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A Review of John Rist's "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination"

Caleb Brown

In "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination" John Rist clearly states what he wants to add to the discussion on Augustine's doctrine of free will and predestination: "It is my contention that the synthesis I shall attempt to present, if correct, negates other syntheses, and that all Augustinian texts which are relevant to the subject-matter are in harmony with it."¹ Rist explicitly rejects any approach to understanding Augustine's position on free will (what could be a purely philosophical topic) without considering his position on predestination (a theological topic). Augustine does not separate philosophy and theology, so Rist rejects attempting to understand Augustine's philosophical and theological stances separately.²

In this paper I seek to summarize and critique John Rist's article "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination."³ In my critique I focus on two points where Rist

¹ John M. Rist, "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 20, no. 2 (October 1969): 421, accessed April 9, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23960142>.

² *Ibid.*, 420-421.

³ This review will treat only the body of Rist's article, not the appendix.

finds Augustine's position lacking. These points are: 1) Augustine's lack of an account of how God acts justly in election and 2) Augustine's demeaning of man to the level of a "puppet." I attempt to demonstrate that Rist's criticisms are rebutted by extending Augustine's teachings of, respectively, 1) causality and the will and 2) the solidarity of humanity with Adam. My aim is not to prove that Augustine's articulation of free will and God's predestination is the correct one, but only that Augustine's position can withstand the criticisms Rist brings against it.

Rist's Definitions

Rist notes that Augustine uses several terms differently than they are often used today and defines these terms according to Augustine's usage. While these definitions occur throughout the article, it is most helpful to deal with them up front. Rist states that when Augustine uses *voluntas* he means "moral self" or "moral personality." By this Augustine does not mean a faculty of the person, but the person herself.⁴ A person cannot be separated from her will, so there is no "compelling to will."⁵ Because she is inseparable from her will, if she is forced to do something, it is not because her will has been manipulated against her but because her will has been overpowered.

⁴ Ibid., 421.

⁵ Ibid., 422.

When Augustine uses *liber* as in *liber voluntas* or *liber arbitrium* he intends to signify responsibility, not that fallen man can refrain from doing evil.⁶ He means only that when we act, we, ourselves, choose—we do not struggle against an outside power only to be overcome by it. Habits and sin nature direct us, yet we are free when we act. Finally, when Augustine speaks of predestination he means: “foreknowledge and ‘pre-paration’ by God of those acts of kindness . . . by which those who are saved are saved.”⁷ Moreover, Augustine holds that God only predestines to **salvation**, not to damnation. Passages where Augustine speaks of predestination to death or punishment do not use the same sense of the word. In these contexts “predestination” signifies a passive attitude on God’s part, whereas when God predestines to salvation He affirmatively chooses.

Augustine’s Conception of Free Choice: The Ability to do Right

According to Rist, Augustine holds that, unless aided by God, post-fall humans will not choose right. Man belongs to one of two camps, *caritas* or *cupiditas*. There is no middle ground, no participation in both at once. A person belongs to and is controlled by either one or the other. Thus, freedom is not the ability to do otherwise than one does but is “obedience to God, the choice and performance of good works under the guidance of God’s grace. It is freedom from the necessity of sin.”⁸

⁶ Ibid., 425.

⁷ Ibid., 427.

⁸ Ibid., 424.

Moreover, without the grace of God, there is no hope of moving from *cupiditas* to *caritas*.⁹ This grace of God is not based on any past, present, or future merit of the individual who receives it. Rist notes that, even though Augustine portrays humanity as dependent on God for salvation, there is still the possibility that he allows humanity autonomy in relation to God in some areas such as non-salvific good. If Augustine does not teach that humanity has some autonomy from God, Rist holds that Augustine will have reduced people to mere “puppets.”¹⁰

Autonomy in Regard to Doing Good: It does not Exist

As seen above, when Augustine says that humans are free, he means that they are responsible, not that they can do any good apart from God. God’s continued, active assistance is necessary for a person to do good, even after that person has been freed from sin—placed in the *caritas* camp. God’s grace must be continually applied for a person to act in a God-honoring manner. Rist sees Augustine’s commitment to this doctrine as especially demonstrated in his discussion of the sinlessness of Mary. Augustine holds that Mary was not once and for all made sinless, but, in an extraordinary and unparalleled working of God’s grace, was continually sustained in righteousness.¹¹ Even then, like everyone else, only after death did Mary reach a point where sin was an impossibility.

⁹ Ibid., 425.

¹⁰ Ibid., 425.

¹¹ Ibid., 427.

The Difference Between Adam's Power of Choice and Current Humans' Power of Choice

Augustine holds that Adam had the knowledge, power, and all other things necessary to either accept or reject God's grace. As Adam accepted God's grace, he was maintained in righteousness. If he rejected it, he fell into sin. Unfallen Adam was "free from moral evil, though necessarily possessed of the ontological weakness that is the lot of all that is both free and created."¹² Rist holds that determining if any of Adam's original choice still remains to humans is important to understanding Augustine's doctrine of free will and predestination. Rist gives the following account of Augustine's view of the fall of Adam: When Adam fell, all fell.¹³ In this Fall, both Adam's nature and the nature of all of humanity was scarred and "vitiating."¹⁴ Humans are no longer capable of a choice like Adam's. However, the "last vestiges"¹⁵ of Adam's original nature do remain in people. The question is, what do these vestiges enable humans to do? How much of Adam's capability of free choice do those vestiges enable in the present humanity?

Do these vestiges allow humans any opportunity to autonomously accept or reject God's grace? Rist has already discussed Augustine's position that humans

¹² Ibid., 434.

¹³ Ibid., 431.

¹⁴ Ibid., 432.

¹⁵ Ibid.

cannot be saved apart from God's grace, and that, once saved, they cannot do good apart from God's grace. So the good people do is causally determined by God's grace. But what about that grace itself? Do humans have the power to do otherwise in their relationship to God's grace? As Rist notes, Augustine's metaphysical "last vestiges"¹⁶ teaching allows for this possibility. According to Rist, Augustine rejects this possibility in his letter to Simplicianus where he holds to an extremely difficult interpretation of the passage: "many are called, but few chosen."¹⁷ As Rist points out, the plain reading of the passage is that a person can reject God's salvific grace, but Augustine employs convoluted distinctions to demonstrate that this passage is in accord with the idea that all to whom God offers His grace accept it and are saved. Rist concludes, "Augustine argues . . . salvation is independent of man's fallen will; it is a matter of God's omnipotence."¹⁸

Rist's Reaction

Rist concludes that Augustine's position is that "fallen man is totally subject to the acts of God."¹⁹ He criticizes Augustine's position by pointing out that Augustine cannot explain why God selects those he elects. Rist argues that, although this is a complex issue, Augustine cannot be excused on grounds of complexity because he

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 436.

¹⁸ Ibid., 437.

¹⁹ Ibid., 438.

excels at formulating speculative solutions to complex doctrines (such as the Trinity). Rist argues that Augustine's lack of an explanation leaves God vulnerable to the charge of injustice.²⁰

Rist writes that, according to Augustine, "Man can only be bound to the good by a new act of God. And this act of God can only occur at the sacrifice of one of the greatest gifts given to Adam, namely his ultimate autonomy on the matter of moral choice."²¹ Rist reacts strongly against this teaching, which he holds renders men to be on the level of "puppets."²² He sympathizes with Augustine only by recognizing that Augustine sees the security of a scenario based on God's involvement through efficacious grace as better than the contingency of one based on Adam's choice. In his conclusion Rist also notes that Augustine does not believe that Adam had a real choice. His metaphysical derivation from nothingness made his fall an "irresistible phenomena."²³

Critique of Rist's Criticism Regarding Election and God's Justice

Rist argues that Augustine's lack of an explanation for why God chooses to elect those he does leaves God liable to charges of injustice. This charge does not take into account Augustine's approach to the nature of the will. Augustine's doctrine

²⁰ Ibid., 440.

²¹ Ibid., 442.

²² Ibid., 441.

²³ Ibid., 442.

of God's election of certain individuals is consistent with his approach to the will, whether human or divine. Rist's own discussion of Augustine's doctrine of the will acknowledges that Augustine holds that there is no final cause of the will outside of itself.²⁴ Speaking of Adam and Eve's choice, Bonnie Kent writes, "The only explanation Augustine can conceive is that their sin arose from an evil will which itself had no prior or external cause."²⁵ Augustine extends this doctrine on the divine level: "Thus if they were to say 'What determined God to make heaven and earth?' one should respond to them that those who desire to become acquainted with God's will should first learn about the power of the human will. For they seek to know the causes of God's will when God's will itself is the cause of all the things there are."²⁶ Augustine's doctrine of the will's initial or self-causality as a sort of "unmoved mover" is not an acquiescence to mystery in the Divine Nature, but rather a carefully reasoned and consistent application of his broader theory of will.

Of course, the fear is that, without justification, God's choices will be arbitrary and thus unjust. This fear conflates "unjustified" and "unjust." For Augustine, the

²⁴ Rist, 423.

²⁵ Bonnie Kent, "Augustine's Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 222.

²⁶ Qtd. in: William Mann, "Augustine on Evil and Original Sin," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 41.

core of justice is “right relationship.”²⁷ It is a consistent biblical pattern that God’s choices are not justified by any merit in the individual, whether it be the selection of Jacob, the people of Israel, or the elect. It seems possible to argue that God’s choices are just not only *in* their lack of a justification, but even that their lack of a justification is important to their justness. God’s place, as the sovereign, transcendent ruler is one of complete authority. Would it be just for a person to be constrained in the use of his household dishes by any sort of obligation to them? Certainly this would not be a right relationship. Similarly, it would be an improper relationship for God to be constrained in His plans for His creation by anything other than His own nature.²⁸

Critique of Rist’s Position that Augustine Renders Humans as “Puppets”

Two general observations are in order. First, while Rist does not make this explicit, he appears to assume that, “an agent acts with free will, or is morally responsible for an act, only if he could have done otherwise.”²⁹ Second, Rist

²⁷ Mary T. Clark, "Human Persons and the Foundation of Justice and Rights," *Cogito* 1 (March 1983): 120, accessed April 13, 2016, Philosopher's Index with Full Text.

²⁸ Note: I have not found evidence that Augustine himself fully expressed this position. My point here is only that Augustine’s system can be extended to meet Rist’s objection, not that Augustine himself extended his system to this point.

²⁹ Eleonore Stump, “Augustine on Free Will,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzman, (New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 125.

acknowledges in his opening remarks that, for Augustine, “‘Freedom’ . . . did not carry the same emotional overtones as those with which we are familiar.”³⁰ Despite this acknowledgment, Rist proceeds to speak disparagingly of Augustine for reducing people to puppets—an approach which seems to indicate that Rist is applying his modern valuation of freedom to the discussion. Thus, Rist engages Augustine on Rist’s terms, not Augustine’s, and so Augustine’s position is disadvantaged.

A more substantive issue with Rist’s critique of Augustine on free will is its failure to account for the significance of Augustine’s conception of corporate solidarity in Adam. My argument here will rely on Eleonore Stump’s contention that an agent can still act in-deterministically although it is not possible for him to act otherwise than he does. First, I will examine how Augustine argues against the Pelagians that sinful actions *do* corrupt the will. Second, I will argue that Augustine’s doctrine of corporate solidarity with Adam allows individual humans to maintain *ultimate* freedom.

Warfield describes the Pelagian position on the will’s corruptibility thus: “No corruption of nature, even by growing habit, is really allowed.”³¹ “Pelagius still asserted our continuous possession of ‘a free will which is unimpaired for sinning

³⁰ Rist, “Augustine on Free will and Predestination,” 421.

³¹ Benjamin Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), 295.

and for not sinning.”³² Julian also argued, “Our free will is just as full after sins as it was before sins.”³³ Augustine explicitly rejects this position: “Augustine replies that this destroys the Savior’s work—for how can He save from sins if sins do not corrupt?”³⁴ He sees the Pelagian position as conflicting directly with biblical passages such as Romans 1.³⁵

From this discussion it is apparent that Augustine holds that one’s previous sinful choices could limit one’s ability to choose rightly in the present. Stump proposes that “an agent acts with free will or is morally responsible for an act, only if the act is not *ultimately* causally determined by anything outside the agent.”³⁶ This criterion allows for a scenario in which an individual could not do anything other than what he does but still be free. While an individual’s impaired will may constrain him to choose evil in a given instance, it is possible that only he himself is responsible for the impaired state of his will.

Augustine’s doctrine of corporate solidarity with Adam allows the condition of ultimate responsibility to be met for all of humanity. From *De Peccatorum Meritis Et Remissione Et De Baptismo Parvulorum* book three, chapter 14:

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 330.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Stump, “Augustine on Free Will,” 128.

Nor, indeed, are those sins of infancy so said to be another's, as if they did not belong to the infants at all, inasmuch as all then sinned in Adam, when in his nature, by virtue of that innate power whereby he was able to produce them, they were all as yet the one Adam; but they are called another's, because as yet they were not living their own lives, but the life of the one man contained whatsoever was in his future posterity.³⁷

According to Augustine, Adam's sin was not external to the rest of humanity. The idea of Adam's sin as his and not the rest of humanity's, *both corporately and individually*, is foreign to Augustine.

Stump's analogy of the sci-fi smoking device provides a useful tool for understanding how a person can be free although bound by sinful nature to be wholly dependent on God. In Stump's analogy there is a smoker who, on his own, is wholly incapable of refraining from smoking. But this smoker can choose to put on a device, and if he does he will have an effective first-order will to refrain from smoking. Stump argues that, while the smoker's first order will is caused by the device, he is actually still free because the ultimate cause of his will is his decision to use the device.³⁸ In the context of the doctrine of corporate solidarity and free choice, Adam's sin, which is the sin of all humanity, both corporately and individually, takes the place of the device. While this sin constrains human will, the

³⁷ Augustine, "0354-0430 – Augustinus – De Peccatorum Meritis Et Remissione Et De Baptismo Parvulorum," *Documenta Catholica Omnia*. December 6, 2011. Accessed April 13, 2016. [http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0354-0430,_Augustinus,_De_Peccatorum_Meritis_Et_Remissione_Et_De_Baptismo_Parvulorum_\[Schaff\],_EN.pdf](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0354-0430,_Augustinus,_De_Peccatorum_Meritis_Et_Remissione_Et_De_Baptismo_Parvulorum_[Schaff],_EN.pdf), 214.

³⁸ Stump, "Augustine on Free Will."

cause of this sin is free will, so the constrained will is ultimately caused by a free choice of will. Thus, *ultimately*, there is nothing *external* which causally determines the state of humanity and the decisions, and constraints on decisions, which flow from that state.

It does appear to be true that Augustine portrays humanity as totally dependent on God both for salvation and for post-salvific good. Moreover, it seems clear that he did not hold that humanity could refuse God's grace. But Rist's assertions that Augustine reduces humanity to the level of puppets do not account appropriately for the fact that each human's state of dependency is of his own making.³⁹

Conclusion

John Rist treats Augustine with honesty. When is as authoritative as Augustine, the temptation to manipulate his writings into saying things which agree with one's own position is strong. Rist resists this temptation, even concluding that Augustine holds a position on free will and predestination which Rist finds highly objectionable.

³⁹ At the end of his article, Rist does mention in passing that Augustine does not hold that Adam was actually "free" in Rist's sense of the word—that Adam's fall was irresistible. However, he does not provide any justification for this statement. He gives no references to Augustine's writings in which Augustine states this. It is true that Augustine holds that pride is an inherent liability (see Rist, "Augustine on Free Will and Predestination," 441) but this is very different from asserting that Adam's fall was inevitable. Moreover, this assertion conflicts with other statements Rist makes which *are* clearly derived from Augustine (Ibid., 430). Thus, this statement will be passed over and no attempt will be made to integrate it into my discussion.

But in his objections to Augustine's position, Rist does not do justice to the whole system of Augustine's thought. First, he imposes his own criteria and value for freedom upon Augustine (criteria and value which clearly conflict with Augustine's own) without ever discussing which criteria and values are correct. Second, he conflates an unjustified decision with an unjust decision, failing to recognize that Augustine could see God's unjustified (at least by any human attribute) selection of persons to salvation as the right relationship between God and humanity. Finally, he does not give full weight to the catholic nature of Augustine's doctrine of the corporate solidarity of humanity in Adam. He takes the doctrine of humanity's participation in the sin of Adam in the sense of an external effect, whereas Augustine characterizes it as an internal decision.

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