

Reconciling Augustine's Ideas on Free Will and Predestination

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Abstract

In the works *City of God* and *Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine argues that humans have free will. However, earlier in *City of God* as well as in *On the Predestination of the Saints*, he argues that humans are subject to God's will and that humans need intervention from God to come to salvation. The two ideas look incompatible, for if salvation only comes by the person's decision to take it, then the action cannot be predestined. The predestination of the action would make the action a necessary action, not a free action. It is clear that Augustine makes an argument that humans have free will. The argument for free will is mentioned in several of his works, and he makes many arguments for its validity. Scholars, such as John Rist, disagree that Augustine makes an argument for the predestination at all. They argue that he only makes a case for human free will. Scholars who question if Augustine wrote an argument for predestination suggest that the term has been misinterpreted by readers with a modern understanding of it. In contrast, other scholars such as Gerald Bonner argue that Augustine did make arguments for both free will and predestination and that there is an issue of trying to reconcile both views. While Augustine's agreements seem to contradict each other, they can be rectified if God is placed outside of time. Predestination presupposes that God foreknows all things that every person will do before the person acts. However, If God exists outside of time, then the two arguments can be made compatible while retaining the presupposition of predestination that God has foreknowledge. For, if God's knowledge, and thus his predestination exists outside of time, it does not interfere with man's ability to make free decisions.

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1. Introduction

People make decisions every day, from what they will eat for breakfast to where they live to where they work. They also make decisions about their spirituality, if they will be religious or not, and if so, what religion will they practice. It is a part of everyday life for people to make whatever choices they desire. However, are these decisions made by free will of the person or are the decisions predetermined by someone or something beyond our control? Augustine argues that while one's actions are of their own free will, the decision of salvation is only possible with the predestination of God. It would appear that the two ideas are incompatible with one another. How can one be predestined to come to accept salvation while maintaining free will? Augustine does not indicate if there are no problems with holding both views, or if he changed his beliefs later in his life from predestination to that of free will. However, people can be predestined to obtain salvation while maintaining their free will.

2. Free Will and Predestination

2.1 Free Will

In order to see how free will and predestination are compatible, one must first understand what both terms represent. The idea of free will is something that is believed by most people, even if that is not the term they give for it. People, generally, would agree that they are free to do whatever they desire and free to avoid what they do not want. This is the essence of free will, the ability of a person to choose the decisions in his or her life. For example, some people get up every morning and start their day by making coffee. They do this because they enjoy coffee and it helps them through their day. This decision is made without any other influence besides their own. On the other hand, some people do not start their day by making coffee because they either do not like it or think that it is unnecessary. These people also make this decision based solely on their own desires and by their own choice. In order “to say a person in a particular situation has free will means two things. The first is that it is possible for him to make one decision, and it is also possible for him to make at least one other decision... to say that a person has free will means, second, that he or she – not anyone else by he himself or she herself – chooses to make one of the possible decisions and not any of the others.”¹ To make a decision freely is to have options and then make a decision. However, if a person is compelled or forced to choose a particular decision or no decision at all the action is not free. Returning to the coffee example, if a person was forced to make coffee every morning by another person, the person making the coffee would not be making the decision freely as he or she is being compelled to do so. Free actions done by a person’s free will must be voluntary actions. The difference between voluntary and involuntary action lies within the will behind it. Robert Kane puts it this way, “voluntary will is what is done ‘in accordance with one’s will’, and the involuntary what is done ‘against one’s will’...it also implies doing it for the reasons you will to do it and in a manner that is not coerced or compelled.”² There is no way that an involuntary action is done by a person’s free will because the person is not choosing the action on his or her own.

Augustine agrees with the idea of people having free will. He states that “our wills also have just as much power as God willed and foreknew, they should have...that they would have the power to do it.”³ The power behind people’s ability to make free choices was given to them by God to be used, and God knew how people would use that power. Even though “God has foreknowledge of everything in the future and that nonetheless will whatever we will.”⁴ The main reason for people to be given this ability is because “no one can act rightly except by that same free choice of the will, and I affirmed that God gave us free choice in order to enable us to act rightly.”⁵ However, Augustine makes it clear that people are able to turn their wills away from the ability to act justly in order to act in a way that is evil. He states “I asked: ‘What is wickedness?’ and found that it is not a substance by a perversity of the will turning away from you, God, the supreme substance, toward lower things-casting away, as it were, its own insides, and swelling with desire for what is outside it.”⁶ John Rist says about Augustine’s argument of free will is “each human being can make decisions by virtue of what Augustine calls his free choice (*liberum arbitrium*). Consistently through the whole range of his writings Augustine is insistent that everyone has this power of free will (*voluntas*).”⁷ Free will, according to Augustine, is what gives people the ability to follow God or to follow his or her own desires.

2.2 Predestination

Necessary actions are the opposite of free will. These are actions that must be done by the person at the time that has been determined for it to happen. The person performing these actions does not have the option to refuse the actions or do them at a later time or date. A practical example of this is a natural death. When people die naturally, they do not have any say in when that will happen or by what means. It is determined for them and there is not a way for them to change the time, place, or means by which it will happen. They also cannot choose to not die, as it is necessary for every living thing to die at some point in time. The actions that are necessary cannot be changed by the people who must do them. They are the involuntary actions that are not done by free will as one is forced or compelled to act, react, or think in a specific way.

Predestination is the precursor to necessary actions, as it is the idea that all or some actions done by people are predetermined by someone or something, usually said to be God. In the Scriptures it states “God would either harden the heart or display mercy on whomever he chose, molding the clay as he wished, to show either his wrath or his mercy (Rom. 9:19-25). God had ‘destined’ the saints for adoption ‘according to the good pleasure of his will’ (Eph. 1:5-6). Jesus had announced that no one could come to him unless ‘drawn by the Father’ (Jn 6:44).”⁸ If an action is predestined by God, it is a necessary action as God cannot be made to be wrong. It “includes [that] both God’s

foreknowledge of all that will come to pass and his will to save those whom he elects.”⁹ One must understand that there is a difference between foreknown events and caused ones. Predestination presupposes that the foreknowledge causes actions and that some people are, without choice, made to do an action while others are not. This raises the question as to why are only some people selected to perform the action and on what basis are they selected? It also raises questions about the other people, who will not perform the action, why were they not selected, and what the process of this selection looked like or was it completely random?

As previously discussed, Augustine promotes the idea of free will, he also promotes the idea of predestination. He says about human will “all of them are most of all subject to the will of God, to whom all wills also are subject, since they have no power except what He has bestowed upon them.”¹⁰ The will of humans are “themselves are included in that order of causes which is certain to God.”¹¹ The order of causes is known by God and, therefore, must be acted out in the order that God knows them to be. The idea of foreknowledge presupposes that God knows these things before the action takes place and can alter them as he pleases. Augustine shows this by saying “God gave them the spirit of compunction, -eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear even to this day.”¹² According to Augustine, God not only foreknows all the actions of people, he also predestines them to do the will that he has planned for them.

3. The Incompatibility of Free Will and Predestination

3.1 The Problem

According to Augustine, “a consequence of original sin, all human beings belong to a *massa damnata*. The salvation of God’s people depends on God’s sovereign choice to save some to whom he grants the gift of perseverance, and to leave others in their fallen estate.”¹³ One could argue that all people could be predestined to come to faith. Yet if one talks to multiple people, it would be soon realized that this is not the case as not all hold to a faith group, and among the people who do there is an abundance of different groups that different people adhere to in life. Due to this diversity among people, people are free to say that it is unlikely that all people are predetermined to come to faith.

He states that it is “not in the choice of man’s will to believe or not believe, but because in the elect the will is prepared by the Lord.”¹⁴ The gift of faith is impossible to reach without God because God must prepare the will to follow after him. It would be impossible for people to seek out or obtain faith without God’s direct intervention within the person. However, Augustine makes it clear that not all people are given this gift and, therefore, do not come to faith. He says that “those to whom the faith was not announced at all were foreknown as those who would not believe.”¹⁵ Like with the free will argument “Augustine continued [later in life] to maintain freedom of choice by the elect, despite the vital necessity of grace to enable them to exercise that freedom.”¹⁶ Augustine held that, while salvation was given to the elect, the elect had the freedom to choose or reject the gift.

The arguments here presented through Augustine presents two different ideas. One argument presents people have free will and is thus free to make their decisions as they please. This would include the decision to come to faith in God. People with free will choose whether or not they believe in God and if they will come to have faith in him. However, people who are predestined do not receive this choice. They have to believe or not believe in God based on what God has decided for them. On top of God having decided for them, if they will have faith or not, it has become a necessary thing for them because they need God to place the action of faith within them in order to reach faith. If God does not give them the action of faith, it is impossible for them to come to it on their own terms and it is not a free choice that they can make for themselves.

3.2 Augustine’s Solution

An objection could be raised if one can freely choose of his or her own will to come to faith in God or is the person predetermined to come to faith by God? If one is predestined, he or she is not choosing of their own free will. The person must be made to come to faith if God predestines him or her, and if faith is not reachable without God then there is no way a person can freely choose it without God intervening. However, if the person is choosing of his or her own will, then how could that person be predestined. Someone choosing of his or her own will to come to faith in God cannot be determined in any way to come to faith, and it cannot depend on God’s action to come to that faith unless the action is given by God to all people. It does not seem possible to say that someone can be both predestined, but also have the free will to make his or her own choice

Augustine attempts to make the two arguments work together by saying that predestination is based on the foreknowledge of God; however, he also limits his argument to remaining in the belief that this is only afforded to “the elect”. They are the ones who God predetermines to come to faith in him. Ralph Blumenau states that “the word [elect] comes from the Latin *eligere*, which means to select, though the Latin word itself comes from *legere*, meaning to choose.”¹⁷ Augustine’s use of this word shows that these who are “the elect” were selected to choose God. He does not say much about the people who are not included in “the elect”, whether or not they are also predetermined, or if they are the ones who come of their free will. It is unclear if Augustine meant that all people were given the ability of faith, but only those who acted on it would be predestined and therefore “the elect”.

3.3 The Response to Augustine’s Solution

While Augustine makes a point that God’s foreknowledge is the key to having predestination, he does not extend it to the free will problem or apply it to all people groups. Supposing that God indeed has foreknowledge and cannot be wrong about the things that he foreknows, it is possible for people to have free will while also be predestined using Augustine’s argument.

Let’s return to the coffee example, if a person is free to make coffee as they please, then he or she wills the coffee to be made, and the action is completed by the will of the person. If God has the foreknowledge that the person will make the coffee in the morning, then God has the foreknowledge of the person’s will. This does not have God determining the person’s ability to make the coffee, just that God knows he or she will do it. The problem with God foreknowing that he or she would make coffee would come if God was actually determining the event and not just observing. God foreknowing the wills of all people just means that God is observing the process of decision making they will go through. The same works for coming to faith. If a person comes to faith at some point in his or her life, then God sees the point that the person will do so. If God sees the point at which a person will put his or her faith in God, God is not interfering with the free will, he is just observing the will of the person.

4. Reformulation of Augustine’s Argument

4.1 Freedom to Choose Faith

The ability to come to faith, often called grace, is something that is given by God to people in order that they can come to faith in God. There are “some men [who] are predestined to exercise their will to accept the offer of Grace and others are predestined to reject it. God, being omniscient, foresees, but does not determine who will accept his Grace and who will not.”¹⁸ If a person will not put his or her faith in God at any point in his or her life, then God sees this and does not give them the necessary things to put within the person to have faith in God. Therefore, the person accepts salvation of their free will and God, being omnipotent, sees the event, giving the person the ability to come to salvation.

If faith depends on the gift of grace, can it still be said that a person is free to choose to come to faith? In section 3.1, it was stated that Augustine believes that grace is a gift given only to “the elect” in order that they may come to faith in God. It is clear that there is a link between faith and grace, but how then does this allow for free will? If people are given grace, then they are able to come to faith in God. Grace is given by God to bridge the separation of people so that they can come into faith with God. While without grace it is impossible to come to faith in God, grace can also be freely chosen by the people to whom it is given. Essentially, all people are given the opportunity of grace. Anyone who would choose to accept the grace offered, grace is given. God foreknows, but does not cause, who will accept the grace that is offered. In this way, he can give the grace to those people who will accept it, thus allowing them to also come to faith. As grace is offered to all and only given to those whom accept it, it does not make it necessary as it is based on each person’s own will to accept the gift.

4.2 The Timelessness of God

It could be argued that the foreknowledge of God would still make the action of faith necessary to the believers and non-believers. This comes from the idea that God can never be wrong, this would not allow for the person to have a complete freedom of will. If God knows that a person will come to faith at some point in his or her life, there is no way that the person could ever not come to faith because God is omnipotent. If the foreknowledge of God makes the faith of a person necessary, the argument still exists that a person does not have the free will to make that decision because they cannot defy God’s knowledge.

Consider Augustine's view of God existing apart from time, then objection becomes unnecessary. In book 11 of the *Confessions*, Augustine explains how God created time and, therefore could not be bound by time.¹⁹ Augustine believed that the creator could not be bound by his creation, as the creation comes out of the creator. This would mean that God exists apart from the creation, and apart from time. He is not bound by time and experiencing each event as it happens, instead God experiences time in its totality. Each life, God sees from its beginning until the death of the person; this would allow for God to have foreknowledge of the life of each person. The foreknowledge would not necessitate any action on behalf of the person because God just sees the freely chosen actions of the person in their entirety.

This objection becomes unnecessary because God's foreknowledge is the knowledge of the will of the person and does not interfere with the person's ability to freely make decisions. It is not God determining the actions of a person, but on the decisions that he or she will make on his or her own. God's foreknowledge, being based on what each person wills, has no determining or necessitating power over the will of the person. What each person decides on the matter of coming to faith or not, is completely of his or her own choosing to receive the gift of grace offered and by coming to faith through that gift. God, foreknowing that decision, gives the gift of grace, giving the person the ability to have faith.

5. Conclusion

Augustine presents arguments for both free will and predestination, which at first glance, appear to be like they are incompatible with each other. It seems like people cannot freely choose God if they are predestined to have faith in God. While he gets close to a solution, he does not solve it for everyone, just a select group of people. However, through the foreknowledge God possesses of a person's will throughout his or her life allows for that person to be predestined by God through his or her own will. This allows for a person to have the free will to choose to have faith in God during his or her life and it allows for God to predestine the person to have faith by giving him or her the means that Augustine argues are necessary for faith to happen in the person. By using this argument, every person is able to come to faith in God, but only if that person choose to do so, and God knowing his or her decision will predestine the person to come to faith by giving him or her the means necessary to have faith or by not giving the person those means if he or she will not come to faith. When considering the view that Augustine held of God existing apart from time, this solution seems even more likely. God being outside of time would allow him to see the lives of people in their completions allowing him to consider the whole of each individual's life and if the person will make the decision to come to salvation at any point during life. This reconsideration of Augustine's argument allows for free will and predestination to both be true.

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7. Endnotes

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