

Augustine on Freedom and God

Montague Brown
Saint Anselm College

Augustine wrote much about the relationship between God's activity and human freedom. Early and late in his career, he insists on two truths: God is the cause of every activity and we have freedom of choice. He does not mean that our actions are both determined and free. If this is what compatibilism means, then Augustine is not a compatibilist. He simply insists on human freedom and denies that God's providence takes it away. But neither does he mean that our free actions are not caused by God. This would be a metaphysical impossibility as well as heretical. If being free from God is what libertarianism means, then Augustine is not a libertarian. The best we can do philosophically to explain how both propositions are true is negative: we can show that it is not possible to deny either one. We cannot deny that everything comes from God, for from any exercise of our reason thinking about the world, we come to the knowledge of the existence of God the creator, source of all that is. Nor can we deny that we have free choice, for without it "we" cannot act at all. The only possible positive explanation is theological. In Christ are both divine activity and human freedom. We live and act in grace by freely entering into a covenant freely offered by God.

The relationship between human freedom and God's activity (whether understood as knowledge, causality, or grace) is one of the most vexed problems in philosophy. God's activity and human free choice appear to be exclusive alternatives. For if we say that God's foreknowledge is absolutely certain, or that God is the cause of every activity, or that God's grace is necessary for us to choose the good, then it is hard to explain how our choices can be free. On the other hand, if we claim that our choices are really free, it seems we must deny that God has any part in them, either knowing them with certainty or causing them. This means that God is not omniscient or omnipotent. The issue of free choice also plays a critical role in that other vexed philosophical puzzle—the problem of evil. For if we do not have free choice, we are not to be blamed or praised for our actions; rather, it is all God's doing. God becomes responsible for moral evil, either by causing it Himself or by punishing us who are not responsible for it.

Augustine wrote much on the subject, early and late in his career. Some have argued that early on, he emphasized freedom of the will, but later, combating the Pelagians, he held that we are not free on our own to save ourselves. It must be admitted that Augustine does at times imply a conflict between God's action and our freedom, as when he says that inordinate desire is the cause of moral evil¹ or when he interprets Old Testament texts such as those in Exodus where God is said to harden Pharaoh's heart.² However, there is sufficient material in his works to show that he denies the incompatibility of these activities. Nor does saying that they are

¹ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will (De libero arbitrio)* (hereafter, *Free Choice*), tr. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1993) 1.4.

² Augustine, *Grace and Free Choice (Gratia et libero arbitrio)*, in *Answer to the Pelagians IV*, Part I, Vol. 26, ed. John E. Rotelle, tr. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999) 21,42.

compatible mean for him that our acts are both free and determined (not free)—an obvious contradiction.³ To understand Augustine’s position, it is essential that we demarcate two aspects of his solution. The first is what we might call the philosophical solution. In this, there is no reconciling the two ideas (of God’s creative action or grace and our freedom) by one more basic idea. Rather, the best we can do is show that it would be absurd to deny either one, and that they are not contradictory. Since this is a muddle that cannot be solved positively within philosophy, we should not get bogged down in it. The second aspect of Augustine’s solution is theological. Here indeed there is a way to understand both at once, but that is in the mystery of Christ and the new covenant.

I: The Philosophical Challenge and Response

As mentioned above, Augustine’s strategy in terms of natural reason or philosophy is to refute the twin claims that God’s activity puts freedom at risk and that our free choices (our good one’s at any rate) are free from God’s activity. That is, Augustine exercises a negative philosophy here, showing that God’s activity does *not* threaten freedom of choice and that freedom of choice does *not* escape God’s activity. Of course, it is impossible to refute challenges unless something is known with certainty. There are two truths here that Augustine considers irrefutable. On the one hand, from any exercise of our reason thinking about the world, we come to the knowledge of the existence of God the creator, source of all that is. On the other hand, it is self-evident that we have free choice. This is, as it were, a first principle of practical reason: without it “we” cannot act. “We are in no way compelled either to preserve God’s prescience by abolishing our free will, or to safeguard our free will by denying (blasphemously) the divine foreknowledge. We embrace both truths, and acknowledge them in faith and sincerity, the one for a right belief, the other for a right life.”⁴ In Book Three of *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine articulates his strategy for defending the truths of faith, among which is the affirmation of the simultaneity of God’s providential activity and our free actions. “We should first show that it is not foolish to believe such things, and then show that it is foolish not to believe such things.”⁵ Let us begin by considering these two truths one at a time. Having done this, we shall examine Augustine’s defense of them in the face of apparent contradictions.

³ According to Katherin Rogers, “‘Compatibilism’ holds that it is consistent to believe that a given choice is determined and that the agent is nonetheless morally responsible for that choice.” (“Augustine’s Compatibilism,” p. 4 of manuscript, forthcoming in *Religious Studies*) If this is what it means to be a compatibilist, then Augustine is not a compatibilist.

⁴ Augustine, *City of God (De civitate Dei)* 5.10, tr. Henry Bettenson (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 195; *Quocirca nullo modo cogimur aut retenta praescintia Dei tolerare uoluntatis arbitrium aut retento uoluntatis arbitrio Deum (quod ne fas est) negare praescium futurotem; sed utrumque amplectimur, utrumque fideliter et ueraciter confitemur; illud, ut bene credimus; hoc, ut bene uiuimus* (CCL 47, p. 141). “We believe both that God has foreknowledge of everything in the future and that nevertheless we will whatever we will” (*Free Choice* 3.3, p. 77); *Ita fit ut et deum non negemus esse praescium omnium futurorum et nos tamen uelimus quod uolumus* (CCL 29, p. 280).

⁵ *Free Choice* 3.21, p. 112; *primo quam non sit stultum talia credere, deinde quam sit stultum talia non credere* (CCL 29, p. 311).

Augustine's work *On Free Choice of the Will* opens with the challenge of the problem of evil. Evodius asks Augustine, "Please tell me: isn't God the cause of evil?" Implied by this question is the affirmation of an all-good, all-powerful, creating God. For if God is not all-good, the question is directly answered, and if God is not all-powerful, then it is obvious that some other being could be the cause of evil against God's will. To answer this question, Augustine will have to address the issue of human freedom, for apart from human freedom, the only explanation for the evil found in the world created by God would have to be God (either directly, as determining our will, or indirectly, as creating the causes that determine our will). At this point Augustine just affirms, as an act of faith, that God is good and just and hence cannot be the cause of evil. "If you know or believe that God is good—and it is not right to believe otherwise—then he does no evil."⁶ As creator, God is the cause of everything, and everything insofar as it exists, is good.⁷ In the *Confessions*, Augustine insists that the only thing that is not caused by God is the movement of the will away from good.⁸ The evidence for our knowing, in addition to believing, that God is the good and all-powerful creator of all things is not presented until Book II. Because in this first stage of our argument we are working with philosophical reason as opposed to Revelation, let us examine Augustine's proofs for the existence of God found there and in a number of other works.

Augustine's favorite argument is based on the hierarchy of being that we discover in the world. We judge that some things are more perfect than others. We judge that things which are alive are more perfect than inanimate things. We judge that things that are alive and can sense (animals) are more perfect than things that are alive but cannot sense (plants). And we judge that we who think, sense, and live are more perfect still. However, the existing human being is not the ultimate key to understanding reality; for when we judge, we judge by some criterion of truth, goodness, or beauty. And if our judgement is correct, then the criterion we use must be certain and unchanging. We judge by the truth; we do not judge the truth. Thus, the truth is something above us. Either this truth is God or God is the cause of truth. "It is not in any place, but it is present everywhere. It warns outwardly, and teaches inwardly. It changes for the better all those who see it, but apart from it no one judges rightly....If there is something more excellent than the truth, then that is God; if not, the truth itself is God. So in either case you cannot deny that God exists."⁹

He presents another argument here based on the need for an unchangeable form to explain those forms which change. In this proof he relies on the Platonic insight that to

⁶ *Free Choice* 1.1, p. 1; *At si deum bonum esse nosti uel credis—neque enim aliter fas est—, male non facit* (CCL 29, p. 211).

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions (Confessiones)*, tr. John K. Ryan (Garden City, NY: Image, 1960) 7.12.

⁸ *Confessions* 12.11.

⁹ *Free Choice* 2.14, p. 58; *nullo loco est nusquam deest, foris admonet intus docet, cernentes se commutat omnes in melius, a nullo in deterius commutatur, nullus de illa iudicat nullus sine illa iudicat bene.... Si enim aliquid excellentius, ille potius deus est; si autem non est, iam ipsa ueritas deus est* (CCL 26, pp. 263-64). We find a similar argument in *City of God*, tr. Gerald G. Walsh et al. (Garden City, NY: Image, 1958) 8.5-6, *Confessions* 9.10 and 11.3, *On True Religion*, tr. J. H. S. Burleigh (South Bend, Ind: Regnery/Gateway, 1959) xxix,52-xxx,56.

understand something is to grasp that which does not change—its form. “Whatever changeable thing you may look at, you could not grasp it at all, either by the sense of the body or by the contemplation of the mind, unless it had some form composed of numbers, without which it would sink into nothing.”¹⁰ Changeable things do not explain themselves. They cry out for a further explanation.¹¹ “For every changeable thing is necessarily also formable....But nothing can form itself, since a thing can’t give what it doesn’t have....And what more is there to say about the changeableness of both body and soul? Enough has already been said. And so it follows that both body and soul are formed by an unchangeable form that abides forever.”¹² All things that are in any way changing or limited must be caused by another. Thus, there must be an unchanging cause of all changing things—God. What’s more, it is clear that this God is providential. “From this we understand that everything is governed by his providence. For if everything that exists would be nothing without form, then that unchangeable form—through which all changeable things subsist, so that they complete and carry out the numbers of their forms—is itself the providence that governs them.”¹³

From these proofs, we have all we need to set up the problem of freedom of choice: God is truth, goodness, and beauty (or the cause of them); God is the cause of every existing thing; and God is providential. To deny these conclusions is not only to deny the faith, but also to deny the legitimacy of reason. But, of course, it is absurd to present a reasoned argument that reason does not work.¹⁴ Thus, all activities, including free choices, are under God’s providence.

Let us now turn to Augustine’s arguments for freedom of the will. As noted above, the issue of freedom of the will comes up in *On Free Choice of the Will* in the context of the problem of evil. For if we have no freedom of choice, then the evil we do is not our fault. We cannot very well be expected to avoid doing what we cannot help but do. The denial of our free choice has serious implications for our belief in God. In the first place, if sin is not our fault, we should not be punished for it; if God does punish us for it, he is unjust. Or, more radically, perhaps God is the source of evil or too weak to prevent some other being from doing evil. But all these solutions go against what we now God to be—the omnipotent, perfectly good creator of

¹⁰ *Free Choice* 2.16, p. 62; *Si ergo, quicquid mutabile aspexeris, uel sensu corporis uel animi consideratione capere non potes, nisi aliqua numerorum forma teneatur, qua detracta in nihil recidat* (CCL 29, p. 267).

¹¹ “Lo heaven and earth exist: they cry out that they have been created, for they are subject to change and variation” (*Confessions* 11.4, p. 280); *Ecce sunt caelum et terra, clamant, quod facta sint; mutantur enim atque uariantur* (CCL 27, p. 197).

¹² *Free Choice* 2.17, pp. 62-63; *Omnis enim res mutabilis etiam formabilis sit necesse est....Nulla autem res formare se ipsam potest, quia nulla res potest dare quod non habet....Quid autem amplius de mutabilitate corporis et animi dicamus? Superius enim satis dictum est. Conficitur itaque, ut corpus et animus forma quadam incommutabili et semper manente formentur* (CCL 29, p. 267).

¹³ *Free Choice* 2.17, p. 63; *Hinc etiam comprehenditur omnia prouidentia gubernari. Si enim omnia, quae sunt, forma penitus subtracta nulla erunt, forma ipsa incommutabilis per quam mutabilia cuncta subsistunt, ut formarum suarum numeris impleantur et agantur, ipsa est eorum prouidentia* (CCL 29, pp. 267-68). For similar proofs, see *Confessions* 11.4 and *On Literal Commentary on Genesis* 8.

¹⁴ Augustine refutes the skeptics in many places, claiming that there are some things about which we are absolutely certain. See *City of God* 11.26 and *The Trinity* 15.12.21.

all things. It is because of challenges such as these that Augustine takes up the task of defending free will.¹⁵

Before getting into Augustine's proofs for free will, let us admit that Augustine does sometimes speak as if God's providence forces our choices. For example, in his *Retractations* when discussing his *To Simplician—On Various Questions*, he writes: "I have tried hard to maintain the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God prevailed."¹⁶ Even more dramatic is what Augustine says in *Grace and Free Choice*. "When God wanted to punish the sin of idolatry, he produced it in the heart of man, with whom he was, of course, justly angry."¹⁷ And again, "God works in the hearts of human beings to incline their wills to whatever he wills, whether to good actions in accord with his mercy or to evil ones in accord with their merits."¹⁸ These latter quotations invite the accusation that Augustine holds a contradictory position of saying that my actions are not really my actions, but God's. Nevertheless in the same work, Augustine explains explicitly that grace does not take away free will. In Matthew, the Lord says, *Not all accept this word, but those to whom it has been given* (Mt 19:10-11). Commenting on this passage, Augustine writes, "It is both the gift of God and free choice that some accept this word [from God] which not all accept."¹⁹

Augustine's "proof" of freedom of choice amounts to a *reductio ad absurdum*. Since free choice is obvious and there is nothing more basic to explain it, it is absurd to deny it. This is true of all first principles. As first, they are self-evident; they are not explained by something else. If they could be explained by something else, they would not be first. The best we can do in defending first principles is to show that it is absurd to deny them and that any challenge to them can be refuted. This is what Augustine does in defending free will.

Free will is implied in every moral judgment, whether that judgment be God's or our own. Rewards and punishments, either human or divine, would be unjust if those rewarded or punished were not responsible for their acts, that is, free to have done or not to have done them.²⁰ Thus our moral, political, and religious lives would be absurd—completely devoid of justice and responsibility—if there were no free will. But more radically, our judgments obviously require freedom of choice. Even to challenge the justice of God's punishment implies freedom of choice. If I challenge, then I am free. If I am offended by the injustice of God, then I am free. To deny

¹⁵ Of course, there is another way of getting out of the problem: one could just deny that there is any moral evil in the world, thus escaping the need or any solution to the problem. But this path Augustine refuses to take. We are all too aware of evil perpetrated on the innocent as well as the disorder of our own wills.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Retractations (Retractiones)* 2.1 in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. J. H. S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 370; *In cuius questionis solutione laboratum est quidem pro libero arbitrio uoluntatis humanae, sed uincit dei gratia* (CCL 57, pp. 89-90).

¹⁷ *Grace and Free Choice* 21,42, p. 101; *Ecce Deus idololatriae peccatum uolens vindicare, hoc operatus est in ejus corde, cui utique iuste irascebatur* (PL 44, p. 908).

¹⁸ *Grace and Free Choice* 21,43, p. 102; *operari Deus in cordibus hominum ad inclinandas eorum uoluntates quocumque uoluerit, sive ad bona pro sua misericordia, sive ad mala pro meritis eorum* (PL 44, p. 909).

¹⁹ *Grace and Free Choice* 4,7, p. 76; *Itaque, ut hoc uerbum, quod non ab omnibus capitur, ab aliquibus capiatur, et Dei donum est, et liberum arbitrium* (PL 44, p. 886).

²⁰ *Free Choice* 3.16, p. 103.

freedom of choice is to deny the meaningfulness of any moral judgment.²¹ As Augustine says when entertaining an alternative explanation for sin (in this passage, God): “If this line of defense succeeds, it turns out that the creature did not sin at all, and so there is nothing to blame God for.”²² Any explanation of moral good or evil ceases to be an explanation if the choice is not the agent’s own. Thus, sin or evil-doing without free will is not sin or evil-doing. We cannot get away from this implication of moral judgment. Freedom of choice is a first principle of moral reason.²³

Besides the general argument that it would be unjust for God to punish sins if the perpetrator of the sin were not free (the actual point of contention bringing up the issue of free will), Augustine offers two *reductio* arguments in *On Free Choice of the Will*, and reiterates their insights elsewhere. One is a thought experiment challenging Evodius to think about the relationship between God’s providence and human happiness, which is presented in Book III, following the extensive arguments for God’s existence as creator in Book II. The other occurs in the Book I and is, if possible, even more direct in its revelation of the absurdity of doubting free choice.

Let us consider the argument from Book III first. Here Augustine is testing Evodius’s claim that God’s providential foreknowledge destroys free will. To deny that God knows the future is to deny God’s sovereignty over all things. But this is simply to deny the existence of the God we know by faith or reason. God’s providence is certain. But, if God knows with absolute certainty what I shall choose tomorrow, then apparently I shall not be able to choose differently. To answer this challenge, Augustine suggests the following scenario. “Suppose, for example, that you are going to be happy a year from now. That means that a year from now God is going to make you happy.”²⁴ This must follow if God is the cause of all good things and if happiness is good. Note that this is one of the places where the language is problematic, for to say that “God is going to *make* you happy” implies that you will have to be happy whether or not you choose to be or not. But this is precisely the point Augustine is rejecting. There are just no words we can use to describe causality that do not connote necessity of some sort and hence appear to threaten our free choice. Augustine asks Evodius the rhetorical question: will you be happy against your will? For if you hold that God, and not you, will be the cause of your happiness, then you will be happy unwillingly. What could be more absurd than this? It is impossible to be happy (what we all will) against one’s will. The will to happiness is a self-evident principle of the moral life.²⁵ Since it is impossible to conceive of one being happy against one’s will, the idea that providence

²¹ Of course, one could explain the judgment on psychological, sociological, or biological grounds, but then one is not explaining a *moral* judgment, but some psychological, sociological, or biological fact.

²² *Free Choice* 3.16, p. 103; *si recte defenditur non peccauit; non ergo est quod tribuas conditori* (CCL 29, p. 302).

²³ Free choice is not a first principle of moral reason in terms of content, i.e., an end to be chosen such as happiness or the basic goods, but in the sense of function or activity: there is no moral reasoning without free choice.

²⁴ *Free Choice* 3.3, p. 75; *Si igitur uerbi gratia post annum beatus futurus es, post annum te beatum facturus est* (CCL 29, p. 278).

²⁵ Happiness is a self-evident principle of the moral life as to content: we all desire happiness in all that we do. It is the ultimate end that we seek.

takes away free will is false. The very reason that the problem of evil is so pressing is because I will to be happy but find an apparent problem that makes me unhappy—the specter of an immoral or impotent God. Thus, even if I’m not happy, I will to be happy. If I could be happy, I would. “Who would be crazy enough to say ‘We do not will by the will?’”²⁶ It is obvious that we will to be happy, and there is no reason to believe that God’s knowledge of this takes away this will. “I am merely saying that when you do become happy, it will be in accordance with your will, not against your will.”²⁷

There is no contradiction between God’s providence and human free will. No compromise is necessary. “We believe both that God has foreknowledge of everything in the future and that nonetheless we will whatever we will.”²⁸ As a matter of fact, the insight into God’s providence which appears to threaten our free will actually confirms it. “What extraordinary foolishness! If God foreknew a future will that turned out not to be a will at all, things would indeed happen otherwise than as God foreknew them.”²⁹

We, of course, cannot understand *how* both God, through his providence, and we can be the cause of our good acts of free will; to understand this, we would have to be God. However, we do understand how both God’s providence and human free will are both to be affirmed. We affirm God’s providence as the conclusion of a metaphysical argument understood by theoretical reason; and we affirm freedom of choice as a self-evident principle of practical reason.

This self-evidence of free will is revealed even more clearly in Augustine’s argument from Book I. Here’s the conversation on this essential point.

Augustine: So tell me this: Do we have a will?

Evodius: I don’t know.

Augustine: Do you want to know?

Evodius: I don’t know that either.

Augustine: Then don’t ask me any more questions.³⁰

This seems like a kind of mean-spirited reply on Augustine’s part. After all, Evodius is sincerely seeking an answer to a tough problem. But Augustine refuses to accept Evodius’s answer. He sees it as an irrational dodge. His abrupt reply is meant to be a kind of wake-up call, a call to reflect. Of course Evodius knows that he has free will. If he didn’t have free will, then he would not have asked the question in the first place. And when he replies to Augustine’s query about whether he wants to know with “I don’t know that either,” Augustine is rightly

²⁶ *Free Choice* 3.3, p. 76; ‘*non uoluntate autem uolumus*’ quis uel delirus audeat dicere? (CCL 29, p. 279).

²⁷ *Free Choice* 3.3, p. 76; *sed dico, cum futurus es beatus non te inuitum, sed uolentem futurum* (CCL 29, p. 279).

²⁸ *Free Choice* 3.3, p. 77; *Ita fit ut et deum non negemus esse praescium omnium futurorum et nos tamen uelimus quod uolumus* (CCL 29, p. 280).

²⁹ *Free Choice* 3.3, p. 76; *O stultitiam singularem! Quo modo ergo non potest aliud fieri quam praesciuit deus, si uoluntas non erit, quam uoluntatem futuram ille praesciuerit?* (CCL 29, p. 280).

³⁰ *Free Choice* 1.12, p. 19; *A. Nam quaero abs te, sitne aliqua nobis uoluntas./ E. Nescio./ A. Visne hoc scire?/ E. Et hoc nescio./ A. Nihil ergo deinceps me interroges* (CCL 29, p. 227).

exasperated. Only a complete lack of self-awareness or moral sincerity could prompt such a reply. It is absurd to continue the conversation under such circumstances.

Thus, when Evodius asks “Why not?” in reply to Augustine’s abrupt “Then don’t ask me any more questions,” Augustine answers by pointing out the obvious things at stake in any serious quest for truth—the self-evident basic goods that underlie all intelligent human conversation. “First, because there’s no reason for me to answer your questions unless you want to know the answer.”³¹ How absurd to try to provide an answer to someone who does not want to know (i.e., who does not freely choose to pursue the truth). “Second, because I should not discuss these sorts of things with you unless you want to attain reason.”³² Not only is such discussion absurd, but it is immoral—a waste of time, like throwing pearls before swine. Augustine should not discuss such important matters as the problem of evil with anyone who does not want to know. “And finally, because you can’t be my friend unless you want things to go well for me.”³³ Evodius’s replies violate the good of friendship. Friendship only exists if freely given. Any mutual quest for truth is absurd if we are not free.

Of course, Augustine does carry on a good deal from here, in large part, I think, because of the good of friendship—that is, he wants to help Evodius understand that human beings are free and that God is not the cause of moral evil. But in a way, it makes no sense to carry on explaining how it is possible that we are free if it is self-evident that we are. It is trying to explain the more evident by the less evident. To ask about other people’s free choices or about God’s relationship to these choices is interesting, but no information gathered from such empirical or metaphysical speculations will add to our knowledge that we are free. In fact, there is a danger that such speculations will lead us to doubt our freedom. For if our free actions are caused by some other thing, intelligent or unintelligent, then they are not free.³⁴ “So either the will is the first cause of sin, or no sin is the first cause of sin. And you cannot rightly assign responsibility for a sin to anyone but the sinner; therefore, you cannot rightly assign responsibility except to someone who wills it—but I don’t know why you would want to look any further.”³⁵ Of sin, there is no further explanation. To give one would be to deny the sin. We always have the freedom not to sin. “If you fear it [the movement toward sin], do not will it; and if you do not

³¹ *Free Choice* 1.12, p. 19; *Quia roganti tibi respondere non debeo nisi uolenti scire rogas* (CCL 29, p. 227).

³² *Ibid*; *Deinde nisi uelis ad sapientiam peruenire sermo tecum de huiusmodi rebus non est habendus*.

³³ *Ibid*; *Postremo amicus meus esse non poeteis nisi uelis ut bene sit mihi*.

³⁴ To say that our free actions are caused by God does not contradict this statement. Here metaphysical insight can help us, but again only negatively. We know metaphysically that God is *not* another thing: what we know of God is that God is the cause of all things. If we make God out to be a thing among others, then we have the question of how God and other things are related. The Platonic dialectic of the many implying the one kicks in, and we have to say that there must be a common cause of God, as one kind of thing, and the rest of the things that are. Augustine is less clear about articulating this point than Aquinas will be. Aquinas insists that we know that God exists but not what God is. The creating God is the cause of all things—a being of infinite perfection who cannot be categorized since all categorization requires limitation.

³⁵ *Free Choice* 3.17, p. 105; *Aut igitur uoluntas est prima causa peccandi aut nullam peccatum est prima causa peccandi. Nec est cui recte imputetur peccatum nisi peccanti. Non ergo est cui recte imputetur nisi uolenti—sed nescio cur aliud te quaerere libeat* (CCL 29, p. 304).

will it, it will not exist. What greater security could there be than to have a life in which nothing can happen to you that you do not will?”³⁶

Still, it may seem that we have not put to rest all questions here. We can point to some of Augustine’s explanations of free choice that raise serious questions about whether that freedom is real. This may be inevitable. For if we try to explain freedom of the will in any way, we present prior causes, either in time or metaphysically. But giving a prior cause points to a more adequate explanation: “we thought the explanation was this (secondary cause), but really it is that (primary cause).” In this fashion, all causality tends to get rolled back into the first cause. This is the danger in the Neo-Platonic metaphysics. All duality is explained by unity. All the things we experience emanate from the One, existing through a kind of fall from the reality of the One. Difference only exists through imperfection. Thus all perfection comes from the One. This tendency to attribute all real causality to the One (God) is the trend of later medieval philosophy through Scotus to Ockham. It leads to nominalism: we say that there are many things which act on their own, but we are just fooled by words. Really there is only the power of God. This reduction of difference to sameness, of the many to the One, is a natural tendency of human reason ordering its experience. Trying to explain free choices among the other things of our experience, we look for a universal cause of both. This exercise is legitimate if we leave it at what we know: that there must be some explanation of these different things. However, the moment we try to conceive of what that explanation is, we are in danger of substituting some vague unity for the certainty of diversity. The explanation of free will is no exception. We must be alert and always guard against the reductionism of human explanation.

Having laid out the basic arguments for both God’s creative causality and our free will, let us consider the challenges such a position presents for explaining moral evil in a good creation. What, for example, is the relationship between God’s causality and our evil choices? This, we have mentioned, is the occasion for the discussion recorded in *On Free Choice of the Will*. Augustine claims consistently that God is the cause of everything, but not of our evil choices. “The only thing that does not come from you [God] is what does not exist, together with any movement of the will away from you who are and towards that which is in a lesser way, for such a movement is crime and sin.”³⁷ In the *City of God*, Augustine claims that “from him come all powers, but not all wills.”³⁸ And later, “Just as he is the creator of all natures, so is he the giver of all power of achievement, but not of all acts of will. Evil wills do not proceed from him because they are contrary to the nature which proceeds from him.”³⁹ And in *Grace and Free Will*, he writes, “For if your merits come from yourself, they are evil merits which God does not

³⁶ *Free Choice* 2.20, p. 69; *Si enim times illum, oportet ut nolis; si autem nolis, non erit. Quid ergo securius quam esse in ea uita ubi non possit tibi euenire quod nan uis* (CCL 29, p. 273).

³⁷ *Confessions* 12.11, p. 311; *hoc solum a te non est, quod not est; motusque uoluntatis a te, qui es, ad id quod minus est, quia talis motus delictum atque peccatum est* (CCL 27, 221-22).

³⁸ *City of God* 5.8, p. 189; *a quo sunt omnes potestas, quamuis ab illo non sint omnium uoluntates* (CCL 47, p. 135).

³⁹ *City of God* 5.9, 193; *Sicut enim omnium naturarum creator est, ita omnium postestatum dator, non uoluntatum* (CCL 47, p. 139).

crown, but if they are good, they are God's gifts."⁴⁰ Augustine makes a similar point in the *City of God*: "For the evil of the soul, its own will takes the initiative; but for its good, the will of its Creator makes the first move."⁴¹ That is, the only actions that are caused only by us are our evil actions. This is the logical implication of Augustine's doctrine of creation and of the insight that moral responsibility requires freedom. All that exists is created by God; since evil is a lack of being, it is not created by God. Sin is uncaused: to assign a cause sufficient to explain our sin would be to remove it from us.

Still, there are grounds for another challenge here. If God is the cause of every good thing, this includes my good actions. "He freely bestows upon us voluntary assent, earnest effort, and the power to perform works of fervent charity."⁴² Apparently, then, God could always cause me to be good without violating my free will. "To be sure, no one resists his will."⁴³ If he does not do this, is he not guilty by reason of neglect? Certainly, if I could easily cause you to be good without violating your free will yet refused to do so, I would be guilty of neglect. That is because I have obligations to you, understood by the law of reason (the natural law) and as fellow creatures of a good God. However, it makes no sense to say that God the creator has obligations to creatures. Creatures owe everything to the Creator; the Creator owes nothing to creatures. "God, on the other hand, owes nothing to anyone; he gives everything freely. Someone might say that God owes him something for his merits, but surely God did not owe him the gift of existence, since he was not around for God to owe him anything."⁴⁴ It is a simple metaphysical implication. Since all good comes from God to creature and God receives nothing from the creature, the obligation is all one way.⁴⁵ Besides, God has given us what we need to avoid sin. Since sin is only possible if we know it is sin and still do it, all we have to do to avoid sin is not to will it.

As to why God does not prevent us from doing evil, there is no answer, just as there is no answer for why we sin. Nor can we say how God can be the cause of my free will yet it still be mine. It seems that philosophical reason must leave us with a number of insoluble puzzles about the relationship between free will and grace. It can tell us that there must be a cause of all that exists—a conclusion of theoretical reason. And it can tell us that we have free choice—a first principle of practical reason. However, natural reason cannot tell us how the two can be one without denying one or the other. But theology can. Christ is God and man. Hence every act of

⁴⁰ *Grace and Free Choice* 6.15, p. 81; *Haec enim si talia sunt [a te ipso], mala sunt; quae non coronat Deus: si autem bona sunt, Dei dona sunt* (PL 44, p. 290).

⁴¹ *City of God* 13.15, p. 523; *ad malum quippe eius prior est uoluntas eius; ad bonum uero eius prior est uoluntas Creatoris eius* (CCL 48, p. 396).

⁴² Augustine, *To Simplician—On Various Questions* 1.2.21, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. and tr. by J. H. S. Burleigh (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), p. 405; *ut sit nutus uoluntatis, ut sit industria studii, ut sint opera caritate feruentia, ille tribuit, ille largitur* (CCL 44, p. 54).

⁴³ *To Simplician* 1.2.17, p. 398; *uoluntati eius nullus resistit* (CCL 44, p. 43).

⁴⁴ *Free Choice* 3.16, p. 102; *Deus autem nulli debet aliquid, quia omnia gratuito praestat. Et si quisquam dicet aliquid ab illo deberi meritis suis, certe ut esset non ei debebatur; non enim erat cui deberetur* (CCL 29, p. 302).

⁴⁵ We will discuss the mystery of faith and the covenant in which God does freely bind himself to us, but this is from Revelation, and here we are looking at the problem from the perspective of the data available to natural reason.

Christ is divine and human, including his free choices. This is the only adequate model for understanding the relation between human freedom and grace. All others lead to the denial of one or the other.

II: The Theological Answer: Covenantal Life in Christ

The model for all Augustine's thought is faith seeking understanding. Augustine insists in a number of places that the faith requires us to believe both that God is provident and that we are free. When discussing the difficulties Cicero had in reconciling these two points, Augustine writes, "The religious mind chooses both, foreknowledge as well as liberty."⁴⁶ Augustine lays out numerous texts from Scripture in favor of both truths in *Grace and Free Choice*.⁴⁷ In the beginning of *On Free Choice of the Will* where he addresses Evodius's question about the cause of evil, Augustine says that the only way to approach this problem is within the confidence of faith.

You have hit upon the very question that worried me greatly when I was still young, a question that wore me out, drove me into the company of heretics, and knocked me flat on my face. I was so hurt by this fall, buried under a mountain of silly fairy tales, that if my love of finding the truth had not secured divine help, I would not have been able to get out from under them to breathe freely and begin to seek the truth. And since such pains were taken to free me from this difficulty, I will lead you on the same path that I followed in making my escape. God will be with us, and he will make us understand what we have believed.⁴⁸

The only way for us to understand such things is for us to receive divine help: we understand, but only because we are helped. True, the phrase "he will *make* us understand" sounds as if it takes away our freedom, but this is just because there is no way to refer to the activity of God's grace (divine help) without indicating some kind of causality on God's part. And every instance of causality acting upon the will within creation, that we can imagine or conceive, acts *instead of* the will. But this is not true of God's grace. Our certainty that God's grace helps us freely choose the good is a certainty of faith, not philosophy.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *City of God* 5.9, p. 191; *Religiosus autem animus utrumque eligit* (CCL 47, p. 137).

⁴⁷ *Grace and Free Choice* 2,4-3,5 (on free choice) and 3,7-5,12 (on the need for grace).

⁴⁸ *Free Choice* 1.1, p. 3; *Eam questionem moues, quae me admodum adulescentem uehementer exercuit et fatigatum in hereticos impulit atque deiecit. Quo casu ita sum afflictus et tantis obrutus aceruis inanum fabularum, ut, nisi mihi amor inueniendi ueri opem diuinum impetrauisset, emergere inde atque in ipsam primam quaerendi libertatem respirare non possem. Et quoniam mecum sedulo actum est, ut ista quaestione liberarer, eo tecum agam ordine, quem secutus euasi. Aderit enim deus et nos intellegere quod credidimus faciet* (CCL 29, p. 213).

⁴⁹ It is more of an existential than logical certainty that is being referred to here. Metaphysically, we know that God is the cause of all that is good. Since our good free choices are good, they are caused by God. However, we do not know how God and we can both be the cause of our free acts: here is where the philosophical uncertainty appears and the certainty of faith is required. It is only by keeping our minds focused on Christ as God and man, that we are confident about how God and man can act together.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine adverts to the role of Church doctrine in leading him to his conversion. The context is a discussion of the problem of evil.

Such things I turned over within my unhappy breast, over-laden with gnawing cares that came from the fear of death and from not finding the truth. Yet the faith of your Christ, our Lord and Savior, the faith that is in the Catholic Church, was firmly fixed within my heart. In many ways I was as yet unformed and I wavered from the rule of doctrine. But my mind did not depart from it, nay, rather, from day to day it drank in more and more of it.⁵⁰

Christ is the model for free will and grace. And insofar as we are part of the body of Christ, that is, sacramentally, we too act freely in God's grace. Augustine struggles to find the truth. And in this struggle, God is leading. "Being thus admonished to return to myself, under your leadership I entered into my inmost being. This I could do, for you became my helper."⁵¹ It is precisely because of God's help that Augustine can do this. He does it, with God's help. Ask him how this happens (that is, how God's grace helps him and does not do it instead of him), and he cannot adequately explain it; but ask him if it happens, and he is certain that it does.

Consider the conversion passage, where Augustine struggles with "the two wills". Augustine wants to commit himself to God, but he cannot do it. This is puzzling, since in order to convert, all he has to do is will his conversion, and this he wants (that is, wills) to do. Nevertheless, he does not do it. Rather, he struggles within himself as if he has two wills. "The tumult within my breast hurried me out into it [the garden], where no one would stop the raging combat that I had entered into against myself."⁵² What is stopping him? His own will. How can he change this? His own will, with the help of God's grace. "Suffering from a most fearful wound, I quaked in spirit, angered by a most turbulent anger, because I did not enter into your will and into a covenant with you, my God. For all my bones cried out for me to enter into that covenant, and by their praises they lifted me up to the skies."⁵³ The covenant is the key. There is no other way that Augustine's act of conversion, which is his, down to his very bones, can be free and be graced, except he enter into a covenant with God—that covenant most perfectly real in Christ.

This covenantal explanation is most obvious in the cause of conversion, but it must be the model for understanding any act of free choice. For any explanation short of a free agreement

⁵⁰ *Confessions* 7.5, p. 163; *Talia uoluebam pectore misero, indrauidato curis modacissimis de timore mortis et non inuenta ueritate; et stabiliter tamen haerebat in corde meo in catholica ecclesia fides Christi tui, domini et saluatoris nostri, in multis quidem ad huc informis et praeter doctrinae normam fluitans, sed tamen non eam relinquebat animus, immo in dies magis magisque imbibebat* (CCL 27, 97).

⁵¹ *Confessions* 7.10, p. 170; *Et inde admonitus redire ad memet ipsum intraui in intima mea dulce te et potui, quoniam factus es adiuto meus* (CCL 27, 103). See also *On Grace and Free Choice*: "The victory by which sin is conquered is nothing but the gift of God who helps us in this struggle." (4,8, p. 77)

⁵² *Confessions* 8.8, p. 195; *Illuc abstulerat tumultus pectoris, ubi nemo impediret ardentem litem, quam mecum agressus eram* (CCL 27, 125).

⁵³ *Ibid*; *Ego fremebam spiritu indignans indignatione turbulentissima, quod non irem in placitum et pactum tecum, deus meus, in quod eundum esse omnia ossa mea clamabant et in caelum tollebant laudibus* (CCL 27, 125)

between God and human beings renders human freedom either unintelligible or impossible. It does not matter whether the causality is conceived of as operating from below (desires) or from above (divine determinism). If the causality is conceived as an alternative explanation for my freedom, then either it is random and hence unintelligible (and hence no explanation at all) or it destroys my freedom. As Fr. Donald Keefe points out in his work *Covenantal Theology*, only a covenantal act can be at once free and intelligible. A free action is not random; if it were, it would not be intelligible. Neither is a free action reducible to some prior physical or metaphysical cause; if it were, it would not be free. A covenant is a free agreement between parties. Try to explain freedom of choice by either pole (divine or human action), and the free and intelligible act disappears. “Only the Covenant permits a free intelligibility, a free human community, and thus a unique or personal dignity....”⁵⁴ To explain the order of history, which includes the history of free choices, we must make use of the covenantal paradigm. “Such an ‘order’ cannot be other than covenantal if it is to be at once free and intelligible: *no other free order or free intelligibility exists, nor has any other ever been proposed.*”⁵⁵ Augustine's free conversion is covenantally free. It is free in God, not free from God.

Augustine's crisis continues. “Why do you stand on yourself, and thus not stand at all? Cast yourself on him. Have no fear. He will not draw back and let you fall. Cast yourself trustfully on him: he will receive you and he will heal you.”⁵⁶ In short, as the passage from Romans that Augustine reads says, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans, 13:14). This is how Augustine comes to unity of will. God's grace does not replace or fragment his will; on the contrary, grace is the very life of his will.

Augustine reflects on the mystery of freedom in Christ in the opening chapter of Book Nine. He begins with a quotation from the Psalms. “O Lord I am your servant; I am your servant and the son of your handmaid. You have broken my bonds: I will sacrifice to you the sacrifice of praise” (Psalm 115:16-17).⁵⁷ It is precisely through becoming the servant of God that his bonds are broken, that he is free. The language of the problem is here: how can one be a servant and free? However, rather than seeing servitude to God and freedom as antithetical, here the very service to God is freedom. But this is because the service is covenantal. God is not a tyrant who takes what is not his (our freedom) and reduces us to slavery. Rather, God's activity in our lives is our freedom. It is when we turn away from this activity that we lose our freedom. “This was the sum of it: not to will what I willed and to will what you willed. But throughout these long years where was my free will? Out of what deep and hidden pit was it called forth in a single moment, wherein to bend my neck to your mild yoke and my shoulders to your light burden, O

⁵⁴ Donald J. Keefe, *Covenantal Theology*, Two volumes in one (Novato, CA: Praesidio Press, 1996), Vol. 2, p. 389.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *Confessions* 8.11, p. 201; *Quid in te stas et no stas? Proice te in eum, noli metuere; non se subtrahet, ut cadas: proice te securus, excipiet et sanabit te* (CCL 27, 130).

⁵⁷ *Confessions* 9.1, p. 205; *O domine, ego seruus tuus, ego seruus tuus et filius ancillae tuae. Dirupisti uincula mea; tibi sacrificabo hostiam laudis* (CCL 27, 133).

Christ Jesus, ‘my helper and my redeemer.’”⁵⁸ Notice the conjunction here: he does not say, “not to will what I willed *but* to will what you willed” as if the two wills were in competition; rather he says, not to will what I willed *and* to will what you willed.”

As covenantal, God’s grace is our help; that is, it helps us to be good. It does not take away our being good. Without it, we could not be *good*; but without our action, *we* could not be good either, for one is not helped who does nothing. In God’s grace, we participate in our redemption. This is most obviously true of Christ, but through the mystery of God’s covenant with human kind and through the sacramental life of the Church, it is also true of us. “This is our freedom, when we are subject to the truth; and the truth is God himself, who frees us from death, that is, from the state of sin.”⁵⁹ Augustine rejoices in the grace of God which forgives his sins, “so that,” says Augustine, “you may make me blessed in you, changing my soul by faith and your sacrament.”⁶⁰

III: Conclusion

Augustine wrote much about the relationship between God’s activity and human freedom. Besides discussing the issue in his major works, he spent a good deal of his later years making his position clear to the Pelagians. Although he does sometimes speak as though God makes us sin (consider the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart), he does not mean this to indicate that God determines our behavior, that is, takes away our freedom. He insists both that God is the cause of every activity and that we have freedom of choice. “Thus, we believe that God has foreknowledge of everything in the future and that nonetheless we will whatever we will.”⁶¹ He does not mean by this that my actions are both free and determined. If this is what compatibilism means, then Augustine is not a compatibilist. He insists on human freedom and denies that God’s providence takes it away. But neither does he mean by this that my free actions (that is, my good ones) are not caused by God. This would be a metaphysical impossibility as well as heretical. If being free from God is what libertarianism means, then Augustine is not a libertarian. It is only in my evil choices that I am free from God. Concerning these choices, Augustine could be rightly called a libertarian.

What is clear is that Augustine holds by reason and faith that God is creator, the source of every good thing and activity, and that human beings are free. As to the first point, it is often objected that God must be the cause of evil actions, too. But this does not follow. Yes, God is the cause of everything that is metaphysically real in our actions. But evil is a falling short of the

⁵⁸ *Confessions* 9.1, p. 205; *Et hoc erat totum nolle, quod uolebam, et uelle, quod uolebas. Sed ubi erat tam annoso tempore et de quo imo altoque secreto euocatum est in momento liberum arbitrium meum, quod subderum ceruicem leni iugo tuo et umeros leni sarcinae tuae, Christe Jesu, adiutor meus et redempto meus* (CCL 27, 133).

⁵⁹ *Free Choice* 2.13, p. 57; *Haec est libertas nostra, cum isti subdimur ueritati; et ipse est deus noster qui nos liberat a morte, id est a condicione peccati* (CCL 29, p. 262).

⁶⁰ *Confessions* 10.3, p. 230; *beates me in te, mutans animam meam fide et sacramento tuo* (CCL 27, 156).

⁶¹ *Free Choice* 2.3, p. 77; *Ita fit ut deum non negemus esse praescium omnium futurorem et nos tamen uelimus quod uolumus* (CCL 29, p. 280).

good, so that an evil will is a deficient rather than an efficient cause.⁶² This is a positive way of putting it, but really all that's being said is that sin has no cause. To assign it a cause is to deny it as sin. God is the cause of everything that is, not of nonbeing. "If you try to find the efficient cause of this evil choice, there is none to be found."⁶³ The only act we do apart from God is sin. This means that all our good actions are caused by God, and by us. This also means that God could make all our actions good without in the least violating our free will. As to the second point, knowledge of our freedom is self-evident. We cannot deny it without denying ourselves, that is, without drifting into meaninglessness. If there is no freedom, then I do not act: it just happens. Therefore, without freedom of choice, I cannot even perform the activity of denying freedom.

These two truths are not contradictory. This is because they follow from two different spheres of reason. It is a theoretical contradiction to deny that everything comes from God. And it is a practical contradiction to deny that we are free. True enough, we have no theoretical proof that we are free, but neither can theoretical reason prove that we are not free. Since freedom is *sui generis*, to give a theoretical cause of it would not be to explain it, but, on the contrary, to explain it away. And true enough, our knowledge that we are free does not prove that God exists and is providential, but neither do our free choices prove that we escape from God's providence. The only thing that escapes from God's providence is nothing, which of course is not any thing. Since my good choices are not nothing, they are under God's providence.

Any attempt we make to solve this problem within natural reason is doomed to failure. To try to solve it by theoretical reason by presenting some cause of our freedom only destroys freedom. If our freedom has a cause that explains it, then freedom is explained away, whether that cause is from below or above. To try to solve it by practical reason through insisting that our free choice means that we are free from God's influence is to undercut our metaphysical reason for holding that there is a God in the first place, that is, that all good comes ultimately from a single source.

There is, however, a positive model for understanding how grace and freedom are not antithetical; but it is theological, based on revelation, and it lies in the mystery of faith, not the analytical clarity of autonomous reason. In Christ, born of the covenant between God and Mary, grace and freedom coexist in perfect harmony. It is true that our understanding even here is not perfect. Just because we believe that Christ is God and man, born of the covenant between God and Mary, this does not mean that we understand how this could be so. Nevertheless, we can say intelligibly that it is only as covenanted that God's activity of grace and the human activity of freedom can coexist. We are told this, but it also is the only possibly adequate rational explanation. In no other way can freedom be made intelligible. If we present a Neo-platonic deduction of all things, including freedom, from the One, then the freedom is not free, but

⁶² *City of God* 12.7.

⁶³ *City of God* 12.6, p. 477; *Huius porro malae uoluntatis causa efficiens si quaeratur, nihil inuenitur* (CCL 48, p. 360).

determined according to a necessary procession of effects leading from pure unity to diversity. If, on the other hand, we cut off freedom from any explanation, then freedom is random—but that is not freedom either. In other words, the only way to have freedom and intelligibility is to hold that the relationship between God and human beings is covenantal. We learn this through Revelation, but it is also the only possible explanation. Philosophy can show us why every other explanation fails.

This is ultimately Augustine's position. He does sometimes wander away from it by trying to give explanations either philosophical or theological for our free actions in terms of God's universal causality. However, early and late in his career, in as clear terms as possible (it is impossible to make language adequate to discuss God), he insists on the truth of both propositions: God is creator and we are free. These two are only positively understood together theologically, as our freely entering into a covenant with God. "*But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ (1 Cor 6:1). And so, the victory by which sin is conquered is nothing but the gift of God who helps free choice in this struggle.*"⁶⁴

⁶⁴ *Grace and Free Choice*, 4,8, p. 77; *Gratias autem Deo, qui dat nobis victoriam per Dominum nostrum Jesum Christum (1 Cor. xv, 56, 57). Ergo et victoria qua peccatum vincitur, nihil aliud est quam donum Dei, in isto certamine, adjuvantis liberum arbitrium* (PL 44, p. 887).