel positive effort to assert human responsibility and freedom. Here, Augustine broadens his critique of the Manichees to also include any attempts to absolve humanity of responsibility for action. Such Manichean fallacious reasoning can be seen in two primary examples:

1. The theory that human action is necessary and determined in itself, thus disallowing any freedom of will.

2. The related claim that because God has divine foreknowledge of all the actions of humanity, that our wills have consequently been predetermined, and are not free. In *On Free Will*, Augustine addresses these two claims in turn.

Here I will concern myself only with the first claim, which in effect acts as the basis of the second.

Here, Augustine disdains the conception that humanity acts out of necessity through an analysis of the concept of "blameworthiness". *On Free Will* is written in the form of a dialogue between Evodius and Augustine and here Evodius puts forward the possibility of necessitarianism:

> If free will is so given that it has that movement by nature, it turns of necessity to mutable goods; and no blame attaches where nature and necessity prevail (Book 3, section 1).

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Augustine now pressurises Evodius into claiming that this doubting of the culpability of the human will is merely "ironical"[book 3, section1]. Evodius is now made to retract his initial suspicion of free will and culpability by confessing: "obviously I was being ironical in suggesting there could be any doubt about so clear a matter" [section 1]. The apparent self-evidence of this culpability of the human will, with regard to a turning away from God, is now asserted by Augustine:

> It remains that it must be the mind's own motion when it turns its will away from enjoyment of the Creator to enjoyment of the creature. If that motion is accounted blameworthy—and you thought anyone who doubted that deserved to be treated ironically—it is not natural but voluntary (Book 3, section 2).

There is obviously a philosophical weakness in Augustine's use of a kind of rhetorical pressure at this point in the dialogue to assert the voluntariness and culpability of the will. However, an analysis of this protracted issue would lead us out of the scope of our current purposes. For these purposes, it is not important that Augustine derive in a logically validly fashion the conclusion that the will is culpable but rather that he derive this conclusion as such, whether validly or not. It is the assertion of will *per se* which concerns us here as it relates to the wider question of human will and the possibility of virtue, i.e., we are more interested in an interpretation of what Augustine's philosophy of the will here is rather than with any question of logical inference:

> We acknowledge that it is a movement of the soul, that it is voluntary and therefore culpable. And all useful learning in this matter has its object and value in teaching us to condemn and restrain that movement, and to convert our wills from falling into temporal delights to the enjoyment of the eternal good (Book 3, section 2).

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This statement from Augustine is particularly important because, up to this point, there has been an emphasis only on the negative aspects of the will, its culpability. Of course, this culpability is also a sign of its freedom, as without freedom there would be no blame—which is Evodius' initial point against free will. However, if the will is free and is thus culpable when it acts in an evil way, turning away from God, can it also be said to be free to act in an ethical mode, that is, to act well, to turn towards God? In such a case, the will would appear not to be culpable but commendable. In the above passage the reference to a "conversion" of our wills takes on an especial significance in this context; "to convert our wills …to the enjoyment of the eternal good". The implication would appear to be that such "conversion" is itself an action of will, and, to go back to our previous query, it would seem to suggest that the freedom of the will is indeed a freedom to choose between good and evil, to be blameworthy when choosing evil and praiseworthy when choosing good. Augustine now appeals to common sense to reinforce this point:

> Moreover, unless the movement of the will towards this or that object is voluntary and within our power, a man would not be praiseworthy when he turns to the higher objects nor blameworthy when he turns to lower objects, using his will like a hinge. There would be no use at all in warning him to pay no attention to temporal things and to will to obtain the eternal things, or to will to live aright and to be unwilling to live an evil life (Book 3, section 3).

In passages such as these, *On Free Will* appears to be unequivocally affirming the freedom of the will, whether in the case of so-called good action or bad action. It is precisely this apparent emphasis on human freedom and moral autonomy which leads Augustine into controversy with his opponents, most notably the Pelagians.

III. Middle to Late Writings

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The most important texts of Augustine's later period are the so-called 'anti-Pelagian' writings (dated 400 onwards) and the monumental *City of God* (completed in 426). The Pelagian conflict splits Augustine's work through the middle, separating his earlier more "humanist" work (*On Free Will,* completed 388) from his later, more theocentric thought (*Retractations*, *The City of God*).

The controversy stems from what Augustine regards as a serious misinterpretation of his work by Pelagius, in particular Pelagius' reading of *On Free Will*. In this latter text, Augustine is addressing the issue of "the origin of evil" and as such his emphasis is on the responsibility for this evil which attaches exclusively to the "free will" of the individual human being. In this context, he makes no reference to "God's grace" insofar as, for Augustine, God is not responsible in any way for the existence of evil.

However, Pelagius reads this emphasis on free will as a sign that Augustine wishes to make humanity independent of God when it comes to moral action. In other words, Pelagius interprets Augustine's claim that free will is responsible for evil as a claim that free will can choose between good and evil. This would make free will the basis of moral as well as immoral action and would credit the individual with the ability to be virtuous, independently of God's grace.

We have already seen in our discussion of *On Free Will* that there are good textual grounds for such a claim and yet it is precisely this claim which Augustine wishes to unequivocally refute:

> Hence the recent Pelagian heretics, who hold a theory of free choice of will which
> leaves no place for the grace of God, since they hold it is given in accordance with our
> merits, must not boast of my support (*Retractations*, Book 1 Chapter 9).

Pelagius has apparently interpreted Augustine's emphasis on the autonomy of the will out of context. Augustine is now claiming that the will has an exclusively negative autonomy. That is, it is capable of doing wrong on its own volition but not capable of doing good on its own volition. Indeed Augustine tries to show that he has already clarified this very issue in the text *On Free Will*:

> But, though man fell through his own will, he cannot rise through his own will.
> Therefore, let us believe firmly that God's arm, that is, Our Lord Jesus Christ, is stretched
> out to us from on high (2.20.54).

There has been much debate and disagreement about the truth of this situation. Did Pelagius interpret Augustine correctly? Is Augustine being honest about his intentions in *On Free Will*, or rather did he over-stress human will and seek to pretend otherwise in hindsight? This is a fascinating and ongoing hermeneutic question, but I want to move on from the specifics of it here and address its primary importance from the point of view of our own thematic.

Augustine is claiming that he has continuously held to the principle that when it comes to moral action, the possibility of acting virtuously, the human will is *not* free and independent. Indeed, in the *Retractations*, Augustine goes much further than this in his disavowal of human moral autonomy. Not only can it be said that the human is not an independent moral agent, it can further be said that the human is *completely dependent* upon God with regard to the possibility of moral action. In order to understand this more radical claim one needs to analyse Augustine's wider metaphysics which acts as a foundation for his (a)moral theory.

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In the *Retractations*, Augustine clarifies the context within which individuals find themselves incapable of independent moral action:

> The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary one to another, so that you do not the things that you would (Book 1, chapter 9, section 5).

The moral predicament for mankind thus has its roots in a metaphysical malaise. Augustine does not deny the contorted and paradoxical nature of his description of the "moral" life of the individual. Rather he affirms precisely these difficulties as the result of a "punishment" from God:

> But all this applies to men as they appear on the scene after the condemnation of death…. if man would be good if he were constituted differently, and he is not good because he is in his present condition; if he has not the power to become good, whether because he does not see what he ought to be, or because he sees and yet cannot be what he ought to be, or because he sees and yet cannot be what he sees he ought to be, then this is surely a punishment (*Retractations*, Book 1, chapter 9, section 5).

The *Retractations,* therefore, in its clarifying overview of the Pelagian controversy seems to outline a continuous thematic of non-freedom of the will, extending from *On Free Will* right through the anti-Pelagian texts. Augustine wishes us to understand that there is no discontinuity between the earlier and later works on this point. His perspective on the will has always been that it is not free to do good actions, independently of God's grace. There is no moral autonomy, properly speaking, for the human being. Certainly, the anti-Pelagian texts would appear to be consistent with this view and as we will see, the *City of God* represents an intensification of this very perspective. Here, I will point to how one might see *On Free Will* fitting into such a trajectory.

Augustine's own quotation of this text in the *Retractations* stresses the inability of the human being to rise up, once it has sinned. Pelagius interpreted this as saying that the human being was born sinless and free, and that it was only if it sinned and chose evil that it became incapable of choosing good. That is, Pelagius interpreted *On Free Will* as stating that every individual is capable of autonomous moral action prior to sin. What this, however, crucially failed to take account of was the determination (for Augustine) of the will *as such* by sin after the Fall. Existing humanity is born in original sin for Augustine and, as such, from birth we are incapable of rising again of our own accord, without the help of God's grace.

Pelagius did not take account of the background context of original sin in *On Free Will.* Pelagius' interpretation of the freedom of the will cannot even be said to apply to Augustine's interpretation of man before the fall. As Henry Chadwick has pointed out, with reference to both Book 14 (section 27) of the *City of God* and Augustine's early *Exposition of Genesis* in *Refutation of the Manichees,* even in Paradise Adam needs grace. This refers to grace not only as a helpful adjunct to his will but as an indispensable means (the reference is to a 'divine inbreathing into the soul in paradise', Chadwick*, Augustine*, p. 110 ff). This interpretation makes it possible to see *On Free Will* as continuous with the critique of the will in the anti-Pelagian texts. It means that one can read *On Free Will* as more than simply a polemical or hyperbolic text. This leaves us with the question of these texts' relation to the *City of God*. Here I will primarily focus on Book 19, 'Philosophy and Christianity on Man's End'.

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In Book 19, Augustine is keen to differentiate the eschatology of Christianity from the more

immanent 'empirical' approach of philosophy *per se*. Augustine mentions the Stoics by name

but it is clear that his critique of philosophical teleology applies to virtually all previous

philosophers:

> Those who think that the supreme good and evil are to be found in this life are
> mistaken. It makes no difference, whether it is in the body or in the soul, or in both—
> or, specifically, in pleasure or virtue or in both—that they seek the supreme good.
> They seek in vain whether they look to serenity, to virtue, or to both; whether to
> pleasure plus serenity, or to virtue, or to all three; or to the satisfaction of our innate
> exigencies, or to virtue, or to both. It is in vain that men look for beatitude on earth
> or in human nature (Book 19, Chapter 4:5).

This conception of virtue certainly applies to the self-sufficient continence of Aristotle, which

is hereby rendered inadmissible from an Augustinian perspective. With reference to Greek

philosophy, one might wonder as to whether there is not a Platonic or even a (neo-Platonic)

Plotinian resonance in this passage. However, even the distrust and suspicion of the sensible

world characteristic of Platonism can not match the extremity of Augustine here. In the *City

of God*, for example, Augustine distinguishes between the 'City of God' (a heavenly city) and

the 'City of Babylon' (symbolising the earth). Only in the 'City of God' can an authentic

polis be imagined, while the 'City of Babylon' is doomed to endless war and strife.

Augustine's ontological dualism, his strict division between two worlds, certainly develops

from an original Platonic metaphysic. Plato's early text, the *Phaedo*, is paradigmatic of this

'two-world' ontology, Plato there constructing an insurmountable division between the

World of Forms and the sensible world. In a manner which both anticipates and is influential

upon Augustine's dualism, Plato describes the condition of the soul's embodiment as a

punishment and a "descension" from an original blessedness (72e-77d). Philosophy becomes

a preparation for death (107c-108c). Certainly these dualistic motifs (which are qualified in

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Plato's later texts such as the *Parmenides* and the *Philebus*) bear a great similarity to Augustine's concerns in the previous passage. Nonetheless, the crucial difference remains that whereas Plato continues to stress the volition of the soul and its ultimate responsibility for its own destiny (108c), Augustine will deny this possibility. For Plato, the soul, however abject, remains morally autonomous.

The question of the influence of the neo-Platonist Plotinus on Augustine's division between two worlds is a difficult and well-documented problem (cf., for example, John Dillon's Introduction to Plotinus' *Enneads*). However, with regard to our present problematic, we can say the answer is quite simple. Like Plato, Plotinus at all times stresses the independence of the ego (the psyche), which can only reach union with the 'Godhead' (the ultimate *telos* of the mystical initiation) by its own merits, autonomously. Again, the contrast with Augustine is striking.

The specificity of Augustine's philosophy of the will is thus clear, in contradistinction even to the Platonic tradition to which it is often compared. But the emphasis on the 'slavery of the will' which I have traced from *On Free Will* to the *Retractations*, is given an especially venomous stress in several passages of the *City of God*, most notably Book 19. I conclude this paper with a brief analysis of some of these passages:

> For who, no matter how great his torrent of eloquence, can avail to enumerate the miseries of this life? Cicero lamented them, as best he could, in the *Consolation* on the death of his daughter, but how inadequate was his best? (Book 19, Chapter 4:6).

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In Book 19 of the *City of God*, we find Augustine in a despairing mood. Whatever the social,

political or psychological factors which might be adduced as explanations, the fact remains

that it is merely the rhetorical tone which differs here from his early work—the fundamental

philosophical claim remains the same. Humanity, it is claimed, is incapable of autonomy,

whether moral or epistemological. Even the venerated phenomenon of love holds no hope for

Augustine. Quoting Terence, he outlines the fundamental vacuity of even the most intimate

human relationships:

> I have taken a wife: what misery I have known therewith: children were born,
> another responsibility. What of the ills that love breeds…..slights, suspicions,
> enmities, war, then peace again? Have they not everywhere made up the tale of
> human events….A man's foes are even those of his own household; words that
> are heard with great sorrow of heart (Book 19, Chapter 5:1).

Crucially, virtue itself as a value cannot escape Augustine's attack:

> As to virtue itself, what is its activity here but perpetual war with vices, not
> external vices but internal, not alien but clearly our very own (Book 19, Chapter
> 4:7).

Augustine goes on to enumerate a similar fatalism at the heart of social life as such,

friendship, the justice system and the city state amongst others. What are we to make of this

almost unparalleled critique of human existence?

The rhetorical intensity of Book 19 of the *City of God*, on my interpretation, rather than

constituting an anomalous last gasp of a dying man, strikes at the very core of the

fundamental continuity in Augustine's thought. When Augustine tells us in Book 19 that

those we love we will eventually hate, he is not telling us anything dissimilar from when he

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says in *On Free Will*: that we are incapable of rising through our own will, being determined

by original sin. The implications for ethics of this thesis of the depravity of humanity are

immensely serious. Without moral authority, there can in effect be no moral responsibility, at

least as normally understood. To rephrase Dostoevsky, we might say "if man is depraved,

everything is permitted!". Would this amoralism constitute the truth of Augustine's Christian

philosophy?

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[1] Although Thomism remains the orthodox Catholic philosophy, Augustinian thought has exerted an incomparably greater influence on philosophy more generally. In the twentieth century, this Augustinian influence was immense and it continues in recent developments in Philosophy of Religion. For evidence of the latter influence cf. for example, *Questioning God* edited by John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley and Michael J. Scanlon (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2001); *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought* edited by Merold Westphal (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1999); *The Augustinian Tradition* edited by Gareth B. Matthews (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999). For evidence of the former cf. Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* especially sections 43-44, 190, 199. Another powerful example of Augustine's continuing influence is Jacques Derrida's *Circumfession*, a text devoted to a neo-Augustinian reading of Derrida's own mother's death-agony.

Dr. Jones Irwin is a Lecturer in Philosophy in the Education Department, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin.