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Augustine on Free Will

Overview

Augustine

Free Choice of the Will

The Problem of Evil

- Traditional answers

- Augustine's answer

Free will

- No-coercion

- Indifference

- Spontaneity

Questions

Some Context: Augustine's Life (354–430)

- 354–430
- Born in Thagaste (Algeria); bishop of Hippo (also Algeria)
- Studies grammar and rhetoric
- Joins the Manicheists, for 9 years!
- Then in Milan meets Ambrose, and gets baptized (387)
- Returns to Africa; ordered a priest, then a bishop



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Some Context: Augustine's Life (354–430)

- 354 Augustine born
- 387 conversion
- 388 *On the Free Choice of the Will* (books 1&2)
- 391 ordained a priest
- 395 consecrated as a bishop
- ca. 400 *Confessions*
- 409 Visigoths invade Spain
- 410 Rome is sacked by the Visigoths
- 413–426 *The City of God*
- 426 *Reconsiderations*
- 430 May Vandals besiege Hippo
- 430 Augustine dies
- 431 Vandals take Hippo

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The Free Choice of the Will

3 books; I&II written much earlier than III. Different emphasis (arguing against the Manicheans vs. the Pelagians)

Some philosophically interesting issues discussed in FCW1:

- evil and its origin
- the will and its freedom
- eternal law and temporal law
- Euthyphro dilemma (or the reverse): is something evil because the law forbids it, or does the law forbid it because it is evil?
- the good will and the other virtues – can you have a good will and not be courageous at the same time?
- belief and understanding: which comes first?

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The Problem of Evil

The “classical” formulation:

- 1 God is all good and all powerful.
- 2 A good being prevents all evil (s)he can.
- 3 Therefore, there is either no evil, or no (all-good and all-powerful) God.
- 4 Obviously, there *is* evil.
- 5 Therefore, there is no (all-good and all-powerful) God.

Augustine's formulation is simpler:

FCW1.2:

“We believe that everything that exists comes from the one God, although God is not the author of sins” (p. 5).

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P4: There *Is* Evil



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Johannes Tinctor, *Sermo contra sectam Vaudensium*,
5th-c. Flemish, Oxford,
Bodleian, Ms. Rawlinson D
410

Waldensians worshipping the
Devil in the shape of a goat
(often a shitting goat).

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Confessions II (tr. Chadwick, 29)

“I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong. There was a pear tree near our vineyard laden with fruit, though attractive in neither colour nor taste. To shake the fruit off the tree and carry off the pears, I and a gang of naughty adolescents set off late at night.... We carried off a huge load of pears. But they were not for our feasts but merely to throw to the pigs. Even if we ate a few, nevertheless our pleasure lay in doing what was not allowed.”



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Some Traditional Answers

Evil exists...

- 1 To magnify God;
- 2 To determine human moral standing;
- 3 To teach right and wrong;
- 4 As part of the best possible world;
- 5 As part of a plan humans cannot understand.

Augustine doesn't think any of these is any good.

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Some Preliminaries

① Evil done vs. evil suffered

“We usually speak of “evil” in two ways, namely when someone has (a) done evil; (b) suffered something evil” (p. 3).

② Evil is caused by lust (inordinant desire; *libido*); the external deed is irrelevant.

“it is clear now that nothing but lust dominates in every kind of evil doing” (p. 7).

③ Evil deeds are voluntary:

“Evildoings are redressed by God’s justice. It would not be just to redress them unless they come about through the will” (p. 1).

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Augustine's Answer (FCW)

Evil is the result of free human choices. God gave us free will, and provides for our freedom, but it is we who make the choices.

- Inordinate desire (lust): “the love of things one can lose against one’s will” (p. 9).
- The opposite of inordinate desire is *good will*, which wills everything according to its own proper place and order.

How is this a solution?

- Augustine can affirm that God is good and nevertheless evil exists;
- Evil exists as a result of choices we make, so it is not due to God.

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What should we do to avoid evil?

- Things are ordered, and according to this order, humans are distinguished from animals by their reason. Therefore, it is reason that should govern the whole human being.
- According to reason, love only those things that are everlasting; don't love temporal things that you can lose against your will.
- Some temporal goods we must not inordinately love: bodily health; beauty; education; freedom; family members; friends; city; honor; popularity; property.
- Once one has good will, one also has all the cardinal virtues (prudence, courage, temperance, justice)

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Consequence: The Happy Life – Easy!

The Happy Life

“Someone is happy when he takes delight in his own good will, and on account of it he attributes little worth to anything else that is called good but can be lost even when the will to retain it remains” (p. 24).

Since it is up to our will what we will, and what we will determines whether we are happy or not, it is up to our will whether we are happy or not!

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What Augustine has established so far:

- we have will
- it is up to our will to be happy
- the will was given to us by God
- the will is something good

Remains to be seen:

- our will is indeed free to choose between good and evil

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What *is* free will?



¹Source: www.livescience.com.

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Freedom of the Will

In what sense is our will free, according to Augustine?

- ① Acting in accordance with your nature.
- ② Not determined by character or background.
- ③ Not coerced by external forces.
- ④ Capable of changing the course of history.
- ⑤ Capable of choosing otherwise – liberty of indifference. (questionable)²
- ⑥ The source of your actions is your own person – liberty of spontaneity.

²FCW3.4 suggests that we do not have this kind of freedom; on the other hand, FCW1.16 and 2.19 suggest that we do.

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No Coercion

Can someone force our will to choose evil? – Augustine: No (FCW1.12-13)

- ① If *A* forced our will to choose evil, *A* would have to be either superior or equal or inferior to the will.
- ② But if *A* were equal or superior, it would not do it (it would be at least as wise as the will itself);
- ③ If *A* were inferior, it *could* not do it (an inferior cannot act on a superior).
- ④ Therefore, nothing can force our will to choose evil.



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Indifference – Can We Do Otherwise?

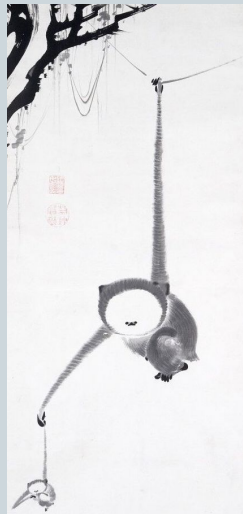
FCW 2.20

“this...movement, since it is voluntary, is placed within our power...What then is more secure than to be in that life where what you do not want cannot happen to you!”

FCW 3.1

“if the movement by which the will is turned one way or another were not voluntary and placed in our power, a man should neither be praised for swinging with the hinge (so to speak) of his will to higher things, nor blamed for swinging with it to lower things.”

¹Ito Jakuchu, Two Gibbons Reaching for the Moon (1770)



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FCW 3.17

“But what, in the end, could be the cause of the will before the will? Either it is the will itself, in which case there is no getting around this root of the will, or it is not the will, in which case it has no sin. Hence either the will is the first cause of sinning, or no sin is the first cause of sinning. No sin is rightly assigned to anyone but the sinner. Therefore, it is rightly assigned only to someone who wills it. I do not know why you want to look any further.”

- 1 Either the will is its own cause or it is not.
- 2 If the will is not its own cause, there is no sin or responsibility.
- 3 There *is* sin and responsibility.
- 4 Therefore, the will is its own cause.

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- Augustine says we should not ask why the will causes itself, since that would result in an infinite regress.
- Deeper explanation: the will is the ultimate cause for what we do. People can supply reasons, but no reason is compelling. Ultimately we do as we do because we so will.

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Some Remaining Questions

- Would we be humans if we weren't the source of our actions?
- Does spontaneity mean that ultimately, our actions are inexplicable?
- Is 'no coercion' + liberty of indifference + spontaneity enough for free will? Are they necessary *and* sufficient?
- What exactly is the relationship between free will and deliberation? Is deliberation free, or dictated by our values? Can we deliberate between incommensurable goods?
- What is more important: deliberation, or the capacity to pick an option?

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