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Jonathan Edwards, Augustine, and Human Freedom Under the Sovereignty of God

To this day, the age-old, controversial dispute over the freedom of the will in light of the sovereignty of God rages on with no less vigor and passion than when Augustine and Pelagius famously debated it 1500 years ago. Perhaps one of the most in-depth analyses of the question of the man's will was Jonathan Edwards' work called *Freedom of the Will*. In this book, Edwards argues for the necessity of God's grace to restore and redeem the wholly dysfunctional and disordered will of man in his fallen state. Among the many important contributions Edwards made in the history of this continuing debate in his discourse, one thing in particular stands out: the distinctions. Not only are they extremely precise and worth being closely attended to when making a study of this topic, but they are reminiscent of the distinctions Augustine made between moral liberty and freedom centuries earlier. Whether intentional or not, Jonathan Edwards seems to align with Augustine's position on the freedom of the will, which is very often misinterpreted. Luckily, the distinctions of different types of freedom in the first part of his discourse on the will shed light on, clarify, and develop the theology posited by Augustine, without misunderstanding or drastic change.

In order to identify exactly where these parallels in theology lie and assess them, it is of foremost importance to understand Augustine's position on the doctrine of free will and predestination. The mere idea that Augustine believes in a twofold predestination tends to be a contentious subject for most scholars and theologians outside of reformed circles because "the

very word ‘freedom,’ or the phrase ‘freedom of the will’, is held to denote something desirable.”¹ The very idea that one of the most prominent, prolific, and revered theological thinkers after the Apostle Paul could not be hailed as an advocate of human freedom is a hard pill for many to swallow. Nevertheless, the evidence is overwhelming: Augustine is, in fact, a proponent of the bondage of humans’ will to sin. While he insists that the will is free, he does not mean it in the libertarian sense; it is far more nuanced than that.

For one to more fully understand what Augustine means by “freedom” we must first attend to how he defines the word “will.” The common Latin term Augustine uses for the will is *voluntas* which can be roughly translated as “‘moral self’ or ‘moral personality.’”² It is absolutely crucial to understand, then, that when Augustine is talking about the will, he is speaking about it in the moral sense, so when he refers to the freedom of the will, he is referring to moral freedom in particular. Augustine is adamant that we are responsible for all of our moral actions and thus our will must be free from coercion, otherwise we would not be responsible for our action. Ultimately, “a man wills what is good, says Augustine, because he is good; he wills what is bad because he is bad” and thus, he acts willingly.³ Augustine does not deny this fact, but he does make clear that humans inherit Adam’s guilt that leaves us in a fallen state, which complicates the issue of freedom. In Augustine’s doctrine of the Fall of Adam, he notes that after Adam fell, his descendents are marred by sin in their very nature, rendering them *non posse non peccare* (not able not to sin) whereas Adam, before he sinned was *posse peccare, posse non peccare* (able to sin and able not to sin). As a result, Augustine believed that the person acts in accordance with what they love. In the *Confessions* he notes that “My weight is my love; by it

¹ John Rist, “Augustine on Free Will and Predestination,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 20, no. 2 (October 1969): 420.

² Rist, 421.

³ Rist 422.

am I borne wherever I am borne.”⁴ By this he means that the weight of love that one has, either for good or for evil, is ingrained in their nature and will and motivates them to choose whatever they so desire. This makes logical sense given the fact that Augustine insists time and again that the man’s choices are still free and, at the same time, “our moral helplessness is still our moral guilt.”⁵ In such a way, the human being acts out of what they chiefly desire moment by moment and are therefore free and responsible for the sins that they commit.

Because we mysteriously participate in the guilt of Adam’s sin, which impairs our nature and, by extension, our moral ability to do what is good, it can still be maintained that the will is not externally compelled in any way, but that by nature, we sin willingly and *necessarily*. RC Sproul sums Augustine up well on this point when he writes that “What fallen man lacks is the moral disposition, the desire, or the inclination of righteousness” and therefore we will always choose to sin. Augustine is clear and consistent in this regard and it is impossible to dispute because to do so would be to destroy the logic of Augustine’s argument. For him, the will is free insofar as “the slave to sin is free to do evil” and it is only through Christ that one is free to do good, which is meant when Christ says “*If the son of Man shall set you free, then you will be free indeed.*”⁶ If one follows Augustine’s theology to its rational and stated conclusion, it must necessarily be the case that, without the grace of God effectually working in the fallen human being, their freedom is not a freedom of autonomy, or what Augustine calls “liberty.” We have the moral freedom to sin as we choose, or under God’s grace, to do good, but we are never at liberty to choose between good or evil.

⁴ St. Augustine, “Confessions” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: First Series Volume I*, trans. J.G. Pilkington, ed. Philip Schaff, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.), book XIII, ch. 9, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/110113.htm>

⁵ Rist, 423.

⁶ Gerald Bonner, *Freedom and Necessity: St. Augustine’s Teaching on Divine Power and Human Freedom*, (Washington D.C: Catholic University Press, 2007), 68, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hillsdale-ebooks/reader.action?docID=3134770&query=>

Many associate the idea of the bondage of the human will with reformed theologians like John Calvin and Martin Luther as it tends to be one of the more distinctive aspects of the Reformed tradition in general. However, what many fail to consider is how deeply Augustinian these men (and many others in the Reformed tradition) were. This tends to be confusing to many because of the historical claim the Catholic Church has on Augustine's life and works, though the Catholic Church maintains exactly the opposite of what Augustine claims about the freedom of the will. The Catechism of the Catholic church states that "As long as freedom has not bound itself to its ultimate good which is God, there is a possibility of choosing between good and evil, and thus growing in protection or of falling and sinning."⁷ On the other hand, the Westminster Confession of Faith asserts that "Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto."⁸ The Reformed position on free will and responsibility, as stated by the Westminster Confession is almost indistinguishable from Augustine on this point. This particular conception of the sovereignty of God is decidedly not new- in fact it has been a commonly held belief for centuries.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Jonathan Edwards, being a product of about 200 years worth of development in the Reformed tradition and one of the most influential theologians of American Puritanism, is very aligned with Augustine on the issue of human freedom. In fact, they make very similar distinctions regarding ability. Though they differ with respect to terminology, their meaning is fundamentally the same. Edwards, in *On the Freedom of the Will*,

⁷ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*, Part 3, Section 1, Ch. 1, Article 3 (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000).

⁸ Westminster Divines, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 9 Section 3, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-confession-faith> .

explores and distinguishes between different types of human ability or freedom. While Augustine focuses mainly on the distinctions between moral freedom and liberty, Jonathan Edwards takes this a step further. He maintains Augustine's position concerning moral freedom and liberty, which he calls moral ability of freedom and natural ability of freedom. However he takes this idea a bit further by distinguishing between the motive and will as well as natural, philosophical, and moral freedom, not just moral and natural as Augustine does.

Edwards does this mainly in part one of the discourse where he first clarifies and defines his terms. He begins in part one, section one by expounding upon the nature of the will. He defines the "will" as "that by which the mind chooses anything" and therefore concludes that "an act of the will is the same as the act of choosing or choice."⁹ By this definition, Edwards insists, like Augustine, that the will acts voluntarily, "expressed by its [the will] pleasing a man to do thus or thus; and a man's doing as he wills, and doing as he pleases, are the same thing in common speech...will and desire do not clash in the least"¹⁰ The important thing that Edwards establishes immediately in his treatise is that men, at all times, act out of their greatest desire, making us still individually responsible for our choices. He goes on to say that "A man never, in any instance, wills anything contrary to his desires, or desires anything contrary to his will."¹¹ Augustine holds this same point of view. John Rist summarizes Augustine's view well in this regard, writing that "Our habits are like weights around our necks, and they reflect, or rather are identical with our likes and dislikes... It is clear that this 'weight' which Augustine envisages, this 'delight' which marks his will and impels him to act will be operative upon his choices."¹²

⁹ Jonathan Edwards, "Part I. Wherein Are Explained Various Terms and Things Belonging to the Subject of the Ensuing Discourse," in *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, 137, <http://edwards.yale.edu/archive?path=aHR0cDovL2Vkd2FyZHMueWFsZS5lZHUvY2dpLWJpbi9uZXdwaGlsby9nZXRvYmp1Y3QucGw/Yy4wOjUud2plbw==>

¹⁰ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 139.

¹¹ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 139.

¹² Rist, 423.

For both men, it is clearly the case that the man acts out of their greatest desire at any given moment.

Edwards, however, develops this Augustinian beyond what Augustine clearly identifies and brings another term into the discussion: motive. Motive is defined by Edwards as “the whole of that which moves, excites, or invites the mind to volition, whether that be one thing singly, or many things conjunctly.”¹³ As such, the mind must always be inclined towards something that is somewhat “agreeable” to the mind, or, what he would call “the greatest apparent good.”¹⁴ It is important to note here that when Edwards says “good” he is referring not to what is objectively Good, but what *appears* good to the mind. Ultimately, the mind chooses what suits it most in terms of the greatest apparent good. In the end, when we trace our motives back to their origin, we find that they are not willed, but given. Therefore, Edwards finds it rational to conclude that “the will is *determined* by the greatest apparent good, or by what seems agreeable.”¹⁵ This is what drives theologians like RC Sproul to say that “every choice that we make is free, and every choice that we make is determined.”¹⁶ Augustine does not say this in so many words, but Edwards and Augustine accept the same premise that the will is motivated by what it chiefly desires, Edwards just develops the idea a bit more and brings it to a logical conclusion.

Additionally, Edwards and Augustine are united in their distinction between what Augustine would call moral freedom and liberty and what Edwards would call moral and natural ability. In simple terms, per Augustine and maintained by Edwards, man is naturally free to choose what he wants at any given moment, but has lost his desire for righteousness and is

¹³ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 141.

¹⁴ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 142.

¹⁵ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 144.

¹⁶ RC Sproul, “What is Free Will,” <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/series/chosen-by-god/what-is-free-will>

morally enslaved to sin. RC Sproul concludes that “For both Edwards and Augustine, man is still free to choose; but if left to himself, man will never choose righteousness, precisely because he does not desire it.”¹⁷ Edwards, like Augustine, makes clear that our nature has never been in opposition to our choice. In fact, he writes that “choice, in many cases, arises from nature, as truly as other events.”¹⁸ Nature, according to Jonathan Edwards, is free from any external coercion and comes from within oneself, thus making it morally necessary for us to choose what we want when we want it because it “is a certainty of the inclination of the will itself.”¹⁹ Thus, as long as there are conflicting desires in the human being, including an appetite to sin, then man is not completely free in the moral sense in which Edwards spoke. Augustine observes the same thing, concluding that man will never experience the fullness of liberty or choice in the autonomous sense.

Edwards, however, takes this a step further and expounds upon the “controversy about liberty and moral agency” and makes some necessary distinctions that fit well into Augustine’s point of view and adds clarity to it. He first observes that “the terms ‘necessary’ impossible,’ ‘irresistible,’” are used in general, which makes them relative to us and our experience. He writes that “We are accustomed, in the common use of language, to apply and understand these phrases in this sense: we grow up in such a habit; which we daily use of these terms, in such a sense, from our childhood becomes fixed and settled.”²⁰ It may feel like, from our perspective, that we are doing things that are necessary or irresistible, but objectively, we are willingly acting in accordance with our strongest desires. Edwards makes a rather astute observation here: that

¹⁷ RC Sproul, “The Meaning of Man’s Will,” accessed 4/29/23, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/the-meaning-of-mans-will>

¹⁸ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 158.

¹⁹ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 159.

²⁰ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 150.

we often slip into using this general language to describe the way in which we make choices which is misleading.

By highlighting this issue, Edwards is able to draw a distinction between the general language of necessity and philosophical/metaphysical necessity. Edwards describes philosophical necessity as “that by which a thing cannot be, or whereby it cannot be otherwise, fails at being a proper explanation of it” and ultimately, it “is really nothing else than the full and fixed connection between things signified by the subject and predicate of a proposition.”²¹ A thing, therefore, must be necessary in its own nature in order for it to be philosophically necessary. This manifests itself in three main ways, which Edwards identifies. He uses the example of two and two, when added together, equal four. This is necessarily the case and cannot be otherwise. The second instance of philosophical necessity is that “which affirms the existence of something, may be fixed or certain because the existence of that thing has already come to pass; and either now is, or has been” and the last instance “affirms something to be... so the existence of the thing may be *consequentially* necessary.”²² This distinction between what is philosophically necessary and the sense in which we often use words like necessity, impossible, and irresistible sheds more light on the subject matter at hand and clarifies terminology. This distinction is a helpful one as it separates the different types of necessity in the human mind so that they are might understand in a fuller sense the abilities and limitations of the will and the extent to which it is really free. Edwards, in this way, does not change Augustine’s theology, but develops and clarifies it.

In conclusion, Augustine, for his time articulated the sense in which the will is in bondage very clearly and it has had a tremendous impact upon the way in which we conceive of

²¹ Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 152.

²² Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 153.

the will under the absolute sovereignty of God. Edwards maintains Augustine's view of the will and develops it by making some necessary distinctions, thereby adding clarity to how one should understand the workings of the human will.

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