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Augustine's rejection of the free-will defence: an overview of the late Augustine's theodicy

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Abstract: **Augustine is commonly considered the greatest early proponent of what we call the free-will defence, but this idea is deeply misleading, as Augustine grew increasingly dissatisfied with the view from an early point in his career, and his later explorations of the implications of his doctrines of sin and grace led him to reject free-will theodicies altogether. As a compatibilist, however, he continued to reject the idea that God is responsible for the advent of evil. His alternative was his often misunderstood claim that the primal sin had a 'deficient' cause, together with a version of what Alvin Plantinga has nominated the '*felix culpa*' approach. Thus, Augustine was actually the free-will defence's first major Christian detractor, and by the end of his career he had become its greatest critic.**

In his late work, *The Grace of Christ*, while discussing Pelagius' reasons for pursuing a free-will approach, St Augustine contends that Pelagius envisions the free will as ultimately neutral, balanced between the possibilities of good and evil: God makes human beings with a dual ability for good or evil, and then we make of ourselves what we will. This approach is compelling because it seems to solve the theodical problem – making human beings, and not God, to blame for evil – and, Augustine writes, 'I think I can see what he was afraid of' (*GPO*, I.16.17).[1]

A fear of making God blameworthy for sin led Augustine himself to advocate a free-will theodicy early in his career, and presumably that fact explains why it is commonly thought that St Augustine was, if not the inventor of what we now call the free-will defence, at least its greatest early proponent. The *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, for instance, indicates in its article on 'theodicy' that Augustine was the main classical Christian advocate of responding to the problem of evil with a free-will defence (Smith (1995), 1066; also see Adams (1999), 34; Evans (1982), ch. 5; Kirwan (1989), chs 5–6.).[2] About a decade ago, however, Rowan Greer raised some important questions about that view. Greer's

argument – based on a wide knowledge of Augustine's forbearers, and a close reading of Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will* – is that versions of the free-will defence were standard Christian Platonist views, views Augustine inherited upon his conversion to the Catholic faith, but soon began to question and transform (Greer (1996)).[3] Augustine finds himself wondering why human beings continually misuse the freedom God has given, and he ends up arguing that because of our negative inheritance from Adam, 'man cannot rise by his own free will as he fell by his own will spontaneously' (*LibAr*, II.10.54). Augustine is left with the view that 'the capacity of choosing good or evil now attaches only to Adam and Even before the fall' (Greer (1996), 479). Quite early on, then, Augustine believed he had found a weakness in the free-will defence – for if the view just expressed is true, a free-will defence loses much of its sparkle. If all post-lapsarian human beings are unable to love God properly, the divine gift of self-determination becomes a much less attractive explanation for the problem of evil.

In *On Free Choice* Augustine's response to this problem is merely to tweak the free-will defence by suggesting that although post-Fall humanity cannot will to love God directly, we can nevertheless seek divine grace for assistance. It is well-known, however, that Augustine later came to reject this view. He came to believe, instead, that a person unable to choose his or her loves with regard to everyday good or evil, let alone to love the absolute Good, would not be able to choose to seek God for help, either – a view that became one basis for his doctrine of prevenient grace.

My argument in the present essay is that this, amongst other developments traced below, led Augustine to reject the free-will defence altogether. He became a compatibilist, though he continued to believe that evil is not caused, but is rather permitted, by God, because God was able to use evil to produce a greater good. Thus, far from being the classic exponent of the free-will defence, Augustine was actually its first major detractor, and by the end of his career he had become the free-will defence's most enduring critic.

The end of the free-will defence trial period

Whether scholars of Augustine interpret him as a compatibilist or not – and many have trouble recognizing that 'free will' can have anything other than an incompatibilist sense (the leading handbook on Augustine, a massive volume entitled *Augustine Through the Ages*, omits any reference to compatibilism) – they typically take for granted that he considered Adam and Eve's wills free in an incompatibilist sense (e.g. Baker (2003), 463–464). It is widely held that though Augustine places increasing limitations on human free will post-Fall, he always maintained that Adam and Eve, at least, were 'free' to choose either good or evil, obedience or forbidden fruit. In addition, it is widely believed that Augustine considered the self-determining free choice of those first two human

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beings valuable enough for God to have allowed sin and evil to enter the world. This, it is thought, is why Augustine claims that God made Adam and Eve *posse non peccare* – sinless, with the possibility of not sinning – and not, like the saints in heaven, *non posse peccare* – perfect, with the impossibility of sinning. If God had made Adam and Eve with the impossibility of sinning, their free will would have been vitiated, and the good of determining for themselves their most fundamental loves would have been lost. Unfortunately, this reading of Augustine fails to take into consideration the development of Augustine's thought about the problem of evil during his arguments with the Pelagians, as he elaborated his doctrines of original sin and prevenient grace (see Couenhoven (2005)).

Augustine flirted with a free-will theodicy as late as *The Spirit and the Letter*, written around 412 CE. Near the end of that work he considers why not everyone believes in God – in his mind the greatest of all evils, and the source of the rest – and he tentatively replies that free choice is a neutral power able to turn to faith or unbelief (*SL*, 33.57–8). God wills for all to be saved, Augustine suggests, but not so as to deprive them of free choice. This does not infringe on divine sovereignty, because although unbelievers act against God's will when they do not believe, they do not defeat His will, since God willingly allows human choice and then punishes or rewards accordingly. God also offers to assist everyone by arranging external circumstances so that persons are enticed to choose the good, and even by working internally, bringing to mind thoughts that are good – but only some assent to this help (*SL*, 34.60).

This passage is widely considered a classic locus for Augustine's late understanding of theodicy, but interpreters have all too often ignored the caveats with which Augustine begins and ends the discussion just summarized. He begins by saying, 'Let us … set forth this idea and see whether it provides a satisfactory answer' (*SL*, 34.58), and he concludes with a less than ringing endorsement: 'If this discussion is enough to resolve the question, let it suffice' (*SL*, 34.60). But it is not at all clear, in fact, that the discussion *is* enough to resolve Augustine's questions. After proposing his solution, similar to that with which he had concluded *On Free Choice*, Augustine admits that he is not able to understand why one person is stirred to the point of being convinced while another is not. Thus, the free-will defence leaves Augustine with his old question about the inexplicability of incompatibilist free choice and why it is so regularly put to a bad use. Once again, he finds the free-will defence psychologically unsatisfying (see Stump (2001), 139, who cites *DDP*, 8.16, 18 and 11.26–27).

Augustine never again champions a free-will theodicy in any of his major works. Moreover, he actively disputes the theory for a variety of reasons, some scriptural, and others related to the development of his doctrines of sin and grace. In addition, he begins to expound a replacement for the free-will approach.

We might read Augustine's response to Pelagius in *The Grace of Christ*, in 418 CE, as a comment on the view he defended in his early works, and tried out in

The Spirit and the Letter. In reply to Pelagius' suggestion that we are born without virtue or vice and have the ability for each alternative implanted in us by God, Augustine argues there is not one root of good and evil actions – an undetermined will – but two separate roots (*GPO*, I.18.19; 2.13.14). Covetousness is the root of all evils, but properly ordered love is the root of all good. A good person has a good will, which loves properly, and a bad one has a bad will, which covets. What then explains the bad will, if not a natural power for alternates? Augustine only hints at his answer here: the origin of the bad will is falling away from the good (*GPO*, I.19.20). Since God bestows only one of these possibilities, the good will, Augustine contends that God is not responsible for evil. Let us now consider how he developed these claims.

Augustine's objections to free-will approaches

Augustine's expressions of dissatisfaction with the free-will approach indicate that he considered the approach at best psychologically inert – since it leaves human choices mysterious and inexplicable – and at worst actively misleading – implying that human beings have more control over their choices than experience (and, he came to believe, scripture) suggests. Given the complexity of this topic, no more than a thumbnail sketch of the way in which this concern about free will is developed in his late works can be offered here. But with that caveat in mind, let us consider Augustine's late view of the *liberum arbitrium* (free choice) Adam and Eve had before the Fall.

One might wonder why I begin with Adam and Eve rather than the angels. The angels, however, deserve second billing in our discussion, not only because his treatment of them is less than clear, but because Augustine thinks the blessedness of the pair in the garden might have been quite different from that of the angels. This leads him to say in one place that the devil must have sinned immediately on being created, unlike Adam and Eve (*GnLit*, XI.19.25–23.30; but for a contrasting view, *CD*, XI.12–19, XII.1; also *DCG*, 10.27; *DDP*, 7.13). Indeed, Augustine suggests that every angel was immediately and eternally confirmed in whatever choice it made upon being created; for one good discussion, see Burns (1988), 18. Augustine's discussion of the human fall is also much more detailed than his treatment of the angelic fall, and casts important light on the latter, to which we will return.

In his discussion of the human fall, Augustine tells us that his great Pelagian opponent Julian believes an evil will could arise just as a good will could, Adam and Eve's pre-lapsarian wills having been in a kind of intermediate position between these alternatives. Augustine dissents, however, noting that this makes it seem as though the first couple was 'made without a good will. Man was made upright, as scripture said. The question, then, is not how the good will with which he was made, but how the evil will with which he was not made, could have come

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to be in him' (*OpImp*, V.38; see *DCG*, 11.32). Christ, Augustine believes, was born righteous; similarly, the first couple was made upright, as is stated in a scriptural passage on which Augustine came to depend heavily, Ecclesiastes 7.29 (*CD*, XXII.1, XIV.11; *OpImp*, V.57, 61, IV.83).

Augustine's gloss on 'upright' is not simply that Adam and Eve were without sin when they were created, but that God made their wills oriented towards their true Good. That is, they were made with love for God. Making the first couple with good wills was God's only real creative option, Augustine contends, because the will cannot stand in between, and be neither bad nor good. If we love righteousness, the will is good; if we love it more, the will is better – but if we do not love righteousness, the will is not good (*PeccMer*, II.18.30). There is therefore no logical space for a will that is neither good nor evil, and God is unable to make human beings in a neutral position, in addition to being unwilling to create beings with evil wills. For Augustine, if God had made us with divided wills, loving and hating evil, our wills would have been evil, on the whole: goodness requires a purity that evil, given its nature as a privation, does not.

Augustine's view that God made human beings with wills oriented towards the good depends not only on Ecclesiastes 7.29, but also on his view that the creation account makes it clear that before they became evil, Adam and Eve were created morally good (*DCG*, 11.32; *OpImp*, V.41, 57). In addition, Augustine came to believe that one of the reasons it is a fault to withdraw from God is that it is more natural to adhere to him: evil is contrary to that for which we were created, or it is not evil at all (*CD*, XI.17, XXII.1). Thus, the first couple must have had an original righteousness, which consisted in their obeying God and not having the law of carnal concupiscence in their members (*PeccMer*, II.23.37).[4] They were not, like the saints in heaven, unable to sin, but they were entirely able not to sin, which is a lesser form of goodness (*DGC*, 12.33; *GnLit*, XI.7.9).

Augustine's belief that Adam and Eve were made with wills already oriented to the good has important implications for our understanding of his late view of free choice. Though the full story is too complex to tell here, Augustine's thought about the role of free choice in human willing is summarized in his late discussions of the temptation of Eve. Augustine notes in a number of places that when the first couple sinned in the Garden, they were preceded by the serpent, who tempted Eve (*CJul*, VI.22.68; *CD*, XIV.11; *DeTrin*, XII.17). The serpent's suggestion aroused Eve's delight in the forbidden fruit, and she and Adam then consented to eating it. This triad of *suggestion, delight*, and *consent* provides a rubric that Augustine often, implicitly as well as explicitly, applies in his discussions of willing (see Burns (1988), 19; Kirwan (1989), 89; TeSelle (1994), (2002)).

Augustine contends that what comes to mind – what is *suggested* to us – is not fully under our control; for instance, he cites Ambrose's statement that 'our heart and our thoughts are not in our power. When they pour in unexpectedly, they confuse the mind and spirit and drag it elsewhere than you intended it to go'

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(*DDP*, 8.20). If we cannot control what is suggested to us, one might hope that it is at least in our power to choose our responses to the suggestions of our random thoughts, or to what is simply seen or heard. As the quotation above indicates, however, Augustine does not believe that life is so simple; our hearts are no more under our control than our minds. Internal orientations, in us by nature or custom, or inclinations provoked by the attractive power of a variety of goods, make it difficult to control our desires by choice. Indeed, Augustine came to believe that it is really our *delights* that drive us, our choices simply following as a ratification of our deepest desires. Thus, Augustine comes to speak of choice as *consent*, and while consent is to be distinguished from delight, the former depends on the latter.

In brief, then, Augustine's view is that we consent to what attracts us – based both on our affections and our reasons (see Wetzel (1992), 84). I will appropriate Peter Brown's phrase and call this Augustine's 'psychology of delight' (Brown, P. (1969), 154–155). The dependence of human willing on things that delight is a theme Augustine returns to regularly in his later works. Even *The Spirit and the Letter* indicates that we will not follow what we should pursue unless it delights us (SL 35.63). Elsewhere he writes that sinners

> … do not will to do what is right, whether because they do not know whether it is right or because they find no delight in it. For we will something with greater strength in proportion to the certainty of our knowledge of its goodness and the deep delight we find in it'. (*PeccMer*, II.17.26; see also II.19.33, and Burnaby (1938), 220–226; Harrison (2000), 94–96; O'Daly (1989), 92; Rist (1969), 422)

Thus, consent depends on delight.

Rowan Greer has insightfully argued that Augustine makes this point using another terminology, as well. Greer claims that, starting as early as *On Free Choice* I.11.21, Augustine

> … introduces a novel distinction between 'free will'(*liberum arbitrium*) and 'will' (*voluntas*). He repeatedly uses the expression 'the free choice of the will,' and in this way treats the relation between the two terms as correlative with motive and act. That is, 'will' is a way of speaking of what motivates our 'free choices'. (Greer (1996), 479; see also Greer (2001), ch. 3)

Thus, *voluntas* is the basic orientation of the mind – which Augustine equates with delight – that motivates our choices (*liberum arbitrium*).[5]

One of the fundamental shifts in Augustine's thought about the free-will theodicy is that Augustine applies these convictions he holds about human willing in general to Adam and Eve in particular. That is, he comes to believe that what is true about the structure of human willing after the Fall must have been true before it as well. Thus, he contends that for Adam and Eve, too, the springs of action are not in an indeterminate power, but in one's basic orientation, either a proper or an improper love.[6]

In short, Augustine came to believe that Adam and Eve's freedom, their *libertas*, was of a compatibilist sort; they were created to choose what delighted them, and what they were created to delight in was God.[7] Augustine is not committed to a thoroughgoing psychological (or causal) determinism, however; he holds there are times when what is most true and loveable is not chosen – such as when our best reasons for choosing a thing simply fail to come to mind. It should also be emphasized that his psychology of delight includes important elements of intellectualism. It is a general truth for Augustine that we desire what seems true and right – even sinners, Augustine believes, sin because they propose a reason for doing so (*CJul*, VI.24.75). Augustine also believes, sensibly, that we can love a thing more the better we understand it (*DeTrin*, XIII.3.6–4.9). Thus, desire and intellect are closely tied (see *DeTrin*, XII.12.17).

The fact that God made human beings with good wills indicates that *liberum arbitrium*, even before the Fall, was not a power for opposites, but a power for consenting to the good in which God created human beings to delight (partly for this reason, Augustine rejects what some call the principle of alternate possibilities, but that is not a matter that can be addressed here). This power can be sinfully misused, but such a use of *liberum arbitrium* is not only improper but faulty. God prepared the way for humanity to choose the good – that is what choice is for. It is only a kind of madness and nihilation that allows human beings to take a different path.

We have seen so far that Augustine rejects free-will theodicies both because he believes that affirmation of a neutral will clashes with the scriptural claim that God made the first couple upright, and because he felt that the picture of human willing provided by a free-will approach was inadequate. As Augustine became more thoroughly compatibilist in his thinking about the structure of the human will, he was inclined to think of Adam and Eve's freedom and choice in a manner that accorded with the views he was developing in his treatises on original sin and grace.

Augustine also became dissatisfied with the free-will defence because he came to believe that it cannot fully address the problem it is meant to solve (intriguingly, this is a claim that is presently gaining a hearing (see Adams (1999), ch. 3 and Plantinga (2004)). While discussing the will of the angels, for instance, Augustine suggests that the proposal that the angels produced a good or bad will in themselves by their independent choice intimates that God left them quite vulnerable to evil (*CD*, XII.9). Thus, Augustine claims that an incompatibilist view leaves God more responsible for evil than his compatibilist view.

Augustine also draws back from a free-will theodicy because he concludes that the free-will approach implies not only that the persons God created needed improvement but that the improvement had to be supplied by those persons themselves, acting independently (see *CD*, XII.9; Babcock (1988), 40–44). This latter thought is directly contrary to the doctrine of prevenient grace to which

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Augustine grew increasingly committed as he grew older. Augustine's considered opinion is that only God can give good wills. This is not simply a point about human weakness in sin, for him. To be sure, Augustine asserts that human beings with bad wills, such as those who exist after the Fall, do not have the resources to chance their fundamental orientation from being disordered to one of faith in and love for God. Augustine's more fundamental commitment, however, is that goodness can only come from the absolute and super-personal source of good (see, e.g., *DPS*, 3.7–7.12; *DDP*, 8.16–18, 11.26–27). This is a point he felt held as much before the Fall as after (*CD*, 14.27).

Finally, Augustine became convinced that autonomous free choice is not so great a good, in itself, that it would be appropriate to prefer it to a good will. Thus he tells Julian that 'innocence, if you pay close attention, is a greater good than free choice' (*OpImp*, VI.32). Once choice is relegated to secondary status, a free-will theodicy loses much of what made it appear compelling. Augustine's considered opinion is that incompatibilist free choice is simply not worth the price of evil, sin, and suffering.

A new 'explanation' of the Fall

By the end of his life, Augustine had an array of reasons for rejecting the free-will defence to which he had once been drawn. The late Augustine was a compatibilist – even about pre-lapsarian wills (cf. Rogers (2004)). However, Augustine also steadily rejected divine responsibility for the Fall, and divine determinism along with it. In place of either a free-will theodicy or divine determinism, Augustine began to articulate a view that has often, ironically, been mistaken for both of the views he rejected. His new view began with a new understanding of the condition of the possibility of the Fall, summarized in the following passage:

> The angel or the human being, then, was able to sin precisely for this reason, that is, each of them was able to make bad use of this gift of God, namely, free choice, precisely because neither of them is God, that is, each is made by God, not out of God. (*OpImp*, V.38)

This approach is developed in a number of his later works (see O'Daly (1989), 87–89). As we have seen, Augustine claims that while evil is brought about by free choice (*C2Ep*, III.9.25; *Ench*, 105), choice is not fundamentally a neutral power for opposites but an ability to consent that is tied to the affections and reason of the person whose choice it is. Rational beings were created with good wills – that is, with love for God, the highest good (*CD*, XII.9), and God made free choice good, as well (*C2Ep*, III.9.25). Indeed, choice had a clear *telos*: 'For Adam was created with free choice so that he could not sin if he did not will to, not so that, if he willed to, he could sin' (*OpImp*, V.38). An evil will could arise from this good nature, then, not fundamentally because choice is a power for opposites, but because created

beings are made from nothing, and thus (unlike God, who cannot sin) have the ontological possibility of falling away from the good (*DNC*, II.28.48; *CD*, XII.6; *OpImp*, V.38).

Augustine makes his central claims in two important passages:

> … the evil act … was committed only when those who did it were already evil; that bad fruit could only come from a bad tree. Further, the badness of the tree came about contrary to nature, because without a fault in the will, which is against nature, it certainly could not have happened. But only a nature created out of nothing could have been distorted by a fault. … its falling away from its true being is due to its creation out of nothing. (*CD*, XIV.13; see *CD*, XII.1)

> But the first evil act of will … was rather a falling away from the work of God to its own works, rather than any substantive act … an evil will is not natural but unnatural, because it is a defect … .(*CD*, XIV.11; see *CJul*, I.8.36–8; *CD*, XII.6)

The primal sins were not substantial acts; rather, Augustine speaks of angelic and human sin as a 'falling away' (*CD*, XII.1). Thus, he came to think of all primal sins more as a slipping than a turning away (see Burns (1980), 110; (1988), 15). This Fall was made possible, though not necessary, by creation out of nothing.

Augustine does not puzzle over good choices that might have been made before the Fall; in addition to the good nature with which they were created, Adam and Eve were helped by what was 'not a small grace' so they could will the good (*DCG*, 11.31). Far from being inevitable, the Fall was unlikely. Therefore, what confuses Augustine is the bad choice – but here we should pause, for it is actually inaccurate to maintain that Augustine is confused by the choice to eat the forbidden fruit. Rather, he is confused by the advent of the evil desire on which that bad choice was founded; the choice is not inexplicable, given the presence of the evil desire. Of course, Augustine often writes that the primal sin is an evil choice. It is important, then, to note that his description of the primal sin in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis* XI and *City of God* XIV.11–14 makes it clear that Adam and Eve flirted with desires that should not have been attractive to them, had their hearts not already been turned to sin before they actually chose to disobey. The evil act, as the quotation above says, is based on an evil will (the bad tree).

Properly put, then, what confuses Augustine is this evil will. His solution to the problem is controversial: Augustine argues that the Fall is fundamentally inexplicable, a matter of deficiency (*CD*, XII.6–7, 9). The advent of the evil will cannot be explained by anything more basic than itself – the devil's crafty suggestion does not fully explain this desire, for disobedience would not have been attractive to a good will. Here, Augustine says, is the undetermined will that Pelagius, and his follower Julian, sought (*NG*, 30.34, 46.54; *OpImp*, I.78, 79, 85, V.51). From his later perspective, however, this possibility is not grounded in an innate power for choosing between opposites. Rather, the paradigm case of Pelagius's undetermined will is simply a malfunctioning will, a deficient form of desiring that can

have only a negative direction. Augustine's late view is that any inexplicable desire must be evil, because like Adam and Eve's radical desire for the forbidden fruit, it must be opposed to the good for which human beings were made (see Burrell (1993), 91–92). And as a faulty act of will, Augustine believes it is not really free at all. Thus, Augustine turns from what we might (for want of better terms) call a psychological understanding of the first sin to an ontological understanding of the Fall.

Augustine's suggestion that the primal sin was made possible by the fact that human beings are made from nothing, and can fall back into it, is not intended as an explanation of why the Fall happened: it simply indicates the condition of the possibility of the Fall. Augustine adds that sin was also possible (though again, not necessary) because, though the first couple was greatly graced by God, they were not given the special grace of perseverance necessary to confirm them in their created goodness (*DCG*, 10.26; *DDP*, 7.13). For Augustine, what both of these facts have in common is the further, and more basic, fact that when God created Adam and Eve, God did not elect to unify them with himself in the manner in which the saints in heaven are unified with God in Christ. A being unified with Christ in that way partakes of the divine nature itself, and comes to share in the divine inability for sin – this, Augustine comes to believe, is the reason for the higher *libertas* of the saints in heaven, who are so completely free from weakness that they find it impossible to sin.

So creation *ex nihilo*, combined with lack of union with the divine, made it possible for Adam and Eve to desire what they should not have, and thus to choose to eat the forbidden fruit. Nevertheless, doing so was nonsensical: God not only made them with good wills, but made them so intelligent that Adam was able to name all of the animals, and in addition, God both gave them the grace to love him and threatened them with death if they disobeyed his command (*DCG*, 12.35)!

Katherin Rogers (2004) is hardly alone in thinking that Augustine contradicts himself on this point in a discussion of the fall of the angels in *City of God*, XII.9, where he seems to imply that God made the angelic fall inevitable, because God withholds a grace they needed in order not to fall. It is best, however, to read Augustine's confusing and brief comment on this topic in the light of his longer and more perspicuous discussion of Adam and Eve's fall. In that context, Augustine's suggestion that the angels who fell may have done so because 'they received less grace of the divine love' should not be read as indicating that they *had* to fall. Because Augustine is always anxious to defend God from blame for evil (that is, he admits that God permits evil, but never that God causes it or makes it necessary), it is highly doubtful that he is allowing himself to speculate that some angels were divinely determined to fall. Rather, Augustine is suggesting that the condition of the possibility of their falling was that they did not receive that grace that makes it impossible to sin. He is not, however, suggesting that this

explains or accounts for the primal sin – a fall that he considers uncaused and inexplicable. On Rogers's reading of Augustine the Fall was necessitated by divine negligence, but Augustine's view is that the Fall was not at all necessary; it was not even caused.

Thus, though the ontological analysis of the possibility of the Fall outlined above does not explain sin's advent, Augustine does not mean it to (*contra* Robert F. Brown (1978), 319–324). Rather, he indicates that no explanation for the primal sin is available, and that none should be sought: instead of an efficient cause, Augustine writes with rhetorical flourish, sin has a 'deficient' cause (*CD*, XII.6; XII.7, 9). He is claiming that the primal sin lacked both cause and explanation; far from being necessary, or even reasonable, it was perverse.[8] The primal sin, as a desire for a lesser good, and ultimately harmful knowledge, is inexplicable, because Adam and Eve were created to rest in God.

This ontological analysis of the Fall fits Augustine's privation account of evil, according to which sin is a falling from the good, a defect. The sin of that first couple was a sin of falling away; they became less than they were made to be. And while Augustine is thus left without an explanation of how the Fall happened, he *is* able to provide an explanation for his inability to explain the Fall: if the primal sin made sense, it would not have been as bad as Augustine believed it was. Falling back into nothing occurred, Augustine indicates, against the odds, and the fact that we cannot explain why it occurred is fitting, since the more sense we can make of the Fall, the less disturbing and worrisome – and the more logical and acceptable – it might seem. For Augustine the Fall is a surd, and appropriately so.

Augustine's treatment of the primal sin as not a turning away, but a fall, reinforces my claim that Augustine rejects determinism. Thus, our understanding of his 'psychology of delight' must be nuanced: his treatment of the Fall suggests that some evil desiring, though not choice or consent, is radical and mysterious (cf. Chappell (1995), 190–192; Gilbert (1963), 18). However, this does not make Augustine some kind of libertarian about free will; it simply means that Augustine's compatibilism does not commit him to, or depend on, belief in determinism. First, Augustine is not generally libertarian because his psychology of delight remains his general rubric. Good choices are always (properly) motivated, and sin is rarely (if ever, pear-stealing notwithstanding!) as fully inexplicable as the primal sin. He makes it clear that post-lapsarian human beings love inordinately, and must, because of the disordered fundamental orientation called original sin. The behaviours that arise from this state of carnal concupiscence are explicable in terms of Augustine's psychology of delight, since sinners will what seems good according to their fallen delights.

Second, Augustine is not a libertarian concerning the primal sin, either. He claims, after all, that the radical autonomous changes in delight that constituted the Fall were not only unplanned and uncontrolled, but not even substantial acts, as we saw above.[9] Such changes could only be uni-directional; they had to be falls

away from God, and into nothingness. That is hardly an incompatibilist freedom; it is not a power at all, but an uncontrolled weakness.

Augustine's idea that the Fall had a deficient cause might seem philosophically untenable. Can he avoid falling prey to Rogers's charge that in the end he makes God 'the author of sin'? Augustine's interpreters must be careful here. First, it is important to note that Augustine's rejection of the free-will defence naturally raises significant questions. Second, it is important to clarify that in one central respect Augustine's late view of God's relationship to evil is the same as his early view: all along, Augustine was committed to the belief that God was partially responsible for the Fall, since God permitted it to happen. Early and late, Augustine considers God responsible for sin's advent – he simply insists that God has good reasons for letting the Fall happen, only some of which we understand. What changes as Augustine rejects incompatibilist understandings of free will is how Augustine thinks the Fall happened, as well as some of the reasons he offers for saying that we should not blame God for permitting the Fall.

Third, the fact that one sees problems raised by Augustine's late view is not a reason to ascribe to Augustine the view that God is to be blamed for sin, because that is clearly a view he rejects. In his writings on how original sin is transmitted, Augustine objects to the 'creationist' idea that God creates fallen souls precisely because it makes God responsible for making souls evil. Augustine makes it clear that he is 'certain that the soul has fallen into sin by no fault of God, by no necessity of God or of its own' (*Letter 166*, II.5; brought to my attention by Rombs (2006), xxvii). The exegetical task is to present what Augustine said; whether those views are tenable is a matter that cannot be properly addressed here.

That said, I should admit that I lack others' confidence that Augustine's understanding of the Fall as a 'surd' is entirely deficient. Indeed, critics often apply a double standard in objecting to the idea of a deficient cause, since many of them are committed to something like agent causation, a view at least as mysterious as Augustine's late representation of the Fall. My sense is that Augustine presents compatibilists with an alternative to Calvin's view that is worth exploring. Interestingly, moreover, Augustine's view has much in common with Karl Barth's discussion of sin as an 'impossible possibility,' a view that many theologians, at least, have found attractive; for an instructive discussion, see Wolterstorff (1996).

A happy fault?

We have considered Augustine's reasons for rejecting a free-will theodicy, and his redescription of the condition of the possibility of the Fall. Nothing, however, has been said about why the late Augustine thinks God should not be blamed for sin, given that God knew the Fall would take place even in spite of His having made everything very good.

Augustine addresses the divine logic of permitting the devil's fall in a metaphorical reading of Genesis he proposes in *City of God*. This reading can appear to advance an aesthetic theory about evil that he had advocated earlier in his life, and which many believe Augustine never abandoned: a Plotinian divine ordering theodicy, according to which the divine ordering of evil contributes to the overall beauty of the universe (see Adams (1999); Burnaby (1938), 195–196; Greer (1996), 480–482). After noting that the angels are not mentioned in the creation account, and suggesting that Genesis may refer to them metaphorically in speaking of the creation of the light and the dark – meaning the holy and fallen angels, respectively – Augustine evokes a picture of the creation as a great and beautiful painting, beautiful when it 'has touches of black in appropriate places', along with lighter colors elsewhere (*CD*, XI.23). The beauty of this divine work of art depends in part on the contrast between the light and dark colours that make it up. Augustine also argues that the sovereign divine interweaving of colours is accomplished as evil is put into its proper place by the penalties assessed to evil, 'so that the penalty of sin corrects the dishonour of sin' (*DLA*, III.9.25–6).

Yet, as Greer has noted, an aesthetic theodicy is at odds with Augustine's commitment that evil is a privation. Sin, as a falling away from the good, cannot be made to contrast positively with the good simply by being appropriately punished, even if that punishment is itself a good (as Adams (1999), 39–43, also argues). The aesthetic approach implies that sin is actually the opposite of the good, which can be put in its proper place, thereby enhancing the overall beauty of the universe. The privation theory, however, implies, to the contrary, that sin is simply the good, harmed. On the privation account, sin is not like a dark colour of paint that contrasts with lighter colours; rather, it is more like holes in the canvas that detract from what the picture originally was supposed to portray, or an unpleasant change in tint and texture over the entire canvas.

Thus, an aesthetic explanation for the divine permission of evil fails on Augustine's own terms. Happily, however, it is possible to read Augustine's discussion of the fall of the angels in a manner that does not invoke this self-contradictory aesthetic theodicy. And once again, it is easier to interpret Augustine if we begin by discussing Adam and Eve.

In his treatment of why non-angelic sin was permitted, Augustine shows that a version of the theme of the divine ordering of the universe can be a coherent and thought-provoking option, when, as Rowan Williams has argued, that ordering is understood as the historical process of God's salvific responses to evil, rather than the way 'evil' might be said to look beautiful in the eyes of an ideal observer seeing everything at once (see Williams (2002)). Augustine appeals to this theme of divine ordering when he writes that 'evil things are allowed to exist in order to show how the righteousness and foreknowledge of the Creator can turn even those very evils to good account' (*CD*, XIV.11). God permits evil, therefore, because He knows He can bring good out of it (*CD*, XIV.27; *GnLit*, XI.4–11). Indeed,

Augustine claims that it was good that God did not make the Fall impossible. The reason is not, as in the free-will defence, that God built into creation a good (incompatibilist free choice) that can be preserved by permitting evil; Augustine's late view is that God permits evil because by doing so a new and greater good could be brought to pass.

The good that God brings out of evil takes two forms. The first is epistemic: He orders evil by having it show how foolish and bad disobedience to Him really is, how just He is in punishing those who disobey, and, by contrast, how great His mercy really is. Without the Fall, and negative consequences for it, Augustine believes that we would not be able to understand just how terrible sin is, and just how amazingly gracious God is. The Fall, then, is permitted, in part, because it can lead to the good of a better understanding of God, what God is for, and what God is against.

Augustine also indicates that God permitted the Fall because of a relational good that God knew He would bring out of human evil, and to which the epistemic good just mentioned is ordered. God permitted the Fall He foreknew because He knew that great good could be brought out of it by the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, 'in whom we have obtained our lot, predestined according to the plan of him who accomplishes all things' (Ephesians, 1.11, cited in *DDP*, 7.14; cf. Rist (1994), 282–283). In bringing the human and the divine into unity in Christ, and in then bringing human beings into unity together with Christ, God improves on the original creation in a number of ways. First, God's loving and gracious relationship to that creation is revealed more fully than it would otherwise have been. Second, God is enabled to relate to that creation not only as creator but also as redeemer. Third, in Christ God adopts human beings as sons and daughters, making them Christ's 'body', and in the process divinizing them (*CD*, XII.23, XXI.16; *DDP*, 7.15). As Augustine makes especially clear in his late doctrine of baptism, entry into the church is the beginning, at least, of incorporation into Christ. Because God graciously redeems by incorporating human beings into Christ these three goods really amount to one new relationship with God, a relationship that Augustine believes is not only the greatest gift that God can offer, but one that would have been impossible without the Fall. Unexpectedly, the Fall thus becomes a happy fault (cf. Plantinga (2004)).

We can now return to the angels, and Augustine's picture of evil in *City of God*. In writing that 'the whole universe is beautiful, if one could see it as a whole, even with its sinners, though their ugliness is disgusting when they are viewed in themselves' (*CD*, XI.23), Augustine is not invoking an aesthetic theodicy, but asserting that the universe as a whole is good, though there are disgusting things in it, given sin's advent. Sin is not part of the beauty of a larger picture; it remains foul. Positively, Augustine is arguing (in response to the Manichees; see *CD*, XI.22), that creation is fundamentally good, and better than many of his contemporaries thought: it might seem evil that the world has been made such that

we can, for instance, be harmed by poisons, but seen in proper perspective, our physical vulnerability is good, because we are taught the humility that we ought to have, as those who are dependant on another for our very existence.

Augustine's defence of finitude, and his argument that time and change are part of the good of a material world full of finite beings, should not be mistaken for an aesthetic response to evil – when he speaks (as in *CD*, XI.18) of God enriching the course of history by providing antitheses to evil by putting evil to good use, Augustine is referring to 'a kind of eloquence of events' in which the beauty of God's decision to create is revealed over time, through a process in which the ultimate anti-type is Christ himself (as ancient Christian typological interpretation of scripture indicated). In itself, then, the Fall was simply evil, but God permitted it, according to Augustine, because God knew that He could bring out of it a good nonpareil.

Dare we hope?

We are left with an obvious question. Say that Augustine is right in claiming that God permitted sin because He knew He could bring out of it the great good not only of a deeper knowledge of Himself but of redemption through union with Himself, in Jesus Christ. Is the divine permission of evil to be praised if only some of the persons God created enjoy that deeper relationship with God?

Augustine, of course, believes that scripture indicates that God will not save the fallen angels, and only some human beings. Nevertheless, he sometimes wonders about the logic of this divine decision. And in his late works he provides two responses to the question why God does not choose to save everyone (neither of which is that God respects free choice by saving only those who turn to him).

The first is that God would be perfectly just to eternally damn all sinful persons (*CD*, XXI.13). However, while this claim indicates that God is not obliged to save everyone, it fails to address the theodical issues with which we are dealing, because even if the claim is true, it might still be the case that God shares blame for sin's advent, for instance, by not having prevented it when he could easily have done so.

A relevant answer would indicate that God had some good reason for permitting the Fall, while knowing that not all will be redeemed. And Augustine commonly appeals to a claim of this sort, when he maintains that God has chosen to show mercy only to some as a way of both showing the reality and seriousness of divine justice, and of highlighting the unmerited graciousness of divine mercy, by contrast (see, e.g. *Letter 190*). This position is an intensification of the view that God permitted evil because it could be used to bring about the good of a deeper knowledge of God – the intensification being that here Augustine suggests that the best explanation of the scriptural witness concerning God's character and

behaviour is that the Fall and limited forms of punishment by themselves is not enough to show the full depth of God's justice and mercy; both the Fall and eternal punishment are required.

Augustine's late theodicy is thus, basically, an argument that a world in which at least some relate to God as redeemer is beautiful and good in ways that an alternative world in which none relate to God as redeemer, and there is no evil, is not. While Augustine never states the claim as it is put in the preceding sentence, he appears not only to agree with it but take it for granted in his late thought; it is a basic assumption for him. In response, of course, it is natural to wonder whether the world Augustine believes God created is in fact the best world God could have created.[10] Augustine does not seem to have asked himself questions about the existence of a best possible world, but that may be because he did not find the question appropriate. What he does say is as follows: first, he is convinced, as the paragraph above states, that a world in which there is sin, and some are redeemed, exhibits impressive goods. Second, Augustine is convinced that God is not obliged to actualize any kind of world; in his view, any world God creates is an unmerited grace, for which we can only be thankful. Third, Augustine's writings imply that there is no way for us to know what the best possible world is; it is for that reason that he contents himself with pointing out that this world is full of goods we often fail to recognize. Augustine does not attempt to portray this as the best of all possible worlds – he simply hopes to defend the goodness of the world that has been revealed, and praise the God who made it.

Such calls for epistemic humility are common for Augustine, even when he believes he knows what the church's teaching is or should be. Discussing why God chooses to save one particular person rather than another, for instance, he says that he simply does not know:

> … why will he [God] in the same situation punish me rather than that fellow or set free that fellow rather than me?' I have nothing to say; if you ask me why, I admit that the reason is that I do not find anything to say. And if you again ask why, I reply that the reason is that, just as his anger is just, just as his mercy is great, so his judgments are inscrutable. (*DDP*, 8.18; see 9.21; *CD*, XX.2; *DPS*, 8.16; *PeccMer*, I.21)

Augustine assumes that God has reasons for what God does, and that he might even learn some of them in the future, but he does not have an inkling of what they might be – he is unable to see as God can.

This admission of limitation brings our discussion of Augustine's late theodicy to a close on an important and enduring Augustinian note. Whatever the turns and adjustments he made on other matters (and perhaps in light of them!), Augustine was confident throughout his career that human attempts to plumb the mystery of divine goodness are partial at best. And though Augustine sometimes sounds quite sure of his theodical surmises, he would have agreed that despite his best attempts to understand the problem of evil, his vision remained

incomplete: 'Scripture did not, after all, say without a reason, *Your judgments are like a great abyss.*' 'And yet there is no injustice in God. Why? Who is not troubled? Who is not forced to exclaim at such a great depth … ?' (*PeccMer*, I.29, 30).[11]

Abbreviations

C2Ep	*Contra Duas Epistulas Pelagianorum* Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians
CD	*De Civitate Dei* City of God
CJul	*Contra Julian* Answer to Julian
DDP	*De Dono Perseverantiae* The Gift of Perseverance
DeTrin	*De Trinitate* On the Trinity
DGC	*De Corruptione et Gratia* Rebuke and Grace
DNC	*De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia* Marriage and Desire
DPS	*De Praedestinatione Sanctorum* The Predestination of the Saints
Ench	*Enchiridion de fide, sep, et caritate* Enchiridion
GnLit	*De Genesi ad Litteram* The Literal Meaning of Genesis
GPO	*De Gratie et Peccato Originali* The Grace of Christ and Original Sin
LibAr	*De Libero Arbitrio Voluntatis* On Free Choice of the Will
NG	*De Natura et Gratia* Nature and Grace
OpImp	*Contra Julian Opus Imperfectum* Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian
PeccMer	*De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione* The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins
SL	*De Spiritu et Littera* The Spirit and the Letter
VerRel	*De Vera Religione* On True Religion

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Notes

1. References to Augustine's works are by book, if any, in Roman numerals, and chapter and paragraph, in Arabic numerals – not to page numbers. I refer to his texts by English titles in the body of my paper, but by Latin abbreviations in parenthetical citations. See the list of abbreviations above.
2. In fact, however, it is unlikely that Augustine was either the free-will defence's inventor or its greatest exponent, since he seems to have inherited the idea from Ambrose, amongst others, and because he came to have doubts about the free-will approach early in his career as a Catholic.
3. From early on, Augustine differed from many of his contemporaries in pursuing the sort of free-will approach Marilyn McCord Adams calls a 'free-fall' approach, not a 'soul-making' approach (Adams (1999), 32–33); but I will not focus on this issue here.
4. In his later works, carnal concupiscence is Augustine's multi-purpose term for a vitiated fundamental orientation, and misguided desire. It does not necessarily have anything to do with sexual desire. For a defence of these claims, see Couenhoven (2005).
5. Greer also rightly suggests that, as Augustine elaborates this picture of the will and choice, and their relation, over time, he is led to the views expressed in his later writings on grace and original sin.
6. This shift in his thought is likely connected, in complex ways, to the fact that after about 415 he stopped flirting with the Plotinian idea that souls sin in heaven before falling to earth; for an excellent discussion of the debate about Augustine on the origin of the soul, see Rombs 2006. Given this change of mind, we should be cautious about making too close a connection between Augustine's early and late understandings of human responsibility, but that is a topic for another paper.
7. Thus, I disagree with Stump's (2001) contention that Augustine defends libertarian free will in his late works, but concur with Baker's reading of the late Augustine as a compatibilist; Baker (2003). Augustine's distinction between *voluntas* and *liberum arbitrium* suggests, however, that Baker's claim that no human act of will is needed for salvation is mistaken: for Augustine, saving grace reforms the human *voluntas*, but the consent of the *liberum arbitrium* is necessary for a full conversion to take place, and that is a human act of will, though it follows from divine salvific action by a natural necessity.
8. William Babcock takes Augustine to task on this point; Babcock (1988), 46–52. Scott MacDonald (1999) gives a perceptive, but ultimately un-Augustinian, defence of Augustine's insight, since he overemphasizes the role of reason, and marginalizes the role of perverse desire in the production of the primal sin.
9. Augustine therefore implies (without explicitly saying) that Adam and Eve did not cause the Fall; the Fall happened to them. This naturally raises questions about what they can be blamed for; my interpretation, which cannot be defended here, is that Augustine does not blame them for causing the

Fall, but rather for being fallen. Adam and Eve thus end up in much the same situation as their progeny; they find evil within themselves without having first chosen it.

10. We might also wonder whether it is a good idea to focus more on God's relation to the world than to the individual persons in that world; I am not sure what Augustine would have thought of that.
11. I would like to thank the Editor of this journal, as well as an anonymous reviewer, for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.