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978-0-521-80655-8 - Augustine: On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice,
and Other Writings

Edited by Peter King

Excerpt

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*On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace
and Free Choice, and Other Writings*

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On the Free Choice of the Will

Book I

EVODIUS: Please tell me whether God is not the author of evil. I.1.1.1

AUGUSTINE: I shall tell you if you make it plain what kind of evil you are asking about. We usually speak of “evil” in two ways, namely when someone has (a) done evil; (b) suffered something evil.

EVODIUS: I want to know about both kinds.

AUGUSTINE: Well, if you know or believe that God is good (it is blasphemous to think otherwise), then He does not *do* evil. On the other hand, if we grant that God is just (denying it is irreligious), then He rewards the good; by the same token, He hands out punishments to evildoers, punishments that are doubtless evils to those who suffer them. Accordingly, I.1.1.2 if no one pays penalties unjustly – which we must believe since we believe that the world is governed by divine providence – then God is indeed the author of evils of type (b), though not in any way the author of evils of type (a).

EVODIUS: Then is there some other author of the evil we have found not to come from God?

AUGUSTINE: Of course! Evil could not occur without an author. But if I.1.1.3 you ask *who* the author is, no answer can be given, for there is not just a single author – rather, evil people are the authors of their evildoing. If you doubt this, pay attention to my earlier statement [in I.1.1.1] that evildoings are redressed by God’s justice. It would not be just to redress them unless they come about through the will.

EVODIUS: Perhaps no one sins unless he has learned how. But if that is I.1.2.4 true, I ask: From whom did we learn how to sin?

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On the Free Choice of the Will

AUGUSTINE: Do you hold that teaching¹ is something good?

EVODIUS: Who would dare to say that teaching is something evil?

AUGUSTINE: What if it is neither good nor evil?

EVODIUS: It seems good to me.

AUGUSTINE: Rightly so, in that knowledge is imparted to us (or awakened in us) through teaching, and nobody learns anything except through teaching. Do you think otherwise?

EVODIUS: I for one think that only good things are learned through teaching.

1.1.2.5 AUGUSTINE: Then draw the conclusion: Evil things are not learned! For “teaching” (*disciplina*) is linguistically derived from “learning” (*discere*).

EVODIUS: Evil things are not learned? Then how does it happen that we do them?

1.1.2.6 AUGUSTINE: Perhaps because we turn aside and away from teaching, that is, from learning. But whether this is the reason or not, the point is certainly clear: Since teaching is something good, and “teaching” is derived from “learning,” evil things cannot be learned at all. For if evil things are learned, they are included in teaching, and thus teaching will not be something good. But it *is* something good, as you yourself declared. Hence evil-doing is not learned, and your search for the one from whom we learn to do evil is in vain. (Alternatively, if we do learn evil things, we do so to avoid them rather than to do them.) The conclusion is that evil-doing is nothing but turning away from teaching.

1.1.3.7 EVODIUS: All in all I think there are two kinds of teaching: one through which we learn to do right, the other through which we learn to do evil. But when you asked whether teaching was something good, the love of the good itself caught my attention, and so I looked only at the first kind, and thus I replied that it is good. But now I am mindful of the second kind, which I declare without a doubt to be an evil, and whose author I am looking for.

1.1.3.8 AUGUSTINE: Do you at least think that understanding is indeed something good?

EVODIUS: Of course! It is plainly so good that I do not see what could be more excellent in humans. I declare that no understanding can be evil in any way.

¹ “Teaching”: *disciplina*, the general activity associated with a field of knowledge.

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AUGUSTINE: Well, if someone were not to understand when he is taught, can he seem to you to have learned anything?

EVODIUS: Not at all.

AUGUSTINE: It follows that if all understanding is good, and no one learns without understanding, then everyone who learns is doing right. For everyone who learns, understands; everyone who understands is doing right. Hence anyone looking for an “author” through whom we learn something is really looking for the one through whom we do right. Accordingly, stop trying to track down some mysterious evil teacher! If he is evil he is not a teacher, and if he is a teacher he is not evil. 1.1.3,9

EVODIUS: Very well. Now that you have pushed me into admitting that we do not *learn* to do evil, tell me: How is it that we *do* evil? 1.2.4,10

AUGUSTINE: You are raising a question that hounded me while I was young; when I was worn out it caused my downfall, landing me in the company of heretics.² I was so injured by this fall, and so buried under such vast heaps of empty tales, that had the love of finding out the truth not succeeded in requesting and receiving divine succor for me, I would not have been able to dig my way out and breathe again, recovering my earlier freedom of inquiry. And since such pains were taken in my case to set me free from that question, I shall guide you on the same route that I used to escape. God will be at hand and make us understand what we have come to believe. Indeed, we are well aware that this is to take the course prescribed by the prophet Isaiah, who says: “Unless you believe you shall not understand” [Is. 7:9]. 1.2.4,11

Now we believe that everything that exists comes from the one God, although God is not the author of sins. But this is the sore point: If sins come from the souls that God created, and those souls come from God, how is it that sins are not almost immediately traced back to God?

EVODIUS: You have now stated plainly what keeps troubling my thoughts, pushing and dragging me into this very investigation. 1.2.5,12

AUGUSTINE: Take heart! Believe as you do; there is no better belief, even if the reason why it is so is hidden. Holding God in the highest esteem is surely the most authentic beginning of religiousness. Nor does anyone hold God in the highest esteem without believing that God is omnipotent, not changeable in even the least detail, the Creator of all good things, Who is more excellent than they are, the most just Ruler of

² The Manichaeans. See *Confessions* 3.7.12–3.10.18 and 8.10.22–24.

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all He has created. Nor does God require the assistance of any nature in his creating – as though He were not sufficiently powerful all by Himself!

1.2.5.13 It follows that God created all things from nothing. Yet out of Himself He did not *create* the one whom we call the only Son of God, but rather *generated* him as equal to Himself.³ When we try to describe the Son of God more plainly we call him “the power of God and the wisdom of God” [1 Cor. 1:24]; through which He made everything that was made from nothing.⁴

1.3.5.14 Now that these points have been settled, let us try with God’s help to gain an understanding of the problem you posed, as follows. You are really asking *why* it is we do evil. Thus we should first of all discuss what it is to *do* evil. Declare your view on this topic. If you cannot summarize it briefly, at least acquaint me with your view by calling to mind some particular evil deeds.

EVODIUS: Adultery, murder, and sacrilege – not to mention others that time and memory will not allow me to list. Is there anyone to whom these deeds do not seem evil?

1.3.6.15 AUGUSTINE: Then tell me first of all why you think it is evil to commit adultery. Is it because the law forbids it?

EVODIUS: It is not evil because it is forbidden by the law. Instead, it is forbidden by the law because it is evil.

AUGUSTINE: What if someone were to exaggerate the delights of adultery, pressing us insistently why we judge it to be evil and worthy of condemnation? Do you think that people who now want to understand, and not merely to believe, should take cover in the authority of the law?

1.3.6.16 Well, for my part I believe as you do. I resolutely believe that adultery is evil, and I proclaim that all societies ought to believe so. But now we are trying to know and establish most firmly through understanding what we have already accepted on faith. So think it over as carefully as you can, and tell me the reason by which you know that adultery is something evil.

³ The Persons of the Trinity are co-eternal, standing in relations of interdependence: The Father generates the Son; the Father and the Son spirate the Holy Spirit. Neither is a case of “creation” strictly speaking.

⁴ See Jn. 1:3: “All things were made by [the Word], and without Him was not any thing made that was made” (partially cited in 3.10.30.108). Also 2 Mac. 7:28: “Look upon the heavens and the Earth, and all that is in them, and consider that God made them of things that were not.”

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EVODIUS: I know that it is evil because I would be unwilling to tolerate it in the case of my wife. Anyone who does to another what he is not willing to have happen to himself is undoubtedly doing something evil.

AUGUSTINE: What if someone's lust (*libido*) leads him to offer his wife to another, freely tolerating her being violated by him, and in turn desiring to have equal license with the other man's wife? Does he then seem to you to have done nothing evil? 1.3.6.17

EVODIUS: On the contrary, a great evil!

AUGUSTINE: But he does not sin according to your rule, since he does not do what he himself is unwilling to tolerate. Accordingly, you should look for something else to prove that adultery is evil.

EVODIUS: It seems evil to me because I have often seen people condemned for this crime. 1.3.7.18

AUGUSTINE: Well, people are often condemned for acting rightly, are they not? Look again at history – and, not to send you to other books, look at the history which stands out by virtue of its divine authority. You will quickly find just how evil we must think the apostles and all the martyrs are if we accept that condemnation is a reliable judgment of evildoing. They were all judged to deserve condemnation by their admission of faith. Accordingly, if everything condemned is an evil, it was evil in those days to believe in Christ and to profess the faith. But if not everything that is condemned is evil, look for something else to establish that adultery is an evil. 1.3.7.19

EVODIUS: I have no answer to give you.

AUGUSTINE: Then perhaps lust is the evil in adultery, and you will run into difficulties as long as you are looking for evil in the outward visible deed. Now to understand that lust is the evil in adultery, consider the following. If a man does not have the opportunity to sleep with someone else's wife but it is plain somehow that he wants to do so, and that he is going to do so should the opportunity arise, he is no less guilty than if he were caught in the act. 1.3.8.20

EVODIUS: Nothing could be more obvious. Now I see that there is no need for a long discussion to persuade me about murder, sacrilege, and in fact all other sins. It is clear now that nothing but lust dominates in every kind of evildoing. 1.3.8.21

AUGUSTINE: You do know, do you not, that lust is also called "desire"? 1.4.9.22

EVODIUS: Yes.

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On the Free Choice of the Will

AUGUSTINE: Well, do you think that there is a difference between desire and fear, or that there is not?

EVODIUS: I think there is a great difference between them.

AUGUSTINE: I believe you think so because desire pursues its object whereas fear avoids it.

EVODIUS: That is it exactly.

AUGUSTINE: Then suppose someone were to kill a person, not out of a desire to get something but because of fear that some evil will happen to him. Will he not be a murderer?

1.4.9.23 EVODIUS: He will indeed. Yet his deed is not free from the domination of desire by that token; whoever kills someone in fear surely *desires* to live without fear.

AUGUSTINE: And does living without fear seem like a small good to you?

EVODIUS: It is a great good, but the murderer cannot achieve it in any way through his crime.

1.4.9.24 AUGUSTINE: I am not asking what he can *achieve* but what he *desires*. Anyone who desires a life free from fear certainly desires a good thing. Hence the desire itself ought not to be blamed; otherwise we shall blame all who love the good. The upshot is that we must admit that there are cases of murder in which the dominance of evil desire cannot be found, and either (a) it will be false that lust dominates in all sins insofar as they are evil, or (b) there will be some kind of murder that can be not a sin.

1.4.9.25 EVODIUS: If murder is killing a human being, it can sometimes happen without sin. For instance, a soldier kills an enemy; a judge or his agent executes a convicted criminal; someone throws his weapon by chance imprudently and against his will. They do not seem to me to be sinning when they kill someone.

AUGUSTINE: I agree. But they are not usually called murderers, either. So tell me: Do you hold that someone who kills his master, at whose hands he fears brutal torture, should be counted among those who kill someone but do not merit the name of murderer?

EVODIUS: I see that this case is quite different. In the earlier cases, the people were acting according to the laws – or at least not against the laws – whereas no law sanctions the crime of this slave.

1.4.10.26 AUGUSTINE: Once again you are calling me back to authority. You must remember that we have now undertaken to *understand* what we believe.

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We do indeed believe the laws; hence we should try, if we somehow can, to grasp whether it is not an error for the law to punish the slave's deed.

EVODIUS: The law hardly punishes "in error" since it punishes someone who willingly and knowingly puts his master to death, which none of the others⁵ does.

AUGUSTINE: Well, do you recall having said a little while ago that lust dominates in every evil deed, and that a deed is evil due to lust? 1.4.10.27

EVODIUS: Of course I do.

AUGUSTINE: And have you yourself not also granted that someone who desires to live without fear does not have an evil desire? 1.4.10.28

EVODIUS: I remember that too.

AUGUSTINE: Then, although the master is slain by the slave on account of his desire, he is not slain on account of a blameworthy desire. Consequently, we have not yet found out why this deed is evil. For we agreed that all evildoings are evil precisely because they come about from lust, that is, from a blameworthy desire.

EVODIUS: It seems to me now that the slave was condemned unjustly. Yet I would not dream of saying so if I had another reply to offer. 1.4.10.29

AUGUSTINE: Is it so? You convinced yourself that so great a crime should go unpunished before considering whether the slave desired to have no fear of his master so as to gratify his lusts. Surely evil people desire to live without fear, just as good people do. But the difference is as follows. Good people pursue this by turning their love away from things that cannot be possessed without the risk of losing them. Evil people, on the other hand, try to remove hindrances so that they may securely attach themselves to these things to be enjoyed. The end result is that they lead a life full of crime and wickedness, a life which is better called death. 1.4.10.30

EVODIUS: I have regained my wits now. I am glad to know so plainly the nature of that blameworthy desire referred to as "lust." It has become 1.4.10.31

apparent that lust is the love of things one can lose against one's will. So, if you agree, let us now look into whether lust dominates in sacrilege too – most of the cases of sacrilege we see are committed out of superstition. 1.5.11.31

AUGUSTINE: Make sure the question is not premature. First of all, I think there should be a discussion whether a charging enemy or a murderer attacking from ambush may be killed without lust, but for the sake of one's life, freedom, or chastity. 1.5.11.32

⁵ The soldiers and judges mentioned in 1.4.9.25.

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EVODIUS: How can I think that people are free of lust if they fight ferociously for things that can be lost against their will? On the other hand, if such things cannot be lost, what need is there to resort to killing someone for their sake?

1.5.11.33 AUGUSTINE: Therefore, the law is unjust which grants permission (*a*) to a traveler to kill a highway robber, so as not to be killed himself; (*b*) to any man or woman to slay a rapist in his onslaught, if possible, before enduring rape. Indeed, the law bids a soldier to kill the enemy, and if he holds back from this bloodshed he pays the penalties from his commander. Surely we will not dream of calling these laws unjust – or rather, not to call them “laws” at all, for a law that is not just does not seem to me to be a law.

1.5.12.34 EVODIUS: I see that the law is well protected against this kind of charge. [1] The law gives the people whom it governs permission to do lesser evils in order to avoid greater ones. It is much more civilized that someone who plots against another’s life be killed rather than the one who is protecting his own life; it is much more barbarous that someone unwillingly endure a rape than that the assailant be slain by his intended victim. [2] Furthermore, in killing the enemy a soldier is then acting as an agent of the law, and thus easily does his duty without lust.

1.5.12.35 [3] Besides, the law itself, which was enacted for the protection of society, can hardly be accused of lust – at least assuming that the lawgiver, if he enacted the law at God’s bidding (namely as eternal justice prescribes), was able to do so entirely free of lust. However, even if he did decree the law out of some lust, it does not follow that obeying the law must be accompanied by lust. A good law can be enacted by a lawgiver who is not himself a good person. For example, if someone who had seized tyrannical power were to accept a bribe from an interested party leading him to decree that it is illegal to run off with a woman, even for marriage, the law will not thereby be evil merely because the one who enacted it is unjust and corrupt. Therefore, the law that bids enemy force to be repulsed by equal force, to protect the citizens, can be obeyed without lust. The same thing can be said regarding all officials who wield their powers in accordance with law and the established order.

1.5.12.37 Yet even if the law is blameless, I do not see how the people involved can be blameless. The law does not force them to kill, but merely leaves it in their power. Hence they are free *not* to kill anyone for things they can lose against their will, which they should therefore not love. With respect

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to life,⁶ someone could perhaps be in doubt whether it is somehow taken away from the soul when the body dies. Yet if life can be taken away, it should be held of little worth. On the other hand, if it cannot, there is nothing to fear. With respect to chastity, well, seeing that it is a virtue, who would doubt that it is located in the mind itself? Therefore, it cannot be taken away by a violent rapist. Hence anything that was about to be taken away by the one who was killed is not completely in our power. For this reason, I do not understand why it should be called “ours.” In the end, I do not find fault with the law that permits such people to be killed. Yet I have not found any way to defend those who do the killing. 1.5.12.38

AUGUSTINE: I am even less able to find out why you are looking to defend people whom no law finds guilty. 1.5.12.39

EVODIUS: Well, perhaps no law among those that are public and proclaimed by human beings. I rather suspect they are guilty according to a more powerful and hidden law, if divine providence oversees all things. How indeed are they free of sin in the eyes of divine providence? They have been stained with human blood for the sake of things that should be held of little worth. Therefore, it seems to me that a law drafted to govern society rightly permits these things, and also that divine providence rightly redresses them. The former has in its scope redressing deeds sufficiently to maintain peace among unenlightened people, to the extent that such deeds can be governed by human beings. The other faults, however, have different penalties appropriate to them, from which wisdom alone, it seems to me, can free them. 1.5.13.40

AUGUSTINE: I approve and endorse this distinction of yours. Even though it is just a beginning and not complete, it confidently aims at exalted heights. For it seems to you that the law that is enacted to govern states tolerates and leaves unpunished many things, which are nevertheless redressed by divine providence (and rightly so). Yet it does not follow that just because the law does not accomplish everything, we should disapprove of what it *does* accomplish. 1.5.13.41

If you agree, let us look carefully at (a) the extent to which retribution for evildoings should be exacted by the law that controls society in this life, and then at (b) what remains, which is punished by divine providence in a more unavoidable, yet hidden, fashion. 1.6.14.42

⁶ Life and chastity are examples of things that can be lost against one’s will, namely by murder and rape.