

**Notes on St. Augustine**

I. Some Background

The Epicurean Argument against Religion:

- (1) God is omnipotent and benevolent and the free creator of the world. (Def.)
- (2) Evil and suffering exist in the world. (Obs.)
- (3) If God is willing to prevent evil but unable, then he is not omnipotent.
- (4) If God is able to prevent evil but not willing, then he is not benevolent.
- (5) If he is neither willing nor able, then he doesn't deserve to be called 'God.'

Manicheanism: A religion/philosophy founded by the Persian thinker Mani towards the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup>-century C.E. According to Mani, there are two fundamental substances or principles in existence in the world: a power of goodness, light, and so on, and a power of evil, darkness, and death. In other words, Manicheanism is *dualistic*. These two beings are in conflict, and evil arises when the power of darkness wins out over the power of good in some instance. (Note: both beings are eternal and fundamental properties of the world.) So, Mani takes the Epicurean argument and essentially accepts the claim that God is not omnipotent.

Two kinds of evil:

- Moral evil: Evil or suffering that is the result of the action of some rational being. (E.g., rape, murder, etc.)
- Natural evil: Evil or suffering that is not the result of a rational being but rather of the course of physical events. (E.g. earthquakes, floods, famines, etc.)

II. Augustine's *On Free Will*

As Augustine tells us in his *Confessions*, he was troubled by the problem of evil and, for a while, adopted Manicheanism. Eventually, however, he rejected this for Christianity. And part of his direct response to Manicheanism and his own resolution to the problem of evil is found in our reading from *On Free Will* (actually, *On the Free Choice of the Will* (*De libero arbitrio voluntatis*)). As he writes in his *Retractions*, "We undertook this discussion 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." (p. 65)

In the selection from Book II of *On Free Will* that we read for class, Augustine sets out to discuss three questions: (i) "how it is manifest that God exists"; (ii) "whether all good things, in so far as they are good, are from him"; and (iii) whether free will is to be counted among the good things." (p. 33) In Book III, he considers whether human free will is consistent with divine foreknowledge.

(A) *The Existence of God*

Note that Augustine begins (as Descartes will in his *Meditations*) by arguing that knowledge of the self comes first and is indubitable and that human beings possess intelligence (i.e. have or are minds). Augustine gets Evodius to concede that things can be put into three classes: those that exist (stones), those that live (plants and animals), and those that possess intelligence (human beings). According to Augustine, if they can find that there is something higher than intelligence, then it must be God. (pp. 37-38) There are things, the eternal truths of mathematics, for example, that are common to all rational beings. (p. 40) And since truth itself acts as a standard of intelligence ("we pass judgment on our minds in accordance with truth as our standard" (p. 47)), it must be considered to be superior to the human mind and reason. Therefore, either truth and wisdom are God or God is something above truth and wisdom. (p. 49)

(B) *The Origin of Good and Evil*

Augustine goes on to argue that all finite beings ultimately owe their existence to God. “Behold the heaven, the earth, the sea; all that is bright in them or above them; all that creep or fly or swim; all have forms because all have number. Take away number and they will be nothing. From whom have they their being if not from him who has made number?” (p. 50) But it’s not only number that is present in finite beings, there is also form. (“Neither by bodily sense nor by the thinking mind can you find any mutable thing which is not contained in some numerical form. Take away the form and it sinks to nothingness... Every mutable thing must also be capable of receiving form.” (p. 51)) Because God is the source of form and number of all finite things, he is also the source of all things in the world. Such things, in turn, as creatures of God must be good. (“There can be no good things, whether great or small, which do not owe their existence to God. (p. 52))

Regarding evil, although this doesn’t come out as clearly as possible in *On Free Will*, Augustine believes that Manicheism is false: there is no thing or being that is evil; there is only the good, that which follows from God, and the privation (lack) of the good. In other words, God is responsible for everything good and for all being; any instance of ‘evil’ is simply the absence of the good. This is a partial response to the problem of natural evil. The other part of the response, also not in our reading, is that, although some particular part of creation may *appear* bad, the whole of creation is good. Moreover, with respect, to moral evil, Augustine locates its source squarely in the free will of rational beings. As he puts it in the *Confessions*, “I asked, ‘What is iniquity?’ and I found that it is not a substance. It is perversity of will, twisted away from the supreme substance, yourself, O God, and towards lower things...” (VII.16)

(C) *Freedom of the Will*

According to Augustine, “although free will must be numbered among good things since without it no one can live aright,” (p. 55) it is nevertheless an intermediate good because, as we saw above, evil is brought about when the human will turns away from the good. As Augustine puts it in *On Free Will*, “The will, therefore, which cleaves to the unchangeable good that is common to all, obtains man’s first and best good things though it is itself only an intermediate good. But the will which turns from the unchangeable and common good and turns to its own private good or to anything exterior or inferior, sins. It turns to its private good, when it wills to be governed by its own authority; to what is exterior, when it is eager to know what belongs to others and not to itself; to inferior things, when it loves bodily pleasure.” (p. 55)

(D) *Divine Foreknowledge and Justice*

The Main Problem: How can it be that God knows all things beforehand and that, nevertheless, we do not sin by necessity? (p. 58) Note that implicit in this question is the thesis that freedom entails the ability to do otherwise or having it in our power to do otherwise. In other words, I am free to choose chocolate ice cream because I could also just as well choose pistachio ice cream. In other words, Evodius’ problem becomes, If God knew beforehand that I was going to choose chocolate ice cream, then, in some important sense, it couldn’t have been the case that I could have chosen pistachio ice cream. Therefore, I wasn’t free. Similarly, in more important things, Judas sinned *necessarily* when he betrayed Christ, for God knew that he would do so.

Augustine responds to this problem by arguing, first, that “having in our power” means “being able to do what we will.” But the will is in our power, and “as soon as we will [*volumus*, i.e. ‘we want’] immediately the will is there.” (p. 59) According to Augustine, then, whenever we will, we will voluntarily (and not by necessity). And, therefore, “though God knows how we are going to will in the future, it is not proved that we do not voluntarily will anything.” (p. 59)

Suppose God knows that tomorrow I shall choose chocolate ice cream and (after eating it) be happy. In other words, God knows that tomorrow I shall be happy. Question: Am I happy necessarily, that is, *against my will*? Augustine says, No, I direct my will towards chocolate ice cream (and happiness) voluntarily, that is, freely. Similarly, if I direct my will away from God, though God knew that I would do so beforehand, it is still my (culpable) will.

The second issue is by what right God punishes or rewards people for actions he knew in advance they would commit. How can God punish Judas when he knew that Judas would sin? Here Augustine considers the following kind of case: Suppose you know with absolute certainty that your friend will choose chocolate ice cream. Does your prescience make your friend's action any less *his* action? "Unless I am mistaken, you would not directly compel the man to sin, though you knew beforehand that he was going to sin. Nor does your prescience in itself compel him to sin even though he was certainly going to sin... Similarly, God compels no man to sin, though he sees beforehand those who are going to sin by their own will." (p. 61) Since God compels no one to sin, there is no problem with his meting out justice. [Note: the sense of freedom involved here is not so much the ability to do otherwise, but the absence of compulsion.]

But, still, God is responsible for creating the Judas who sins and is punished. True, Augustine says, but God deserves praise for the creation of our soul, which, though it "be soiled with sins it is nevertheless loftier and better than if it were changed into visible light." (p. 61) And we should never think that the world could have been better if our souls had been otherwise – if Judas hadn't sinned, if *I* hadn't sinned. God made these souls, and everything he creates is good. It is, Augustine concludes, "envious weakness that bids you think that anything ought to have been made better than it is." (p. 62) In other words, stop y'er belly-achin', and do what's right!

(E) *Grace*

In the *Retractions*, Augustine tries to argue against and defend himself from the charge of Pelagianism, which rejected the doctrines original sin and grace. According to Augustine, we sin and live rightly by virtue of the will. *But* the will itself must be "set free by the grace of God from that slavery by which it has been made a *servant of sin*." (p. 66) If we had not received this free gift from God, we would be condemned to live a life of sin, in which, because of our fallen nature, we are always drawn away from God.

This issue becomes incredibly difficult. Not only is Augustine's view hard to pin down, but Catholic theology generally has several conflicting solutions to offer. But what you should know is that there is a kind of Scylla and Charybdis, through which one is supposed to navigate. On the one hand, there is Pelagianism and radical libertarianism, according to which human beings have solely within their own power the ability to act in such a way as to merit eternal reward or punishment. On the other hand, Jansenism (a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic movement that the founders argued was really Augustinian!) and Calvinism, according to which grace is the free gift of God necessary for salvation, *but not everybody gets the gift!* In other words, human beings are predestined by God.