

Philosophy 200 - 4th Homework

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### **Augustine - "On Free Will" - Book I**

In this assignment I will summarize and critique Book I of St. Augustine's "On Free Will", dealing with the nature and origins of evil. I realize that this is a very short passage, but already by the end of it I disagree with Augustine's reasoning, and so I will address that here. By the end of my critique I will return briefly to the greater topic of free will, and agree in large part with some of Augustine's overarching conclusions. It is merely the means by which he arrives there where I disagree.

"On Free Will" is a dialogue between Augustine and Evodius. Book I begins with Evodius inquiring of Augustine whether God is the author of the evil deeds which occur. Augustine replies that as God is just, and thus must punish the wicked, He is the author of those evil occurrences which befall men as punishments; but as God is good, he is not the author of the evil deeds which wicked men commit. Evodius asks then who is the author of such evil deeds, to which Augustine replies that every man is the author of his own evil deeds, and must commit them voluntarily, otherwise the punishment bestowed upon them by God would be unjust, and thus unbecoming of a just God. Evodius wonders then whether men could be taught by some malicious agent to do evil, and Augustine argues that they could not, for teaching imparts only knowledge, which is good; or even if some knowledge were somehow bad, the teaching of it would require the use of intelligence, which is wholly good, and thus such knowledge could not be learned. Evodius thus asks again why men do evil things, if our faculties are only capable of learning to do good things, and Augustine rephrases this into the classical problem of evil: How is the notion of an all knowing, all powerful, and completely good creator of all, compatible with the existence of evil?

They then begin to examine the nature of what it means for a deed to be evil. Augustine asks Evodius to name several evil deeds, and Evodius names three - adultery, homicide, and sacrilege. Augustine asks him whether these crimes are evil because they are illegal, and Evodius answers that rather they are made illegal because they are evil deeds. Augustine then asks what it is which makes them evil, and Evodius answers that they are evil because he would not wish such deeds committed against himself. Augustine presses further, though - asking whether such acts, where all parties involved consent, are still evil, and Evodius answers that he believes they are, but cannot answer why he believes such. He postulates it is perhaps that it is because such acts are popularly condemned, but Augustine points out that many people they both believe to be great and noble martyrs, such as Jesus himself, had their deeds condemned by the people of their own times. Finally Augustine offers his own suggestion: that deeds are evil when they are motivated by lust. To this, Evodius agrees.

Already by this point I find serious fault in the reasoning made here. All of the reasoning of the discourse is of course already spurious for they assume the conclusion they are trying to reach and are simply trying to justify their beliefs, rather than examining what is or at least what is possible and derive whatever conclusions come from such premises. This is most evident to me here near the end of Book I, where Evodius stumbles across and then dismisses what I believe to be the correct answer to the nature of immoral deeds - nonconsensual, hypocritical deeds are immoral, and all other deeds which, in all involved parties' opinions harm no one, are perfectly moral. I say immoral and moral here to make an important distinction between "good or evil" and "moral or immoral"; to me, the definitions of good and evil are simple and not particularly useful as they are relative things. A deed is good *to something* when it tends to preserve that thing or aid in its preservation; a deed is evil *to something* when it tends to destroy that thing or aid in its destruction. Thus one event may be good to one thing and evil to another. This seems to track with the first kind of "evil" quickly dismissed in Book I, the kind which does originate from God.

But morality is a universal and abstract thing, and a clear understanding of it can be useful. To state more clearly the notion which Evodius throws out so quickly, I would say that a deed is moral if both the deed (the *doing*) and its reciprocal (the *being done unto*) are good to their respective parties; conversely a deed is immoral if it is evil in place of both goods, and it is amoral if it is evil in place of one good but not the other. So I agree with Augustine and Evodius that deeds are not immoral ("evil") because they are illegal, nor are they immoral because they are unpopular ("condemned"); but neither are they immoral simply because they are motivated by lust. Still, without lust, no immoral deeds could be done. Lust, as I understand it, is a sort of passionate shortsightedness, a powerful drive for some immediate good, blind to the (possibly evil) consequences or implications of its acquisition. In this sense lust is very similar to ignorance, in that both affects narrow a person's perspective.

It seems most people would agree that no person would believe something they are aware to be contradictory, but only believe contradictory things because they are ignorant or, in their haste (lust), have not considered the two contradictory aspects of their beliefs together. I hold that likewise no person would intend something they are aware to be hypocritical, but instead only do hypocritical things because they are ignorant of their hypocrisy, having not considered both aspects of their actions (the *doing* and the *being done unto*) - and this inconsideration is due to lust. But as we are finite beings and are not omniscient, our perspective is inherently limited, and so to act at all from that perspective is to display some degree of lust, simply because we cannot consider everything. So lust alone cannot be the determining factor in immorality.

It is this limitedness of perspective that I see as the solution to at least two major philosophical dilemmas. It is the solution the problem of evil, and also to the problem of free will. Using the definition for evil which I earlier gave, we see that evil is a relative thing: an action may be good to one person and evil to another person. However, that deed will either be good or evil to whatever grouping those two people both belong to. Even so, a deed which is evil to that

group may in turn be good to another group, and from the perspective of a group which encompasses the both of those groups, that may be a net good. As the effects one person can make on progressively larger scale groups diminishes, it becomes clear that for a deed to be evil to the largest group, the infinite universe itself, is fundamentally impossible. I can imagine no one disagreeing that the universe is impervious to harm, and thus it is only our finite perspective that allows us the relative perception of some things as good or evil. To God, no evil can be done. Likewise with morality, our limited perspective grants us the illusion that amoral deeds can be “gotten away with” - that one can do evil to another and escape any consequences of that action. Any deed that occurs will be either good or evil to some encompassing group, and what is evil to the group is evil to each member of the group, though perhaps not in proportion. While the evil consequences of an apparently amoral deed may be mitigated by other goods, it nevertheless stands that less evil would befall each member of a group if less evil were done to the group, and so any deed which harms the group harms the evildoer as well. As we all ultimately fall under some grouping together, we survive only so long as enough good occurs to mitigate any evil deeds; failing that, the evil will cause the end of whatever group has more evil-doing within it than good, and thus the end of the evil occurring within that group. Thus nothing amoral occurs, and immoral deeds lead eventually to their own cessation. This may be seen as a process similar to karma, or if you wish to personify the universe as God, it can be seen as divine punishment.

Similarly with free will. In short, if the universe is ultimately determinate, then to God, we have no free will. But we are finite, thus while the choices we will make are determined by our pasts, we have not yet made those choices, and as those choices play a part in determining the future, to us we seem to have the power of free will. Similar to the Stoics, this leads ultimately to the notion that more good will come to you if you are aware of God / the universe, and go with its “flow” rather than fight it; and this notion tracks well with Augustine’s conclusion that evil comes about as a falling-away from God, and not as anything which is a part of Himself.