

**Understanding God's Sovereignty and Human Freedom:
Recovering Augustine's View of Free-will**

by

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Declaration

Candidate:

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and to the best of my knowledge contains no materials previously published or written by another person. It contains no material extracted in whole or part by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis. I also declare that any assistance received from others in terms of design, style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Hudson', written in a cursive style.

30 June, 2021

Abstract

Christian theology portrays God as sovereign over all human history, and yet his human creatures as able to choose between morally significant courses of action. At the heart of created reality is both a theological determinism where God has determined the course of human history, *and* a human capacity to make real and meaningful choices between two or more possibilities. This thesis sets out to explore the compatibility of God's sovereignty and human freedom, in the eyes of a key contributor to the theological tradition, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo Regis. Specifically, it examines the coherence of Augustine's view of free-will (that we *can* choose between alternate possibilities), and his doctrine of grace (that we need God's grace because without it we *will not* choose God). It is argued that Augustine's distinction between our ability (*posse*) and our will (*velle*) is key for understanding his construal of the compatibility between God's sovereignty and human freedom. Although we have the *ability* to choose other than what God has determined, we do not have the *will* to choose other than what God has determined, whether God moves us by his Spirit or gives us over to our sin. Thus, while we *can* choose between alternate possibilities, God has determined all that *will* come to pass. While it is often assumed that Augustine held that, apart from the grace of God, fallen humanity is *non posse non peccare* (not able to not sin), it is demonstrated that the only instance of this phrase in the entire works of Augustine, is in a single sentence in which Augustine is quoting Pelagius. By contrast, it is argued that Augustine would have rejected the view that fallen humanity is *non posse non peccare* (not able to not sin), and instead, advocated that fallen humanity is *non velle non peccare* (not willing to not sin).

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Introduction – The Problem of Compatibilism

One of the most formidable challenges in Christian theology is reconciling God’s sovereignty and human freedom. Carson observes that, “Many of the theological disputes of almost any day, including ours, revolve around compatibilism – that is, the view that God’s sovereignty on the one hand and human freedom and responsibility on the other are mutually compatible”.¹ The Bible constantly describes God as the Sovereign LORD over the heavens and the earth, and his human creatures as able to choose between different courses of action and responsible for the choices that they make (Gen 50:19-20; Exod 9:15-19; Deut 30:6-16; Prov 16:1-9; Isa 10:5-19; Jer 18:5-10; John 6:44-56; Rom 9:6-29). This raises a series of theological questions: if God is sovereign over everything, is he also the author of evil? If God has ordained all of our choices, how can we be held accountable for things that we cannot avoid? If we are free to choose between alternate possibilities, is God simply reacting to the choices that we make? Theological and pastoral concerns regarding predestination, perseverance, prayer, evangelism, judgment, grace, the problem of evil, the justice of God, and biblical inspiration, all push us towards some kind of understanding of the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human freedom.

Despite the importance and frequency of issues that arise out of and alongside the compatibilism between God’s sovereignty and human freedom, some theologians have argued that it must remain a mystery.² Certainly, the secret things belong to the LORD (Deut 29:29), and while the term ‘mystery’ originated from the Greek word *μυστήριον* meaning ‘secret’ (*BDAG*), the English word ‘mystery’ has since evolved to mean “something that is difficult or impossible to understand or explain” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). However, when the biblical authors speak of mystery, they are referring to the secret and the unrevealed, not the incomprehensible (Matt 13:11; Rom 16:25-26; Eph 3:3-9; Col 1:25-2:3). While it may be difficult to understand *how* God’s sovereignty and human freedom are

¹ D.A. Carson, ‘Foreword’, in Scott Christensen, *What About Free Will? Reconciling Our Choices with God’s Sovereignty* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2016), ix.

² J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 23 ;D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002). 218.

compatible, God has purposefully communicated both of them to us; and a vagueness, or worse an incoherence, in either doctrine can lead (and has almost invariably led) to a denial of either God's sovereignty or human freedom.

Monergism and the Importance of Affirming Theological Determinism

One of the major points of contention in debates on God's sovereignty and human freedom concerns the way in which God is sovereign over salvation (a subset of the way in which God is sovereign over everything). Is the work of salvation done by God alone (monergism), or is the work of salvation shared by God and the believer (synergism)? This is at the heart of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone as it has been put forward by Augustine, the Reformers, and most of the Protestant church. However, since the Reformation, some within the Protestant church have sought to qualify this doctrine in the light of human freedom and creaturely integrity, most notably Arminius,³ Wesley,⁴ and their followers. They broadened God's saving grace to a (common) prevenient grace that is resisted by unbelievers.⁵ God's grace then becomes something that enables us to contribute to our salvation (synergism) rather than something that achieves salvation for us (monergism). Synergists may still affirm that we are saved by grace, but it is a grace that we must cooperate with. However, the problem is that whatever we contribute to our salvation effectively reduces the magnitude of God's grace to us, since "if it is by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace" (Rom 11:6). Salvation is either the free gift of God (monergism), or it is in some sense dependent upon us (synergism).⁶ It cannot be given as a free gift and earned at the same time – if it is earned in any sense, then it is not a free gift; "to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation" (Rom 4:4). For this reason, Augustine and the Reformers sought to defend the monergistic view that God's grace is effectual for salvation.

³ James Arminius, 'Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius, delivered before the States of Holland' in *The Works of James Arminius* (trans. by James Nichols and William Nichols; 3 vols; London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1825), 1.549-627.

⁴ John Wesley, 'Free Grace' in *The Works of John Wesley* (ed. Albert Outler; 27 vols; Bicentennial ed.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 3.544-559.

⁵ Arminius, 'Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius', 1.600; Wesley, 'Free Grace', 544-559.

⁶ Daniel Kirkpatrick, *Monergism or Synergism: Is Salvation Cooperative or the Work of God Alone?* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 11-12.

If it is the case that salvation is determined by God rather than by human choices, then the theological determinism of all of human history seems to follow as a close corollary, since if God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight (Eph 1:4), then every historical event leading up to the creation and salvation of those whom he chose, must also be determined by God. Humanly speaking, historical events are dependent upon other historical events. The exponential cascade of causality described by *snowballing* and *the butterfly effect* connects historical events with an exponentially larger number of later historical events in a causal chain, rendering everything outside of this causal chain as inconsequential.⁷ What then is inconsequential to God's plan? All of the days ordained for us are written in his book (Ps 139:16), not a single sparrow falls to the ground outside of God's care (Matt 10:29), and even the very hairs on our head are all numbered (Matt 10:30). The irreducible complexity of history renders salvation history as inseparably bound to all of human history. If God is sovereign over salvation history, then he is necessarily sovereign over all of human history as well. God's promises, and indeed the doctrine of grace, depend upon a theological determinism where God is the one who determines the course of human history.

Human Responsibility and the Importance of Affirming the Power of Contrary Choice

At the same time, God's commands, and indeed the doctrine of sin, seems to depend upon a view of human freedom that renders people culpable agents who make choices for which they are held accountable. No serious theological account denies human responsibility altogether, but the nature of human freedom required for human responsibility is often contested. On one hand, libertarians maintain the human responsibility requires the freedom to have done otherwise; in other words, the *power of contrary choice* is necessary for moral responsibility. This principle is often referred to as the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP). On the other hand, voluntarists maintain that human responsibility can be grounded in a softer form of freedom, namely, the freedom to follow one's own desires. The power of contrary choice, then, is *not* necessary for attributing moral responsibility, since

⁷ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (A Theology of Lordship; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 53-61.

the lack of a *will to choose otherwise* is sufficient.⁸ For example, John Locke argues against the principle of alternate possibilities using an analogy of a man who chooses to stay in a room which is locked.⁹ It is argued that even though he *cannot* leave, the relevant factor for his moral responsibility is that he *will not* leave. Similarly, Harry Frankfurt proposed a series of examples of agents who choose to commit a blameworthy action, unaware that had they chosen otherwise, the action would have been coerced or committed by another.¹⁰ It is likewise argued that the fact that the agent *will* commit the blameworthy action renders them morally responsible, regardless of whether or not the action *can* be avoided.

The difficulty with attempting to ground moral responsibility in a freedom that lacks the power of contrary choice is that without such a power, we are not in control of our moral decisions. Holding people responsible for something that is outside of their control appears to be unjust; for example, blaming or punishing someone because of the colour of their skin. If the man in Locke's analogy was commanded to leave the room, and tried to do so only to find the door locked, then it is no longer reasonable to hold him responsible for staying in the room. It is outside of his control. In Frankfurt-style cases, if the agent had chosen *not* to commit the blameworthy action, then they could hardly be held responsible for the subsequent actions of others, since these also are outside of their control. People are morally responsible for *their* choices, and by definition, choice is the act of choosing between two or more possibilities. It is only after Moses and Joshua put two possibilities before the people, that the people are challenged to choose obedience over sin (Deut 30:15-20; Josh 24:15). If there is only one possibility, then to speak of 'choice' is meaningless. There is literally no choice. As a positive example of the principle of alternate possibilities, no one would hold a doctor responsible for failing to cure what is incurable at the time, since he or she could not do otherwise, even if such a doctor wanted the patient to die (they would be responsible before God for the evil in their heart, but

⁸ Robert Young, *Freedom, Responsibility and God* (Library of Philosophy and Religion; London: Macmillan Press, 1975), 7-10.

⁹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (ed. Peter Nidditch; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2.21.10.

¹⁰ Harry Frankfurt, 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *Journal of Philosophy* 66/23 (1969): 831-836.

not for the death of the patient). However, doctors *are* negligent when they fail to cure a patient whom they could have cured, since they could have done otherwise. According to this line of thinking, the crucial difference between agents who are morally responsible, and mere instruments which are exempt from moral responsibility, is the *ability* of an agent to choose between morally significant courses of action.¹¹ While an agent may use a weapon to kill someone, no one puts the weapon on trial, since it had no ability to do otherwise. However, agents who *choose* to take up weapons and kill are held morally responsible for their actions by all.

Approaching Augustine's Compatibilism

At the heart of the Protestant Reformation was the rejection of synergism and the defence of monergism – that we are saved by grace alone (*Sola gratia*) through faith alone (*Sola fide*) in Christ alone (*Solus Christus*). At the same time, moral responsibility has persistently, although not universally, been grounded in the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP), also known as alternativity – the power to choose between two courses of action.¹² Broadly speaking, the clash of these two ideas has been *the* central issue around which theological battles lines have been drawn up between Reformed theologians (arguing for monergism), and advocates of free-will (arguing for alternativity). Despite a long history of polarisation on these issues, recent decades have seen efforts to bridge the divide. On the side of free-will, philosophers like Plantinga¹³ and Craig¹⁴ have argued that affirming human alternativity does not necessarily contradict a theology in which God is sovereign over human history. On the Reformed side, theologians like Tiessen,¹⁵ Frame¹⁶ and Ware¹⁷ have acknowledged the compatibility between theological determinism and human freedom in a

¹¹ John Lennox, *Determined to Believe? The Sovereignty of God, Freedom, Faith, and Human Responsibility* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2017), 26-27.

¹² Robert Kane, 'Introduction: The Contours of Contemporary Free Will Debates', in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (ed. Robert Kane; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

¹³ Alvin Plantinga, *The Necessity of Nature* (Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 164-195.

¹⁴ William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 49-116.

¹⁵ Terrance Tiessen, *Providence & Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 290-362.

¹⁶ Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 119-159.

¹⁷ Bruce Ware, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 61-160.

qualified sense. Nevertheless, despite the best efforts of both sides to bring about a rapprochement, all reach the conclusion that theological determinism and the power of contrary choice are incompatible.¹⁸ However, Augustine argued for both a strong view of God's sovereign grace against the Pelagians, and for human free-will against the Manichees. This thesis seeks to gain clarity on Augustine's view of free-will, which seems to have enabled him to hold and argue for both.

Literature Review

The scholarship on Augustine's view of free-will is so widely contested that, as Eleonore Stump points out: "Historians of philosophy read Augustine on free will so variously that it is sometimes difficult to believe they are reading the same texts".¹⁹ This is indeed the case, and it is largely because Augustine articulates a robust view of free-will in his earlier works *On Free Will*, which he then nuances in his writings against the Pelagians. This has led many to suggest that Augustine changed his mind on the subject of free-will.²⁰ However, during the Pelagian controversy, when Pelagius brought up Augustine's earlier writings *On Free Will*, Augustine did not retract them, but instead wrote: "I acknowledge them; they are my words. But let him now be so kind as to acknowledge everything which I have said above [in *Nature and Grace*]"²¹ For Augustine, his earlier writings are consistent with his later writings, but were written in a different context for a different for a different purpose. In Augustine's *Revisions*, which he wrote towards the end of his life, he wrote:

Because of the question that was before us, there is no discussion in these [earlier] books about the grace of God, whereby he has predestined his chosen ones in such a way that he himself prepares the wills of those among them who already exercise free choice... For it is

¹⁸ Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, 'Recent Work on Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will', in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (ed. Robert Kane; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 48-49.

¹⁹ Eleonore Stump, 'Augustine on free will', in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* (ed. David Meconi and Eleonore Stump; second ed; Cambridge Companions to Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 166.

²⁰ James Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1980), 8-9; William Babcock, 'Augustine on Sin and Moral Agency', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16/1 (1988): 36-41; James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 97; John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14-15; Eric Jenkins, *Free to Say No? Free Will and Augustine's Evolving Doctrines of Grace and Election* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), xi.

²¹ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace' in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 67.80; trans. of *De natura et gratia*.

one thing to examine where evil comes from and another to examine how to return to one's original condition or to attain a higher good".²²

Augustine himself insisted that he did not change his mind, but rather that his earlier writings were about free-will and the origin of evil, while his later writings are about God's grace and how the will is restored.

If Augustine was in fact consistent in his approach to free-will, as he claimed to be, then the question arises as to how he is read in such different ways today. One of the contributing factors is the historical association of the phrase *non posse non peccare* (not able to not sin) to Augustine, especially in popular writings.²³ However, it is now possible, through the digitisation of Augustine's works, to search throughout them for individual words and grammatical constructions. Such a search reveals that Augustine did use the expression *non posse non peccare*, but only once, and that was when he was quoting his opponent Pelagius:²⁴

[Pelagius] goes on to say, "But since the ability to not to sin does not come from us, even if we will not to be able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*), we cannot fail to have the ability not to sin (*non posse non peccare*)".²⁵

Here, Pelagius was arguing that even if we wanted to be *non posse non peccare*, we cannot be *non posse non peccare*, and this is the only instance of this phrase in the entire works of Augustine. The origin of this phrase lies in one of Augustine's later works, *Rebuke and Grace*, in which Augustine wrote:

We must carefully and attentively examine how these two differ from each other: to be able not to sin (*posse non peccare*) and not to be able to sin (*non posse peccare*)... The first freedom of the will [before the fall] was the ability not to sin (*posse non peccare*); the final freedom [in heaven] will be much greater, namely, the inability to sin (*non posse peccare*).²⁶

While Augustine here distinguishes between our first state before the fall, and our final state in heaven, later writers in the Augustinian tradition have since inserted other states.

²² Augustine, *Revisions* (ed. Roland Teske; trans. Boniface Ramsey; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/2; New York: New City Press, 2010), 1.9.2; trans. of *Retractationes*.

²³ For example, R.C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986), 65.

²⁴ Lorenzo Boccanera, 'Motori di ricerca (Search Engine)'. Online: <http://www.augustinus.it/ricerca/index.htm>

²⁵ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace' 49.57.

²⁶ Augustine, 'Rebuke and Grace' in *Answer to the Pelagians IV* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/26; New York: New City Press, 1999), 12.33; trans. of *De correptione et gratia*.

Peter Lombard

The idea that Augustine held that fallen humanity is *non posse non peccare*, was first introduced into the Augustinian tradition by Peter Lombard in the mid-1100s. In the second volume of *The Sentences*, Lombard wrote:

For the first freedom of choice was that in which there was the power to sin and not to sin; but the last will be that in which there be the power not to sin, and no power to sin; and the middle one is that in which there is the power to sin, and no power not to sin (*non potest non peccare*).²⁷

In the paragraph after this one, Lombard made a further distinction within ‘the middle one’ between a second state immediately after the fall in which we “cannot not sin (*non potest non peccare*)”,²⁸ and a third state in which we have received God’s grace in which we are “able to sin [and] able not to sin”.²⁹

This is the origin of the well-known four-fold state of humanity:

Pre-Fallen Man	Fallen Man	Reborn Man	Glorified Man
Able to sin	Able to sin	Able to sin	Able to not sin
Able to not sin	Unable to not sin	Able to not sin	Unable to sin

To support both of the above paragraphs in *The Sentences* (or chapters as Lombard calls them), Lombard cites the quote from Augustine’s *Rebuke and Grace* above: his footnote at the end of the first paragraph (chapter) reads “On this chapter and the next, see Augustine, *De correptione et gratia*, c12 n33”.³⁰ Although Augustine did not use the language of *non posse non peccare* to describe our post-fallen state, Lombard introduced this language citing Augustine to support it.

John Calvin

In the 1500s, John Calvin was a giant of the Reformation, who sought to defend the monergism of salvation by grace alone against the synergism of the contemporary Roman Catholic Church. In the

²⁷ Peter Lombard, *The Sentences* (trans. Giulio Silano; Mediaeval Sources in Translation; Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007-2010), 2.25.5 (157).

²⁸ Lombard, *Sentences*, 2.25.6 (158).

²⁹ Lombard, *Sentences*, 2.25.6 (158).

³⁰ Lombard, *Sentences*, 2.25.5 (157).

context of these Reformation debates, ‘free-will’ was not used in opposition to a ‘determined will’, but rather in opposition to an ‘enslaved will’.³¹ Thus, in Calvin’s *Institutes* he writes:

Man will then be spoken of as having this sort of free decision, not because he has free choice equally of good and evil, but because he acts wickedly by will, not by compulsion. Well put, indeed, but what purpose is served by labelling with a proud name such a slight thing? A noble freedom, indeed – for man not to be forced to serve sin, yet to be such a willing slave.³²

In this context, Calvin describes Augustine’s view of free-will as follows:

[Augustine] plainly confesses that “without the Spirit man’s will is not free, since it has been laid under by shackling and conquering desires.” Likewise, when the will was conquered by the vice into which it had fallen, human nature began to lose its freedom. Again, man, using free will badly, has lost both himself and his will. Again, the free will has been so enslaved that it can have no power for righteousness. Again, what God’s grace has not freed will not be free. Again, the justice of God is not fulfilled when the law so commands, and man acts as if by his own strength; but when the Spirit helps, and man’s will, not free, but freed by God, obeys. And he gives a brief account of all these matters when he writes elsewhere: man, when he was created, received great powers of free will, but lost them by sinning.³³

In the context of the Reformation debates that Calvin was engaged in, where ‘free-will’ was opposed to an ‘enslaved will’ rather than a ‘determined will’, Calvin accurately cites Augustine as opposing his Roman Catholic opponents. However, in the centuries since the Reformation, the debate on ‘free-will’ has shifted from whether the will of fallen man is enslaved to whether it is determined, and so Calvin’s reading of Augustine (and Calvin’s own view of free-will) is often taken out of context.³⁴ Like Augustine, Calvin did not argue that we *cannot* turn to God, but rather that our hearts are so corrupted by sin that we absolutely *will not* turn to God without his grace.³⁵

Francis Turretin

Francis Turretin was a Reformed theologian who wrote in the 1600s. In his major work of systematic theology, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Turretin expounded Lombard’s four-fold state of humanity, also anchoring it in Augustine’s *Rebuke and Grace* (translated *Admonition and Grace*):

³¹ Greg Forster, *The Joy of Calvinism: Knowing God’s Personal, Unconditional, Irresistible, Unbreakable Love* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 31.

³² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John McNeill; trans. Ford Battles; 2 vols; Library of Christian Classics 20-21; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 2.2.7.

³³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.8.

³⁴ Forster, *The Joy of Calvinism*, 31-32; 171.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.3.5.

The liberty of glory in blessedness is not to be able to sin (*non posse peccare*). The liberty of sinners in the state of sin is not to be able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*). The liberty of sinners in the state of believers, in grace, is to be able to sin, and not to sin (*posse peccare et non peccare*). But the liberty of Adam was to be able not to sin (*posse non peccare*). The first was an absolute incapability of sinning; the second an incapability of acting well; the third the power of sinning and of acting well. The fourth was the power of not sinning. Augustine explains this excellently: “We must diligently and attentively examine if these good things differ, to be able not to sin (*posse non peccare*), and not to be able to sin (*non posse peccare*), to be able not to die, and not to be able to die, to be able not to leave the good, and not to be able to leave the good. For the first man was able not to sin, not to die, not to leave the good” (*Admonition and Grace* 12* [33]). And afterwards: “Therefore the first liberty of will was to be able not to sin (*posse non peccare*), the last will be much greater, not to be able to sin (*non posse peccare*).³⁶

Despite quoting Augustine’s distinction between the two kinds of freedom before the fall and finally in heaven (*posse non peccare* and *non posse peccare*) twice, Turretin nevertheless grounds his (or perhaps Lombard’s) four-fold liberty in Augustine’s words in *Rebuke and Grace*, in order to support the description of our post-fallen state as *non posse non peccare*. Neither Lombard nor Turretin directly attribute the words *non posse non peccare* to Augustine, but both cite Augustine in support of it.

Louis Berkhof

While very few scholars attribute words to Augustine that cannot be cited, it was Luis Berkhof who appears to have most directly attributed the words *non posse non peccare* to Augustine. In *The History of Christian Doctrines*, in a section titled *Augustine’s view of sin*, Berkhof wrote:

Augustine does not regard sin as something positive, but as a negation or privation... Man was created immortal, which does not mean that he was impervious to death, but that he had the capacity of bodily immortality. Had he proved obedient, he would have been confirmed in holiness. From the state of the *posse non peccare et mori* (the ability to sin and die) he would have passed to the state of the *non posse peccare et mori* (the inability to sin and die). But he sinned, and consequently entered the state of the *non posse non peccare et mori* (the inability not to sin and die).³⁷

Berkhof does not cite any works of Augustine’s in support his summary of Augustine’s view of sin. However, at the end of the chapter (*The Pelagian and Augustinian Doctrines*), he lists a number of

³⁶ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison; trans. George Musgrave Giger; 3 vols; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.571 (8.1.9).

³⁷ Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1969), 134.

secondary sources, many of whom discuss Augustine's distinction between *posse non peccare* and *non posse peccare*, but none who appear to attribute the phrase *non posse non peccare* to Augustine.³⁸

Berkhof was likely influenced by Lombard and Turretin and others, but took a further step in attributing this phrase to Augustine directly.

Etienne Gilson

In 1961, the French philosopher Etienne Gilson published *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, which discussed among other things, Augustine's view of Christian Liberty. Gilson begins by describing how important the concept of free-will was for Augustine, especially as he repudiated the more fatalistic view of Manichees.³⁹ Gilson states that "Augustine's thought [on the will] has a history of its own. His ideas are not expressed in the same way before and after Pelagius".⁴⁰ And yet, Gilson also explains Augustine's earlier work *On Free Will* is compatible with his letters in answer to the Pelagians:

What becomes of the human will when made so directly dependent upon grace? The answer is contained in very few words: it retains its free choice, and it gains liberty... We must understand that grace, in acting upon the will, not only respects free choice but confers liberty upon it as well. Indeed, liberty (*libertas*) is merely the good use of free choice (*liberum arbitrium*). Now if the will always remains free – in the sense of free choice – it is not always good, and consequently not always free – in the sense of liberty.⁴¹

In Augustine's earlier work *On Free Will*, he defended free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) as part of our created nature. But in his later writings against the Pelagians, Augustine argued that we lost our true liberty (*libertas*) in the fall, and so we are all dependent on God's grace for salvation. To the extent that this distinction is recognised, Augustine's thought on the will is coherent, even if "his ideas are not expressed in the same way before and after Pelagius".⁴²

³⁸ Berkhof's sources are listed as follows: Wiggers, *Augustinianism and Pelagianism*; Cunningham, *St. Austin*; Moxon, *The Doctrine of Sin*, 47-140; Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 1.321-358; Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 5.61-261; Seeberg, *History of Doctrines*, 1.328-381; Loofs, *Dogmengeschiedenis*, 183-238; Thomasius, *Dogmengeschichte*, 1.437-557; Neander, *History of Christian Dogmas*, 1.345-356; Otten, *Manual of the History of Dogmas*, 357-386; Sheldon, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 1.222-243; Shedd, *History of Doctrine*, 2.26-110; Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 176-198; McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, 2.71-143.

³⁹ Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (trans. L.E.M. Lynch; London: Victor Gollancz, 1961), 143-148.

⁴⁰ Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 158.

⁴¹ Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 161-163.

⁴² Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 158.

Eugene TeSelle

Eugene TeSelle was a professor of church history and theology, who studied Augustine's thought in great depth. In his seminal book *Augustine the Theologian*, TeSelle also examined Augustine's approach to "the problem of grace and free will",⁴³ grounding the coherence of Augustine's thought, not merely in his philosophy (as Gilson did), but in his theology:

When it comes to the question why men sin, and why some men then turn to God, Augustine recognises, on the one hand, that it would be difficult to explain the fact of sin if God were the author of all men's acts, and, on the other, that it would be difficult to explain the fact of obedience if God merely created the will and from that point on everything were from man himself (*De pecc. Mer.*, II, 18, 28-30; *De spir. et litt.*, 33, 57-59). He puts both explanations together, then: the finite will is the source of sin, God is the source of the good act. The will itself is a *media vis* (*De spir. et litt.*, 33, 59), one of those "natural goods" which can be used either for good or for evil (*De pecc. mer.*, II, 18, 30; cf. *De lib. arb.*, II, 18, 47-20, 54).⁴⁴

TeSelle notes that, for Augustine, the will "can be used either for good or for evil", and yet, left to ourselves, "the finite will is the source of sin", but by God's grace, "God is the source of the good act". We retain free choice in that we *can* choose between good or evil, but ever since the fall, we are no longer truly free, since we *will* always choose to sin without God's grace. In TeSelle's words: "There is always free choice, says Augustine; but it is not always *good* choice".⁴⁵ In a later chapter, TeSelle observes that this distinction was key for Augustine's compatibilism:

In many passages [Augustine] is concerned to argue that God's foreknowledge does not compromise the reality of freedom (*De lib. arb.*, III, 3, 6-4; 10; *De civ. Dei*, V, 8-10) – certainly the freedom of the primitive state, in which fidelity or apostasy is decided by the choice of creatures themselves; but also the freedom that persists in the man bound by sin, for Augustine's view is not that free choice is eradicated in a famous dictum, and is inadequate for willing the good until it is liberated by divine aid (*C. duas ep. Pel.*, II, 5, 9; *De corr. et gr.*, 11, 31).⁴⁶

Augustine's solution to the problem of grace and free-will was that free choice is not eradicated by sin, but "inadequate for willing the good until it is liberated by divine aid".

⁴³ Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 284.

⁴⁴ TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, 285-286.

⁴⁵ TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, 292.

⁴⁶ TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, 314.

Katherin Rogers

For the reasons stated above, a number of theologians have argued that Augustine changed his mind on the freedom of the will.⁴⁷ In response to some of these arguments, Katherin Rogers has argued for continuity in Augustine's view of free-will, noting that:

In looking back from his later perspective, Augustine insists that the earlier work does not advance a view of the relationship of the divine to the created will which is fundamentally different from the one he later enunciated against the Pelagians.⁴⁸

Rogers argues for a consistency between Augustine's earlier work *On Free Will* and his later works against the Pelagians, observing that Augustine consistently held that our wills *can* turn towards the good and the bad, but nevertheless *are* drawn to particular choices by one's desires. In Roger's words:

Certainly in [*On Free Will*] Augustine insists that our choices must be voluntary, for otherwise we could not be praised or blamed. And the voluntary movement of the will clearly distinguished from motion which occurs by natural necessity like the falling of a stone (3.1.2). The will is likened to a hinge, in that it can turn towards the good and the bad (3.1.3). Nothing is so much in our own possession as our will, and we have only to will the good will in order to possess it (1.12.26). But there is nothing here inconsistent with compatibilism and so no evidence of libertarianism. On the contrary, the assumption seems to be that we choose what we are drawn to choose by our desires.⁴⁹

Rogers explains the compatibility of Augustine's earlier descriptions of the will as voluntary with his later descriptions of the will as determined, by stating that the will "*can* turn towards the good and the bad", and yet "we choose what we are drawn to choose by our desires".⁵⁰ However, this distinction is not maintained throughout her analysis of Augustine's Compatibilism. Rogers argues that it is not merely *certain* that one will choose what their will is drawn to, but *inevitable*, and therefore they *cannot* turn to the alternative.⁵¹ Consequently, Rogers concludes that Augustine's view "leaves no room for any 'primary' agency on the part of the rational creature, from which it seems to follow that God is indeed, 'the author of sin' [even though] Augustine says that he denies this".⁵²

⁴⁷ Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace*, 8-9; Babcock, 'Augustine on Sin and Moral Agency', 36-41; Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 97; Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought*, 14-15

⁴⁸ Katherin Rogers, 'Augustine's Compatibilism', *Religious Studies* 40.4 (2004): 423.

⁴⁹ Rogers, 'Augustine's Compatibilism', 423.

⁵⁰ Rogers, 'Augustine's Compatibilism', 423 (emphasis added)

⁵¹ Rogers, 'Augustine's Compatibilism', 418, 425-426.

⁵² Rogers, 'Augustine's Compatibilism', 433.

Carol Harrison

Carol Harrison has also argued for continuity in Augustine's thought, at least throughout his early work *On Free Will* up to his *Confessions* in A.D. 396 (but stopping short of examining his later work in answer to the Pelagians).⁵³ Harrison argues that:

The Pelagians looked back to Augustine's early works and found there a theologian they could only admire: one who upheld the freedom of the will... Why, they asked, was Augustine now accusing them of defending what he himself had argued so forcefully? In response, Augustine was forced to return to the early texts they cited and to argue... that he had never held that the will is free to know or to do the good without grace; that he had always taught, from the beginning, that it is subject to original sin, ignorance, and difficulty, and that any good action is wholly dependent upon God's grace.

Subsequent scholars, however, like the Pelagians of Augustine's own day, have been very reluctant to take Augustine at his word, but have tended to take precisely those texts which the Pelagians cited, in order to endorse their own identification of the early Augustine as, indeed, 'more Pelagian than Pelagius'.⁵⁴

Harrison makes the case that, just as the Pelagians pitted Augustine's early defence of free-will against his writings in answer to the Pelagians, so too, modern scholars of Augustine impose the same dichotomy between Augustine's early defence of free-will: that we *can* choose between good and evil, and his later arguments against the Pelagians that we *will not* choose the good without God's grace. When what we *cannot* do is conflated with what we *will not* do, then the contradiction emerges. However, to the extent that these categories are kept distinct, the argument for continuity in Augustine's thought becomes more robust, and, as we shall see below, can even be extended beyond Harrison's work to include Augustine's writings against the Pelagians.

Gerald Bonner

In *Freedom and Necessity: Augustine's Teaching on Divine Power and Human Freedom*, Gerald Bonner frames Augustine's view of freedom as follows:

Freedom may be understood as the absence of constraint, the capacity to follow one's own desires and inclinations without hinderance... [But] for Augustine, to turn away from God to

⁵³ Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵⁴ Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology*, 199.

pursue one's own ends is not freedom but self-diminution, which can only be remedied by returning to God.⁵⁵

Here, Bonner implicitly identifies the distinction in Augustine's mind between the freedom *from* constraint, and freedom *for* the relationship with God for which we were made. It is not that we *cannot* turn to God because of some physical constraint, but that we *will not* turn to God because our hearts are inclined to sin, and what the heart desires, the will chooses. This distinction enabled Augustine to defend his grounding of human responsibility in free-will, whilst attacking the Pelagian view of the will unaffected by the fall:

A puppet cannot be held responsible for its actions, nor can a man who, by reason of mental incapacity, has no control over his will. To be fully human, one needs to possess a will and be able to command it... Such an approach, based on common experience, was that of Pelagius and his supporters. Pelagius, in his analysis of what constituted a good action, identified three elements: possibility, volition, and action. We must be able to do it; we must will to do it; and we must then do it... The essential element here, which distinguishes Pelagian from Augustinian psychology, lies in the will. For Augustine, to will requires the gift of grace for every individual.⁵⁶

The difference between the views of Augustine and the Pelagians was not on whether we are *able* to do good, but on whether we have *the will* to do good without God's grace.

Bonner also makes an argument for the continuity of Augustine's thought on the will, citing Augustine's reflection on God handing over sinners to their sin in *On Free Will*, to deduce that "Augustine's understanding of the nature of the Fall was the same in 394/5, long before the Pelagian Controversy had broken out, as it was in 418".⁵⁷ Here, Bonner extends Harrison's argument for the continuity of Augustine's thought right through to the Pelagian controversy.

Jesse Couenhoven

In 'Augustine's Rejection of the Free-Will Defence: An Overview of the Late Augustine's Theodicy', Jesse Couenhoven argues for a discontinuity in Augustine's view of free-will, stating that:

⁵⁵ Gerald Bonner, *Freedom and Necessity: Augustine's Teaching on Divine Power and Human Freedom* (Washington D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 49-53.

⁵⁶ Bonner, *Freedom and Necessity*, 66-67.

⁵⁷ Bonner, *Freedom and Necessity*, 77.

It is well-known, however, that Augustine came to reject [his earlier] view. He came to believe, instead, that a person unable to choose his or her loves with regard to the everyday good or evil, let alone to love the absolute Good, would not be able to choose to seek God for help, either.⁵⁸

To explain this shift in Augustine's thought, Couenhoven posits a developing 'psychology of delight' in the mind of Augustine:

Augustine came to believe that it is really our *delights* that drive us, our choices simply following as a ratification of our deepest desires. Thus, Augustine came to speak of choice as *consent*, and while consent is to be distinguished from delight, the former depends on the latter.⁵⁹

This is indeed a significant part of Augustine's view of the will, as it is developed in his works against the Pelagians. However, for Couenhoven, this not only explains *why* people make the choices that they make, but is part of Augustine's "structure of human willing".⁶⁰

Couenhoven acknowledges that "Augustine claims that God made Adam and Eve *posse non peccare* – sinless, with the possibility of not sinning".⁶¹ However, for Couenhoven, this does not mean that Adam and Eve had the *power* to choose between opposites. Couenhoven argues that, for Augustine:

The fact that God made human being with good wills indicates that *liberum arbitrium* [free-will], even before the Fall, was not a power for opposites, but a power for consenting to the good in which God created human beings to delight (partly for this reason, Augustine rejects what some call the principle of alternate possibilities).⁶²

Describing the *will* to consent to the good as "a power for consenting to the good" is break from how Augustine understood the two. For Augustine "there are two things: willing (*velle*) and being able (*posse*).... Hence, as one who wills has the will, so one who is able has the power".⁶³ But for Couenhoven, not having the *will* to choose the good, means that one does not having the *power* to choose the good either.

⁵⁸ Jesse Couenhoven, 'Augustine's Rejection of the Free-Will Defence: An Overview of the Late Augustine's Theodicy', *Religious Studies* 43.3 (2007): 280.

⁵⁹ Couenhoven, 'Augustine's Rejection of the Free-Will Defence', 284 (emphasis original).

⁶⁰ Couenhoven, 'Augustine's Rejection of the Free-Will Defence', 284.

⁶¹ Couenhoven, 'Augustine's Rejection of the Free-Will Defence', 281.

⁶² Couenhoven, 'Augustine's Rejection of the Free-Will Defence', 285.

⁶³ Augustine, 'The Spirit and the Letter' in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century I/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 31.53; trans. of *De spiritu et littera*.

Lenka Karfíková

In *Grace and the Will According to Augustine*, Lenka Karfíková sets out Augustine's distinction between our *power* of contrary choice, and the universal *will* to choose to sin:

[For Augustine], faith is thus “in our power” (*in potestate*), although it is also given to us by God because it is he who bestows the “power” (*posse, potestas*)... What does arise from us is our will (*velle, voluntas*) to use that power, as without it every power remains a mere possibility (*potestas*). Only when the roles are divided in this way is it possible to ascribe the freedom of the will to men without being ungrateful for mercy.⁶⁴

This is precisely the distinction which, it will be argued, remained constant in Augustine's mind, and to the degree that it is maintained, demonstrates that coherence of Augustine's thought on the will.

However, this distinction is often conflated, including in Karfíková's own work:

Yet it is not in the power of the weakened nature or the will, which arises from it, to recover. Men cannot be healed through the same capacity (*potestas*) as that which ruined their health but need a physician instead.⁶⁵

Again, Karfíková writes:

According to Augustine, God does not only give the capacity for a good deed, but also works in men “both to will and to do” (Phil. 2:13). Human nature as created is not a permanent capacity for both the good and evil will and the resulting deeds, but is determined by cupidity (*cupiditas*) or love (*caritas*) and is thus divided into two entirely different roots.⁶⁶

Immediately after citing Augustine's distinction between our capacity, our will, and our actions; Karfíková argues that, according to Augustine, “Human nature as created is not a permanent *capacity* for both the good and evil will and the resulting deeds”.⁶⁷ Curiously, to defend this point, Karfíková quotes the following section from Augustine's *The Grace of Christ and Original Sin*:

In fact, love (*caritas*), the root of good actions, is one thing, and covetousness (*cupiditas*), the root of bad actions, is something else. They are as different as virtue and vice. *But that ability is clearly able to become each of these roots*, because human beings not only can have love by which they are good trees, but also can have covetousness by which they are bad trees.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Lenka Karfíková, *Grace and the Will according to Augustine* (trans. Markéta Janebová; Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*; Boston: Brill, 2012), 185.

⁶⁵ Karfíková, *Grace and the Will according to Augustine*, 189.

⁶⁶ Karfíková, *Grace and the Will according to Augustine*, 201.

⁶⁷ Karfíková, *Grace and the Will according to Augustine*, 201 (emphasis added).

⁶⁸ Karfíková, *Grace and the Will according to Augustine*, 201; quoting Augustine, *The Grace of Christ and Original Sin*, 1.20.21 (emphasis added).

Conflating our capacity with our will (despite citing Augustine's distinction between them), Karfíková moves from Augustine's insistence that our "ability (*capax*) is clearly able to become each of these roots",⁶⁹ to the view that "Human nature as created is not a permanent *capacity* for both the good and evil will and the resulting deeds".⁷⁰ While Augustine argues that we have the capacity for the good but not the will for the good, Karfíková reads Augustine's denial of our will for the good as a denial of our capacity for the good as well.

Eric Jenkins

In *Free to Say No? Free Will and Augustine's Evolving Doctrines of Grace and Election*, Eric Jenkins sets out the contours of the debate on whether or not Augustine was consistent in his view of free-will:

There are at least three different approaches to evaluating Augustine's theories of free will. The first approach seeks continuity by interpreting his later predestinarian teaching in light of his early teachings on the freedom of the will... The second approach seeks continuity by attempting to harmonize Augustine's early and later works with each other... the third approach... suggest Augustine's later doctrines of grace and election call into question his early theory of free will.⁷¹

There is agreement that Augustine's early writings emphasise free will, and that his later writings emphasise our need for God's grace. However, there is much debate on whether these two are consistent (Jenkins argues that they are not).

Jenkins argues for a significant turning point in Augustine's thought in his letter *To Simplician, on Various Questions*:

[Augustine] writes, "I do not know how it could be said that it is vain for God to have mercy unless we willingly consent. If God has mercy, we also will, for the *power* to will is given with the mercy." This is a dramatic departure from his early position insisting the will must be in the power of the will.⁷²

⁶⁹ Augustine, 'The Grace of Christ and Original Sin' in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 1.20.21; trans. of *De gratia Christi et de peccato originali*.

⁷⁰ Karfíková, *Grace and the Will according to Augustine*, 201 (emphasis added).

⁷¹ Jenkins, *Free to Say No?*, xi.

⁷² Jenkins, *Free to Say No?*, 38 (emphasis added); quoting Augustine, 'To Simplician – on Various Questions' in *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (trans. John Burleigh; The Library of Christian Classics 6; London: SCM Press, 1953), 1.2.12; trans. of *Ad Simplicianum de diversis quaestionibus*.

This is supported by Augustine’s comment in his *Revisions* of this work, where he stated that in his examination of the basis of salvation in Romans 9, “I strove on behalf of the free choice of the human will, but God’s grace conquered”.⁷³ For this argument, Jenkins uses Burleigh’s translation: “the *power* to will is given with the mercy”.⁷⁴ However, Augustine does not use the word ‘power’ (*posse*) or even ‘given’, but rather ‘pertains to’ (*pertinent*), as Ramsey’s more recent translation demonstrates:

I do not know how it may be said, on the other hand, that God is merciful to no avail unless we will. For if God is merciful, we also will. It pertains to (*pertinent*) the same mercy, in fact, that we will.⁷⁵

According to Augustine, God’s mercy ‘extends to, directs, or pertains to’⁷⁶ our will, but that does not render our will powerless without it. Indeed, Augustine insists on the distinction that “there are two things: willing and being able”.⁷⁷

Regarding Augustine’s comment in his *Revisions*: I strove on behalf of the free choice of the human will, but God’s grace conquered”,⁷⁸ if Augustine was speaking of *the truth* the two propositions, then this would be a strong argument. However, in context, Augustine was arguing that the elect in Romans 9 *are saved by God’s grace alone*, for God’s grace conquers our free choice to sin:

Unless the Lord of hosts had left us offspring, we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been like Gomorrah (Rom 9:29). In answering this question I in fact strove on behalf of the free choice of the human will, but God’s grace conquered, and otherwise I would have been unable to arrive at understanding what the Apostle said with the most evident truthfulness, *For who sets you apart? What do you possess that you have not received? But, if you have received, why do you boast as though you had not received?* (1 Cor 4:7).⁷⁹

⁷³ Augustine, *Revisions*, 2.1.

⁷⁴ Augustine, ‘To Simplician – on Various Questions’ (trans. John Burleigh), 1.2.12 (emphasis added).

⁷⁵ Augustine, ‘To Simplician’ in *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions* (ed. Raymond Canning; trans. Boniface Ramsey; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/12; New York: New City Press, 1997), 1.2.12; trans. of *Ad Simplicianum de diversis quaestionibus*.

⁷⁶ P.G.W. Glare, ‘pertineō’, *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (2 vols; 2nd ed; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.1497-1498.

⁷⁷ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 31.53.

⁷⁸ Augustine, *Revisions*, 2.1.

⁷⁹ Augustine, *Revisions*, 2.1.

Ultimately, the reason why the opposition for grace and free choice in the mind of Augustine is unconvincing is because Augustine himself protests against it. To Julian, he wrote:

You claim that I said in another book of mine that “free choice is denied, if grace is defended and, on the other hand, grace is denied, if free choice is defended.” You lie; I did not say that... I said “This question, in which the dispute concerns the choice of the will and the grace of God, is so difficult to sort out that, when one defends free choice, one *seems* to deny God’s grace, and when one upholds God’s grace, one *is thought* to destroy free choice” and so on. But you, an honest and truthful man, suppressed the words I said and replaced them with what you made up. After all, I said that this question is difficult to sort out, but I did not say that it could not be sorted out. Far less, then, would I say what you say I said with your lies, namely, that “free choice is denied, if grace is defended, and grace is denied, if free choice is defended.” Restore my words, and your slander will vanish. Put the words back in their places where I said, “seems” and where I said “is thought,” so that the deceitfulness of your argument on so important a topic will be obvious. I did not say, “One denies grace,” but “One *seems* to deny grace.” I did not say, “One denies or destroys free choice,” but “One *is thought* to destroy it”.⁸⁰

In the minds of many, the doctrines of grace and free choice are in direct opposition. But evidently, they are compatible in the mind of Augustine.

Eleonore Stump

Augustine wrote two books of his final *Revisions*, but at no point did he ever retract his view of free-will. This raises the question: if Augustine did not change his mind, what exactly was Augustine’s view of free-will, and how it relates to moral responsibility? This is heavily debated. On one hand, some argue that “Augustine declares that freedom is a necessary condition for the ascription of moral responsibility”.⁸¹ On the other hand, Eleonore Stump, in her influential article, *Augustine on free will*, argues that:

As Augustine reminds his readers in the *Retractationes* (*retr.* 1.9), he claims in *De libero arbitrio* that anything good in a human person, including any goodness in the will, is a gift from God (*lib. arb.* 2.19.50). On his view in the *De libero arbitrio*, then, human beings are unable to form a good volition unless God produces it in them or cooperates in producing it. Nonetheless, when human beings will to sin, according to Augustine they are culpable. It

⁸⁰ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’ in *Answer to the Pelagians II* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/24; New York: New City Press, 1998), 4.8.47-48 (emphasis added); trans. of *Contra Julianum*.

⁸¹ Robert King, ‘Introduction’, in Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings* (ed. Peter King; trans. Peter King; Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xix.

apparently follows that a person can be morally responsible for a sinful act of will even when it was not possible for her not to will to sin.⁸²

Stump is entirely correct in stating that, according to Augustine, “anything good in a human person, including any goodness in the will, *is* a gift from God”.⁸³ However, from this premise, Stump then concludes that, according to Augustine, “human beings are *unable* to form a good volition unless God produces it in them or cooperates in producing it”,⁸⁴ conflating what we *will not* do with what we *cannot* do. Stump’s conclusion that “human beings are unable to form a good volition unless God produces it in them” is supported by a footnote that reads: “Augustine makes this point explicitly and at length in *De libero arbitrio* 3.18.51”.⁸⁵ However, in the paragraph immediately prior to this, Augustine writes:

Whatever this cause of the will is, if one cannot resist it, one yields to it without sin. But if one can resist it, let one not yield to it, and one will not sin. Does it perhaps deceive those who are not careful? Let them be careful then so that they are not deceived. Or is the deception so great that it cannot be avoided at all? Then there are no sins. For who sins in a matter that can in no way be avoided? But sin is committed; hence, it can be avoided.⁸⁶

These are the very words that Augustine later defended both during the Pelagian controversy, and in his final *Revisions*⁸⁷: “who sins in a matter that can in no way be avoided? But sin is committed; hence, it can be avoided”.⁸⁸ Stump is at best reading Augustine out of context, and at worst attributing a position to him that he himself would have rejected. The source of this error (which is by no means unique to Stump), is the conflation of what one *will* do with what one *can* do. Indeed, Stump translates Augustine’s words: “without [the grace of God, human beings] do (*faciunt*, present indicative) nothing good whether in thinking, in willing and loving, or in action”,⁸⁹ as “without grace men *can* do no good, in thought, will and love, or action”,⁹⁰ despite Augustine’s use of the present

⁸² Stump, ‘Augustine on free will’, 167.

⁸³ Stump, ‘Augustine on free will’, 167 (emphasis added).

⁸⁴ Stump, ‘Augustine on free will’, 167 (emphasis added).

⁸⁵ Stump, ‘Augustine on free will’, 167, 183.

⁸⁶ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’ in *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (trans. John Burleigh; The Library of Christian Classics 6; London: SCM, 1953), 3.18.50; trans. of *De libero arbitrio*; quoted in ‘Nature and Grace’, 67.80.

⁸⁷ Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 67.80; Augustine, *Revisions*, 1.9.3,5.

⁸⁸ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’ 3.18.50; Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 67.80; Augustine, *Revisions*, 1.9.3,5.

⁸⁹ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 2.3.

⁹⁰ Stump, ‘Augustine on free will’, 175 (emphasis added).

indicative (as opposed to the subjunctive) form of *facio* (lit. ‘do, produce, make’⁹¹), and the absence of *posse* (lit. ‘can, is able to, has the ability to’⁹²). Ultimately, this has led Stump to argue that, according to Augustine, “a person can be morally responsible for a sinful act of will even when it was not possible for her not to will to sin”,⁹³ when in actual fact, Augustine elsewhere stated that “it is the height of injustice and insanity to hold someone guilty of sin because he did not do what he could not do”.⁹⁴

Methodology

In the 850 years since Lombard argued that Augustine’s view of fallen man was *non posse non peccare*, or was at least consistent with that description, no one seems to have challenged it. However, this thesis will argue that this is not how Augustine understood fallen man at all, but rather that Augustine repeatedly affirmed that it is possible for one to be without sin in this life (because we sin by choice).⁹⁵ But he also insisted that no one apart from Christ was, is, or will be without sin in this life (because we sin by nature).⁹⁶ Augustine and Pelagius agreed that we sin by choice, but Augustine insisted that we sin by nature as well, a point that Augustine was adamant that Pelagius was overlooking. Despite being able to prove that Augustine never used the phrase *non posse non peccare* except when quoting Pelagius, in order to demonstrate that this *idea* is not Augustinian, we must make a thorough examination of Augustine’s view of free-will. If the idea that we are *non posse non peccare* can be found in Augustine’s writings, especially in his writings against the Pelagians, then the view of free-will advocated above could rightly be called Pelagian. However, if Augustine maintained that we *can* choose the good despite that fact that no one does, then the view of free-will advocated above is demonstrably Augustinian.

⁹¹ Glare, ‘faciō’, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1.732-735.

⁹² Glare, ‘possum’, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2.1552-1553.

⁹³ Stump, ‘Augustine on free will’, 167.

⁹⁴ Augustine, ‘The Two Souls’ in *The Manichean Debate* (ed. Boniface Ramsey; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/19; New York: New City Press, 2006), 12.17; trans. of *De duabus animabus*.

⁹⁵ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins, and the Baptism of Little Ones’ in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century I/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 2.6.7 trans. of *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum*; Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 1.1; Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 67.80.

⁹⁶ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.7.8; Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 2.3; Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 67.81.

Therefore, this thesis proposes the following:

1. That Augustine's view of free-will remained consistent before during and after the Pelagian controversies.
2. That the distinction between our power (*posse*) and our will (*velle*) is key for understanding the coherence of Augustine's view of free-will.
3. That Augustine would not have agreed that fallen man is unable to avoid sin (*non posse non peccare*), but is unwilling to avoid sin (*non velle non peccare*) without God's grace.

Given that Augustine defended free-will against the Manichees, and defended God's grace against the Pelagians, a thesis arguing for Augustine's continued affirmation of free-will needs to be tested primarily against Augustine's writings in answer to the Pelagians. If Augustine ever repudiated his earlier view of free-will, then it would likely be in his defence of God's grace against the Pelagians, whom, in Augustine's view, over-emphasised free-will. For this reason, after a brief examination of Augustine's early work *On Free Will*, the majority of this thesis will examine Augustine's writings in answer to the Pelagians. In order to argue for the consistency of Augustine's view of free-will (and against the view that Augustine changed his mind on free-will), Augustine's writings will be engaged with in chronological order, so that the development of Augustine's thought on free-will may be traced, and the argument that Augustine changed his mind may be tested.

Modern translations of Augustine have been used throughout, primarily the New City Press' *Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, and long quotations are often given to preserve the context, and often irreducible complexity, of Augustine's arguments, to make it harder for me to appropriate Augustine for my own purposes. Over time, there have been developments in our understanding of Latin, as well as improvements to translations of Augustine, as various scholars have challenged older translations. For this reason, the most up-to-date scholarly translation of Augustine is used: the New City Press' Translation for the 21st Century, except for *On Free Will* which was yet to be translated in this series at the time of writing. Where it is relevant, the original Latin text of Augustine is examined to gain clarity on Augustine's thought.

This work builds upon the scholarly conclusions of Harrison and Bonner, that Augustine was in fact consistent in his thought on the will; and also upon the scholarly work of Gilson and TeSelle, which distinguishes between Augustine's conception of free-will (*liberum arbitrium*) and liberty (*libertas*). In TeSelle's words: "There is always free choice, says Augustine; but it is not always *good* choice".⁹⁷ In Gilson's words: "liberty (*libertas*) is merely the good use of free choice (*liberum arbitrium*)".⁹⁸ This work will challenge the work of Jenkins and others that Augustine changed his mind on the subject of the will, the conflation in the work of Karfíková and Stump between our ability (*posse*) and our will (*velle*), and the notion put forward by Lombard, Turretin and Berkhof, that Augustine advocated that fallen man is unable to avoid sin (*non posse non peccare*).

A close reading of *On Free Will*, and especially of Augustine's letter in answer to the Pelagians, suggests Augustine's distinction between what we are able (*posse*) to do, and what we will (*velle*) to do, was critical to his approach to untying the Gordian knot of compatibilism. Without the *ability* to choose between two or more courses of action, moral responsibility is at best a mystery, and at worst an impossibility. However, without the *certainty* that we will make particular choices in line with God's sovereign will, God's sovereignty over human history is untenable. Therefore, the distinction between our *ability* to choose between two or more course of action, and our *will* to choose one course of action in particular, is paramount. While we are *able* to choose between alternate possibilities, only one future *will* happen, and that future is known and determined by God. While Augustine used the distinction between our ability (*posse*) and our will (*velle*) to coherently argue for monergism against the Pelagians *and* for the power of contrary choice against the Manichees, the two are frequently conflated in discussions on God's sovereignty and human freedom, and imposed onto Augustine to argue that he changed his mind, despite his insistence in his *Retractions* that he did not.

⁹⁷ TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, 292.

⁹⁸ Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 163.

Chapter 1 – Augustine *On Free Will*

Augustine’s Basis for Affirming Free-will (*On Free Will*, Book 1)

Augustine’s writings on free-will began with *On Free-Will (De libero arbitrio)*, written between 388 and 395 A.D., as a theodicy to establish the origin of evil in free-will, in contrast to the Manichean eternal dualism between good and evil.¹ While Augustine’s previous view of Manichaeism has a straight forward answer to the problem of evil (that good and evil have always existed in tension), the problem of evil presents a much more formidable challenge those who hold to the Christian view of a good and sovereign God. *On Free Will* is written in three books, in the form of a conversation between Augustine and Evodius. Evodius moved from Milan to Carthage with Augustine, in order to form a Christian community there.² However, Augustine’s mother Monica died on the journey in 387, the year before Augustine began his three volume work *On Free Will*. When his mother died, Augustine was comforted by Evodius, and their discussion, and Augustine’s record of it in his work *On Free Will*, was likely in response, at least in part, to the felt problem of evil and suffering upon the death of Augustine’s mother. While book 3 of this work is most germane to Augustine’s view of free-will, a brief overview of books 1 and 2 provides a helpful context of his thought on the subject.

In book 1, Augustine begins by discussing the nature of evil and moral responsibility, arguing that:

Every evil man is the author of his evil deeds. If you wonder how that is, consider what we have just said: evil deeds are punished by the justice of God. They would not be justly punished unless they were done voluntarily (*fierent voluntate*).³

After examining human motives, Augustine argues that all people sin by choice, but then wrestles with the apparent injustice of our natural predisposition to sin, since we sin by nature *and* by choice.⁴ Augustine concludes (agreeing with his conversation partner Evodius) that “it is indeed a terrible penalty and an altogether just one, if anybody placed on the height of wisdom should choose to

¹ John Burleigh, ‘*On Free Will* Introduction’, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (The Library of Christian Classics 6; London: SCM Press, 1953), 106.

² Augustine, *The Confessions* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Maria Boulding; second ed.; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/1; New York: New City Press, 2013), 9.8.17; trans. of *Confessiones*.

³ Augustine, ‘*On Free Will*’ in *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (trans. John Burleigh; The Library of Christian Classics 6; London: SCM, 1953), 1.1.1; trans. of *De libero arbitrio*.

⁴ Augustine, ‘*On Free Will*’, 1.1.2 – 1.10.20; 1.11.21; 1.11.22.

descend and become a servant to lust”.⁵ That is, we sin by nature and by choice, but even our nature (or disposition) is the result of our free choice. In Augustine’s words, we “*choose* to descend and become a servant to lust”.⁶ For Augustine (and Evodius), this then leads to the question of “whether our Maker ought to have given us free will seeing it is proved to be the source of our capacity to sin”,⁷ the subject of book 2.

Augustine’s Free-will Defence Against the Problem of Evil (*On Free Will*, Book 2)

In book 2 *On Free Will*, Augustine develops his free-will defence against the problem of evil:

If man is good, and if he would not be able to act rightly except by willing to do so, he ought to have free will because without it he would not be able to act rightly. Because he also sins through free will, we are not to believe that God gave it to him for that purpose. It is, therefore, a sufficient reason why he ought to have been given it, that without it man could not live aright.⁸

Augustine’s conversation partner pushes back, arguing that this would mean that the result of free-will does not match God’s purpose for it: “no one ought to be able to sin voluntarily if free will was given that we might live aright”,⁹ and Augustine responds by pointing to the goodness of God’s character: “If it is certain that [God] has given [free-will], we ought to confess that, however it was given, it was rightly given”.¹⁰ Since this assumes God’s goodness, which is one of the premises brought into question by the problem of evil, Augustine goes back to first principles to establish that God exists,¹¹ and that all good things are from him,¹² before returning to the question of whether free-will is a good thing.¹³ Augustine argues that, while all good gifts can be used for good and for evil,¹⁴ free-will is especially good because we cannot live aright without it.¹⁵ For Augustine, the ability to live aright is so good that free-will is worth it, even though it is through free-will that we sin: “We cannot doubt that that movement of the will, that turning away from the Lord God, is sin; but surely we cannot say

⁵ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 1.11.23.

⁶ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 1.11.23 (emphasis added).

⁷ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 1.16.35.

⁸ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 2.1.3.

⁹ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 2.2.4.

¹⁰ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 2.2.4.

¹¹ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 2.3.7 – 2.15.39.

¹² Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 2.15.40 – 2.17.46.

¹³ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 2.18.47 – 2.20.54.

¹⁴ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 2.18.48.

¹⁵ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 2.18.48,49; 2.20.54.

that God is the author of sin?”¹⁶ Having rejected the dualism of the Manicheans, Augustine depends entirely on free-will for defending God’s goodness against the problem of evil. Free-will is therefore not only important for Augustine’s anthropology, but essential for Augustine’s theology.¹⁷

Augustine’s Definition of Free-will (*On Free Will*, Book 3)

In book 3 *On Free Will*, Augustine grounds moral responsibility in free-will, specifically, in our power of contrary choice: “If that movement of the will exists by nature or necessity, it is in no way culpable”.¹⁸ Augustine illustrates this in a comparison between the movement of the will and the movement of a stone:

The stone’s motion is natural, the soul’s voluntary. Hence anyone who says that a stone sins when it is carried downwards by its own weight is... completely mad. But we charge the soul with sin when we show that it has abandoned the higher things and prefers to enjoy lower things... We acknowledge that it is a movement of the soul, that it is voluntary and therefore culpable.¹⁹

Augustine’s conversation partner Evodius pushes back, arguing that God’s foreknowledge makes this understanding of free-will (power of contrary choice) impossible: “Since God foreknew that man would sin, that which God foreknew must necessarily come to pass. How then is the will free when there is apparently this unavoidable necessity?”²⁰ Augustine replies by examining Evodius’ premise, that if something *will not* happen then it *cannot* happen, and exposes its conflation of God’s perspective of the future with ours:

Aug. – You think, therefore, that all things of which God has foreknowledge happen by necessity and not voluntarily.

Ev. – Yes. Absolutely.

Aug. – Try an experiment, and examine yourself a little, and tell me what kind of will you are going to have tomorrow. Will you want to sin or to do right?

Ev. – I do not know.

Aug. – Do you think God also does not know?

Ev. – I could in no wise think that.

¹⁶ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 2.20.54.

¹⁷ Roland Teske, ‘*Libero arbitrio, De (On Free Will)*’ in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (ed. Allan Fitzgerald; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 494.

¹⁸ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 3.1.1.

¹⁹ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 3.1.2.

²⁰ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 3.2.4.

Aug. – If God knows what you are going to will tomorrow, and foresees what all men are going to do in the future, not only those who are at present alive but all who will ever be, much more will he foresee what he is going to do with the just and impious?²¹

For Augustine, moral responsibility depends on the fact that we *can* do otherwise, even though God knows precisely what we *will* do: “if ever in the future you have a culpable will, it will be none the less your will because God has foreknowledge of it”.²²

Augustine refuses to let his conversation partner leap from the premise of God’s foreknowledge of what we *will* choose, to the conclusion that we *cannot* choose otherwise:

Observe, pray, how blind are those who say that if God has foreknowledge of what I am going to will, since nothing can happen otherwise than as he has foreknown it, therefore I must necessarily will what he has foreknown. If so, it must be admitted that I will, not voluntarily but from necessity. Strange folly! Is there, then, no difference between things that happen according to God’s foreknowledge where there is no intervention of man’s will at all, and things that happen because of a will of which he has foreknowledge?²³

Augustine consistently upholds God’s foreknowledge of what we *will* choose, but rejects that one “must necessarily will what he has foreknown”.²⁴ Here we see in the background of Augustine’s thought the distinction between what we *can* do, and what we *will/will not* do. God’s knowledge of what someone *will* choose voluntarily does not entail a necessity where they *cannot* choose otherwise:

I omit the equally monstrous assertion of the man I mentioned a moment ago, who says I must necessarily so will. By assuming necessity he strives to do away with will altogether. If I must necessarily will, why need I speak of willing at all?²⁵

Augustine’s conversation partner continues to press Augustine on “how God’s foreknowledge of our sins and our freedom of will in sinning can be other than mutually contradictory”,²⁶ and Augustine continues to reply with expressions of the distinction between what one *cannot* do, and what one *will not* do:

If you knew in advance that such and such a man would sin, there would be no necessity for him to sin... you would not directly compel the man to sin, though you know beforehand that he was going to sin... Simply you know beforehand what another is going to do with his own

²¹ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 3.3.6.

²² Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 3.3.7.

²³ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 3.3.8.

²⁴ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 3.3.8.

²⁵ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 3.3.8.

²⁶ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 3.4.9.

will. Similarly God compels no man to sin, though he sees beforehand those who are going to sin by their own will.²⁷

Despite Augustine's explicit rejection of God's foreknowledge implying necessity, later readers of Augustine have conflated the two in their reading of this specific work with statements such as: "whatever God foreknows must necessarily happen",²⁸ and "if God foreknows that a man is going to sin, it is necessary that the man sin".²⁹ If one assumes that God's knowledge of the future is like ours, then this is a very easy move to make: the way we make future events certain (and therefore knowable), is by making them necessary (that is, by eliminating alternate possibilities). But if God's knowledge of the future is different to ours in that he alone has a unique perspective of the one future that will happen, then God does not need to eliminate what are alternate possibilities for us, in order to have certain foreknowledge of the future, regardless of whether God moves us by his Spirit or gives us over to our sin. In response to the confluences made by Rowe and Hopkins above, Craig recognises that Augustine denies that the premise that God's foreknowledge implies necessity,³⁰ and follows Augustine's reasoning that, for foreknown events, "it is certain that the event will occur, since it is foreknown, but its contingency is in no way removed by my knowing what is going to happen".³¹

To explain the compatibility of God's foreknowledge (required for God's sovereignty), and free-will (required for human responsibility), Augustine compares our perspective of the past, with God's perspective of the future:

Just as you apply no compulsion to past events by having them in your memory, so God by his foreknowledge does not use compulsion in the case of future events. Just as you remember your past actions, though all that you remember were not actions of your own, so God has foreknowledge of all his own actions, but is not the agent of all that he foreknows.³²

²⁷ Augustine, 'On Free Will', 3.4.10.

²⁸ William Rowe, 'Augustine on Foreknowledge and Free Will', *The Review of Metaphysics* 18/2 (1964): 356.

²⁹ Jasper Hopkins, 'Augustine on Foreknowledge and Free Will', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8/2 (1977): 115.

³⁰ William Lane Craig, 'Augustine on Foreknowledge and Free Will', *Augustinian Studies* 15 (1984): 53.

³¹ Craig, 'Augustine on Foreknowledge and Free Will', 56.

³² Augustine, 'On Free Will', 3.4.11.

There is a sense here in which God's knowledge of the future is like our knowledge of the past: just as our knowledge of past free choices do not make them any less free or negate the power of contrary choice when the choice was made, so too God's foreknowledge of future free choices do not make them any less free or negate the power of contrary choice at the time the choice will be made. God's unique perspective of the whole of human history enables him to know what we will freely choose as history unfolds, just as our perspective of history – from our point in the timeline of history – enables us to know what was freely chosen in the past. Our creaturely perspective of the future is limited to what *might* happen, but God the Creator knows what *will* happen, both when he moves us by his Spirit, and when he gives us over to our sin. God knows what we *will* choose, but he alone has that perspective; the certainty that we *will not* choose otherwise does not mean that we *cannot* choose otherwise, only that we certainly *will not* choose otherwise. This distinction between God's perspective and ours was crucial for Augustine's defence of God's goodness in the face of the problem of evil.³³ Augustine's early work *On Free Will* is difficult to reconcile with the proposition that fallen humanity is *non posse non peccare*. At least at this point in Augustine's thought, the concept of free-will was one that Augustine sought to defend, in order to prevent God from being accused of authoring evil. For Augustine, the reason that there is evil and suffering in the world, is because we freely choose to do evil, and God justly gives us over to our sin.

³³ Augustine, 'On Free Will', 3.9.25-26.

Chapter 2 – The First Pelagian Controversy

We Sin by Nature and by Choice (*The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sin*)

For at least fifteen years after Augustine's work *On Free Will*, Augustine was concerned with other subjects and works, including his *Confessions* and *The Trinity*. However, in 411 A.D., the Pelagian controversy broke out, and Augustine turned his attention to writing against the Pelagians in defence of the grace of God.¹ When Rome fell to the Goths in 410, Pelagius and a number of his supporters moved to North Africa. When Caelestius, one of Pelagius' associates, claimed that Adam's sin did not affect his offspring, and that infants are born into the state of innocence that Adam was in before the fall, he was denounced as a heretic by Paulinus, a deacon of Milan, and his application to be ordained as a priest was refused.² When these ideas were put before Augustine, he set about refuting them in his writings. The first of Augustine's works in answer to the Pelagians was *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sin* (*De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum*), a work written over three books, the first two written in response to Rufinus the Syrian³ the forerunner of Pelagianism,⁴ and the third written in response to Pelagius himself.⁵ While the first book was primarily concerned with the impact of Adam's sin on his mortality and descendants,⁶ it is in the second book that is relevant to our examination of Augustine's view of free-will, as it addressed the possibility of freedom from sin in this life.

Augustine agreed with the Pelagians that we sin by choice, but maintained that we sin by nature *and* by choice, and took issue with the Pelagians for neglecting this all-important point:

¹ Louis Sébastien and Le Nain de Tillemont, *The Life of Augustine of Hippo* (trans. Frederick Van Fleteren; 3 vols; Collectanea Augustiniana; New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 3.13.

² Ivor Davidson, *A Public Faith: From Constantine to the Medieval World, A.D. 312-600* (ed. John Woodbridge and David Wright; The Monarch History of the Church; Oxford: Monarch Book, 2005), 181.

³ Roland Teske, 'Answer to the Pelagians General Introduction', in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 12.

⁴ Gerald Bonner, 'Rufinus the Syrian and African Pelagianism', *Augustinian Studies* 1 (1970): 31-47.

⁵ Roland Teske, 'The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Little Ones Introduction', in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 28-29.

⁶ Teske, 'The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins Introduction', 19.

For there are some who rely so heavily on the free choice of the human will that they suppose that we need no help, even from God, in order to avoid sin, after our nature has once and for all received the free choice of the will.⁷

Augustine did not disagree with the Pelagians about the fact of free choice of the human will, but took issue with it being used to suppose that we do not need and depend upon the grace of God. In other words, he agreed that we *can* resist sin, since we all sin by free choice. However, Augustine strongly disagreed on whether we *will* resist sin without God's grace:

They think that they say something clever – as if any of us were unaware of this – when they say that “if we do not will to, we do not sin, and God would not command human beings to do what would be impossible for the human will.” But they see less well that, in order to overcome temptation in the case of some things which we desire wrongfully or fear wrongfully, we at times need the great and full strength of the will. He who willed that the prophet truthfully say “No living person will be found righteous in your sight” (Ps 143:2), foresaw that we will not in every case fully use this power.⁸

Augustine agreed with his opponents that “God would not command human beings to do what would be impossible for the human will”;⁹ but his issue was that they had overlooked that God “foresaw that we will not in every case fully use this power”.¹⁰ For Augustine, the Pelagians were right about the fact of free-will, but had completely neglected our *concupiscentia*, that is, our desires,¹¹ which were so disordered from the fall that we naturally choose to sin.¹² The Pelagians had assumed a strict symmetry between sinning by choice and obeying by choice, but Augustine, using the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector from Luke 18, insisted on an asymmetry in that we sin by nature and by choice, but we obey by God's grace and by choice:

Not even the Pharisee of the gospel was blinded by such darkness. He was mistaken in thinking that his righteousness was perfect and in supposing that he had attained its fullness. But he still gave thanks to God, because he was not like other human beings unjust, thieves, and adulterer, like the tax collector, since he fasted twice a week and gave away a tenth of all

⁷ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Little Ones’ in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century I/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 2.2.2; trans. of *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum*.

⁸ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.3.3.

⁹ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.3.3.

¹⁰ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.3.3.

¹¹ P.G.W. Glare, ‘concupiscō’, *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (2 vols; 2nd ed; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.430.

¹² Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.4.4 – 2.5.6.

he possessed. He did not ask that his righteousness be increased, but by giving thanks to God for the things he had, he had admitted that he had received everything from him.¹³

Even while forcefully arguing that we *will not* abstain from sin, Augustine still insisted that it is not the case that we *cannot* abstain from sin:

One need not, of course, with a rash incautiousness, immediately oppose those who say that there can be human beings in this life without sin. After all, if we say that it is impossible, we will be disparaging both the free choice of the persons who use their will to strive for this as well as the power and mercy of God who brings it about by his help. But it is one question whether this is possible; it is quite another whether it is actually the case. It is still another question why it is not the case, if it is not so, though it is possible. And it is still another question not only whether there is someone who has never had any sin whatsoever, but whether there can or could ever be such a person. If someone asks me in accord with these four ways of posing the question whether a human being can be without sin in this life, I admit that one can be by the grace of God and free choice... But if one asks the question I put in the second place, namely, whether it is actually the case, I do not believe it is. For I prefer to believe the scripture which says, “Do not enter into judgment with your servant, because no living person will be found righteous in your sight” (Ps 143:2).¹⁴

On the question of whether “there can be human beings in this life without sin”,¹⁵ Augustine distinguished between “whether this is possible” which he affirmed, and “whether it is actually the case” which he denied.¹⁶ Here the crucial distinction between what is possible and what is actual, or better, what *can* be done and what *is* done, is made, and the crucial factor, as we shall see, is the will. Augustine argued that while it was *possible* to be sinless in this life, even the ones that the Scriptures describe as righteous (Noah, Daniel, Job, Zechariah and Elizabeth) to whom the Pelagians appealed,¹⁷ were not, in fact, sinless.¹⁸

Augustine then came to what would become a common Pelagian objection, that God would not command the impossible, to which he agreed, but also pointed out that this did not refute his argument because of the difference between what we *cannot* do and what we *will not* do:

¹³ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.5.6.

¹⁴ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.6.7 – 2.7.8.

¹⁵ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.6.7.

¹⁶ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.6.7; 2.7.8.

¹⁷ B.R. Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press 1991), 40-44.

¹⁸ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.10.12 – 2.14.21.

“But,” they object, “the Lord said, “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). He would not command this, if he knew that he is commanding what is impossible.” At this point the question is not whether it is possible, if they take this perfection to mean that a person can be without sin, while living in this life. For we have answered above that it is possible. Our present question is rather whether anyone has actually been sinless.¹⁹

To demonstrate that God commands what he knows we *will not* do (as opposed to what we *cannot* do), Augustine points to the example of Adam and Eve:

“Why then,” they ask, “does he command what he knows no human being is going to do?” In the same way one can ask why he commanded those first human beings, who were the only two, what he knew they would not do. Nor should we say that he gave the command precisely so that one of us would do it, if they did not, for God gave to them alone the command that they should not take food from that tree. Just as he knew the righteousness that they were not going to observe, so he knew the righteousness that he was going to produce from them. *In that way, then, he commands all human beings not to commit any sin, although he foreknows that no one will fulfil the command.*²⁰

For Augustine, the question of why God commands what he knows we will not do, can equally be applied to Adam: if Adam could have obeyed, and yet God knew that he would not obey, then the same compatibility between foreknowledge and free-will can be applied to us. It is worth noting that while Augustine continuously appeals to our fallen nature to explain why we do not and will not resist sin,²¹ this argument does not. For Augustine, Adam and Eve’s sin was the cause of our fallen nature, not the other way around (as it is for us).²²

On the possibility of whether fallen human beings can be sinless, Augustine distinguished between the first question, “whether this is possible”,²³ the second question, “whether it is actually the case”²⁴ (in the past/present), and the fourth question, “whether there can or could ever be such a person”²⁵ (in the future). While Augustine answered the first question in the affirmative²⁶ (since we sin by choice), he

¹⁹ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.15.22.

²⁰ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.16.23 (emphasis added).

²¹ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.4.4 – 2.5.6; 2.8.9 – 2.9.11.

²² Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.22.36.

²³ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.6.7.

²⁴ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.6.7

²⁵ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.6.7.

²⁶ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.6.7.

answered the second question in the negative²⁷ (since we sin by nature); and for Augustine, the answer to the fourth question followed directly from the answer to the second:

If the answer we gave to our second question is correct, namely, that there is no one without sin, then little ones are certainly not without sin. It follows from this as something beyond any doubt that, even if there could be someone in this life so perfect in virtue as to attain complete righteousness and, consequently, be without any sin, that person was, nonetheless, previously a sinner and was transformed from that state into this newness of life. For we have asked one question in the second place, and we have raised another question in this fourth spot. In that earlier question we asked whether anyone in this life did by God's grace and by effort of the will attain that perfect life which is completely without sin. In this fourth question we are asking whether among human offspring there was someone or there could have been or can be someone, not who has come to absolutely perfect righteousness from sin, but who has never been bound by any sin whatsoever.²⁸

For Augustine, the reason that no one in the future will be without sin, is because there is no one in the past or the present without sin (apart from Christ). The fourth question, "whether there can or could ever be such a person"²⁹ (in the future), is different from the first, "whether this is possible",³⁰ (indeed, Augustine denied the former but affirmed the latter); but it is much more like the second, "whether it is actually the case"³¹ (in the past/present), since it follows directly from it. It is not that it is impossible, but rather that it will never be the case because there is no one "who has never been bound by any sin whatsoever".³²

Rather than overreacting to the Pelagian's defence of free-will, Augustine acknowledges their good and right desire to put sin to death, while simultaneously cautioning against presuming that one may indeed be without sin. Both views are necessary if we are to avoid a proud claim to righteousness (legalism), and a carefree love of sin (licentiousness). To the extent that we feel that righteousness is out of reach we can become prone to becoming complacent with sin, and to the extent we feel that we have achieved God's standard of righteousness we can fail to appreciate God's grace to us in Christ. The Pelagians were rightly condemning licentiousness, but their overreaction to it led them to a form

²⁷ Augustine, 'The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins', 2.7.8.

²⁸ Augustine, 'The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins', 2.20.34.

²⁹ Augustine, 'The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins', 2.6.7.

³⁰ Augustine, 'The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins', 2.6.7.

³¹ Augustine, 'The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins', 2.6.7.

³² Augustine, 'The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins', 2.20.34.

of legalism. Augustine saw the dangers in both extremes, and advocated for a third way: “Let us turn neither to the right nor to the left... neither turning to the right in a proud claim to righteousness nor turning to the left in a carefree love of sin”.³³

The third book of this work is concerned with Pelagius’ rejection of original sin in his *Exposition of Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans*.³⁴ Here, Augustine’s primary contention is for our solidarity with Adam.³⁵ While agreeing with Pelagius that we sin by choice, Augustine insists that Pelagius is neglecting the all-important truth that we sin by nature *and* by choice:

Let no one, then, be mistaken about this matter and mislead others. This clear meaning of the holy Scriptures banishes and removes all ambiguity. Just as death in the body of this death comes from our origin, so too sin in this sinful flesh has come from our origin. To heal this sinfulness contracted by birth *and* increased by our will and to raise up this flesh, the physician came in the likeness of sinful flesh. It is not those who are in good health who need him, but those who are sick, and he did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.³⁶

Augustine’s first work against the Pelagians was careful and measured, seeking to agree with them where possible, in order to win them over where necessary. Augustine consistently agreed with his opponents premise, that it is *possible* to resist sin; but firmly rejected their conclusion, that we *will* resist sin if only we try harder. As we shall see in his further writings against the Pelagians, Augustine believed that our propensity to sin was not at the level of the will, but at the deeper level of the heart. We therefore need hearts transformed by God’s grace so that we will freely and more regularly choose to obey him. Without God’s grace, our hearts will always choose to sin, regardless of the religious veneer that we use to mask it.

We Will Not Obey Does Not Mean that We Cannot Obey (*The Spirit and the Letter*)

Augustine’s first work in answer to the Pelagians was followed up by *The Spirit and the Letter (De spiritu et littera)*, partly because the recipient of his first work, Marcellinus:

Wrote back that you were disturbed by my statement in the second of the two books. I had said that it was possible for a human being to be sinless, if with the aid of God’s power the

³³ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 2.35.57.

³⁴ Teske, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins Introduction’, 28-29.

³⁵ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 3.4.7-9.

³⁶ Augustine, ‘The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins’, 3.12.21 (emphasis added).

will was not lacking, but that apart from the one in whom all are brought to life, there has been no one and will be no one in whom this perfection is to be found while in this life.³⁷

Here we see Augustine defend the distinction between what we *cannot* do and what we *will not* do: in contrast to fatalism it is not the case that we *cannot* resist sin (and so we are morally responsible), but in accord with theological determinism it is the case that we *will not* resist sin (and so we need God's grace). For Augustine, humanity is not in a neutral state; ever since the fall, all people sin by nature; and yet, this does not negate the fact that all people sin by choice. Augustine emphasised that we constantly, freely and naturally make choices in line with our nature; however, at no point did he relinquish his commitment to free-will. For Augustine (and the Pelagians), free-will was necessary for moral responsibility. To demonstrate the coherence of his earlier work, Augustine took up Marcellinus' challenge of how it is meaningful to speak about possibility if it is never actualised:

It strikes you as absurd to say that something is possible when we have no example of it. And yet, I suspect, you are certain that a camel has never passed through the eye of a needle, though the Lord said that this was possible for God. You can also read that twelve thousand legions of angels could have fought for Christ to prevent his suffering, and yet it did not happen. You can read in scripture that the nations could have all been wiped out at one time from the land which God gave to the children of Israel, but that God willed that this take place gradually. A thousand other things come to mind which we admit either could have taken place or can take place, though we cannot offer examples of their having taken place.³⁸

Consequently, Augustine identifies Marcellinus' error as moving from the premise that we *will not* resist sin, to the conclusion that we *cannot* resist sin:

Consequently, we ought not to deny that a human being can be without sin, on the grounds that we can produce no human being in whom this has been realised, apart from the one who was not only a human being, but also God by nature.³⁹

Augustine stated that, "people who claim that a human being is living or has lived on earth without any sin at all pose no great problem",⁴⁰ but he did take issue with the symmetry that was implied in asserting that "they may by the free choice implanted in their nature live chaste, righteous, and pious

³⁷ Augustine, 'The Spirit and the Letter' in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 1.1; trans. *De spiritu et littera*.

³⁸ Augustine, 'The Spirit and the Letter', 1.1.

³⁹ Augustine, 'The Spirit and the Letter', 1.1.

⁴⁰ Augustine, 'The Spirit and the Letter', 2.3.

lives and merit to attain to the blessed and eternal life”.⁴¹ By contrast, Augustine insisted on an asymmetry in that we all sin by nature and by choice, but turn to God only by his grace and by choice:

Besides the fact that human beings are created with free choice of the will and besides the teaching by which they are commanded how they ought to live, they receive the Holy Spirit so that there arises in their minds a delight in and a love for that highest and immutable good that is God... when what we should do and the goal we should strive for begins to be clear, unless we find delight in it and love it, we do not act, do not begin, do not live good lives. But so that we may love it, “the love of God” is poured out “in our hearts”.⁴²

In this we see Augustine’s anthropology of the will always choosing what the heart desires most, and so having inherited disordered desires from Adam, we naturally choose to sin. But as the Holy Spirit changes our hearts, our desires are reordered such that, by God’s grace, we choose obedience. Augustine found a parallel for this asymmetry in Paul’s words: “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor 3:6)”.⁴³ For Augustine, this meant that:

The letter of the law, which teaches that we should not sin, kills, if the life-giving Spirit is not present. After all, it leads us to know sin rather than to avoid it and increases sin rather than lessens it, because the transgression of the law is added to the evil desire.⁴⁴

According to Augustine, the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart: ever since Adam’s sin our hearts have been set on sin and so our wills naturally and freely choose it (the letter kills), but as God transforms our hearts, they warm to him and so our wills super-naturally and freely choose him (the Spirit gives life).

As Augustine expounded the doctrine of salvation by grace, he was conscious that some have taken it to deny free-will, which he strongly warns against:

Are we then doing away with free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) through grace? Heaven forbid! Rather, we make free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) stronger. After all, as the law is not done away with through faith, so free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) is not done away with, but strengthened by grace... The law is not done away with, but strengthened by faith, because faith obtains the grace by which we fulfil the law. In the same way, free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) is not done away with by grace, but strengthened, because grace heals the will by which we freely love righteousness.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 2.4.

⁴² Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 3.5.

⁴³ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 4.6 – 5.8.

⁴⁴ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 5.8.

⁴⁵ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 30.52.

Having identified the problem lying in the will rather than in our ability, Augustine is able to articulate a more thorough distinction between what we *cannot* do and what we *will not* do:

Someone will ask whether faith itself, which seems to be the beginning of salvation or of this chain leading to salvation, which I mentioned, lies in our power. We will see this more easily, if we first examine somewhat more carefully what power is. *For there are two things: willing (velle) and being able (posse). As a result, one who wills is not immediately able, nor does one who is able immediately will.* After all, just as at times we will what we cannot do, so we also at times can do what we do not will to do. It is quite clear, and the sound of the words indicates that will (*voluntas*) takes its name from willing (*velle*) and power (*potestas*) from being able (*posse*). Hence, as one who wills has the will, so one who is able has the power. But in order that something be done by one's power, the will must be there. After all, people are not usually said to have done something with their power, if they did it unwillingly.⁴⁶

Here, Augustine clearly distinguishes between our willingness and our ability. A choice *cannot* be made without the power to choose it, but it *will not* be made without the will to choose it as well. In approaching the question of whether faith lies in our power, this is *the* distinction that Augustine makes in order to see the answer “more easily”, presumably because of the confusion that arises when our ability (*posse*) is conflated with our willingness (*velle*). For Augustine, the distinction is apparent in that “just as at times we will what we cannot do, so we also at times can do what we do not will to do.” Ultimately Augustine's answer to the question of whether faith lies in our power is that unbelievers refuse to come to faith due to a lack of will, *not* due to a lack of power:

Do people believe if they are unwilling to or do they fail to believe if they will to believe? Isn't that absurd? After all, what is it to believe but to assent that what is said is true? Assent is certainly an act of someone who wills (*volentis est*). Hence faith is surely in our power (*potestate est*).⁴⁷

According to Augustine, faith is in our power (*potestate*), but not in our will (*volentis*) without the grace of God. It is not that we are unable to come to God in faith, but unwilling.

Augustine reasoned that it was in our power to do both good and evil, but that when we have the power to choose between two or more possibilities, our will chooses one of them:

When power (*potestas*) is given, necessity (*necessitas*) is not imposed. Hence, when David received the power to kill Saul, he preferred to spare him rather than strike him. Hence, we

⁴⁶ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 31.53 (emphasis added).

⁴⁷ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 31.54.

understand that evil persons receive power leading to the condemnation of their evil will, but that good persons receive power for the purpose of proving their good will.⁴⁸

Therefore, whether we turn from God in sin, or turn to God in faith, is not determined by which one we are able to do (since we are able to do both), but by which one we will to do.⁴⁹ Moreover, Augustine explains why it is so important to affirm the view that we *will not* turn to God by ourselves, but also to reject the view that we *cannot* turn to God:

It follows that we should investigate a little whether the will by which we believe is itself a gift of God or arises from the free choice belonging to our nature. After all, if we say that it is not a gift of God, we must fear that we think that we have found an answer we can make to the apostle when he chides us and says, “What do you have, after all, that you have not received?” (1 Cor 4:7). We could say: Look, we have the will to believe which we have not received; look, there is the reason for our boasting that we have not received. But if we say that even this sort of will is only the gift of God, we have once again to be afraid that unbelievers and sinners may not unreasonably think that *they have a just excuse for not having believed, because God refused to give them this will.*⁵⁰

For Augustine, our moral responsibility depends on our ability to turn to God in faith (contra fatalism), and Augustine’s doctrine of grace follows from the fact that no one does (theological determinism). Indeed, even Lombard and Turretin, who cite Augustine to support the proposition that we are *non posse non peccare*,⁵¹ still maintain (in agreement with Augustine) that we are free from necessity.⁵² However, without differentiating between God’s perspective of what we *will/will not* do and our perspective of what we *can/cannot* do, Augustine’s insistence that we *will not* turn to God unless he first transforms our hearts, quickly becomes a fatalistic anthropology in which we *cannot* turn to God, not even in theory. Just as the Pelagians moved from the premise that we *can* choose not to sin (because we have free-will) to the conclusion that *will* choose not to sin if only we try harder; so too Lombard, Turretin and others move from the premise that we *will not* choose not to sin without God’s grace (a point which Augustine emphasised) to the conclusion that we *cannot* (that is, we are

⁴⁸ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 31.54.

⁴⁹ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 32.55-56.

⁵⁰ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 33.57 (emphasis added).

⁵¹ Peter Lombard, *The Sentences* (trans. Giulio Silano; Mediaeval Sources in Translation; Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007-2010), 2.25.5-6 (157-158); Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison; trans. George Musgrave Giger; 3 vols; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.571 (8.1.9).

⁵² Lombard, *Sentences*, 2.25.8.2 (160); Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1.661 (10.2.3).

non posse non peccare). Both moves conflate what lies in our power (*posse*) with what lies in our will (*velle*). Augustine refused to conflate the two.

In *The Spirit and the Letter*, Augustine maintains that: “The free choice which the creator has given to the rational soul as part of its nature is a neutral power that can either turn to faith or fall into unbelief”.⁵³ Since all after Adam have fallen into unbelief, “they will be liable to condemnation under his power who, with regard to believing, have held his mercy in contempt. But those who believe... will have good works as a result of grace”.⁵⁴ In conclusion Augustine writes:

There you see how perfect righteousness can be without an example in human beings and yet not be impossible. For it would come to be, if as much will were brought to bear as was sufficient for something that great. But our will would be that great, if none of those things which have to do with righteousness were unknown to us and if they so delighted our mind that the delight would overcome whatever other pleasure or pain might interfere. The fact that it is not the case is due, not to its impossibility, but to God’s judgment. After all, who is unaware that what human beings know is not in their power? And yet it does not follow that they pursue what they know they should pursue, unless it delights them to the point that they cannot but love it?⁵⁵

Augustine agreed with the Pelagians that perfect righteous is not impossible; however, he maintained that apart from Christ it is never realised because we do not delight in righteousness. For Augustine, the problem lies not in our ability (*posse*) but in our willingness (*velle*). It is not that we are not able to not sin (*non posse non peccare*), but rather that we are unwilling to not sin (*non velle non peccare*). The proposition that fallen humanity is *non posse non peccare* implies that perfect righteousness is not possible; but Augustine argued that “perfect righteousness can be without an example in human beings and yet *not* be impossible.” In *The Spirit and the Letter*, Augustine made the crucial distinction between what lies in our power (*posse*) and what lies in our will (*velle*). This enabled Augustine to agree with the Pelagians’ premise that we have the power (*posse*) to choose between sin and obedience, while rejecting their conclusion that we will summon the will (*velle*) to choose obedience without the grace of God. For Augustine, it is not that we are *unable* to turn from sin and to turn

⁵³ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 33.58.

⁵⁴ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 33.58.

⁵⁵ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’, 35.63.

towards God, but that we are *unwilling* to do so without God moving our hearts by his Holy Spirit. Hence, the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor 3:6).

The Asymmetry of Sin and Grace (*Nature and Grace*)

Approximately two years after writing *The Spirit and the Letter*, Augustine received a work by Pelagius called *Nature* (which has only survived in Augustine's quotations of it),⁵⁶ that argued for a symmetry between sin and obedience, both arising from our created nature and free choice.⁵⁷ In response, Augustine wrote a reply called *Nature and Grace* (*De natura et gratia*) which argued for an asymmetry: we sin by *nature* and by choice, but obey by *grace* and by choice⁵⁸ (hence the title). Augustine and Pelagius agreed that people sin by their own free choice and so are justly held accountable to God, and even on the distinction between what one *cannot* do and what one *will not* do:

Now he [Pelagius] first makes this distinction: "It is one thing to ask whether something can be – this pertains only to its possibility; it is something else to ask whether it is." No one has any doubt about the correctness of this distinction. After all, it follows that what is can be, but it does not follow that what can be also is.⁵⁹

According to Augustine, the main points of contention were over the fallen nature of humanity and our need for God's grace, both of which Augustine strongly affirmed and perceived Pelagius to be denying.⁶⁰ While Pelagius argued for a symmetry between how we are judged and how we are saved (by works), Augustine maintained that this left no room for God's grace, and argued for an asymmetry in that judgment is according to our works, but salvation is always and only according to God's grace.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Roland Teske, 'Nature and Grace Introduction', in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 205.

⁵⁷ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace' in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 1.1 – 2.2; trans. of *De natura et gratia*.

⁵⁸ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 3.3 – 6.6.

⁵⁹ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 7.8.

⁶⁰ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 8.9 – 9.10.

⁶¹ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 10.11 – 11.12.

Behind the written debate between Augustine and Pelagius, lay a deeper conflict in their theology of God's sovereignty. While Augustine held that God is not actively working in us when we sin, he was quick to affirm that all of our good gifts, including the will to obey, come from God, and so we should always be thankful to God rather than boastful in ourselves. However, Augustine understood Pelagius to be arguing that God is equally permissive in our obedience as he is in our disobedience:

What I am waiting to hear from him, if I can, is this: Do those who live according to the Spirit and are, for this reason, in a sense not in the flesh, even though they are still living here, live according to the Spirit by the grace of God? Or are they able to do this by themselves by the ability of nature and by their own will which they received when they were created?⁶²

For Augustine, it is God's grace that changes the heart, and the heart that moves the will.⁶³ However, Augustine perceived a tension in Pelagius' mind between obeying because of God's grace and obeying purely because of one's will (apart from God's grace).⁶⁴ In order to exhort Christians to obedience, Pelagius stressed that obedience depended on the will, and by implication, not on God's grace. By contrast, in order to encourage sinners struggling with their own failure and sin, Augustine stressed God's grace, entirely undeserved, resting on the sovereignty and goodness of God in giving us all good things, including the will to obey.

In the forefront of the Pelagian controversy, was the debate about human nature since the fall:

Consider now a point quite pertinent to our topic, namely, how he [Pelagius] tries to portray human nature as if it were completely free of any defect and how, in opposition to perfectly clear passages of scripture, he takes delight in a wordy wisdom which does away with the cross of Christ".⁶⁵

In contrast to Pelagius' view that sin did not weaken or change human nature, Augustine drew from the Scriptures a view of sin that had a much deeper impact.⁶⁶ Without contradicting his earlier statements that it is possible to be sinless in this life, Augustine argued that sin has so corrupted our human nature that without God's grace no one even tries to obey God let alone succeeds.⁶⁷ While Pelagius had thought that the debate was entirely about whether or not we had the power to resist

⁶² Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 17.18.

⁶³ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 17.19.

⁶⁴ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 18.20.

⁶⁵ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 19.21.

⁶⁶ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 19.21 – 22.24.

⁶⁷ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 23.25.

sin,⁶⁸ Augustine insisted that the more fundamental question was whether or not we had the will to resist sin.⁶⁹ Pelagius reasoned that we sin by choice, and so obedience is a purely matter of choice; but Augustine's response was that we sin by nature *and* by choice,⁷⁰ and so any account of sin that did not take our nature into account, or any account of obedience that did not take God's grace into account, was not only misleading but contrary to Scripture.⁷¹

According to Augustine, the key issue was whether human nature entailed the propensity to sin, or merely the ability to sin or to resist. For Pelagius, human nature could only entail what was true for humanity both before and after the fall, but Augustine made a distinction between our pre-fallen nature and our post-fallen nature:

After all, who does not know that they were created healthy and innocent and endowed with free choice and the free ability to live righteously? But now we are dealing with that man whom robbers left half dead on the road".⁷²

And so while Pelagius compared our ability to sin or to resist sin with our ability to speak or to be silent,⁷³ Augustine compared our pre-fallen nature with healthy feet and our post-fallen nature with broken feet.⁷⁴ For Augustine, it was not as though we were created with broken feet and commanded to walk, but that we break our own feet (that is, our nature) with every misstep into sin. To demonstrate this account of our nature, Augustine appealed to Paul's experience in Romans 7:

“For I do not do the good that I want, but I do the evil that I hate” (Rom 7:19). Where is the ability that is found to be inseparably implanted in nature? You see, human beings do not do the things that they want. And the apostle was talking about not sinning, not about flying, since they were human beings, not birds. You see, human beings do not do the good that they want, but they do the evil that they do not want. Willing the good is in their power (*velle illi adiacet* lit. ‘to will it is present’), but doing it is not (*perficere autem bonum non adiacet* lit. ‘but to accomplish the good is not present’).⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 26.29 – 27.30.

⁶⁹ Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 27.31 – 28.32.

⁷⁰ Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 30.34.

⁷¹ Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 31.35 – 32.36.

⁷² Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 43.50.

⁷³ Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 45.53.

⁷⁴ Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 49.57.

⁷⁵ Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 50.58.

If Augustine had used the word power (*posse*, or an inflection of it) in this last clause (as Teske's translation uniquely suggests⁷⁶), then it could certainly be argued that Augustine believed that doing the good was not in our power, but he uses *adiaceō* which means "to lie beside or near to, to be contiguous or adjacent to, or to live near to",⁷⁷ or in this context 'to be present'.⁷⁸ Augustine is not suggesting that doing the good is not in our power, but that the will to do the good is not present without God's grace.

Ultimately, what was most important to Augustine, was the defence of God's grace in our salvation: "The whole dispute with these people turns on this point: that we do not render meaningless the grace of God, which is found in Christ Jesus, our Lord, by a misguided defence of nature".⁷⁹ However, without completely denying God's grace, Pelagius sought to limit God's grace to our creation rather than our salvation:

And so he says, "The ability not to sin lies not so much in the power of choice as in the necessity of nature. Whatever lies in the necessity of nature undoubtedly pertains to the author of nature, namely, God."... He has attributed the ability not to sin to God's grace, precisely because God is the author of the nature in which he claims that ability not to sin is inseparably implanted.⁸⁰

Augustine replied, again by noting the difference between human nature as it was originally created (before the fall), and human nature as it has become (after the fall):

If the author of this book was speaking of that human nature which was in the beginning created innocent and healthy, his statement would be in some sense acceptable. And yet that nature should not have been said to have an inseparable ability, that is, one that cannot be lost. After all, it could be injured and need to seek a physician who would heal its eyes and restore its ability to see which was lost through blindness.⁸¹

For Pelagius, to account for sin and obedience we need only our nature, but for Augustine, to account for sin and obedience we need nature *and* grace respectively. Both agreed that God had graciously given us the ability not to sin (by common grace), but for Augustine, our fallen nature meant that we

⁷⁶ cf. Augustine, 'On Nature and Grace' in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Volume 5, Saint Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (ed. Philip Schaff; trans. Peter Holmes, Robert Wallis and Benjamin Warfield; Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1887), 50.58.

⁷⁷ Glare, 'adiaceō', *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1.46-47.

⁷⁸ Augustine, 'On Nature and Grace' (trans. Peter Holmes, Robert Wallis and Benjamin Warfield), 50.58.

⁷⁹ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 67.81.

⁸⁰ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 51.59.

⁸¹ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 51.59.

are now wholly dependent on God's grace to save us (we need God's saving grace as well). This, Augustine maintained, was at the heart of the debate:

Precisely so that this in their nature might be healed, there is need of the saviour who, as its creator, established the nature. If we admit that the small and the great, that is, wailing infants and old grey heads, need this saviour and that medicine of his, namely, that the Word become flesh in order to dwell among us, the entire question under dispute between us has been resolved.⁸²

Towards the end of *Nature and Grace*, Augustine defends his words *On Free Will* which Pelagius had taken up against him:

He says, "So too, bishop Augustine says in his books on *Free Choice*, 'Whatever this cause of the will is, if one cannot resist it, one yields to it without sin. But if one can resist it, let one not yield to it, and one will not sin. Does it perhaps deceive those who are not careful? Let them be careful then so that they are not deceived. Or is the deception so great that it cannot be avoided at all? Then there are no sins. For who sins in a matter that can in no way be avoided? But sin is committed; hence, it can be avoided.'" I acknowledge them; they are my words. But let him now be so kind as to acknowledge everything which I have said above. *We are, after all, dealing with the grace of God which comes to our help as medicine through the mediator; we are not dealing with the impossibility of righteousness.* One can then resist that cause [of the will], whatever it is; one clearly can. After all, we beg help for this, when we say, "Bring us not into temptation" (Matt 6:13). We would not demand this help, if we believed that we could not resist.⁸³

In contrast to those who argue that Augustine changed his mind on free-will,⁸⁴ Augustine himself stood by his strongest words in defence of free-will, even in the midst of a polemic against Pelagius. While many theologians, beginning with the Pelagians, have drawn a dichotomy between free-will and God's grace, Augustine refused to pit them against each other. Instead, Augustine stood by his earlier writings *On Free Will*, and nevertheless forcefully argued for our utter dependence on God's grace to transform the heart and move the will, which was well beyond Pelagius' view of God's

⁸² Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 52.60 cf. 67.81.

⁸³ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 67.80; quoting Augustine, 'On Free Will' in *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (trans. John Burleigh; The Library of Christian Classics 6; London: SCM Press, 1953), 3.18.50 (emphasis added); trans. *De libero arbitrio*.

⁸⁴ James Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1980), 8-9; William Babcock, 'Augustine on Sin and Moral Agency', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16/1 (1988): 36-41; James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 97; John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14-15; Eric Jenkins, *Free to Say No? Free Will and Augustine's Evolving Doctrines of Grace and Election* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), xi.

common grace in giving us the ability to choose.⁸⁵ For Augustine, we have free-will, but we have universally used it to sin. Our nature is one that inclines our hearts to sin, and so we need God's grace to turn to him in repentance and faith. While sin and obedience are both freely chosen, what we choose is governed by the state of our hearts, such that we sin by nature, and obey by God's grace.

Free-will vs. True Liberty (*The Perfection of Human Righteousness*)

Approximately one year after writing *Nature and Grace*, Augustine wrote a letter called *The Perfection of Human Righteousness* (*De perfectione justitiae hominis*) to his fellow bishops, Eutropius and Paul, in response to a tract that they had given him called *Definitions* attributed to Caelestius, the disciple of Pelagius whose teaching and condemnation had begun the Pelagian controversy four years earlier.⁸⁶ The burden of this tract was to refute Caelestius' teaching of a kind of Christian perfectionism, which in Augustine's view, left inadequate room for God's grace. Augustine explores the relationship between nature and free choice, by taking up Caelestius' question: "What makes a human being sinful. Is it the necessity of nature or by the freedom of choice?"⁸⁷ In answering this question, Augustine develops his concept of true liberty (*vera libertas*) which is related to but distinct from his concept of free-will (*libero arbitrio*). To best grasp this distinction, it is worth quoting Augustine at length:

Freedom of choice (*arbitrii libertatem*) has brought it about that human beings are sinful. But this defective state that is a punishment and has arisen from freedom has produced a necessity. As a result, faith cries out to God, "Deliver me from my necessities" (Ps 25:17). Having become subject to these necessities, either we cannot know what we are to will or, despite our willing, we are unable to do what we know. Freedom (*libertas*), after all, is promised to those who believe by him who sets them free. He says, "If the Son sets you free, then you will truly be free (*vere liberi*)" (John 8:36). For conquered by the vice into which it has fallen by its will, our nature lacks freedom. Hence, another scripture passage says, "For one has become a slave to that by which one has been defeated" (2 Pet 2:19). Just as "it is not those who are in good health who need a physician, but those who are sick" (Matt 9:12), so it is not the free, but slaves who need one to set them free. Thus gratitude for freedom (*libertatis*) says to him, "You have saved my soul from necessities" (Ps 31:8). For that healthiness is the true freedom (*vera libertas*) that would not have been lost, if the will had

⁸⁵ Augustine, 'Nature and Grace', 67.81.

⁸⁶ Augustine, 'The Perfection of Human Righteousness' in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 1.1; trans. of *De perfectione justitiae hominis*.

⁸⁷ Augustine, 'The Perfection of Human Righteousness', 4.9.

remained good. But because the will sinned, there came upon the sinner the hard necessity of having sin (*peccatum habendi dura necessitas*) until its illness is wholly healed and it has received freedom (*tantalibertas*). That freedom will be so great that, just as there necessarily remains the will to live happily, so there will exist the voluntary and blessed necessity of living well and never sinning.⁸⁸

In contrast to the Pelagians, Augustine argued that “because the will sinned, there came upon the sinner the hard necessity of having sin”.⁸⁹ However, in order to support a post-fallen state in which “the ability to use the power of choice properly, is not theirs”, some have translated “the hard necessity of having sin” as “a cruel necessity of sinning” (translating *dura* as ‘cruel’ instead of the more common meaning ‘hard’,⁹⁰ and omitting the word *habendi* lit. ‘having’).⁹¹

While Augustine uses the term ‘free will’ (*liberum arbitrium*) to describe what we are free *from*, he uses the term ‘freedom’ (*libertas*) and especially ‘true freedom’ (*vera libertas*) to describe what we are free *for* (relationship with God).⁹² The difference is one of a fish that is free to jump out of its fish bowl (freedom from coercion), and a fish that is free to live because it chooses not to jump out of its fish bowl (freedom for its purpose). Or better, of person who is free from having to take piano lessons (freedom from coercion), and a person who, having made themselves a slave to piano lessons is now free to express themselves on a piano (freedom for self-realisation). Isaiah Berlin describes this distinction as one of ‘negative freedom’ (the absence of obstacles, barriers, constraints or interference from others) and ‘positive freedom’ (the presence of control, self-mastery, self-determination or self-realisation).⁹³ For Augustine, we have free-will (*liberum arbitrium*) in that we have the negative freedom from external barriers and constraints: “Freedom of choice (*arbitrii libertatem*) has brought it about that human beings are sinful”.⁹⁴ No one forced our hand to sin; sin is wilful disobedience.

⁸⁸ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 4.9.

⁸⁹ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 4.9.

⁹⁰ Glare, ‘dūrus’, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1.639.

⁹¹ Stephen Duffy, ‘Anthropology’, *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (ed. Allan Fitzgerald; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 30; Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 4.9; Duffy, ‘Anthropology’, 30; Glare, ‘dūrus’, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1.639; Glare, ‘habeō’, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1.857-859.

⁹² Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 4.9; Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (trans. L.E.M. Lynch; New York: Random House, 1960), 163-164.

⁹³ Isaiah Berlin, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, in *Four Essays on Liberty* (ed. Henry Hardy; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 169-181.

⁹⁴ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 4.9.

However, our free choice to sin results in our loss of true freedom (*vera libertas*) in that we do not have the positive freedom for self-mastery and self-realisation in the relationship with God that we were made for: “Freedom (*libertas*), after all, is promised to those who believe by him who sets them free. He says, “If the Son sets you free, then you will truly be free (*vere liberi*)” (John 8:36)”.⁹⁵ When these two categories are confused, readers of Augustine often conclude that there is a contradiction in Augustine’s view of the will: either Augustine changed his mind,⁹⁶ or he held that we sin “voluntarily, yet also involuntarily”.⁹⁷

Nevertheless, Augustine’s coherence is evident when the categories of free-will and true freedom are distinguished: for Augustine, free-will (*liberum arbitrium*) is opposed to necessity: “who says I must necessarily so will. By assuming necessity he strives to do away with will altogether. If I must necessarily will, why need I speak of willing at all?”⁹⁸ However, true freedom (*vera libertas*) is opposed to our voluntary slavery to sin: “For that healthiness is the true freedom (*vera libertas*) that would not have been lost, if the will had remained good”.⁹⁹ The difference is one of having a choice (*liberum arbitrium*), and making the truly liberating choice (*vera libertas*). As TeSelle notes: “There is always free choice, says Augustine; but it is not always *good* choice”.¹⁰⁰ Like a fish that freely jumps out of the aquatic environment that it was made for and by doing so forfeits its freedom to live; similarly, we were made for relationship with God and when we voluntarily sin we forfeit the true freedom that we were made for, found only in relationship with God. Since we were made for relationship with God, and since a loving relationship cannot be coerced, we are created with a will that is free from coercion for the possibility of relationship with God,¹⁰¹ and we are saved by God’s grace in Christ for the realisation of it.¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 4.9.

⁹⁶ Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace*, 8-9; Babcock, ‘Augustine on Sin and Moral Agency’, 36-41; Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 97; Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, 14-15; Jenkins, *Free to Say No?*, xi.

⁹⁷ Duffy, ‘Anthropology’, 30.

⁹⁸ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 3.3.8.

⁹⁹ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 4.9.

¹⁰⁰ Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 292 (emphasis original).

¹⁰¹ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 2.18.48,49; 2.20.54.

¹⁰² Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 6.14.

In *The Perfection of Human Righteousness*, Augustine consistently agrees with his interlocutor that the perfection of human righteousness is possible, but he also insists that it is only brought about by the grace of God:

We answer that there ought to be no quarrel with them about these words, for he has not dared to say that anyone – either he himself or someone else – is without sin, but has only answered that one can be – a point that we do not deny either. The question is when one can be and through whom one can be.¹⁰³

In this way, Augustine side-stepped their argument, agreeing with the point that they were putting all their effort into making: that one can be without sin, but pointing out that they had neglected an essential part of the equation: the sinfulness of humanity. When Caelestius appealed to the commands in Scripture that we be without sin,¹⁰⁴ Augustine did not argue against them, but pointed out that we strive to obey them by the strength that God gives us.¹⁰⁵ When Caelestius listed Scripture texts enjoining perfection, Augustine pointed out that “our journey by which we move toward that perfection, is made pure by pure prayer, but prayer is pure when we truthfully say, “Forgive us, as we also forgive” (Matt 6:12)”.¹⁰⁶ When Caelestius argued that God’s commands are not burdensome, Augustine replied that the reason they are not burdensome is because of “the love of God, which is only “poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5)”.¹⁰⁷ For Augustine, the Pelagians held a very naive view of how sin has afflicted our will, and this caused them to move from the true premise that we can be without sin, to the false conclusion that we will be if we just try harder. This overestimation of human will power led to an underestimation of God’s grace, which was for Augustine, the central point of contention. By neglecting the sinfulness of humanity,¹⁰⁸ the Pelagians were effectively setting aside the grace of God in the Christian life.¹⁰⁹ They were not just trying to do theology behind God’s back, they were trying to live as God’s children behind God’s back.

¹⁰³ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 7.16

¹⁰⁴ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 8.17.

¹⁰⁵ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 8.18-19.

¹⁰⁶ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 9.20.

¹⁰⁷ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 10.22.

¹⁰⁸ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 11.23 – 15.33.

¹⁰⁹ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’, 15.34-36.

Augustine's Defence of Both Grace and Free-will (*The Deeds of Pelagius*)

Shortly after Augustine had written his first four works in answer to the Pelagians, Pelagius was tried for heresy at the synod of Diospolis (now Lod, Israel), and to Augustine's shock, Pelagius was acquitted.¹¹⁰ When Augustine had received the records of the trial, he wrote a response called *The Deeds of Pelagius (De gestis Pelagii)*. During his trial, Pelagius had stated that

We did not, however, say that there is anyone who never sinned from infancy to old age, but that those who have turned away from sin can by their own effort and by the grace of God be without sin.¹¹¹

While this seemed to be significantly closer to Augustine's understanding of human nature and God's grace, Augustine's central concern was that, "It is still not clear from these words what he means by the grace of God",¹¹² since,

He stated with utter clarity that "he understood by God's grace the fact that our nature received the ability not to sin, when it was created, since it was created with free choice." And thus, the bishops failed to recognise the heretic and acquitted him as a Catholic, because they did not think that he meant the grace by which we have been adopted as the new creation.¹¹³

Augustine's chief concern was whether Pelagius was using the phrase 'the grace of God' to refer to a common grace conferred at creation by which we have the ability (*posse*) to obey God, or the saving grace by which our hearts are transformed such that we have the will (*velle*) to obey God.

Although Augustine admitted that Pelagius anathematised those who held Caelestius' view that the grace required for obedience consisted in free choice, or in the law and teaching,¹¹⁴ nevertheless, Augustine states his grounds for his concern with Pelagius' view as follows:

Pelagius said, "God gives to one who is worthy to receive them all the graces, just as he gave them to the apostle Paul." I would not be concerned at all about his response, if it did not touch upon this question about which the utmost care must be taken that the grace of God is not attacked, while we remain silent and overlook such a great evil. He did not say that God

¹¹⁰ Roland Teske, 'The Deeds of Pelagius Introduction', in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 321-322.

¹¹¹ Augustine, 'The Deeds of Pelagius' in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 6.16; trans. of *De gestis Pelagii*.

¹¹² Augustine, 'The Deeds of Pelagius', 6.20.

¹¹³ Augustine, 'The Deeds of Pelagius', 10.22.

¹¹⁴ Augustine, 'The Deeds of Pelagius', 14.30.

gives to one to whom he wills, but says, “God gives to one who is *worthy* to receive them all the graces.” Hence, I could not, in reading this, fail to be filled with suspicion. The word “grace” itself and the meaning of this word is done away with, if it is not given gratuitously, but is received by one who is worthy of it... After all, he said, “If it is by grace, it is not on the basis of works; otherwise, grace is no longer grace” (Rom 11:6).¹¹⁵

Pelagius may well have distanced himself from the extreme views of his disciple Caelestius; nevertheless, he still embraced a synergism which struck at the heart of the Christian doctrine of salvation accomplished only by the work of Christ and received as grace. Augustine speculates that, “Pelagius will perhaps say, “I did not say that the apostle, to whom those great graces were given, was worthy of them on the basis of works, but on the basis of faith.”¹¹⁶ But Augustine still took issue with the word ‘worthy’, since it makes faith (or whatever one is worthy on the basis of) to be a work that is rewarded, whereas Augustine insisted that faith was a gift:

“God has given to each one the measure of faith” (Rom 12:3). From him we also have this, “After all, what do you have that you have not received?” (1 Cor 4:7). And so, we have received even that from which there begins whatever good we have in our actions.¹¹⁷

Here we see the thrust of Augustine’s concern: that salvation be understood monergistically rather than synergistically. It is not that we are saved by grace plus faith/works/choice/something else, but that we are saved by grace alone. It is only by grace that our hearts are transformed such that we wage war against our sinful nature and choose to obey God. Augustine’s chief concern was to defend monergism.

While Augustine’s main concern in this response to Pelagius’ trial was to defend a monergistic doctrine of salvation by grace, this was never at the expense of the reality of human choice. He consistently maintained that our obedience is by grace *and* choice:

By my prayer in the closing line, namely, that he might be pleasing to the Lord, I indicated that this lies in God’s grace rather than in the human will alone, since I did not exhort or command or teach him, I would show that it is also a matter of free choice, though I would not take anything away from God’s grace. So too, by uttering a prayer, I certainly called attention to God’s grace, though I did not destroy the choice of the will.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Augustine, ‘The Deeds of Pelagius’, 14.33 (emphasis added).

¹¹⁶ Augustine, ‘The Deeds of Pelagius’, 14.34.

¹¹⁷ Augustine, ‘The Deeds of Pelagius’, 14.34.

¹¹⁸ Augustine, ‘The Deeds of Pelagius’, 29.53.

At the same time, Augustine maintained that our disobedience is not the result of our nature alone (which would absolve us of responsibility), nor is it the result of choice alone since we have been greatly impacted by the fall.¹¹⁹ For Augustine, the heart of the issue was that Pelagius was lifting up choice as the sole determiner for both obedience and disobedience,¹²⁰ rather than recognising that we sin by nature and by choice, and that we obey by grace and by choice. Augustine agreed that we *can* choose to obey or to disobey, but removing our nature from the cause of sin neglected the fact that we *will* choose to sin without God's help (thus making man effectively autonomous), and removing God's grace from the cause of obedience neglected the fact that we *will* choose to obey only with God's help (thus making grace effectively unnecessary). Pelagius went from we *can* obey, to we *will* obey if we simply try harder,¹²¹ the essence of Pelagianism; but Augustine insisted that even though we *can* obey, we *will not* obey without God's saving grace.

The Distinction Between Ability, Will, and Reality (*The Grace of Christ and Original Sin*)

After Pelagius was acquitted at the end of 415 A.D., he wrote four books *In Defence of Free Choice*, which provided sufficient evidence for the church that he was in fact, denying God's saving grace, and he was excommunicated by Pope Innocent in January of 417 A.D.¹²² In May of 418 A.D., the Council of Carthage declared the universality of human sinfulness and the necessity of God's grace as Catholic doctrines, bringing the initial phase of the Pelagian controversy in Carthage to an end.¹²³ It was in this context that Augustine again took up his pen against Pelagius and wrote *The Grace of Christ and Original Sin* (*De gratia Christi et de peccato originali*) to further demonstrate that even though we have free-will, we will not obey without the grace of Christ, because of the impact of Adam's Original Sin. In order to avoid taking Pelagius out of context, Augustine quotes Pelagius at length, especially on his anthropology:

¹¹⁹ Augustine, 'The Deeds of Pelagius', 33.57.

¹²⁰ Augustine, 'The Deeds of Pelagius', 35.61.

¹²¹ Augustine, 'The Deeds of Pelagius', 35.62.

¹²² Roland Teske, 'The Grace of Christ and Original Sin Introduction', in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 386.

¹²³ Teske, 'The Grace of Christ and Original Sin Introduction', 388.

Listen to what he [Pelagius] says, “We distinguish these three elements and arrange them in a definite order. In the first place, we put the ability (*posse*); in the second, willing (*velle*); in the third, being (*esse*). Ability is found in nature; willing in choice; being in action. The first element, namely ability, is properly due to God who conferred it upon his creature. The two other elements, namely willing and being, should be attributed to the human person, because they proceed from choice as their source”.¹²⁴

On the first of these elements (*posse*), Augustine agreed with Pelagius: “He [Pelagius] admits that the first of these three, that is, the ability, was given to nature by the creator and is not in our power, but that we have it, even if we do not want it”.¹²⁵ In other words, Augustine agreed that our ability (*posse*) remains part of our created nature (“even if we do not want it”), and so it is not the case that we are *non posse non peccare*. However, on the remaining two elements (*velle* and *esse*), Augustine strongly disagreed with Pelagius:

But the apostle says just the opposite; he says, “With fear and trembling work out your own salvation” (Phil 2:12). Moreover, he wanted them to know that God helps them, not only so that they are able to act – for they had already received this in their nature and in teaching – but also so that they do act. Hence, he did not say, “It is God, after all, who produces in you the ability (*posse*),” as though they already have both the willing (*velle*) and the acting (*operari*) on their own and do not need his help for these two. Rather, he said, “It is God, after all, who produces in you the willing (*velle*) and the accomplishment (*perficere*)” – or as we read in other manuscripts, especially the Greek ones: “the willing (*velle*) and the action (*operari*)” (Phil 2:13).¹²⁶

Augustine agreed with Pelagius’ distinction between the ability (*posse*), the will (*velle*), and the reality (*esse*), and even used these distinctions in his argument against Pelagius.¹²⁷ However, to the extent that these categories are confused, Augustine’s view of free-will is misunderstood. For example, Jenkins argues that, in *The Grace of Christ and Original Sin*, it is evident that:

For Augustine, the root or source of our actions is no longer the *possibilitas utriusque partis*, or “freedom of decision,” but the fundamental orientation of the soul toward either *caritas* (love) or *cupiditas* (lust)... Augustine has come to believe the fallen will is completely motivated by lust and operates within a limited horizon of necessary sin, with no freedom to choose good. Original sin has become the cause of the will’s necessary assent to evil and

¹²⁴ Augustine, ‘The Grace of Christ and Original Sin’ in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 1.4.5; trans. of *De gratia Christi et de peccato originali*.

¹²⁵ Augustine, ‘The Grace of Christ and Original Sin’, 1.3.4.

¹²⁶ Augustine, ‘The Grace of Christ and Original Sin’, 1.5.6.

¹²⁷ Augustine, ‘The Grace of Christ and Original Sin’, 1.5.6.

grace has become the cause of its assent to good. In neither case does the will determine itself.¹²⁸

However, despite this claim, Augustine agreed with Pelagius that we have the ability (*posse*) to resist sin in our nature and in Scripture's teaching. Commenting on Philippians 2:12 ("with fear and trembling work out your own salvation"), Augustine remarks:

Moreover, he [Paul] wanted them [the Philippians] to know that God helps them, *not only* so that they are able (*possint*) to act – for they had already received this in their nature (*in natura*) and in teaching – *but also* so that they do act.¹²⁹

It was the fact that "God helps them... also so that they do act", which Augustine insisted was missing from Pelagius' view of God's grace.

Rather than disputing our created nature's ability (*posse*), the points of contention between Augustine and Pelagius were on whether we have the will (*velle*) to resist sin without God's grace, and on whether someone actually is (*esse*) without sin.¹³⁰ Augustine was clear that his fundamental disagreement with Pelagius was not on what we *can* do, but on what we *will* do:

Pelagius locates the ability to come [to Christ] in nature or even, as he has now begun to say, in that grace, however he may interpret it, by which he says the ability itself is helped. But coming is already a matter of willing and action. It does not follow, however, that persons who can come (*potest venire*) do come (*etiam veniat*), unless they will it and do it. On the other hand, everyone who has learned from the Father not only can come, but does come (*non solum potest venire, sed venit*).¹³¹

For Pelagius, God's grace was reduced to a common grace that gave people a choice to come to him or to turn away. For Augustine, all have turned away, and so God's grace is the saving grace that transforms our hearts such that we do come to him in faith and repentance.

Despite recent claims to the contrary,¹³² Augustine refused to draw a dichotomy between God's grace and free-will, and he strongly objected to the charge of doing so.¹³³ Even in a polemic arguing for *The*

¹²⁸ Jenkins, *Free to Say No?*, 68.

¹²⁹ Augustine, 'The Grace of Christ and Original Sin', 1.5.6.

¹³⁰ Augustine, 'The Grace of Christ and Original Sin', 1.8.9.

¹³¹ Augustine, 'The Grace of Christ and Original Sin', 1.14.15.

¹³² Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace*, 30-44; Joseph Leinhard, 'Augustine on Grace: The Early Years', in *Augustine the Bishop: A Book of Essays* (ed. Fannie Lamoine and Christopher

Grace of Christ against Pelagius' works *In Defence of Free Choice*, Augustine upheld both grace and free-will, locating the reality of our free-will in our ability (*posse*), and the reality of God's grace in our will (*velle*) and our action/being (*esse*):

Hence, with regard to this question about God's grace and help, pay attention to those three factors which he distinguished with perfect clarity: the power (*posse*), the willing (*velle*), and the being (*esse*), that is, the ability, the will, and the action. Let him then, agree with us that God helps not merely the ability in human beings, even if they do not will or act well, but also the will and the action, that is, so that we will and act in the right way, which are present in human beings only when they will and act well. Let him, as I said, agree that God also helps the will and the action and helps them in such a way that we will or do nothing good without that help, and let him agree that this is the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord by which he makes us righteous with his own righteousness, not with ours, so that it is our true righteousness which comes to us from him. Then no point of controversy will, as far as I can see, be left between us regarding the help of God's grace.¹³⁴

For Augustine, there was never any disagreement on the fact we have the ability to resist sin. However, *the* point of controversy was that "we will or do nothing good without... the grace of God through Jesus Christ".¹³⁵ In Augustine's thought, it is not that fallen humanity is *non posse non peccare* (not able to not sin), but rather *non velle non peccare* (not willing to not sin) and therefore *non esse non peccare* (not being without sin).

During the first Pelagian controversy, Augustine powerfully defended the universality of sin, and therefore the universal need and dependence on God's grace for salvation. However, rather than denying *the fact* of free-will which his opponents used to make their case, Augustine went after *our use* of free-will, which rendered all people sinful and in need of God's grace. For Augustine, the Pelagians' premise that we have the ability (*posse*) to resist sin in our created nature was not the issue. Rather, it was their move from the premise of our ability (*posse*) to the conclusion that some have the will (*velle*) to resist sin without God's grace, and therefore be (*esse*) sinless in their own strength. In these dialogues we see some of the earliest conversations on the subject of God's sovereignty

Kleinhenz; New York: Garland, 1994), 189-191; Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, 14; Jenkins, *Free to Say No?*, 38-43.

¹³³ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian' in *Answer to the Pelagians II* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/24; New York: New City Press, 1998), 4.8.47-48; trans. of *Contra Julianum*.

¹³⁴ Augustine, 'The Grace of Christ and Original Sin', 1.47.52.

¹³⁵ Augustine, 'The Grace of Christ and Original Sin', 1.47.52.

(especially as it relates to our salvation) and human freedom (especially as it relates to our moral responsibility). Despite the perceived tension between God's sovereign grace and the free choice of human beings, Augustine defended both as true, even in a polemic against opponents who held up one at the expense of the other. As Augustine had defended free-will as necessary for moral responsibility against the Manichees, he now defended God's grace as necessary for salvation against the Pelagians. It was the navigation between these two Scylla and Charybdis (opposite dangers/extremes), that would prove to be paramount in the second Pelagian controversy to come.

Chapter 3 – The Second Pelagian Controversy

What the Heart Desires, the Will Chooses, and the Mind Justifies (*Marriage and Desire*)

By May of 418 A.D., Pelagius and Caelestius were exiled and the first phase of the Pelagian controversy came to an end.¹ However, a second phase was about to begin with Julian of Eclanum, a well-trained and formidable opponent for Augustine. At his death, Augustine left an unfinished in response to Julian.² Julian certainly pushed Augustine to an even more rigorous repudiation of Pelagianism. Nevertheless, he did not abandon his convictions about free-will and its relevance for moral responsibility.³ In the summer of 418 A.D., Julian wrote a number of letters to Pope Zosimus accusing Augustine (and in particular, his doctrine of Original Sin) of condemning marriage as the work of the devil.⁴ Augustine responded with a defence of marriage which simultaneously repeated his condemnation of concupiscence, or sinful desire (*concupiscentia*).⁵ In the summer of 419 A.D., Julian once again attacked Augustine's views, prompting Augustine's second book on marriage.⁶

Julian's writings provided a catalyst for Augustine's further articulation of our propensity to sin. While these arguments were consistent with his earlier descriptions of sin as something chosen by the will, he now began to further emphasise the impetus for this choice in our desires:

The law of righteousness absolutely forbids us to obey this concupiscence, this law of sin dwelling in the members, for the apostle says, "Let sin, then, not reign in your mortal body so that you obey its desires, and do not hand over your members to sin as weapons of wickedness" (Rom 6:12-13).⁷

For Augustine, free-will was necessary for sin, but not sufficient. Something had to move the will, either towards sin (our desires), or towards obedience (God's grace). In this sense, Augustine's

¹ Roland Teske, 'Answer to the Pelagians General Introduction', in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 13.

² Augustine, 'Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian' in *Answer to the Pelagians III* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/25; New York: New City Press, 1999), trans. of *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum*.

³ Eugène Portalié, *A Guide to the Thought of St Augustine* (trans. Ralph Bastian; London: Burns & Oates, 1960), 197.

⁴ Augustine, 'Marriage and Desire' in *Answer to the Pelagians II* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/24; New York: New City Press, 1998), 1.1.1; trans. of *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*.

⁵ Augustine, 'Marriage and Desire', Book 1.

⁶ Augustine, 'Marriage and Desire'. Book 2.

⁷ Augustine, 'Marriage and Desire', 1.23.25.

analysis of sin now begun to penetrate beyond the level of the will, to the deeper level of our desires. And yet, none of this stood in contradiction with his earlier work *On Free Will*, or his letters in the first Pelagian controversy. The reason that we do not to obey God is because our disordered desires/loves are such that we *will not* obey, not because of a physical inability in which we *cannot* obey.

Augustine concluded that the Pelagian understanding of human nature fell into the opposite error to that of the Manichees. While Augustine viewed the Manichean origin of evil as too early, in our created nature, allowing us to blame our creator; he viewed the Pelagian origin of evil as too late, in our actions rather than our hearts, allowing us to weaken our view of our sin and guilt before God:

Listen, then, for a few moments to what is at stake in this question. Catholics say that human nature was created good by the good God the creator, but that, having been wounded by sin, it needs Christ the physician. The Manichees say that human nature was not created good by God and wounded by sin, but that human beings were created by the prince of eternal darkness out of the mixture of the two natures that always existed, the one good and the other evil. The Pelagians and Caelestians say that human nature was created good by the good God, but that in newborn little ones it is so healthy that they have no need at that age of the medicine of Christ.⁸

While the Manichees were denying that human nature was created good, and the Pelagians were denying that it was wounded by sin, Augustine insisted on both. This simultaneously upheld the goodness of God in creating us as good, and humanity's guilt and need for God's grace in being wounded by sin. Certainly, we *will not* do other than follow the desires of our wounded sinful hearts, but if we *cannot* do any other, then we can either blame God for creating us this way (the Manichees), or weaken our view of sin so that we are less guilty (the Pelagians). And yet, according to Augustine, human beings "are held captive, not because they are human... They are, rather, held captive because they are sinners".⁹ Human beings are sinners by nature *and* by choice.

In this first response to Julian, Augustine framed the errors of the Pelagians and the Manichees as a Scylla and Charybdis (opposite dangers/extremes), which he would later develop in defending himself

⁸ Augustine, 'Marriage and Desire', 2.3.9.

⁹ Augustine, 'Marriage and Desire', 2.6.16.

against the charge of Manichaeism. In doing so, Augustine contrasted his doctrine of original sin with both the Pelagian over-emphasis of free-will, and the Manichean under-emphasis of free-will. For Augustine, fallen humanity still retained its free-will, but free-will on its own was not enough to explain the ubiquitous nature of sin. Julian pushed Augustine to further articulate the reason why we freely choose to sin, which Augustine located in our desires.

Navigating Pelagianism and Manicheanism (*Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians*)

As Augustine was writing *Marriage and Desire*, Julian wrote a letter accusing Augustine of Manicheanism, and some Pelagian bishops (pressured by Julian) wrote a second, calling for a General Council to examine the issues raised by the followers of Augustine and the followers of Pelagius.¹⁰ Augustine replied in four books addressing both letters.¹¹ Augustine begins his response to Julian by quoting the accusation that Julian has levelled at him:

Now, then, let us reply to the letter of Julian. “Those Manichees,” he says, “with whom we are not in communion, that is, all those whose views we reject, say that by the sin of the first man, that is, Adam, free choice was destroyed and that no one now has the ability to live a good life, but that all are forced into sin by the constraints of their flesh”.¹²

Just as he had done in *The Perfection of Human Righteousness*,¹³ Augustine responded to this charge by distinguishing between ‘free will’ (*liberum arbitrium*), that is, the negative freedom *from* coercion (in Julian’s words, freedom from being “forced into sin by the constraints of their flesh”); and ‘freedom’ (*libertas*), the positive freedom *for* living good and righteous lives:

Who of us would say that free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) was removed from the human race by the sin of the first human being? Freedom (*Libertas*) did indeed perish through sin, but it was that freedom which existed in paradise and which consisted in having complete righteousness with immortality. On account of that sin human nature needs God’s grace, for the Lord say, “If the Son sets you free, the you will truly be free (*vere liberi*)” (John 8:36),

¹⁰ Roland Teske, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians Introduction’, in *Answer to the Pelagians II* (ed. John Rotelle; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/24; New York: New City Press, 1998), 99.

¹¹ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’ in *Answer to the Pelagians II* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/24; New York: New City Press, 1998); trans. of *Contra duas epistulas Pelagianorum*.

¹² Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 1.2.4.

¹³ Augustine, ‘The Perfection of Human Righteousness’ in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 4.9; trans. of *De perfectione justitiae hominis*.

free (*liberi*), that is, to live good and righteous lives. It is far from being true that free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) perished in the sinner. In fact, all people sin by free choice.¹⁴

According to Augustine, there is no outside coercion to sin, “they are free from righteousness only by the choice of the will”.¹⁵ And yet, all are dependent on God’s grace “since human beings do not live good lives unless they become children of God”.¹⁶

In contrast to the proposition that Augustine’s view of fallen man was *non posse non peccare* (not able to not sin), Augustine himself wrote:

It is not true, then, as some claim that we say and as this fellow also dares to write, that we hold that “all are forced,” as if against their will, “into sin by the constraints of the flesh.” Rather, if they are already at that age at which they can use the choice of their own mind, they are held in sin by their own will and are hurled down from sin to sin by their own will.¹⁷

Throughout the second Pelagian controversy as well as the first, Augustine maintained that it was not that humanity is *unable* to resist sin, but rather that humanity is *unwilling* to resist sin. It is not that we cannot avoid sin, but that we will not turn from sin unless God first changes our heart:

None are forced by the power of God against their will either to do evil or to do good, but if God abandons them, they turn towards evil in accord with their merits and, if God helps them, they are turned toward good without any merits. After all, human beings are not good, if they do not will to be, but the grace of God helps one even to this point, namely, so that one wills to be. For Scripture did not say without reason, *It is God, after all, who produces in you both the willing and the action in accord with good will* (Phil 2:13).¹⁸

Since our wills always choose what our hearts desire the most, this movement of the will requires nothing less than the gracious work of God in us at the deepest level – the heart:

They are drawn, then, in marvellous ways to willing by the one who knows how to work interiorly in the hearts of human beings, not so that human beings believe unwillingly – that is impossible – but so that they become people willing to believe from people who were unwilling.¹⁹

¹⁴ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 1.2.5.

¹⁵ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 1.2.5.

¹⁶ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 1.2.5.

¹⁷ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 1.3.7.

¹⁸ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 1.18.36.

¹⁹ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 1.19.37.

For Augustine, God's transformation of the heart does not change us from people who *cannot* obey to people who *can* obey (a prevenient grace), but from people who *will not* obey to people who *will* obey (an effectual grace).²⁰

Turning to the second letter written by the Pelagian bishops, Augustine again defends himself against the charge of Manicheanism by contrasting the error of the Manichees with the error of the Pelagians:

The Manichees blame concupiscence of the flesh, not as a defect added to nature, but as an eternally evil nature; the Pelagians do not see it as a defect, but even praise it as a natural good. The Catholic Church refutes each of them. To the Manichees she says, "It is not a nature, but a defect." To the Pelagians she says, "It does not come from the Father, but from the world." In that way both of them should allow it to be cured like poor health, the former by ceasing to believe it incurable, the latter by ceasing to declare it worthy of praise.²¹

Among the other differences between these two positions is a confusion of what we *can/cannot* do with what we *will/will not* do: the Manichees saw that we *will not* turn from evil, but then falsely concluded that we *cannot* turn from evil and so blamed our created nature; and the Pelagians saw that we *can* turn from evil, but then falsely concluded that we *will* turn from evil if we just try harder and so denied the sinfulness of our hearts and the graciousness of God's grace. By defending our free-will against the Manichees, Augustine places our guilt squarely on us; and by defending God's grace against the Pelagians, Augustine gives the praise for salvation solely to God. In doing so, Augustine framed both positions as extremes which commit opposite errors:

With these diseases that are opposed to each other, the Manichees and the Pelagians do battle with each other; though their aim is different, their vanity is the same. They are divided by their different views, but are akin to each other by the perversity of their mind.²²

The distinction between what we *cannot* do and what we *will not* do, is sometimes obscured in the otherwise very useful modern translation from New City Press. In the following reply to the

²⁰ Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 330-331.

²¹ Augustine, 'Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians', 2.2.2.

²² Augustine, 'Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians', 2.2.2.

objections raised by the Pelagian bishops, Augustine's use of the Latin word *valeō* (which normally means 'to have sufficient strength, to be strong enough'²³) is unfortunately translated as 'capable':

This is our answer to them: We do not say that by the sin of Adam the nature of human beings lost free choice, but that free choice is capable (*valare* lit. 'sufficient'²⁴) only of sin in human beings who are subject to the devil. It is not capable (*valare* lit. 'sufficient'²⁵) of loving a good and pious life, unless the will of the human being has been set free by the grace of God.²⁶

Translating *valeō* as 'capable' here is problematic because it contradicts Augustine's earlier work on the capability of the will.²⁷ For Augustine, free-will is a necessary condition for living aright, but not a sufficient condition.²⁸ Unless we are willing to propose contradictions in the theology of Augustine that Augustine himself denied,²⁹ we must admit that Augustine viewed the human will as *capable* of choosing what is right, but not *sufficient* in and of itself to do so. It is not that we *cannot* choose the good, but that we *will not* choose the good without God's help. In Augustine's mind, this was a valid and relevant distinction to make, even if our ability to choose the good without God is never realised.³⁰

The Pelagian objection confused theological determinism and fatalism. They interpreted God's determination of the future as trapping human beings in an inescapable fate. In contrast, Augustine insisted that God does not force anyone's hand to sin, but he has handed all over to their free choice to sin, save those whom he rescues by his unmerited grace. There is a sense in which God has *determined* that all will freely sin and become subject to judgment, and determined the elect for salvation by his eternal decree. However, this does not necessarily imply fatalism: the view that it is

²³ P.G.W. Glare, 'valeō', *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (2 vols; 2nd ed; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.2211-2212.

²⁴ Glare, 'valeō', *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2.2211-2212.

²⁵ Glare, 'valeō', *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2.2211-2212.

²⁶ Augustine, 'Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians', 2.5.9.

²⁷ Augustine, 'On Free Will' in *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (trans. John Burleigh; The Library of Christian Classics 6; London: SCM Press, 1953), 3.18.50; trans. *De libero arbitrio*; quoted in 'Nature and Grace' in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 67.80; trans. of *De natura et gratia*..

²⁸ Augustine, 'On Free Will', 2.1.3; Augustine, 'Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians', 2.5.9.

²⁹ Augustine, *Revisions* (ed. Roland Teske; trans. Boniface Ramsey; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/2; New York: New City Press, 2010), 1.9.4.

³⁰ Augustine, 'The Spirit and the Letter' in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 1.1; trans. *De spiritu et littera*.

not within our power to do anything to prevent what will happen. Theological determinism is concerned with what will or will not happen, but fatalism is concerned with what can and cannot happen, and these are not identical. For God to determine something *through* the free choice of one of his human creatures (for example, the fall), then there has to be a sense in which the human creature has freely chosen it, where their choice was the act of choosing between two or more possibilities, since if there is only one possibility, there is literally no choice. At the same time, such choices can be *determined* by God, if it is the case that the human creature *will not* choose otherwise. For us mere mortals, certainty about the future can only come about by eliminating alternate possibilities. But God is not bound by such limitations. He who sits in the heavens has perfect foreknowledge of what we *will* choose, despite the fact that we *can* choose between alternate possibilities (as Adam did in the fall). When faced with the charge of fatalism, Augustine responded by affirming the theological determinism implied by his doctrine of God's grace, and then rejecting the view of fatalism in the very next sentence:

We say, nonetheless, that all are born subject to sin on account of the defect they inherit and are, therefore, under the power of the devil until they are reborn in Christ [theological determinism]. We do not defend fate in the name of grace because we say that no human merits precede God's grace [fatalism]. Some may want to refer to the will of almighty God by the term "fate." We ourselves avoid novel words foreign to the faith, but we have no desire to fight over words.³¹

Augustine was insistent in his denial of fate, and maintained that the Pelagians were imposing a false dichotomy:

Where did they get the idea of raising the objection against us that we defend fate under the name of grace? After I thought about this a bit more carefully, I first looked at their next words. After all, they thought that they should raise the objection against us in this way: "Under the name of grace," they say, "they defend fate so that they say that, unless God has breathed into an *unwilling and resisting* human being the desire for good, even for an imperfect good, one *can* neither turn away from evil nor undertake the good".³²

Augustine recognised their error as conflating the view that we are "unwilling and resisting" with a fatalism in which "one *can* neither turn away from evil nor undertake the good". Again Augustine

³¹ Augustine, 'Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians', 2.5.9.

³² Augustine, 'Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians', 2.5.10 (emphasis added).

writes: “For where there is no merit, you conclude that there is fate, and for this reason you want us to understand human merit in the grace of God so that you are not forced to admit fate”.³³ For Augustine, the issue lay in their move from the view that there *is* no merit in fallen man, to a fate in which there *cannot* be merit in fallen man. However, Augustine maintained that our wills are not controlled by fate, nor can the grace of God be conflated with such fatalism:

Those who defend fate maintain that not only actions and events, but even our wills themselves are dependent upon the position of the stars, which they call constellations, at the moment when each person is conceived or born. But the grace of God holds sway not only over all the stars and heavens, but even over the angels. The defenders of fate, then, attribute to fate the good things and the bad things in human lives. But in the bad things which human beings suffer God punishes their sins with the recompense they deserve, while he bestows good things by his merciful will through a grace that is unowed. He does each of these, not through a temporary conjunction of the stars, but through the profound and eternal plan that combines his severity and his goodness. We see, then, that neither of these pertains to fate.³⁴

While the defenders of fate “attribute to fate the good things and bad things in human lives”, Augustine attributed the good things to God’s grace, and the bad things to human sin. For Augustine, God’s eternal plan does not pertain to fatalism.

Augustine defended the difference between his view and that of the fatalists by pointing to an asymmetry between salvation and judgment. Whereas salvation is by grace and entirely undeserved, condemnation is based on what has been done and is entirely deserved. Augustine even used the concept of merit in this connection:

God makes one vessel for an honourable purpose and another for a dishonourable purpose. The good is given without merit (*immerito*) and gratuitously, because the one to whom it is given comes from the same mass, but evil is paid back according to merit (*merito*) and as something owed.³⁵

Augustine supports this point with Paul’s description of Jacob and Esau in Romans 9, noting that Esau was not condemned purely because of a lack of grace but rather because he was “guilty and condemned to just punishment”.³⁶ By contrast, Jacob was elected purely because of God’s grace:

³³ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 2.6.11.

³⁴ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 2.6.12.

³⁵ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 2.7.13.

³⁶ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 2.7.15.

On this account you are surely being foolish, for, though the truth says, *not because of works, but because of his call* (Rom 9:12), you say that Jacob was loved because of the future works which God foresaw that he would do. In the way you speak in opposition to the apostle who says, *not because of works*, as if he could not have said: “Not because of his present works, but because of future works.” In fact, he said, *Not because of works*, in order to emphasise grace: *But if it was done by grace, it is not because of works; otherwise, grace is no longer grace* (Rom 11:6).³⁷

Augustine resisted the symmetry of both the Pelagians who argued from Esau’s condemnation by works to Jacob’s salvation by works, and the Manichees who argued from a salvation by grace to a condemnation by fate. Both errors assume a strict symmetry in how humans are saved and condemned, when pits the deservedness of God’s justice against the undeservedness of God’s grace.

Augustine continued his *Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians* by defending his doctrine of grace against the Pelagian accusation of antinomianism.³⁸ As he did in *The Spirit and the Letter*,³⁹ Augustine mounts a sustained argument, not against the law, but against relying on the law rather than on God’s grace.⁴⁰ He writes:

For this reason all the holy men and women, whether from Abel of old to John the Baptist or from the apostles up to the present time and from now to the end of the world, are to be praised in the Lord, not in themselves.⁴¹

Augustine consistently rejected the optimistic anthropology of the Pelagians, but he also consistently rejected the fatalistic view of the Manichees: “They, however, do not accept what the truth says: that sin took its beginning from free choice and that from it comes every evil whether of angels or of human beings”.⁴² For Augustine, free choice played a role in refuting both:

The fact that we say that our choice, which is free to do evil, needs to be set free by the grace of God in order to do good is against the Pelagians. But the fact that we say that this evil arose from a choice that was previously not evil is against the Manichees.⁴³

³⁷ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 2.7.15.

³⁸ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 3.1-3.

³⁹ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’ in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 4.6 – 14.25; trans. *De spiritu et littera*.

⁴⁰ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 3.4-7.

⁴¹ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 3.8.24.

⁴² Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 3.9.25.

⁴³ Augustine, ‘Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians’, 3.9.25.

In contrast to the Pelagians, Augustine argued for theological determinism in which all have sinned and are dependent on God's grace; and in contrast to the Manichees, Augustine argued against a fatalism in which we have no power of contrary choice.

Augustine's principal issue with the Pelagians was not their affirmation of free choice, but their use of free choice to deny our sinful nature,⁴⁴ just as Augustine's principal issue with the Manichees was not their affirmation of our sinful nature, but their use of our sinful nature to deny free choice. While the Manichees held that we sin by nature and the Pelagians believed that we sin by choice, Augustine consistently argued that we sin by nature *and* by choice, and refused to accept a false dichotomy between them: without the grace of God, we all *naturally choose* to sin. According to Augustine,

All who are in conformity with the rule of the Catholic faith condemn and avoid both of them [Pelagians and Manichees]... They uphold free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) so that they do not say that angelic and human evil arose from an eternally evil nature of some sort, for there is none such, but from choice itself – a point which undoes the Manichean heresy. But they, nonetheless, hold that a captive will cannot again breathe with healthy freedom (*salubrem libertatem*) except by the grace of God – a point which undoes the Pelagian heresy.⁴⁵

Augustine again distinguishes between the free choice (the negative freedom *from* coercion) that we all have, and the healthy freedom (the positive freedom *for* right living) that the saints are given by the grace of God. Throughout Augustine's *Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians*, Augustine argued against the Manichees that we have free choice, and so we cannot blame our sin on fate; and against the Pelagians that we do not have true freedom without the grace of God, and so we cannot claim even part of the praise for our salvation that belongs to God alone.⁴⁶ In the midst of these early discussions on the compatibility of God's sovereignty and human freedom, Augustine saw the two being pitted against each other, but refused to hold up one at the expense of the other. For Augustine, we are saved by the grace of God, which implies that God has an eternal place upon which he is sovereign over; *and* human beings retain the power of contrary choice from our created order, despite its universal misuse to choose sin since the fall.

⁴⁴ Augustine, 'Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians', 4.2.2.

⁴⁵ Augustine, 'Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians', 4.3.3.

⁴⁶ Augustine, 'Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians', 4.4.4-8; 4.6.12-16.

The Evil Disorder of Our Good Desires (*Answer to Julian*)

Based on the level of care and detail and length of Augustine's replies, Augustine's most formidable opponent in the Pelagian controversies was Julian of Eclanum.⁴⁷ In 421 A.D. Augustine received Julian's writings *To Tubantius*, to which he wrote a detailed response titled *Answer to Julian*.⁴⁸ Augustine sought to give "testimonies of the saints who defended the Catholic faith after the time of the apostles", as well as address Julian's writings *To Tubantius*.⁴⁹ In the following years (423 – 426 A.D.), Julian read Augustine's earlier work *Marriage and Desire*, and wrote a response *To Florus*.⁵⁰ Augustine then began his response to that, but died in 430 A.D. leaving an *Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian*.⁵¹ The main point of contention was Original Sin.⁵² For Julian, inheriting a sinful nature from Adam sounded more like the dualism of the Manichees than the teaching of the Catholic Church, and so Augustine demonstrated how the teaching of the Catholic Church has both implicitly affirmed the doctrine of Original Sin, and explicitly rejected the teachings of Pelagianism.⁵³

After a historical survey to show what the Church had always taught, Augustine recapitulates both Julian's accusation and his defence against it:

In these arguments you say, "If God creates human beings, they cannot be born with any evil. If marriage is good, nothing evil can come from it. If all sins are forgiven in baptism, the children of those who have been reborn cannot contract original sin. If God is just, he cannot condemn in the children the sins of the parents, since he forgives even the personal sins of the parents. If human nature is capable of perfect righteousness, it cannot have natural defects." To these arguments we say that God is the creator of human beings, that is, of both soul and body, that marriage is good, that through the baptism of Christ all sins are forgiven, that God is just, and that human nature is capable of (*capacem* lit. 'capable of

⁴⁷ Roland Teske, 'Marriage and Desire Introduction', in *Answer to the Pelagians II* (ed. John Rotelle; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/24; New York: New City Press, 1998), 13.

⁴⁸ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian' in *Answer to the Pelagians II* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/24; New York: New City Press, 1998); trans. of *Contra Julianum*.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *Revisions*, 2.62; Roland Teske, 'Answer to Julian Introduction' in *Answer to the Pelagians II* (ed. John Rotelle; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/24; New York: New City Press, 1998), 223.

⁵⁰ Roland Teske, 'Answer to the Pelagians III General Introduction' in *Answer to the Pelagians III* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/25; New York: New City Press, 1999), 14.

⁵¹ Augustine, 'Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian'; trans. of *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum*.

⁵² Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 1.2.4.

⁵³ Dominic Keech, 'Soteriological Controversies' in *Augustine in Context* (ed. Tarmo Toom; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 158; Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 1.3-7; 2.2-8.

having/getting/doing/producing'⁵⁴) perfect righteousness. And yet, though all of these statements are true, we also say that human beings are born subject to the damaged origin which they inherit from the first human being and that for this reason they face condemnation unless they are reborn in Christ.⁵⁵

Here we see a much more accurate rendering of the word 'capable', translating the adjective *capācis* (from which we get the English word 'capable') which means 'capable of having or getting, capable of an action or emotion, or capable of producing'.⁵⁶ Augustine affirms that human nature is still capable of perfect righteousness, even though it has only been realised in one case (Christ). It is not that we *cannot* achieve a perfect righteousness because of an external constraint, but that we *will not* achieve righteousness because, ever since the fall, our inner most heart has been fixated on disordered loves. We are still capable (*capācis*) of righteousness; however, our free choice is not sufficient (*valeō*) for right living in and of itself. In Augustine's words:

As we struggle in this war, during which human life upon the earth is a trial, we are not without sin, not because that which is called sin in this sense is at work in our members, resisting the law of the mind, even when we do not consent to it for what is forbidden. For insofar as it pertains to us, we would be always without sin, if we never consented to it to do evil.⁵⁷

In responding directly to Julian's writings *To Tubantius*, Augustine exposed Julian's theology to be the Pelagian salvation by works:

Have you yourself not said, "The governance of the body has been entrusted to the soul so that the reward of action is common to each of them, and the soul experiences either the joys of having practiced virtue or the punishment of its rebellion along with the affliction of the flesh which it did not correctly rule in this life?"⁵⁸

For Augustine, this was the same Pelagian underestimation of 'the affliction of the flesh' which led to the cheapening, if not the whole-sale denial, of God's grace. Augustine argued that the suffering of infants proves that children are born into a fallen world stained by sin, rather than into Adam and Eve's state of neutrality before the fall:

⁵⁴ Glare, 'capax', *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1.294.

⁵⁵ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 2.9.31.

⁵⁶ Glare, 'capax', *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1.294.

⁵⁷ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 2.10.33.

⁵⁸ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 3.4.10.

You are mistaken, therefore, in thinking that “there is no sin in little ones, because sin cannot exist without a will, and they have no will.” That is, after all, a correct statement with regard to the personal sin of everyone, but not with regard to the original infection of the first sin. If it did not exist, little ones would not be subject to any evil and would not, under the mighty power of the just God, suffer any evil either in their body or in their soul. That infection, nonetheless, took its beginning from the evil will of the first human beings. And so, there is no origin for any sin except an evil will”.⁵⁹

Anticipating Julian’s objection, Augustine writes:

Naturally, as an excellent logician, you will not allow me to slip away; rather you will question me firmly and briefly whether in the case of little ones I consider the nature or the action guilty. And in answer to the alternatives you say: “If the action, show me what they did; if the nature, show me who made it.” As if a bad action does not make the nature guilty!⁶⁰

Contrary to Julian’s anthropological assumptions, Augustine insists that bad actions do impact our nature, and that it is naive to think that we are in the state of neutrality that Adam and Eve were in before the fall:

There is an evil in human beings from which they need to be healed by the saviour, set free by the redeemer, washed by the bath, rescued by exorcism, and absolved through the blood which has been shed for the forgiveness of sins. This evil is not the result of the bodies, the sexes, or their union, but of the original and ancient sin.⁶¹

In responding directly to Julian, Augustine focussed the heart of the debate on whether our strong desires (*concupiscentia* lit. ‘strong/ardent desire’⁶²) were good or evil:

You say “One who observes moderation in this natural concupiscence (*concupiscentiae naturalis*) makes good use of something good; one who does not observe moderation makes bad use of something good”... I reply to these statements of yours as follows: One who observes moderation in carnal concupiscence (*concupiscentiae carnalis*) makes good use of something evil; one who does not observe moderation makes bad use of something evil... In this debate the whole question between us rests upon whether one makes a good use of something good or something evil.⁶³

Augustine agreed with Julian on free-will, and on the fact that we always freely choose that which we desire most. The heart of the debate was on the morality of our natural desires, Julian argued that they

⁵⁹ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’, 3.5.11.

⁶⁰ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’, 3.6.13.

⁶¹ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’, 3.9.18.

⁶² Glare, ‘concupiscō’, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1.430.

⁶³ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’, 3.21.42.

were part of the created good, but Augustine maintained that they were disordered by Adam's original sin:

As a result of [concupiscence] and along with it a human being is born, a good creature of God, but not free from the evil which is contracted through its origin by birth and is healed by the grace of rebirth... After all, I called "natural good" that which you praise together with me, but I called "original evil" that whose movements you fight together with me and by whose praises you fight in opposition to me. What you are at birth is not an evil, but that is an evil with which you were born and against which you fight spiritually, because you have been born again.⁶⁴

While the Manichees saw humanity as incurably evil, and the Pelagians viewed humanity as naturally good, Augustine refused to let either our created goodness or our evil dispositions, swallow the other:

There is in the one human being a good nature and an evil defect; you yourself surely admit this is the case in adulterers. You do not blame their nature because of their sin, nor do you approve their sin because of their nature.⁶⁵

Without recognising this distinction, Julian misconstrued Augustine's position that without God's help we *will not* govern our desires and hold them in check, with the view that we *cannot* govern our desires nor hold them in check:

You say I falsely declare that the strength of sexual desire is so great that reason cannot govern it and hold it in check. Look, I do not say that the strength of sexual desire is so great that human reason, when set afire and helped by God, cannot govern it and hold it in check. But why do you deny that something that kills if it is not held in check is an evil? Look, I shout out as loudly as I can the point which you claim I deny: The legion of apostles fought against sexual desire which, of course, resisted them.⁶⁶

In responding to Julian's second book, Augustine argued that, like the Pelagians before him, Julian was idolising free choice:

Insofar, after all, as you want "human beings," as you say, "to be stirred to something praiseworthy by the impulses of a generous heart," you want them to boast not in the Lord, but in free choice. That is, you want them first to give something to the Lord so that he may repay them, and in that way grace is no longer grace, because it is not gratuitous.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 3.21.46.

⁶⁵ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 3.21.47.

⁶⁶ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 3.26.65.

⁶⁷ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 4.3.15.

And yet, rather than opposing free choice, Augustine argued that people do not (rather than cannot) move towards the good without the grace of God:

Why, then, do you believe that, as you do, I too “called heavenly gifts the actions of the human will,” as if the will of a human being moved toward something good without the grace of God so that it received its action as a debt owed to it by God? Had you forgotten that along with the Scripture we said in opposition to you, *The will is prepared by the Lord* (Prv 8:35 LXX) or that God also produces in you the act of willing?⁶⁸

Augustine clearly stated that original sin has impacted our will such that it *does not* move towards something good without the grace of God, however, while Augustine placed virtue outside of our desires, he does not place it outside of our nature or reason:

Virtue was, after all, not defined inappropriately by those who said “Virtue is a habit of the mind suitable to the limit of nature and to reason.” They spoke the truth, but they did not know what was suitable for setting free and making happy the nature of mortal beings.⁶⁹

By conflating what we cannot do with what we will not do without God’s help, Julian posits a dilemma to which he believes Augustine is unable to refute. However, Augustine’s response depends on this very distinction, that sin *can* be conquered, but that if we claim we *have* no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us:

If I concede, you claim, that the evil of sexual desire is unconquerable, I declare myself an advocate of shamefulness. If, however, I admit that I said it was a natural evil, but one that can be conquered, that is, avoided, you immediately claim victory for the second half of your thesis. For you say, “Human beings can avoid all sin, since they can conquer the evil of concupiscence. After all, if sexual desire is a natural evil and is conquered by the love of virtue, for much better reason,” you say, “all those vices which depend only upon the will can be overcome.” In many ways we have already often replied to these claims of yours. For, while we live in this life *the flesh has desires opposed to the spirit and the spirit has desires opposed to the flesh* (Gal 5:17). However much we have the upper hand in this conflict and do not offer our members to sin as weapons of iniquity in obedience to its desire, nonetheless, *if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us* (1 Jn 1:8). I say nothing about the senses of the body and the excesses of pleasure that overtake us in things which we use legitimately, and even more in the movements and dispositions of our thought. In vain, then, do you claim victory for the second half of your thesis, unless with sacrilegious pride you reject the statement of the apostle John.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’, 4.3.15.

⁶⁹ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’, 4.3.19.

⁷⁰ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’, 5.7.27.

Rather than accepting Julian's dichotomy of either affirming that "sexual desire is unconquerable", or that "sexual desire... is conquered by the love of virtue", Augustine rejects Julian's framing of the dilemma and advocates for a third option. Namely, that while we can gain "the upper hand in this conflict... nonetheless, *if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us* (1 Jn 1:8)". For Augustine, the issue was not whether we *can* pursue virtue rather than sin, but whether we *will* love virtue without the grace of God. Again he writes:

No one is clean from filth, not even an infant whose life has lasted one day on earth (Job 14:5 LXX). After all, who would deny that mercy is offered to all, both the great and the small, by him who is the salvation of human beings and animals and who *makes his sun rise upon the good and the bad* (Mt 5:45)?⁷¹

In responding to Julian's third book, Augustine's rejection of a human *inability* to resist sin (as opposed to an *unwillingness*) is evident in his description of our hearts being unrepentant insofar as it is up to us. Of believers, he writes that:

[God] draws to repentance those he has predestined, even if by the stubbornness of their unrepentant heart, *insofar as it is up to them*, they store up anger for themselves on the day of anger and of the revelation of the just judgment of God who will repay all according to their works.⁷²

Insofar as it is up to us, believers only store up anger for themselves, not because of a physical inability but because of our "unrepentant heart". Similarly, of unbelievers, Augustine writes:

He draws none of them to a salutary spiritual repentance by which one is reconciled to God in Christ regardless of whether he shows them greater or equal patience. All come from that same mass or perdition and condemnation and, *insofar as it is up to them*, store up for themselves by the hardness of their unrepentant hearts anger for the day of anger on which all are repaid according to their works.⁷³

In both cases, we are unrepentant and therefore condemned 'insofar as it is up to us'. The phrase 'insofar as it is up to us' implies that the outcome is not a foregone conclusion, but rather that we have a hand in deciding which way it will go, as it is 'up to us' rather than outside of our control. This power to decide which way it will go is indistinguishable from the power of contrary choice. The fact

⁷¹ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 5.13.49.

⁷² Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 5.4.14 (emphasis added).

⁷³ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 5.4.14 (emphasis added).

that we are unrepentant and therefore condemned ‘insofar as it is up to us’, indicates that it is not the case that we *cannot* repent, but that we *will not* repent (insofar as it is up to us). Insofar as it is up to God: “He does not make their wills evil, but he makes use of them as he wills, though he cannot will anything unjust”.⁷⁴ Moreover, at the end of this book, Augustine argued that “human beings are works of God free from sin, but sin has, nonetheless, come to be from them, insofar as, through free choice which was given them without sin, they have withdrawn from him who is without sin”.⁷⁵

In responding to Julian’s final book, Augustine highlights their agreement on free-will:

You list points which the Christian faith truly does not doubt; we too preach almost all of those which you mention, and we are convinced that there should be no doubt about them whatsoever. Hence, we admit as true even your statement that “without the act of free choice there can be no human sin.” After all, that which is contracted from our origin would not be a sin without the act of free choice by which the first human being sinned.⁷⁶

However, Augustine’s major disagreement, was that we have been infected by our parents’ sin:

But the sins of our parents are in one sense called sins of others, and in another sense they are found to be our sins as well. They are the sin of others because their action was theirs, but they are ours because their offspring have been infected. If this were false, the heavy yoke upon the children of Adam from the day they emerge from the womb of their mother would surely in no way be just.⁷⁷

According to Augustine, we are not punished for sins that are in no sense ours, as that “would surely in no way be just”. But we are not the blank slate that Adam and Eve were before the fall, and it is naive to think otherwise. Nevertheless, while the natures we inherit often prevent us from fighting, they do not prevent us from being able to fight off, the inordinate desires of our hearts:

You deceive them, both men and women, to the extent that you say that I maintain that “sexual desire cannot (*nec... posse*) be reined in even in a decrepit body.” In fact, I declare that it can be (*posse*) reined in and that it ought to be reined in.⁷⁸

For Augustine, it is not the case that we are unable (*nec... posse*) to rein in our sinful desires, he explicitly says that we are able (*posse*) to rein them in, even in our post-fallen bodies. According to Augustine, we have the *power* of contrary choice, but not the *will* to choose God without his grace.

⁷⁴ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’, 5.4.15.

⁷⁵ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’, 5.16.63.

⁷⁶ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’, 6.10.28.

⁷⁷ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’, 6.10.28.

⁷⁸ Augustine, ‘Answer to Julian’, 6.11.35.

Augustine defended his view of free-will against the Manichees, and his doctrine of God's grace against the Pelagians. Nevertheless, a number of scholars have drawn a dichotomy between Augustine's view of free-will and his doctrine of grace, largely because in Augustine's *Revisions* of his *Two Books for Simplician*, he stated that in his examination of the basis of salvation in Romans 9, "I strove on behalf of the free choice of the human will, but God's grace conquered".⁷⁹ In regards to salvation, Augustine forcefully argued that we are saved by God's grace alone, for God's grace conquers our free choice to sin. But for Augustine, this did not deny the reality of our free-will, and he strongly objected to his words being used to suggest that grace denied free choice, or vice-versa. To Julian, he wrote:

You claim that I said in another book of mine that "free choice is denied, if grace is defended and, on the other hand, grace is denied, if free choice is defended." You lie; I did not say that... I said "This question, in which the dispute concerns the choice of the will and the grace of God, is so difficult to sort out that, when one defends free choice, one *seems* to deny God's grace, and when one upholds God's grace, one *is thought* to destroy free choice" and so on. But you, an honest and truthful man, suppressed the words I said and replaced them with what you made up. After all, I said that this question is difficult to sort out, but I did not say that it could not be sorted out. Far less, then, would I say what you say I said with your lies, namely, that "free choice is denied, if grace is defended, and grace is denied, if free choice is defended." Restore my words, and your slander will vanish. Put the words back in their places where I said, "seems" and where I said "is thought," so that the deceitfulness of your argument on so important a topic will be obvious. I did not say, "One denies grace," but "One *seems* to deny grace." I did not say, "One denies or destroys free choice," but "One *is thought* to destroy it".⁸⁰

Augustine was well aware that his doctrine of grace *seemed* to deny free choice, but even in a polemic against the idolatry of free-will, Augustine affirmed both grace and free choice, and regarded the suggestion of a dichotomy between them in his writings, as both slander and deceit. Indeed, Augustine would later write *Grace and Free Choice* "because there are some who defend the grace of

⁷⁹ James Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1980), 30-44; Joseph Leinhard, 'Augustine on Grace: The Early Years', in *Augustine the Bishop: A Book of Essays* (ed. Fannie Lamoine and Christopher Kleinhenz; New York: Garland, 1994), 189-191; John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14; Eric Jenkins, *Free to Say No? Free Will and Augustine's Evolving Doctrines of Grace and Election* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 38-43; Augustine, *Revisions*, 2.1.

⁸⁰ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 4.8.47-48 (emphasis added).

God so that they deny the free choice of human beings or who think that free choice is denied when grace is defended”.⁸¹ While many in the Augustinian tradition have sought to uphold both grace and free-will,⁸² when what we *cannot* do is conflated with what we *will not* do, they are drawn into a false dichotomy.⁸³ Throughout *Answer to Julian*, Augustine constantly refuted Julian’s writings by exposing the false dichotomy that Julian sought to impose between God’s grace and human freedom. A major contribution of this work was Augustine’s defence of both God’s grace *and* human freedom (and the coherence between them), whilst highlighting the opposing errors of the Pelagians (emphasising human freedom at the expense of God’s sovereignty) and the Manichees (emphasising divine sovereignty at the expense of human freedom). For Augustine, the key to cutting this Gordian knot, was to recognise the difference between our ability (*posse*) and will (*velle*).

We Have Freely Made Ourselves Slaves (*Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian*)

While Julian’s exile prevented him from reading Augustine’s *Answer to Julian*, it did not stop him from writing *To Florus* in response to Augustine’s *Marriage and Desire*.⁸⁴ This prompted Augustine to write another work, which was interrupted by his death, *Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian*, in the format of a conversation between paragraphs of Julian’s work and Augustine’s responses.⁸⁵ In discussing free-will, the definition of free choice proposed by Julian is: “the possibility of committing sin and refraining from sin”,⁸⁶ that is, “It is free to will one or the other alternative, and in that lies the essence of sin and righteousness”.⁸⁷ Rather than rejecting this definition of free choice (alternativity), Augustine’s point of contention was on whether our wills are sufficient in and of themselves to choose righteousness rather than sin:

⁸¹ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’ in *Answer to the Pelagians IV* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/26; New York: New City Press, 1999), 1.1; trans. of *De gratia et libero arbitrio*.

⁸² Peter Lombard, *The Sentences* (trans. Giulio Silano; Mediaeval Sources in Translation; Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007-2010), 2.24.1-3 (140-142); Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologia* (ed. Thomas Gilby; trans. Thomas Gilby; 22 vols; London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1963), 11.239 (1.83.1); Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison; trans. George Musgrave Giger; 3 vols; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.661-663 (10.2.3-6).

⁸³ Lombard, *Sentences*, 2.25.5-6 (157-158); Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1.571 (8.1.9).

⁸⁴ Teske, ‘Answer to the Pelagians III General Introduction’, 14.

⁸⁵ Augustine, ‘Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian’; trans. of *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum*.

⁸⁶ Augustine, ‘Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian’, 1.78.

⁸⁷ Augustine, ‘Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian’, 1.79.

Does it conceive righteousness from its own resources? That is the point at issue with you who do not know the righteousness of God and want to establish your own. For the holy will, of course, conceives righteousness by a holy thought. Scripture says of it, “A holy thought will preserve you” (Prov 2:11 LXX), but the apostle says, “Not that we are sufficient to think something as if by ourselves; rather, our sufficiency comes from God” (2 Cor 3:5). If you would understand this, you would understand that choice that is *free in a praiseworthy manner* is nothing but choice that has been set free by the grace of God.⁸⁸

In other words, Augustine agreed that free-will consists of having the power of contrary choice, but argued that we will never freely choose the contrary to sin without “the love of God which “is poured out in our hearts”, not by a choice of the will which comes from us, but “by the Holy Spirit who has been given us” (Rom 5:5)”.⁸⁹

As Julian and Augustine discussed the kind of slavery that sin imposes on us and the kind of freedom that God’s grace gives us, Augustine’s argued that we do not need the negative freedom *from* coercion (since we still have it from our created nature), but rather, that we need the true freedom *for* living rightly. On Jesus’ words “*Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin*” (Jn 8:34), Augustine comments:

It clearly addressed those who commit sin because they are slaves of sin so that, when they have received the freedom which he promises, they may cease to commit sin. For sin reigned in their mortal body so that they obeyed its desires and offered their members to sin as weapons of iniquity. Against this evil because of which they were committing sin, they were in need of the freedom which he promised. He said, *Everyone*, not who committed sin, but *who commits sin is the slave of sin* (Jn 8:34).⁹⁰

Indeed, despite Julian’s repeated accusations that Augustine was denying free choice, Augustine maintained that the kind of slavery that sin imposes on us does not remove free choice; we do not sin by nature only, but by nature *and* by choice:

When the psalmist says, *Turn away from evil* (Ps 37:27), he, of course, says this in order that one may hold back his will from serious sin. And yet, though the apostle could have correctly said: We command you not to do anything evil, he said, *We pray to God that you do nothing evil* (2 Cor 13:7). There you see why I said that no one is free to do good without the help of God, and not what you say that I said. The apostle prayed for this help for the faithful, but he

⁸⁸ Augustine, ‘Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian’, 1.79 (emphasis added).

⁸⁹ Augustine, ‘Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian’, 1.83.

⁹⁰ Augustine, ‘Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian’, 1.88.

did not remove from human nature free choice (*non ex natura hominis liberum auferebat arbitrium*).⁹¹

Augustine's argument turns on the distinction between the free choice that remains in our created human nature, and being "free to do good" which no one has "without the help of God". The difference is essentially one of having a choice (*liberum arbitrium*) and making the truly liberating choice (*vera libertas*). The former belongs to all of humanity; the latter is the nature of the faithful.

Augustine insisted that our choices remain free, even though our wills are so damaged by the fall that we will always choose to sin (freely) without the grace of God. Our choices are themselves free (the negative freedom *from* coercion), but our "choice of the will"⁹² is to choose a voluntary slavery to sin until it is set free by God (the positive freedom *for* living rightly):

No one can have free choice of the will to do the good which one wills or not to do the evil which one hates except by the grace of Christ. This does not mean that the will is carried off as captive (*captiva*) to good in the same way as to evil, but that, once set free from captivity (*a captivitate liberata*), it may be drawn to its deliverer by the sweet freedom of love, not by the bitter servitude of fear.⁹³

Indeed, the language of positive freedom *for* good and evil becomes explicit as Augustine responds to the charge that he was calling 'not free' what ought to be called 'free':

One is free for evil who by their will (*voluntate*) does evil either in action or in speech or just in thought alone. But who among human beings of a more mature age cannot do this? One is free, however, for good who by a good will (*voluntate bona*) does good either in action or in speech or just in thought alone, but no one can do this without the grace of God.⁹⁴

For Augustine, all of humanity is free to do that which they will to do, and in that sense, fallen humanity has retained the negative freedom from coercion. However, Augustine also argued that since we have fallen into sin we have lost the positive freedom for living rightly, which will only be restored by God's grace. The freedom that we lost in the fall is not the ability (*posse*) to choose the good, but the will (*velle*) to choose the good. In Augustine's words:

We, however, also say that sin cannot exist without free will, and our teaching, nonetheless, is not destroyed on this account, as you say, when we say that there is original sin. For this kind

⁹¹ Augustine, 'Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian', 3.109.

⁹² Augustine, 'Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian', 3.112.

⁹³ Augustine, 'Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian', 3.112.

⁹⁴ Augustine, 'Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian', 3.120.

of sin also came about as a result of free will, not as a result of the personal free will of the one who is born, but as a result of the will of Adam in whom we all originally existed when he damaged our common nature by his evil will.⁹⁵

For Augustine, our power of contrary choice is relevant for our moral responsibility. We do not sin because we are compelled by an outside force, but because of our inner nature and choice: “Neither an angel *nor a human being can be compelled to sin by some force*. And they would not have sinned if they had not willed to sin, for they could also have not willed to sin”.⁹⁶ For both Augustine and Julian, our will is an essential part of what makes us responsible for sin. But while Julian insisted on a dichotomy between our nature and our will/choice, Augustine maintained that we sin by both our inherited nature *and* our wilful choice:

Human beings certainly do both good and evil by their own wills, as you say, and the possibility of each of these in them has an equal weight, and God offers his help for good actions. Why, then, is the nature of mortals more inclined toward sinning, if original sin had no effect?⁹⁷

Unlike Julian, Augustine did not see our inclination to sin and our wilful choice to sin as mutually exclusive:

Let the one who says that the will cannot be attributed to a nature, show us, if he can, a will, whether evil or good, where there is no nature, or let him show us that there could be a will if there were not a nature which wills something.⁹⁸

As Augustine consistently maintained from the beginning, the fact that our choices have motivations (arising from our nature) does not mean that our choices are not free in the sense of having the power of contrary choice.⁹⁹ We sin by nature (having lost the positive freedom *for* living rightly) and by choice (retaining the negative freedom *from* coercion). The fact that we *will not* resist sin does not mean that we *cannot* resist sin, or putting it positively: “Between “He sinned” and “He could sin” there is a great difference; the former is guilt, while the latter is nature”.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, this distinction

⁹⁵ Augustine, ‘Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian’, 4.90.

⁹⁶ Augustine, ‘Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian’, 5.32.

⁹⁷ Augustine, ‘Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian’, 5.48.

⁹⁸ Augustine, ‘Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian’, 5.53.

⁹⁹ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’, 3.18.50-51.

¹⁰⁰ Augustine, ‘Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian’, 5.60.

between what we cannot do and what we will not do is required to prevent evil from being ascribed to the Creator of humanity:

It is perfectly correct not to ascribe to their creator the evil which is ascribed to these natures, because he did not create them [evil natures], when he first created them [people], so that they would be under any necessity of having an evil will, but would only have the possibility of it.¹⁰¹

Augustine's *Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian* is one of his longest, and his final work, in response to the Pelagians. One of the major contributions of this work is Augustine's careful parsing out of human freedom: both the free-will that fallen humanity has retained in our created nature (*liberum arbitrium*), and the true freedom that we have lost in the fall (*libertas*). Even in a polemic against a formidable Pelagian opponent, Augustine maintained that we have the power (*posse*) to choose between alternate possibilities, while insisting that we have lost the will (*velle*) to choose obedience rather than sin, which is only restored by God's grace. Fallen humanity, therefore, is free *from* coercion: God's law is not too difficult for us or beyond our reach (Deut 30:11), and while we are often tempted beyond what we *do* bear, we are not tempted beyond what we *can* bear (1 Cor 10:13). However, fallen humanity is not free *for* self-realisation: when we offer ourselves to someone as obedient slaves, we are slaves of the one we obey (Rom 6:16), and so everyone who sins is a slave to sin (John 8:34). While this distinction first appeared in Augustine's earlier work *The Perfection of Human Righteousness*, it is further developed and used to navigate between the extremes of both Pelagianism and Manicheism in Augustine's *Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian*.

Throughout the second Pelagian controversy, Augustine consistently maintained that fallen humanity has retained, from our creature nature, a freedom to choose between alternate possibilities, and even that this is required for ascribing moral responsibility. However, Augustine also constantly pushed back on Julian's Pelagian tendency to minimise the effect of the fall upon our hearts, which universally, but voluntarily, binds us to sin. In an important sense, our slavery to sin is voluntary; it is a slavery *of* the will rather than against it or despite it. As the second Pelagian controversy forced

¹⁰¹ Augustine, 'Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian', 5.62.

Augustine to think more deeply about the will, and trace its rudder to the heart, his anthropology developed in regard his view of original sin. However, he did not back down from his earlier work *On Free Will*, in which he argued that we *must* have the power of contrary choice if moral responsibility is to be ascribed to us.¹⁰² While the Manichees held up God's sovereignty at the expense of human freedom, and the Pelagians held up human freedom at the expense of God's sovereignty, Augustine refused to pit them against each other, and instead carefully navigated through the Scylla and Charybdis of the Pelagian salvation by works and the Manichean recourse to fate.

¹⁰² Augustine, 'On Free Will' 3.18.50.

Chapter 4 – Augustine’s Final Thought on Free-will

While Augustine wrote no other books (other than those examined above) directly responding to the Pelagians, two more of Augustine’s books are worth examining to understand his view of free-will: *Grace and Free Choice* and *Rebuke and Grace*.¹ Augustine wrote these works in response to those who thought that his view of grace eliminated free choice and the possibility of rebuke/exhortation respectively.² Since these are the last two works listed in Augustine’s *Revisions*, most scholars date them to the last few years of Augustine’s life.³ If this is the case, then they provide us with the best window into Augustine’s final thought on the subject.

The Depths of Sin and the Heights of Grace (*Grace and Free Choice*)

In the first of these works, *Grace and Free Choice*, Augustine begins by stating that his reason for writing is, “because there are some who defend the grace of God so that they deny the free choice of human beings or who think that free choice is denied when grace is defended”.⁴ Wanting to uphold both grace and free choice, Augustine defends his view of free choice by turning to Scripture:

But he has revealed to us through his holy scriptures that there is free choice of the will in human beings. I remind you, however, how he revealed this, not by human words, but by the words of God. First of all, the divine commandments would not have done human beings any good if they did not have free choice of the will by which they might keep them and come to the promised rewards. For the commandments were given to human beings so that they would not have their ignorance as an excuse, as the Lord says in the gospel concerning the Jews, “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin” (John 15:22).⁵

¹ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’ in *Answer to the Pelagians IV* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/26; New York: New City Press, 1999), trans. of *De gratia et libero arbitrio*; Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’ in *Answer to the Pelagians IV* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/26; New York: New City Press, 1999), trans. of *De correptione et gratia*.

² Roland Teske, ‘Answer to the Pelagians IV General Introduction’, in *Answer to the Pelagians IV* (ed. John Rotelle; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/26; New York: New City Press, 1999), 11.

³ Teske, ‘Answer to the Pelagians IV General Introduction’, 13.

⁴ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 1.1.

⁵ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 2.2.

Augustine reminds his readers that the apostle Paul says that we are “without excuse (Rom 1:20)”,⁶ and that James says “God is not a tempter toward evil; rather, he tempts no one (James 1:13)”.⁷ On this point, Augustine agreed with the Pelagians:

What does it mean that God orders in so many passages that all his commandments be observed and carried out? How does he give such orders if there is no free choice?... What else do they show but the free choice of the human will (*satis liberum demonstratur arbitrium*)?⁸

For Augustine, God’s imperatives are sufficient proof of free choice, and free choice is necessary for human responsibility:

Where, of course, it says, “Do not do this,” and, “Do not do that,” and where in God’s counsels the act of the will is required for doing or for not doing something, the existence of free choice is sufficiently proven. Let no one, then, accuse God in his heart, but let each person blame himself when he sins.⁹

Moreover, Augustine recognises that we use the language ‘cannot’ when we really mean ‘will not’, having the ability both to will and not to will, and thus being culpable:

But when someone says, “I cannot (*non possum*) do what is commanded because I am conquered by my concupiscence,” he, of course, no longer has his ignorance as an excuse, nor does he accuse God in his heart, but recognises his own evil in himself and grieves. The apostle, nonetheless, says to him, “Do not be conquered by evil; rather, conquer evil by good” (Rom 12:21). And the choice of the will is, of course, undoubtedly challenged in the case of one to whom it is said, “Do not be conquered.” For to will and not to will are acts which belong to the will.¹⁰

In this last sentence we see that the power of contrary choice is still an essential part of Augustine’s view of free-will. To blame one’s heart, or desires, or concupiscence, is to blame oneself: “[he] recognises his own evil in himself”. It is not that we “cannot do what is commanded”, but that we *will not* do what is commanded without God’s grace.

⁶ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 2.3.

⁷ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 2.3.

⁸ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 2.4.

⁹ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 2.4.

¹⁰ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 3.5.

In order to maintain both a robust defence of free-will, and our utter dependence on God's grace, Augustine continues to draw on an implicit distinction between what we *cannot* do and what we *will not* do, which underlies his thought on grace and free choice:

Do the very many things which are commanded in the law of God against the commission of fornication and adultery point to anything but free choice? For such commandments would not be given unless a man had a will of his own by which he might obey the divine commandments... But "each one is tempted, pulled and enticed by one's own concupiscence" (James 1:14) so that one does not observe these commandments concerning chastity. If at this point someone says, "I will to observe them, but I am conquered by my concupiscence," scripture replies to his free choice the words which I have already cited, "Do not be conquered by evil; rather, conquer evil by good" (Rom 12:21). Grace, nonetheless, helps one to do this, and unless it helps, the law will be nothing but the power of sin.¹¹

According to Augustine, we *can* conquer the concupiscence inherited from Adam, but no one *does*, since without God's grace the law *will be* nothing but the power of sin. We *can* obey God's commands, but it is only with God's grace that we *will* obey them:

For, if the saviour had said, "Watch in order that you may not enter into temptation", he would seem only to have admonished the will of a human being, but when he added, "and pray", he showed that God helps in order that one may not enter into temptation. It was said to free choice, "Son, do not give up the discipline of the Lord" (Prov 3:11), and the Lord said, "I have prayed for you, Peter, that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:32). A human being is then helped by grace in such a way that his will does not receive the commandments to no purpose.¹²

For Augustine, free choice stands behind every sin, and this is precisely what makes us responsible for sin. At the same time, God's unmerited grace stands behind every good work, and this is precisely why God is to be praised rather than us:

For, if grace is withdrawn, a human being falls, no longer standing upright, but cast headlong by free choice. Hence, even when a human being begins to have good merits, he ought not to attribute them to himself, but to God.¹³

For Augustine, this did not mean that we cannot obey God's commands (since we have the negative freedom *from* coercion), but rather that we will not obey God's commands without God's grace (since God's grace gives us the positive freedom *for* living rightly):

¹¹ Augustine, 'Grace and Free Choice', 4.8.

¹² Augustine, 'Grace and Free Choice', 4.9.

¹³ Augustine, 'Grace and Free Choice', 6.13.

[As Paul] said, *I have kept the faith* (2 Tim 4:7), but that man said this who elsewhere said, *I have obtained mercy that I might be faithful* (1 Cor 7:25). For he did not say, “I have obtained mercy because I was faithful,” but *that I might be faithful*.¹⁴

Recognising that an emphasis on free choice can lead to legalism, and an emphasis on God’s grace can lead to licentiousness, Augustine was careful to guard against both:

For we should not suppose that he took away free choice, because he said, *For it is God who produces in you the willing and the action in accord with good will*. If that were the case, he would not have said above, *With fear and trembling work out your own salvation* (Phil 2:12). For, when they are commanded to work, he challenges their free choice [contra licentiousness], but they are to work *with fear and trembling* so that they do not become filled with pride over their good works [contra legalism], as if they were their own, by attributing to themselves the good they do.¹⁵

While both hearers and doers of the law have the negative freedom from coercion, it is only doers of the law who have the positive freedom for living rightly: “Grace, of course, helps so that each of us is a doer of the law who, if we were placed under the law without grace, would only be hearers of the law”.¹⁶ Augustine consistently describes this positive freedom as the freedom to live rightly (such that the law is observed, our nature is set free and sin does not have dominion over us), in contrast to merely knowing the divine law or the forgiveness of sins:

Neither the knowledge of the divine law nor nature nor the forgiveness of sins alone is that grace which is given through Jesus Christ our Lord; rather, that grace brings it about that the law is observed, that nature is set free, and that sin does not have dominion over us.¹⁷

The implicit distinction between what we cannot do and what we will not do without God’s grace is further seen in Augustine’s defence of both the gratuity of grace and the reality of free choice. In defending the gratuity of grace, Augustine wrote:

If faith comes only from free choice and is not given by God, why do we pray that those who do not want to believe may come to believe? We would surely do this to no purpose if we were not perfectly correct in believing that almighty God can convert to the faith even perverse wills which are opposed to the faith. He, of course, knocks at the door of the free choice of a human being where Scripture says, *If today you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts* (Ps 95:8). But unless God could also take away hardness of the heart, he would not say

¹⁴ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 7.16-17.

¹⁵ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 9.21.

¹⁶ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 12.24.

¹⁷ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 14.27.

through the prophet, *I shall take away from them a heart of stone, and I shall give them a heart of flesh* (Ezk 11:19).¹⁸

And in defending free choice, Augustine wrote:

We, however, always have free will, but it is not always good... For the words of Scripture, *If you will to, you will observe the commandments* (Sir 15:16 LXX), amount to this, namely, that someone who will to observe them and cannot should recognise that he does not yet fully will to observe the commandments and that he should pray that he may have a will great enough to observe the commandments. In that way he is, of course, helped to do what he is commanded. For it is useful to will when we are able, and our ability is useful when we will. For what good does it do if we will what we cannot do or do not will what we can do?¹⁹

In both cases, it is possible (*posse*) to observe the commandments and not harden your hearts, but we will not will (*velle*) to do either unless God gives us a heart of flesh that desires to observe his commandments:

For it is certain that we observe the commandments if we will to, but because *the will is prepared by the Lord* (Prv 8:35 LXX), we must ask him that we may will strongly enough that by willing we observe them.²⁰

For Augustine, the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart, not the freedom (or lack thereof) of the will.²¹ It is not that we cannot love God, but that “we would not love God unless he first loved us”.²²

Throughout *Grace and Free Choice*, Augustine is adamant that “the grace of God does not destroy the human will [maintaining freedom from coercion], but changes it from an evil will to a good will and once it is good, helps it [giving freedom for right living]”.²³ Instead of drawing a dichotomy between grace and free-will, Augustine upheld both, defending God’s grace for the sake of his glory, and defending free-will for the sake of God’s justice:

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. For it ought to be fixed indelibly in your heart that there is no injustice in God. And for this reason, when you read in the words of the truth that God deceives human beings or dulls or hardens

¹⁸ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 14.29.

¹⁹ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 15.31.

²⁰ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 16.32.

²¹ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 17.33-36; 18.37.

²² Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 18.38.

²³ Augustine, ‘Grace and Free Choice’, 20.41.

their hearts, have no doubt but that their evil merits came first so that they suffer these punishments justly.²⁴

In order to hold God's grace and justice together, Augustine argued for an asymmetry in God's active intervention for good (by grace), and God permitting sin and evil (by our free-will):

There are evil merits in the one he permits to be deceived or to be hardened. But in the one to whom he shows mercy recognise with faith and certitude the grace of God who does not return evil for evil, but good for evil. And do not deny free choice to Pharaoh because God says in many passages, "I have hardened Pharaoh", or, "I have hardened", or, "I will harden the heart of Pharaoh" (Exod 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:20, 27). After all, it was not the case that Pharaoh did not harden his own heart. For, when the plague of flies was lifted from the Egyptians, we read this of him in the words of scripture, "Pharaoh hardened his heart again this time, and he refused to let the people go" (Exod 8:32). And for this reason God hardened Pharaoh's heart by his just judgment, while Pharaoh himself hardened his heart by free choice.²⁵

One of the major contributions of *Grace and Free Choice* was Augustine's defence of this asymmetry between how we are saved (by grace) and condemned (by choice). The Pelagians rightly saw that people are condemned by our works, but then moved towards a salvation by works; and the Manichees rightly saw that we are saved by God's grace, but then moved towards a condemnation purely because a lack of grace. However, Augustine's defence of the asymmetry between how we are saved (by grace) and condemned (by choice), guards against both errors.

We Need God's Grace Because We Have Free-will (*Rebuke and Grace*)

If Augustine's *Revisions* are taken as an indicator of the order of his work, his final piece of writing was *Rebuke and Grace*. Once again he was responding to a misunderstanding of his view of grace: "I was told that someone had said that no one ought to be rebuked if he does not carry out God's commands; instead, he should only be prayed for, so that he would carry them out".²⁶ *Rebuke and Grace* makes clear that free-will is required for rebuke and exhortation, and again distinguishes between the free choice that implies that we *can* choose good or evil, and the true freedom without which we *will not* freely choose to do good:

²⁴ Augustine, 'Grace and Free Choice', 21.43.

²⁵ Augustine, 'Grace and Free Choice', 23.45.

²⁶ Augustine, *Revisions* (ed. Roland Teske; trans. Boniface Ramsey; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/2; New York: New City Press, 2010), 2.67; trans. of *Retractationes*.

One must admit, then, that we have free choice (*liberum arbitrium*) both for doing evil and for doing good. But in doing evil one is free of righteousness and enslaved to sin, while in doing good no one can be free unless he has been set free by him who said, “If the Son sets you free, then you will truly be free (*vere liberi*)” (John 8:36).²⁷

While these two sentences appear to be in contradiction (“we have free choice both for doing evil and for doing good” and “in doing good no one can be free unless he has been set free”), their coherence is demonstrated if we distinguish between the negative freedom *from* coercion (“we have free choice both for doing evil and for doing good”) and the positive freedom *for* living rightly (“in doing good no one can be free unless he has been set free by [Christ]”).²⁸ The reason why “no one can be free unless he has been set free”²⁹ is not because we do not have the power of contrary choice, but because we do not have the will to choose the good:

For we must understand the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. It alone sets human beings free from evil, and without it they do (*faciunt*, present indicative) nothing good whether in thinking, in willing and loving, or in acting. Grace not merely teaches them so that they know what they should do, but also grants that they do with love what they know.³⁰

Augustine does not say that people *cannot* do anything good in thought word or deed, but that without being set free from our sinful desires “they do (*faciunt*, present indicative) nothing good” in thought, word or deed.³¹ However, when these two are confused, we fail to understand both Augustine’s view of sin and salvation.³²

For Augustine, our utter dependence on God’s grace does not remove our free-will, which Augustine saw as necessary for both moral obligation and responsibility.³³ However, Augustine’s conversation partner took issue with how we are at fault if the source of what we ought to have is beyond us:

“How,” he asks, “do I not have through my own fault what I have not received from him, since unless it is given by him there is no other source from which I might have so good and

²⁷ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 1.2.

²⁸ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 1.2.

²⁹ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 1.2.

³⁰ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 2.3.

³¹ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 2.3.

³² Augustine, ‘The Two Souls’ in *The Manichean Debate* (ed. Boniface Ramsey; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/19; New York: New City Press, 2006), 12.17; trans. of *De duabus animabus*; Augustine, ‘The Deeds of Pelagius’ in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 14.33-34; trans. of *De gestis Pelagii*.

³³ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 3.5.

so great a gift?... I would, however, be correctly rebuked if I did not have this love through my own fault, that is, if I could myself give it to myself or take it for myself and did not do so, or if I refused to accept it though he gave it.”³⁴

Rather than arguing against human responsibility being grounded in our power of contrary choice, Augustine argued for it:

It is, of course, your fault that you are bad, and it is a greater fault that you do not want to be rebuked because you are bad, as if your vices were to be praised or regarded as indifferent so that they are neither praised nor blamed.³⁵

Augustine consistently argued that we are culpable because we have the power of contrary choice, but that we are sinful because we do not have the will to contrary:

When, therefore, [Christ] prayed that [Peter’s] faith would not fail, what else did he pray for but that he would have a will to believe that is perfectly free, firm, unconquerable, and persevering? See how the freedom of the will is defended in accord with the grace of God, not in opposition to it. The human will does not, of course, obtain grace by its freedom; it rather obtains freedom by grace.³⁶

Affirming free choice as the power of contrary choice neither denied God’s sovereignty nor the gratuity of God’s grace because although we *could* choose the good, God foreknew that no one *would*:

The God and Lord of all things who created all things very good, who foreknew that evils would arise from good, and who knew that it pertains to his omnipotent goodness to make good use of evils rather than not to allow evils to exist, ordered the life of angels and human beings in such a way that he might, first of all, show in their lives what their free choice could do and then what the benefit of his grace and judgment of his justice could do.³⁷

While free choice makes us capable of choosing good or evil, it is not sufficient for choosing the good: “For free choice is sufficient for evil, but not sufficient for good, unless it is helped by the omnipotent good... unless this grace also makes him will to”.³⁸ According to Augustine, this grace that actively moves our will towards the good is something that Adam lacked, but that God’s elect will have in the new creation: “The first freedom of the will, then, was the ability not to sin (*posse non peccare*); the final freedom will be will be much greater, namely, the inability to sin (*non posse*

³⁴ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 4.6.

³⁵ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 5.7.

³⁶ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 8.17.

³⁷ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 10.27.

³⁸ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 11.31.

peccare)”.³⁹ This is the text in which Lombard⁴⁰ and others⁴¹ actually went beyond Augustine when they spoke of fallen man is *non posse non peccare*, which they then attributed to Augustine. While Augustine held that Adam was *posse non peccare* (able to not sin) and that in heaven we will be *non posse peccare* (not able to sin), Lombard added that fallen man is *non potest non peccare* (not able to not sin),⁴² even though Augustine explicitly contradicted this before,⁴³ during⁴⁴ and after⁴⁵ the Pelagian controversy: “Who sins in a matter that can in no way be avoided? But sin is committed; hence, it can be avoided”.⁴⁶ Augustine certainly argued that we are not willing to not sin (*non velle non peccare*) and that no one is without sin (*non esse non peccare*),⁴⁷ but the assertion that Augustine’s view of fallen man is not able to not sin (*non posse non peccare*) fails to account for Augustine’s explicit teaching on free-will,⁴⁸ and his repeated insistence that he had not changed his mind.⁴⁹

Distinguishing between what we can/cannot do and what we will/will not do enables us to grasp the coherence of Augustine’s view of free-will. In fact, Augustine makes precisely this distinction immediately after the paragraph which has been misconstrued to deduce the view that we are *non posse non peccare*:

Likewise, we must distinguish these helps. The help without which something is not done is one thing, and the help by which something is done is another. For we cannot live without food, but even when food is available, it does not make someone live who wills to die. This help, then, of food is one without which we do not live, not one which makes us live. On the

³⁹ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 12.33.

⁴⁰ Peter Lombard, *The Sentences* (trans. Giulio Silano; Mediaeval Sources in Translation; Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2007-2010), 2.25.5-6 (157-158).

⁴¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison; trans. George Musgrave Giger; 3 vols; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1.571 (8.1.9); Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1969), 134; R.C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986), 65.

⁴² Lombard, *Sentences*, 2.25.5-6 (157-158).

⁴³ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’ in *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (trans. John Burleigh; The Library of Christian Classics 6; London: SCM Press, 1953), 3.18.50; trans. of *De libero arbitrio*.

⁴⁴ Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’ in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 67.80; trans. of *De natura et gratia*.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *Revisions*, 1.9.3,5.

⁴⁶ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’ 3.18.50; quoted in ‘Nature and Grace’, 67.80; and quoted in *Revisions* 1.9.3,5.

⁴⁷ Augustine, ‘The Grace of Christ and Original Sin’ in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 1.8.9; trans. of *De gratia Christi et de peccato originali*.

⁴⁸ Augustine, ‘On Free Will’ 3.18.50.

⁴⁹ Augustine, ‘Nature and Grace’, 67.80; *Revisions* 1.9.4.

other hand, the happiness which a person does not have makes him immediately happy when he receives it. For it is not only a help without which it is not produced, but also a help which produces that on account of which it is given. Hence, this help is both one by which it is produced and one without which it is not produced.⁵⁰

Here, Augustine distinguishes between necessary and sufficient conditions: the availability of food is necessary for eating but not sufficient, it also requires the will to eat. Using an analogous argument, Augustine argued that free choice is necessary but not sufficient for choosing the good. For that, we need the transformative work of the grace of God:

The first man, then, who had received in that good state in which he had been created upright the ability not to sin, the ability not to die, the ability not to abandon the good, was given the help toward perseverance, not the help which made him persevere, but the help without which he could not persevere by free choice. But now the saints who have been predestined to the kingdom of God by the grace of God are not given such a help toward perseverance, but a help by which they receive perseverance itself, not only so that they cannot persevere without this gift, but also so that by this gift they cannot fail to persevere.⁵¹

Again, Augustine argues that free-will is necessary but not sufficient for choosing the good and living righteously:

Adam was given a free will (*voluntas libera*) without any sin, and he made it a slave to sin. But though the will of the saints was enslaved to sin, it was set free by the one who said, *If the Son sets you free, then you will truly be free* (Jn 8:36). And they receive such great freedom (*tantam libertatem*) through this grace that, though, as long as they live in the world, they fight against desires for sins,... they are, nonetheless no longer enslaved to that sin which leads to death.⁵²

While Adam was given a free will without sin, and we inherit a free will with sin, the “great freedom (*tantam libertatem*)”⁵³ that Augustine spoke of is only received by God’s grace. While the free-will that we all have and which is required for rebuke/exhortation entails the power (*posse*) to contrary, it is only the great/true freedom which is given by grace that moves the will (*velle*) to right living which is needed to be (*esse*) righteous. It is not that we cannot do any other, but that we will not do other unless we are moved to by God’s grace:

⁵⁰ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 12.34.

⁵¹ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 12.34.

⁵² Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 12.35.

⁵³ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 12.35.

God, of course, foreknew that Adam was going to act unjustly; he foreknew this, *but he did not force him to do so*. At the same time he knew what he himself would justly do with regard to him. But now, after that great freedom was lost as a punishment for sin, there remained the weakness which needs to be helped by even greater gifts... The flesh could have had such merits, but lost them, and it lost them through that by which it could have had them, that is, through free choice. On this account there remains for those who need to be set free only the grace of the one who sets them free.⁵⁴

Since the fall all people sin by nature, but we also sin by choice: “they also added other sins by free choice. I mean: a choice that is free, but not set free, a choice free of righteousness, but enslaved to sin”.⁵⁵ Our choices are not “set free”⁵⁶ in that we do not have the positive freedom for righteousness, but they are “free”⁵⁷ in that we do have the power to contrary: “For to will or not to will is in the power of the one who will or does not will in such a way that it does not impede the divine will or surpass its power”.⁵⁸

Throughout *Rebuke and Grace*, Augustine defended both free-will since it is required for rebukes and imperatives, and God’s grace since it is required for choosing the good. Since we sin by nature and by choice, and obey by grace and by choice, the free choice of human beings is necessary for both the accountability of sin, and the imperatival force of God’s commands and rebukes. However, contrary to the teaching of the Pelagians, the fact that we *can* obey does not mean that we *will* obey if only we try harder. While the Pelagians viewed free-will as both necessary and sufficient for obedience to God, Augustine insisted that it is necessary but not sufficient; without God’s grace, none of us have the will to turn from sin. This was an important contribution of *Rebuke and Grace*, as it demonstrated the coherence of both affirming human free-will, and our utter dependence upon God’s grace. Without God’s grace, it is not that we *cannot* turn to God, but that we *will not* turn to God, and the difference is significant.

⁵⁴ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 12.37.

⁵⁵ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 13.42.

⁵⁶ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 13.42.

⁵⁷ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 13.42.

⁵⁸ Augustine, ‘Rebuke and Grace’, 14.43.

Conclusion – Implications for Understanding Compatibilism

Over a century ago, Warfield described the Christian Reformation as a battle between Augustine's doctrine of grace and his doctrine of the church.¹ In a similar manner, the debate between God's sovereignty and human freedom could be described as a battle between Augustine's doctrine of grace and his view of free-will. Augustine contributed more to the discussion of God's grace and the human will than any other historical figure after Jesus and the authors of Scripture. Augustine explicitly held that his doctrine of God's sovereign grace was compatible with his view of man's free-will.² However, in the centuries since Augustine, there has been an enduring debate between those who emphasise God's sovereignty, especially God's sovereignty and work in salvation history (monergism), and those who emphasise human freedom (the power of contrary choice) insisting that it is required for moral responsibility. Augustine's Pelagian opponents were the first to posit a dichotomy between Augustine's doctrine of grace and his view of free-will.³ However, they were by no means the last.⁴ Nevertheless, when the Pelagians drew a dichotomy between Augustine's doctrine of grace and his view of free-will, Augustine instead maintained that they were, in fact, compatible. The question arises: how was Augustine able to hold both to our absolute need and dependency upon God's grace *and* to such a strong view of free-will, when so many others view them as contradictory?

Augustine held to the compatibility of God's sovereign grace and the power of contrary choice, largely because he consistently maintained the distinction between what we are able (*posse*) to do (choose between alternate possibilities) and what we will (*velle*) to do (choose to sin):

For there are two things: willing and being able. As a result, one who wills is not immediately able, nor does one who is able immediately will. After all, just as at times we will what we

¹ B.B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co, 1956), 321-322.

² Augustine, 'Answer to Julian' in *Answer to the Pelagians II* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/24; New York: New City Press, 1998), 4.8.47-48; trans. of *Contra Julianum*.

³ Augustine, 'Answer to Julian', 4.8.47-48.

⁴ James Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1980), 8-9; William Babcock, 'Augustine on Sin and Moral Agency', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16/1 (1988): 36-41; James Wetzell, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 97; John Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14-15; Eric Jenkins, *Free to Say No? Free Will and Augustine's Evolving Doctrines of Grace and Election* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), xi.

cannot do, so we also at times can do what we do not will to do. It is quite clear, and the sound of the words indicates that will (*voluntas*) takes its name from willing (*velle*) and power (*potestas*) from being able (*posse*). Hence, as one who wills has the will, so one who is able has the power.⁵

Having the *power* of contrary choice is not the same as having the *will* to choose otherwise. Knowing what someone *will* choose does not imply that they *cannot* do otherwise, only that they *will not* do otherwise. This point is often obscured by our language. For example, the word ‘incapable’ can refer to what someone *cannot* do (incapable of flying) or to what someone *will not* do (incapable of murder). Similarly, the word ‘inevitable’ can mean ‘certain to happen’ or ‘unavoidable’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*), but the two are not identical. Consider someone catching a train home. Once they enter the train station they are *able* to travel on a train to any station on the same rail network, but they *will* travel on a train to a particular destination. The fact that their journey home was ‘certain to happen’ (as far as humans can be certain of anything) does not make it ‘unavoidable’. Similarly, if it is known that someone *will* make a certain choice in the future, it does not follow that they physically *cannot* make a different choice (since choice is, by definition, the act of choosing between two or more possibilities), only that it is certain that they *will not* make a different choice.

There is a radical difference between the omniscient Creator of all things and the creature constrained by time, space and finitude. From our perspective, we have the *power* to choose between alternate possibilities; but God’s sovereignty over all of human history implies that he knows precisely what we *will* choose, whether he moves us by his Spirit, or gives us over to our sin, or providentially guides us by controlling our circumstances. Keeping distinct God’s perspective of history from our limited perspective of history was key for Augustine’s understanding of the compatibility between God’s sovereignty and human freedom. A common reason why later readers of Augustine have misunderstood his compatibilism between God’s sovereignty and human freedom is because we fail to let God be God: either we seek to elevate our perspective to God’s (that is, we assume that if God has determined what we *will* do then we *cannot* do otherwise), or we seek to limit God’s perspective

⁵ Augustine, ‘The Spirit and the Letter’ in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 31.53; trans. of *De spiritu et littera*.

to ours (that is, we assume that if we *can* do otherwise then God cannot know what we *will* do). In both cases there is a conflation between God's perspective of what *will* happen, and our perspective of what *can* be otherwise. However, Augustine understood God's sovereignty over human history as compatible with the power of contrary choice, because, although we have the *power* to choose other than what God has determined, we do not have the *will* to choose other than what God has determined, whether God moves us by his Spirit or gives us over to our sin. While we *can* choose between alternate possibilities, God has determined all that *will* come to pass.

Clarifying the Kind of Free-will Augustine that Defended

While the libertarian view of free-will typically affirms both the power of contrary choice (that one can choose otherwise) *and* indeterminism (that choice cannot be predicted),⁶ Augustine sought to defend the former (that we *can* choose otherwise) while rejecting the latter (since God knows what we *will* choose), insisting on a meaningful difference between the two. In this sense, Augustine's view of free-will was *not* a libertarian view of free-will, though it is one that affirms the power of contrary choice. On the other side of the debate, Reformed theologians maintain that we cannot obey God unless we are moved by his Spirit to obey him,⁷ but also that the reason why we cannot obey God is not because of an outside force or compulsion, but because of our sinful hearts and inclinations.⁸ However, when this difference is pressed, it is essentially the difference between what one *cannot* do (because of an outside force, compulsion or constraint) and what one *will not* do (because of our sinful hearts, inclinations or nature). However for Augustine, there is again, a meaningful difference between the two.

While Augustine uses the term 'free will' (*liberum arbitrium*) to describe what we are free *from*, he uses the term 'freedom' (*libertas*) and especially 'true freedom' (*vera libertas*) to describe what we

⁶ Robert Kane, 'Libertarianism' in *Four Views of Free Will* (Great Debates in Philosophy; Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 17-18.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John McNeill; trans. Ford Battles; 2 vols; Library of Christian Classics 20-21; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 2.2.27.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.3.5.

are free *for* (relationship with God).⁹ Applying this distinction to the Bible's anthropology, fallen humanity is free *from* coercion: God's law is not too difficult for us or beyond our reach (Deut 30:11), and while we are often tempted beyond what we *do* bear, we are not tempted beyond what we *can* bear (1 Cor 10:13). However, fallen humanity is not free *for* self-realisation: when we offer ourselves to someone as obedient slaves, we are slaves of the one we obey (Rom 6:16), and so everyone who sins is a slave to sin (John 8:34). For Augustine, fallen humanity has the negative freedom *from* coercion (that is, fallen humanity has the *power* of contrary choice, hence alternativity is true), but not the positive freedom *for* self-realisation (that is, fallen humanity does not have the *will* to choose otherwise) unless God transforms the heart (hence monergism is true). As one doctrinal statement puts it: "human beings are sinners by nature and by choice".¹⁰ We sin by nature, and so it really is the case that we *will not* do otherwise; but we also sin by choice, and so it is not the case that we *cannot* do otherwise. If we cannot do otherwise, then by definition, we have no choice.

Augustine's Reconciliation of Theological Determinism and the Power of Contrary Choice

Reformed theologians often recognise that people make choices, and that when we choose, we are physically *able* to choose otherwise.¹¹ By the definition of 'able' (having the power, skill, means, or opportunity to do something), being able to do otherwise means that there is a sense in which we have the *power* of contrary choice. However, this should not to be confused with the *will* to choose otherwise. It is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come (Mark 7:21 NIV), and without God's grace the human heart is only evil all the time (Gen 6:5). Pelagius first confused the *power* of contrary choice with the *will* to choose otherwise, arguing that since we *can* obey God we therefore *will* obey if only we try harder.¹² And others have since confused our lack of the *will* to choose otherwise with a lack of the *power* of contrary choice, arguing that since we *will not* obey God

⁹ Augustine, 'The Perfection of Human Righteousness' in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 4.9; trans. of *De perfectione justitiae hominis.*; Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (trans. L.E.M. Lynch; New York: Random House, 1960), 163-164.

¹⁰ Evangelical Free Church of America, Statement of Faith. Cited 16 March 2018, Online: https://www.efca.org/sites/default/files/resources/docs/2018/02/what_we_believe_download.pdf

¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will*, (Vancouver: Eremitical Press, 2009)32; John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (A Theology of Lordship; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 134.

¹² Augustine, 'Nature and Grace' in *Answer to the Pelagians* (ed. John Rotelle; trans. Roland Teske; The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century 1/23; New York: New City Press, 1997), 19.21.

of our own volition we therefore *cannot* obey God.¹³ Both of these moves commit the logical fallacy of “affirming the consequent: a deductive mistake of the form: if p then q, q, therefore p”.¹⁴ If someone *will* do a certain action then they *can* do it (if p then q); but Pelagius argued that the possibility that we *can* obey God (q) implies that we *will* obey if only we try hard enough (p). Conversely, if someone *cannot* do a certain action then they *will not* do it (if p' then q'); but some have argued that the fact that we *will not* obey God of our own free volition (q') implies that we *cannot* obey God (p').

Since Augustine, many attempts to delineate our ability from our unwillingness have been made.¹⁵ However, the inconsistency of this distinction has led to the widespread perception of an incompatibility between the theological determinism of what *will* happen, and the power of contrary choice that states that we *can* do otherwise.¹⁶ Even in modern scholarly treatments of compatibilism, arguments proceed on the assumption that “If God foreknows p, p shall surely happen, and in that sense, it is not possible that it does not happen”.¹⁷ The clarity and consistency of Augustine’s distinction between God’s sovereignty over what *will* happen, and the alternativity of what *can* happen, enabled Augustine to hold both to our absolute need and dependency upon God’s grace *and* to such a strong view of free-will, while others viewed the two as directly opposed to each other.

Augustine outlined a dynamic of God moving some by his Spirit, while judicially giving others over to their sin, knowing precisely what we *will* choose if he acts or if he refrains (as he alone knows our hearts and minds). This enables God to determine the course of human history (theological determinism) without infringing on our power of contrary choice. While we typically *can* choose between alternate possibilities (to the extent that we have a choice), we *will* choose that which our

¹³ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (trans. Henry Cole; Seaside: Watchmaker, 2010), 27.

¹⁴ Anthony Weston, *A Rulebook for Arguments* (4th ed.; Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), 74.

¹⁵ John Duns Scotus, *Contingency and Freedom: Lectura I 39* (trans. A. Vos Jaczn, H. Veldhuis, A.H. Looman-Graaskamp, E. Dekker, N.W. Den Bok; Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1994), 140 (B); William of Ockham, *Predestination, God’s Foreknowledge, and Future Contingents* (trans. Marilyn Adams and Norman Kretzmann; Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 40 (1.D); Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will*, 26-32.

¹⁶ Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, ‘Recent Work on Divine Foreknowledge and Free Will’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (ed. Robert Kane; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 48-49.

¹⁷ Willem van Asselt, J. Martin Bac, and Roelf te Velde, *Reformed Thought on Freedom: The Concept of Free Choice in Early Modern Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 37.

hearts desire the most. Thus, God's intimate knowledge of our hearts is the grounds of his foreknowledge of our future free choices, whether he directs our hearts by his Spirit, or allows them to follow their own desires. In this sense, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Prov 21:1 NIV 1984). Like a watercourse, if our hearts are undirected, they will follow a certain path (the path of least resistance). However, God is not merely predicting what people will choose, he also actively moves people by his Spirit. In doing both, God directs the course of human history as he pleases, in a manner that is consistent with God's providence by preservation, by working with his creation, and by governing. For Augustine, we have the power of contrary choice in that we *can* choose between alternate possibilities, but God, knowing what we *will* choose of our own free volition or by his movement of our hearts, determines the course of all of human history (theological determinism). On this view, God's sovereign will is the formal cause (the architect's plan) of everything; but while God is the efficient cause of good (the one who does it), humanity is the efficient cause of evil.

Augustine argued that the work of salvation is done by God alone (monergism). This is at the heart of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone as it has been put forward by the Reformers, and most of the Protestant church. Whatever we contribute to our salvation reduces the magnitude of God's grace to us, since if it is by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace (Rom 11:6). Salvation is either the free gift of God (monergism), or it is in some sense dependent upon us (synergism);¹⁸ it cannot be given as a free gift and earned at the same time – if it is earned, it is not a free gift. For this reason, Augustine sought to defend the monergistic view that God's grace is effectual for salvation. However, if it is the case that salvation is determined by God and not dependent upon human choices, then the theological determinism of all of human history seems to follow as a close corollary: if God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight (Eph 1:4), then every historical event leading up to the creation and salvation of those whom he chose, must also be determined by God, since historical events are inescapably

¹⁸ Daniel Kirkpatrick, *Monergism or Synergism: Is Salvation Cooperative or the Work of God Alone?* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 11-12.

dependent upon other historical events. If God is sovereign over salvation history, then he is necessarily sovereign over all of human history as well. God's promises, and indeed the doctrine of grace, depend upon a theological determinism where God is the one who determines the course of history.¹⁹

At the same time, Augustine argued that God's commands and indeed the doctrine of sin, depend upon a view of human freedom such that people cannot be reduced to puppets or robots, but culpable agents who make choices for which they are held accountable. No one denies human responsibility, but the nature of human freedom required for human responsibility is greatly contested. On one hand, libertarians maintain that human responsibility requires the freedom to have done otherwise, hence the *power of contrary choice* is necessary for moral responsibility, and this principle is often referred to as the Principle of Alternate Possibilities (PAP). On the other hand, voluntarists maintain that human responsibility can be grounded in a softer form of freedom, namely, the freedom to follow one's own desires, hence the power of contrary choice is *not* necessary for attributing moral responsibility, the lack of a *will to choose otherwise* is sufficient.²⁰

However, the difficulty with attempting to ground moral responsibility in a freedom that lacks the power of contrary choice, is that without the power of contrary choice we are not in full control (in the sense that we are not able to avoid committing the action), and holding people responsible for things that are outside of their control appears to be unjust. People are morally responsible for their choices, and by definition, choice is the act of choosing between two or more possibilities. If there is only one possibility, then there is literally no choice. No one holds doctors responsible for failing to cure the incurable (since they could not do otherwise). However, doctors are negligent when they fail to cure a patient whom they could have cured (since they could have done otherwise). Indeed, given that "fatalism claims that we lack the power (capability, ability) to perform any actions other than the ones

¹⁹ Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Contours of Christian Theology; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 119-120.

²⁰ Robert Young, *Freedom, Responsibility and God* (Library of Philosophy and Religion; London: Macmillan Press, 1975), 7-10.

that we do, in fact, perform”;²¹ to reject the power of contrary choice to affirm fatalism by definition. While most advocates of God’s sovereignty affirm theological determinism but reject fatalism, Augustine modelled how this was possible; by distinguishing between our ability (*posse*) to choose between alternate possibilities, and our will (*velle*), which always chooses what the heart desires the most; the unregenerate heart choosing to sin, and the regenerate heart choosing obedience to God.

Final Reflections

Augustine’s compatibilism brings to light both the depths of human sin, and the heights of God’s grace. If there is no one righteous because we are *unable* to be righteous, then humanity is not necessarily totally depraved; if we could be righteous, perhaps some would be. But if it is *possible* to be righteous and yet no one is, *not even one*, then it is not only our fallen nature that is depraved, but our will to choose as well. It is only if we are *unwilling* to seek God and do the good, that we are *totally* depraved. Since sin has impacted every part of us (the very definition of total depravity), regeneration will only occur if it begins at the deepest level – the heart (Mark 7:21-23). God does not merely cooperate with our free-will, but rather, God transforms the heart (Ezk 11:19; 36:26) so that we choose to follow him. For Augustine, The Holy Spirit does not change us from people who *cannot* obey to people who *can* obey, but from people who *will not* obey to people who *will* obey. The power of contrary choice exposes the depths of human sin, and the theological determinism of salvation history exposes the heights of God’s grace. There is, at the same time, a covenant of works in which people are responsible for what they have done, and a covenant of grace in which God alone is to be praised for the work of salvation (*WCF* 7.2-3). From our perspective, there are many possible futures and so God’s commands have force; indeed, the doctrine of sin depends upon it. And yet from God’s perspective, the future is determined and so God’s promises are certain; indeed, the doctrine of grace depends upon it.

²¹ Mark Bernstein, ‘Fatalism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (ed. Robert Kane; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 65.

As Carson notes, “Many of the theological disputes of almost any day, including ours, revolve around compatibilism – that is, the view that God’s sovereignty on the one hand and human freedom and responsibility on the other are mutually compatible”.²² To the degree that these are not viewed as compatible, one is defended at the expense of the other. For Augustine, if God’s sovereignty is defended at the expense of human freedom, then we risk falling into licentiousness, since the more sovereign God is the less free and less responsible we are. How can we call people to turn from sin and obey God, if they are not *able* to do so? On the other hand, if human freedom is defended at the expense of God’s sovereignty, then we risk falling into legalism, since the less sovereign God is the more everything appears to be ‘up to us’. How can we call people to trust, rely and depend upon God’s grace, if our righteousness depends upon our *will* to obey? Indeed, Jesus himself sets forth a parable of *two* sons (Luke 15:11), where the younger son rejects the Father through licentiousness (Luke 15:12-24), and the older son rejects the Father through legalism (Luke 15:25-32). For this reason, recovering Augustine’s view of free-will enables us to understand God’s sovereignty and human freedom, and guard against the dangers of defending one at the expense of the other.

²² D.A. Carson, ‘Foreword’, in *What About Free Will? Reconciling Our Choices with God’s Sovereignty* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2016), ix.

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