

Appendix A: Augustine on the Human Will

Any Christian understanding of human free will has to explain at least two things: (1) Do human beings make genuinely free choices at least with respect to God, for which we are personally responsible? (2) Why does it appear from the biblical narrative that in eternity, redeemed human beings will not sin?

In session 1 of this curriculum,¹ I cited three early theologians who represented the teaching of the church: Irenaeus, John Cassian, and John of Damascus. For example, Irenaeus (130 – 202 AD), bishop of Lyons, the first theologian outside the New Testament who wrote a systematic explanation of Christian faith, said: (1) Human free choices towards God are real, and we are personally responsible for them, because God is not coercive; and (2) The redeemed will no longer sin in eternity because we will have perfected our voluntary subjection to God by sufficiently internalizing Him. Here is Irenaeus in his own words:

‘God has always preserved free will and self-government in man...’²

‘Inasmuch, then, as the Spirit of God pointed out by the prophets things to come, forming and adapting us beforehand for the purpose of our *being made subject to God*...’³

‘God made man a free [agent] from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the behests of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God. For there is no coercion with God... Man, a created and organized being, is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God [Genesis 1:26 – 28], the Father planning everything well and giving His commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit nourishing and increasing [what is made], but man making progress day by day, *and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One*. For the Uncreated is perfect, that is, God.’⁴

By contrast, Augustine thought that the human being had a static quality, with a faculty of will which stayed constant. On this point, he differed from Christian interpreters of Scripture before him.

‘According to Augustine, man in Paradise was endowed from the start with all possible wisdom and knowledge: his was a realized, and in no sense potential, perfection. The dynamic conception of Irenaeus clearly fits more easily with modern theories of evolution [and the text of Genesis!] than does the static conception of Augustine.’⁵

But if you believe the human being is static in that sense, then how do you explain how Adam and Eve could corrupt their own true freedom – the freedom with which to choose God. And now, in our fallen state, we make choices against God – why? This worried Augustine.

¹ Mako A. Nagasawa, *Your True Self and True Desires, from God's Perspective*, on this page: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/study-action-shame-glory>

² Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 4.15.2

³ Ibid 4.20.8

⁴ Ibid 4.37.1; cf. 4.38.3

⁵ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993 2nd edition), p.219 – 220; also found here: http://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/history_timothy_ware_2.htm#n2. Augustine quoted from Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.2.7 and 5.19.1 in his writings against Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum (*Contra Julian* 1.3.5), and mentions Irenaeus by name (1.7.32), yet apparently did not consistently understand Irenaeus on this point. (He might also have quoted *Against Heresies* 4.30.1 in *Christian Doctrine* 2.40.60.) Note that Ambrose of Milan (340 – 397), who led Augustine to faith, also held to a developmental view of humanity in creation: ‘Man, therefore, was, figuratively speaking, either in the shadow of life because our life on earth is but a shadow, or man had life, as it were, in pledge, for he had been breathed on by God. He had, therefore, a pledge of immortality, but while in the shadow of life he was unable, by the usual channels of sense, to see and attain the hidden life of Christ with God. Although not yet a sinner, he was not possessed of an incorrupt and inviolable nature... Hence, he was in the shadow of life, whereas sinners are in the shadow of death... There is no distinction, therefore, between the breath of God and the food of the tree of life. No man can say that he can acquire more by his own efforts than what is granted him by the generosity of God. Would that we had been able to hold on to what we had received! Our toils avail only to the extent that we take back again what was once conferred on us.’ (Ambrose of Milan, *Paradise*, chapter 5, paragraph 29; dated between 374 to 383 AD). Augustine was in Milan, in his early 30’s, from the fall of 384 to the summer of 386 AD, so his neglect of Ambrose’s teaching requires explanation. Significantly, Augustine believed that, despite the appearance given by Genesis that God took His time in creation, and lingered over the goodness of His creation, God created instantaneously (*Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis* 3.7)

‘For Augustine, by contrast, the sheer size of the inner world, was a source of anxiety quite as much as of strength. ‘There is, indeed, some light in men: but let them walk fast, walk fast, lest the shadows come.’ The conscious mind was ringed with shadows. Augustine felt he moved in a ‘limitless forest, full of unexpected dangers.’ [...] ‘This memory of mine is a great force, a vertiginous memory, my God, a hidden depth of infinite complexity: and this is my soul, and this is what I am. What, then, am I, my God? What is my true nature? A living thing, taking innumerable forms, quite limitless...’ ‘As for the allurements of sweet smells’ for instance, ‘I am not much troubled... At least, so I seem to myself: perhaps I am deceived. For there is in me a lamentable darkness in which my latest possibilities are hidden from myself, so that my mind, questioning itself upon its own powers, feels that it cannot rightly trust its own report.’⁶

Even during his life, Augustine’s teachings drew forth concerned responses from John Cassian and Vincent of Lerins, who were leaders of Christian monastic communities in Roman Gaul.⁷ In fifth century Gaul, debates about Augustine’s teaching occurred between these monastic communities on the one hand, and by Augustine’s disciples, led by Prosper of Aquitaine, on the other.⁸ After about a century of disturbance, these debates were thought to be sufficiently resolved by the fourteen bishops of the Council of Orange in 529 AD.

While the Council of Orange was ostensibly about God’s grace and human free will, it took a step in clarifying the posture of God towards the human self. The Council of Orange’s settlement was not as clear as the Sixth Ecumenical Council of 680 – 681 AD (see below), which was much more widely attended and included the Greek-speaking Christians of the East. The Council of Orange taught that while Adam and Eve’s sin did indeed damage the human will if we consider it ‘autonomously’ or ‘on its own,’ such a thing is purely hypothetical. In reality, God gives grace to all humans continually. God upholds our very being and our ability to choose Him. This meant that free will, the decision to have faith which arises from a free will, and human goodness are manifestations of God’s grace, as shown by Scripture and the quotations in the first module of this curriculum from Irenaeus, John Cassian, and John of Damascus.⁹ But so is the decision to not have faith, which is rooted in a human will which is genuinely free. In fact, decisions to resist and reject God must arise from a will that is genuinely free, and that freedom was understood to be empowered by God’s grace. So for the time being, the issue was settled. Other Christian theologians did not share Augustine’s worry about the will, as noted above. They interpreted the core ‘self’ much more positively, and relationally dependent on God.

The Greek-speaking Christians in the East arrived at a point of even more clarity with Maximus the Confessor (c.580 – 662 AD). Maximus the Confessor explained that Jesus had two wills in one person, seen especially in the wilderness temptation and the garden of Gethsemane. He had to heal the human will from within, as one of us. So in Jesus, we see that his will is not the same as his personhood: ‘Father, if it be your will, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done’ (Lk.22:42). Jesus seemed to have two wills, and two ranges of desires. Consequently:

- A will is part of a ‘nature’ (divine, human)

⁶ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of CA Press, 2013 edition), p.164 – 174

⁷ Angelo Di Bernardino, editor, *Patrology IV: The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature From the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon* (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1999) remarks, ‘His [Cassian’s] concepts of freedom, of original sin, and of anthropology are derived from Irenaeus of Lyons.’ C.f. Irenaeus (130 – 202 AD), *Against Heresies*, 4.37.1; 4.38.3.

⁸ Seraphim Rose, *The Place of Blessed Augustine in the Orthodox Church* (Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2007 third edition)

⁹ The quotations from Irenaeus are above in footnotes 2 – 4. John Cassian, *On the Incarnation of the Lord* (13.12), ‘It cannot then be doubted that there are by nature some seeds of goodness in every soul implanted by the kindness of the Creator: but unless these are quickened by the assistance of God, they will not be able to attain to an increase of perfection... And therefore the will always remains free in man, and can either neglect or delight in the grace of God. For the Apostle would not have commanded saying: ‘Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling’ [Philippians 2:13] had he not known that it could be advanced or neglected by us. But that men might not fancy that they had no need of Divine aid for the work of Salvation, he subjoins: ‘For it is God that works in you both to will and to do, of His good pleasure.’ And therefore he warns Timothy and says: ‘Neglect not the grace of God which is in Thee,’ [1 Timothy 4:14] and again: ‘For which cause I exhort thee to stir up the grace of God which is in thee...’ [2 Timothy 1:6].’ John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* (book 2, chapter 30), ‘Bear in mind, too, that virtue is a gift from God implanted in our nature, and that He Himself is the source and cause of all good, and without His co-operation and help we cannot will or do any good thing. But we have it in our power either to abide in virtue and follow God, Who calls us into ways of virtue, or to stray from paths of virtue, which is to dwell in wickedness, and to follow the devil who summons but cannot compel us. For wickedness is nothing else than the withdrawal of goodness, just as darkness is nothing else than the withdrawal of light. While then we abide in the natural state we abide in virtue, but when we deviate from the natural state, that is, from virtue, we come into an unnatural state and dwell in wickedness.’

- A will is not synonymous with a ‘person’ (Jesus, though he has two wills, is one person) so my will is conceptually ‘smaller’ (definitionally, or ontologically) than my personhood.

Jesuit scholar Edward T. Oakes compares Augustine and Maximus this way:

‘The bishop of Hippo placed the dilemma of a free will which was created good but which chooses evil anyway inside his nature/grace dialectic, whereas [Maximus] the Confessor saw the problem primarily inside his Christology; for... Christology dominates Maximus’ thought far more than it does in Augustine, with fateful consequences in the West. Moderns tend to identify person with the person’s will... This too is a deeply held presupposition (and error) of modernity, which tends to identify personhood with both consciousness (mind) and will... When personhood is identified without further ado with mind or consciousness, then the concept of eternal life after death becomes well-nigh incredible, since consciousness is so obviously tied to the continued metabolism of the brain; and when personhood is identified without further ado with the will, then the cult of will in Friedrich Nietzsche and his postmodern successors inevitably follows.’¹⁰

Maximus recognized that, in the same logic of the Nicene Creed and the Nicene theologians, God must assume what He intends to heal and save, so he had to have a human will in addition to a divine will.

‘If Adam ate [from the Tree] willingly, then the will is the first thing in us that became subject to passion. And since the will is the first thing in us that became subject to passion, if, according to them [the monothelites, who believed in only one will in Jesus], the Word did not assume that selfsame will along with the [rest of] human nature when he became incarnate, then I have not been made free from sin. And if I have not become free from sin, I was not saved, since whatever is not assumed is not saved.’¹¹

If this is true, then we must say that Jesus restored true human ‘freedom’ – the freedom to always choose God and respond positively to the Father in the Spirit – to the instance of human nature in himself. The loving inclination of the human will towards God (i.e. our desire for God) is drawn out of, etched into, and perfected in the human nature of the Son (note: *in* his human nature *by* his personhood), which Jesus then shares with us by his Spirit. He implicates each of us personally because he is also joined to every human person already by virtue of being our creator (Acts 17:28; Col.1:17). Thus, true ‘freedom’ itself must not proceed from Enlightenment views of human autonomy and individuality, as if a person must have absolute ‘freedom’ to choose evil as readily as good, lest their ‘freedom’ be ‘obstructed.’ Rather, ‘freedom’ must be defined Christocentrically, which means by its very nature, relationally and ontologically: from the person of the Son. This is the Son who is eternally joined to the Father in the Spirit. This is also the Son who shows us in his lifelong obedience that our human nature, too, can only be healed by the Spirit of God, who is identified by Paul as the Spirit *of Christ* (Rom.8:9) at a very precise moment: at that place in his exposition when he stresses that, while we are plagued by ‘the sin which indwells us,’ we must draw upon and participate in Christ’s divinely healed human nature (‘his life’ in Rom.5:10) which he offers to us by his Spirit who also indwells us (Rom.7:7 – 8:11). Paul notably says that the Christian eschatological hope is ‘the *freedom* of the glory of the children of God’ (Rom.8:21). To reject Jesus is to reject our true human freedom, which means our true vocation, true relatedness to God, true selves, true human personhood, and true human nature.

The Sixth Ecumenical Council (680 – 681 AD), called Constantinople III, ratified Maximus the Confessor’s articulation as official church doctrine – that which the church recognizes as a helpful formulation of what it has historically believed. Hence, officially, the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions hold this view on paper. The value of the Sixth Ecumenical Council over the Council of Orange is twofold: (1) its explicit methodology of allowing Jesus to define within himself what true humanity is, and (2) its broader representation of both Latin and Greek-speaking theologians.

Unfortunately, Martin Luther and John Calvin took selectively from Augustine’s later writings – the ones in which he did not give an adequate defense of free will – and developed a view of the human person as intrinsically evil and

¹⁰ Edward T. Oakes, S.J., *Infinity Dwindled to Infancy: A Catholic and Evangelical Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), p.163 – 164

¹¹ Maximus the Confessor, *Disputatio*, PG 91, 325A; quoted in Edward T. Oakes, *Infinity Dwindled to Infancy: A Catholic and Evangelical Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), p.162

resistant to God. Luther and Calvin believed that the human will was so opposed to God that God had to override our will from outside us, and perform a ‘hostile takeover’ on us. Martin Luther defended his use of Augustine’s more extreme statements, which other Catholic and Orthodox theologians had called ‘exaggerations,’ by saying:

‘To say that Augustine exaggerates in speaking against heretics is to say that Augustine tells lies almost everywhere.’¹²

John Calvin believed that Augustine was the most consistent of the ancient writers:

‘Moreover although the Greek Fathers, above others, and especially Chrysostom, have exceeded due bounds in extolling the powers of the human will, yet all ancient theologians, with the exception of Augustine, are so confused, vacillating, and contradictory on this subject, that no certainty can be obtained from their writings.’¹³

However, prior to Augustine, Christian theologians of the Greek East and Latin West were united on divine grace and human freedom being cooperative, according to two prominent historians of the early church, Philip Schaff and J.N.D. Kelly, who rebut Calvin’s assessment.¹⁴ Interestingly enough, scholars now credit Augustine with being the one who was rather confused and contradictory on the subject.¹⁵

Meanwhile, Luther and Calvin, asserting that no one desires God enough to choose Jesus, had to answer the question of why anyone chooses Jesus. They commended Augustinian ‘double predestination’: the idea that God alone chooses for some to be saved, and some to be damned. Centuries later, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud developed secular versions of Luther’s pessimistic view about humanity. Karl Marx’s father converted from Judaism to Lutheranism. Friedrich Nietzsche’s father was a Lutheran pastor. Freud was an Austrian Jew but very influenced by Nietzsche.

Prior developments in the realm of Enlightenment philosophy also contributed to the view that our personhood is synonymous with our will. Descartes seemed to think that the person was a ‘will’ when he said, ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Descartes thought he was constructing a stable foundation for knowledge of reality and even belief in God. He privileged thinking as the fundamental act of willing which proved one’s personhood and even constituted personhood. It was but a short step from saying, ‘I *think*, therefore I am,’ to ‘I *feel*, therefore I am,’ and then, ‘I *feel*, therefore *it must be true*.’

Together, these influences laid the groundwork for the postmodern, and somewhat youthful, resistance to disciplining desires. ‘If you’re against my sexual *desires*, you are against me as a *person*. In fact, you’re doing violence to me as a *person* by being against my *will*.’ Or, in some cases, it led to people hiding their desires because those desires were interpreted as irredeemably selfish. But what if our personhood, especially our personhood in relation to God, is larger than our will and desires? What if our will and desires are only *free* when we draw upon the new humanity of Jesus? What if our personhood is only *fulfilled* when we are in conscious relationship with Jesus?

¹² Martin Luther, “Disputation against Scholastic Theology”; cf. Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes*, book 2, chapter 2, section 4

¹⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* Vol.III, ch.9, sec.146 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1867); J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York, NY: Harper One, 1978), p.352, 356

¹⁵ An example of those who interpret Augustine as arguing *against* free will and for ‘monergism’ (God’s will alone): <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/augustinewill.html>. As examples of those who interpret Augustine as *upholding* free will: Seraphim Rose, *The Place of Blessed Augustine in the Orthodox Church* (Platina, CA: Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2007 third edition) and Angelo Berardino, editor, *Patrology, Volume IV: The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon* (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics Inc., 1991), p.414)