

Breaking The Chains of Autonomy:

Freedom of Will and Moral Development in Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio*

By John McAteer
filmphilosopher@gmail.com

In the dialogue *De Libero Arbitrio* Augustine says that true freedom is being enslaved to God (II.13) and cleaving to God's law (I.15). This paradoxical Augustinian concept of freedom as enslavement to the divine will is diametrically opposed to the concept of freedom advocated in contemporary Kantian political theory. On the Kantian view, freedom is *autonomy* (i.e., an agent's "self-legislation") and slavery consists in obeying someone else's law.¹ In this paper I will examine Augustine's account of moral development as found in the *De Libero Arbitrio* (translated by Thomas Williams as "On Free Choice of the Will"²) arguing that Augustine thinks the goal of human life is happiness which consists in *the achievement of freedom from enslavement to autonomy*.³ To get clear on how Augustine thinks we achieve this end, we must first understand Augustine's opposition of freedom and autonomy.

Freedom vs. Autonomy

There is a widespread pretheoretical intuition that freedom is the power to choose between alternate possibilities. Augustine would not deny that we have this power, but he might hesitate to call it *freedom*. What use is the power to choose between alternate possibilities if I do

¹It is important to note that, though the contemporary notion of autonomy is usually called "Kantian" by the political theorists who advocate it, a careful reading of Kant reveals a notion of freedom much closer to the one I am attributing to Augustine.

²All translations in this paper are Williams's, and all page numbers refer to his Hackett edition of "On Free Choice of the Will" (1993).

not desire any of the available possibilities? It seems strictly correct but still somehow odd to say I am “free” if I have the power to choose between alternatives *X* and *Y*, but what I really desire is *Z*. A more robust notion of freedom would consist in the power to choose to obtain the object of my desire. But to understand what constitutes “true freedom” in Augustine’s sense, we must distinguish a hierarchy of desires. Augustine himself does not explicitly make this sort of distinction, but by introducing it into his account of the will, we can make better sense of how he thinks freedom differs from autonomy. Following Plato, Augustine says that we all have the same ultimate object of desire: happiness (II.9). In language inspired by Harry Frankfurt we could say that everyone’s “highest-order desire” is happiness.⁴ On this way of speaking, then, our “lower-order desires” would be those desires which directly explain our actions. But these lower-order desires might not directly constitute happiness. Instead, they might be instrumental to attaining happiness. Hence, in between the highest-order desire and our lower-order desires there must be what we might call “intermediate-order desires” which are for those things which we believe produce or constitute happiness. So, for example, if I perform the action of eating a donut, I need only appeal to my lower-order desire to taste something sweet in order to explain “why” I performed that action. But it is not likely that I see tasting sweet things as happiness itself. Rather, tasting something sweet is instrumental to achieving pleasure -- a (slightly) more

³For the sake of simplicity, I will (perhaps illicitly) ignore the difficult question of the extent to which Augustine’s views developed throughout his career, confining myself to the Augustine of the *De Libero Arbitrio* only.

⁴Frankfurt’s seminal paper analyzing freedom in terms of hierarchically ordered desires is “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person” originally published in *The Journal of Philosophy* LXVIII:1 (Jan. 14, 1971). But for a revision of Frankfurt’s analysis closer to my reading of Augustine see Eleonore Stump “Sanctification, Hardening of the Heart, and Frankfurt’s Concept of Free Will” *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXXV:8 (Aug. 1988). Note that my use of higher- and lower-order desires is only “inspired” by Frankfurt. The language is meant to be helpful in understanding Augustine’s theory, but is not meant to be faithful to the way Frankfurt (or Stump) uses the terminology.

plausible candidate for happiness than sweets. So in order to explain why I desire to taste something sweet, I would need to appeal to my intermediate-order desire to experience pleasure, and in turn explain my desire to experience pleasure by appeal to my highest-order desire for happiness, since in this example I would presumably believe that pleasure either produces happiness or constitutes happiness.

We will return to this theory of hierarchically-ordered desires in the next section of this paper and examine in more detail how this model helps us understand Augustine's understanding of freedom. For now, note that for Augustine there is an *objective fact* about what produces happiness -- we can be wrong about it. He says that "insofar as all human beings seek a happy life, they are not in error; but to the extent that someone strays from the path that leads to happiness -- all the while insisting that his only goal is to be happy -- to that extent he is in error, for 'error' simply means following something that doesn't take us where we want to go" (p. 47-48). For Augustine, the person who believed that sensory pleasure constitutes happiness (as in the above donut-tasting example) would be in error. According to Augustine the only correct "path" to happiness is the life lived in accordance with the eternal moral law (I.14). And to live in accordance with the eternal law is to "achieve peace by placing all inordinate desire under the control of the mind" (p. 15) so that you are "perfectly ordered within" (p. 12). Inordinate or disordered desire is "when better things are subjected to worse," i.e., when you are not ruled "according to the law that we have found to be eternal" (p. 14). The idea is that even if your lower-order desires are fulfilled, if you have the *wrong* lower-order desires then you will nevertheless remain unhappy. So, even if all your lowest-order desires for donuts, drugs, disco-dancing, etc., are fulfilled, you will not be happy since sensory pleasure alone cannot bring happiness. Hence, wrong lower-order desires are a sign that you have a false conception of how

to achieve happiness in which case your highest-order desire cannot be fulfilled. Augustine puts it like this: “So it’s no surprise that unhappy human beings do not attain the happy life that they will. For they do not likewise will the one thing that goes along with the happy life, without which no one attains it or is worthy to attain it -- and that is, to live rightly” (p. 23). True freedom, then, requires us to bring our lower-order desires into “harmony” with the objective order (i.e., the law) of the universe. Only then will we be truly free to obtain our highest-order desire for happiness.

In this respect, then, Augustine sees the objective and eternal moral law as analogous to the laws of physics. While we are in one sense “free” to autonomously will our own law and to act in accordance with that law (as the Kantian says we ought), we cannot achieve happiness if we ignore the moral law any more than we can fly if we merely ignore the law of gravity. If I falsely believe that I can fly by jumping off a tall building and flapping my arms, despite the fact that the law of gravity says otherwise, I am “free” to persist in my delusion, autonomously leaping off the building. But my mere *will* to fly will not be enough to achieve my desire. Likewise, if I falsely believe that happiness is experiencing sensory pleasure, despite that fact that the eternal moral law says otherwise, I am “free” to persist in my delusion, autonomously seeking pleasure at the expense of every other end, but I will not be happy, which is what I *really* want.⁵ Instead, I must act in accordance with the laws of the universe (physical and moral), by building myself a jet-pack or pursuing pleasure only when appropriate (as the case may be). But just autonomously making up my own law will not get me very far. Freedom in the sense of autonomy turns out to be an illusion of true freedom. In order to satisfy our deepest desires, we

⁵It sounds funny to modern ears to say that the moral law tells us what happiness *is*. We would be tempted to say that morality is about what *ought* to be the case while metaphysics or science

must realize that obedience to God is the only path to happiness, thereby renouncing the illusion of autonomy. Thus Augustine argues that while the autonomous person sees obedience to another person's will as slavery, it turns out that *obedience to God (i.e., bringing our will into alignment with God's eternal law) is true freedom since it is the only thing that allows us to obtain our deepest desire.*

The Grace to Be Free

Having seen that for Augustine freedom consists in being enslaved to God's "truth" (II.13) as embodied in the eternal moral law and that to attain this freedom we must give up our claim to autonomously determine our own law, we now turn to Augustine's account of how an agent actually comes to exemplify this freedom. In Book I of *De Libero Arbitrio* Augustine talks as if it is quite "easy" to achieve this freedom, suggesting that we obtain happiness "by the very act of willing to have it" (p. 23). Here Augustine seems to imply that we can be good by our own effort, a position that conflicts with Augustine's later anti-Pelagian writings which emphasized the role of God's grace in our good works. Indeed, most commentators on *De Libero Arbitrio* see Augustine as changing his view between the writing of Book I where he holds a position according to which we have free will and Book III where he emphasizes the need for God's help and the "difficulty" with which we can turn our will toward God (III.18).⁶ Yet even if Augustine *did* change his views between writing Book I and Book III, he *needn't* have. We will see in the remainder of this paper how my reading of Augustine's view of freedom would allow Augustine to hold consistently that we have libertarian free will *and* that

is about what *is* the case. But, for better or worse, I don't see Augustine as making this sort of fact/value distinction.

we cannot achieve happiness without God's gracious intervention. First, let me point out that while it is clear that Augustine did change his *emphasis* from will to grace, it is not obvious that he changed his *view*. The seeds of grace are clearly present even in Book I. For example, Augustine writes that "I was so hurt by this fall, buried under a mountain of silly fairy tales, that if my love of finding the truth had not secured divine help, I would not have been able to get out from under them to breathe freely and begin to seek the truth" (p. 3). Notice that Augustine says he "would not have been able to ... *begin* to seek the truth" without grace. Augustine goes on to call this state a "difficulty" from which God had to set him "free", thus anticipating his discussion in Book III.

So, despite one or two infelicitous expressions suggesting that it is easy to achieve happiness, it seems that Augustine in fact holds that it is "difficult" for us to will to be good. What is the nature of this difficulty? Augustine explains it thus: "even when we do see what is right and will to do it, we cannot do it because of the resistance of carnal habit, which develops almost naturally because of the unruliness of our mortal inheritance" (p. 106). This "inheritance" is the original sin of Adam which Augustine thinks we are all born with. Our original difficulty inclines us toward sin, and the more we give in to sin, the stronger our sinful "habits" become and the more difficult it is for us to do the right thing in the future. This happens "almost naturally" as we age so that by the time we are old enough to realize what has happened, we are already "enslaved to the flesh" (p. 108). Thus on this account we are not free to will *directly* to be good. My habits rule my will. But I am nevertheless *indirectly* free. I can will to will to be good. Augustine says that "although [the soul] was born into ignorance and difficulty, no necessity forces it to remain there" for "it has the power to reform itself with God's help, and by

⁶On this point see, for example, William Babcock, "Augustine on Sin and Moral Agency."

pious labors to acquire all of the virtues” (p. 109). This reformation will take place “if only [the soul] will make good use of what it has received: the power to search diligently and piously if it wills to do so” (p.115).

In our Frankfurt-inspired hierarchical terminology this would mean that I am not free to have the lower-order volition to be good (because I am cursed by original sin and because I have had the wrong lower-order volitions for so long that they have become habitual), but I *am* free to have the intermediate-order volition to have the lower-order volition to be good.⁷ This is where grace comes in. If I have the intermediate-order volition to bring my habitual lower-order volitions into alignment with God’s will/law, then God may graciously grant me my intermediate-order volition even though achieving this inner harmony would be difficult (and perhaps impossible) without God’s help. This is also where autonomy is seen to be undesirable. In order to ask for God’s help, I must repudiate my own autonomy. I must realize that I need help and am not self-sufficient for my own happiness. In Augustine’s language, I must stop clinging “to the very pride that made them fall ... [and] makes them spit out the medicine of mercy that would restore them” (p.92). My claim to autonomy is an implicit claim to be my

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⁷In the restricted context of *De Libero Arbitrio* it is hard to understand how we could have an intermediate-order volition to obey God and still have the lower-order volition to perform a particular sin. The way I set up the hierarchical model, it would seem that if I am to have a lower-order volition to sin it must be because I have the sinful and deluded intermediate-order volition to be autonomous (although this is not how Frankfurt’s hierarchy works, see note 4 above). I’m not sure how the Augustine of *De Lib. Arb.* would respond to this objection, but in the *Confessions* 8.8-9 the more mature Augustine introduces the concept of a “divided” will. It sounds initially funny to speak of having two wills or a will in opposition to itself, but if, as John Rist suggests, we think of the will in terms of love or desire, this phenomenon of division makes more sense. It does seem possible to love two incompatible things simultaneously. [See Rist, John, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: 1994) p.190 n102]. Making use of the *Confessions* notion of a divided will, then, we see that it would be possible to have a divided intermediate-order volition such that I desire *both* to obey God *and* to be autonomous. Of

“own God” (p. 120) -- which Augustine calls “a perverse imitation of God” (p. 122). In the end wisdom is realizing that God’s will and my ultimate desire are the same: God and I both will my happiness. Likewise I must realize that the only way I can be self-sufficient and autonomous is to will something which turns out prevent my own happiness.

Let me summarize the picture of moral development that emerges. Our lower-order volitions are enslaved to the difficulty of sinful habits. But our intermediate-order volitions are enslaved to the ignorance of thinking autonomy will allow us to achieve our highest-order volition to be happy.⁸ Thus sinners have the intermediate-order volition to make autonomous lower-order volitions. And even if they realize their mistake, and realize that obedience to God’s law will make them happier than creating their own law, they will have difficulty carrying out their lower-order volitions to follow God’s law unless they fully repudiate autonomy and turn over their will completely to God, letting his grace (and the “pious labor” of acquiring virtue) bring their lower-order volitions into line with their intermediate-order volition to do God’s will, thereby satisfying their highest-order volition to be happy. We can put the same picture back into Augustinian language. We all inherit Adam’s sin as ignorance and difficulty. But we have enough freedom of will left to ask for God’s help. This turning to God is a manifestation of our rejection of pride (autonomy) in favor of humility and obedience to God’s will. And if we turn to God in this way, he will help us to see the truth of what his law commands and help us to will to obey those commands. As we obey God’s commands, we will acquire wisdom (III.24) which

course, it would be impossible to simultaneously satisfy both of these desires, so I would need to ask God to grant me the grace to desire to obey him “with singleness of heart”.

⁸This (un)natural inclination toward autonomy does not mean that we always do the wrong thing. It just means that we are inclined to do what we *ourselves* judge to be best. If our own judgment happens to coincide with God’s law, then there is no problem: we will do the right thing. But it is when our judgment conflicts with God’s law that we are forced to choose between autonomy and obedience.

will show us how to acquire the highest good (II.9). This highest good is to “abide” in God (p. 97) and his will, “and when one follows and attains the highest good, one becomes happy; and that, as we all agree, is precisely what we want” (p. 48).⁹

⁹I would like to thank Paul Hoffman for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.