

## The Need for Human Agency

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Augustine presents humanity as having no agency in its own goodness. Pelagius, on the other hand, presents a view of humanity that can and does do good according to its own nature. The two disagree whether humanity is fundamentally good-natured and doing God's will on its own accord or fundamentally corrupted and in need of constant grace to avoid evil and damnation. However, both agree on the causation of any goodness apparent in humanity: God. I will first present Pelagius's argument for the goodness of humanity and God's role in that goodness. Then I will present Augustine's direct objections in outlining his overall view. Ultimately their agreements on causation will resolve Augustine's qualms with Pelagius but leave issues with Augustine intact. Contradictions found in Augustine's model will demonstrate the superiority of Pelagius's that remains uncomplicated. From this and connecting scriptural evidence I will conclude that Pelagius has the more successful position of the two on human agency ergo his model of salvation of salvation and grace that follows is the more successful of the two.

Pelagius asserts humans have been given the capacity for good by God and in this have the ability to will and act for good. He asserts his premises that God created the nature of humanity, God created goodness in humanity's nature, and from nature comes capacity. Since God is the agent responsible for creating humanity's good nature and capacity is necessarily caused by nature, God is also the agent responsible for humanity's good nature. Furthermore, since humans have the capacity to do good, they must have the ability to will good, and from the ability to will good the ability to act good. Pelagius initially justifies these premises on

teleological grounds. God created humanity in his own image to serve him voluntarily. Thus humanity must have a good nature to be in God's image and must be the agent responsible for will and action to be able to serve God voluntarily. Moreover God created much stronger animals that humanity prevailed over so that humanity could understand its own excellence (Burns 41-42). He also implicitly invokes the ought-can principle as he quotes Deuteronomy: "I have set life and death before your face, bless and a curse. Choose life that you may live." (Deut. 30:19, in Burns 42). Since God would not tell someone to do that which they are incapable of as being ought to do something implies being able to and one ought to obey God, one can choose life.

Pelagius presents a few other cases to support his argument such that if Augustine is able to defeat his argument then he must be able to handle these cases as well. The first case is found in Romans where Paul says the law of God is found within the heart of all humankind. As the law itself is written on our hearts, we have a "natural integrity" (Burns 44) in the depths of our souls to judge good and evil. People of all nations have this law despite not having it handed down through revelation, ergo it must arise from human nature. The second case is found in the Lord saying Abel and Noah were just (Burns 45). As justice entails every other virtue, they must be virtuous, which is to say they do and will good. Another case comes from Job who, among other praises, was said by God to be "blameless" and "who refrains from all evil" (Job 2:3, in Burns 47), yet further indications of human agency.

Pelagius continues with further examples and responses to obvious objections, but the question remains what Christ did for us and the ultimate fate of our souls. On the matter of Christ, Pelagius said that just as God giving humanity the law to better know good and evil and thus make it easier to choose good, Jesus cleansed humanity through his life and in doing so restored humanity, thus again making the good easier. Continuing his goodness as virtue ethics

underlying his argument, one must habituate good acts to do them consistently. Because humanity as a whole had over time corrupted, customs led people astray. Thus Christ was needed to set an example and thus let people know how to be good and that being good is possible so that we can do good. Then in the afterlife how good—or virtuous—of people we are in life determines our place in Heaven (Burns 54). Thus salvation comes in the form of blazing a path to follow, though grace is already had in a sense in the goodness God imparted in human nature to begin with.

Augustine agrees that God has given humanity the capacity to do good but staunchly disagrees that we will or act good independently. Thus the praise for goodness in any of the three does not belong to humans but to God alone. He accuses Pelagius of merely “tack[ing] on” (Burns 65) praise to God in will and action when he realizes will and action are both dependent on God-given capacity. Meanwhile he references scripture to point out the law is not a guide to make goodness easier but rather an obstacle (Burns 67). Rather than helping us be good, the law instead points out our inadequacy and thus need for God’s grace.

Augustine finds scriptural evidence that seems to directly contradict Pelagius, causing Pelagius to temporarily qualify his assertion of human goodness. As God works in humanity both to will and to accomplish according to Phil. 2:13, he must have some role in willing and action. Pelagius seeks to escape this by saying teaching rouses the will and thereby action, but as not all have faith, some must be taught but nonetheless fail to do good (Burns 69).

Two further objections of Augustine actually elucidate a foundational agreement between the two, different in accidental qualities rather than necessary qualities. Augustine states that if one does good it’s a clear sign one has learned it from God (Burns 71). He objects that some

follow the law merely out of fear, but if goodness entails good will behind actions or good motives behind will then those who follow the law out of fear in fact fail to follow all of God's law, which is to break the law. After all, if one were to commit murder but not adultery, one would still be in violation of the law even though some of it was followed. Thus both are in agreement that God teaches people to do good. The difference in scope of the law is accidental to the underlying agreement. The second instance comes from the tree allusion. Augustine asserts one does not change himself from evil to good alone as an evil tree would not spontaneously decide to be good as that's not evil (Burns 75). Pelagius would not object to this: he never claims a fully evil tree becomes good. Rather, people are good by nature and while one can dive deeply into evil and corruption, the nature remains fundamentally good. Moreover Pelagius also agrees God is needed for one to be a good tree as the good nature, or being a good tree, came from God in the first place. The temporal shift in when one is a good tree is accidental to God's role in the goodness.

If the two do not disagree on God's role in humanity's capacity for good, then they must disagree on either the contingent transitivity of goodness or necessary transitivity of responsibility from capacity to will to action, which they do. Pelagius holds God responsible in part for will and action, but Augustine holds him in whole responsible, and the two also disagree on the ability of goodness to flow from capacity to will and action. Both agree a capacity for goodness is necessary for willing goodness, but Augustine alone asserts it's not sufficient for possibly willing goodness but that a further divine requirement must be met.

Pelagius's examples of just men as described by God present an issue for Augustine not holding people accountable for their own will. God praises Noah and Abel for being just and Job for his virtue. However, if humans are not responsible for our own goodness, then God is

incorrect in commending their virtue as they are not virtuous. Augustine assents to an agent-centric model of judging people in his scripturally-grounded tree allegory. Thus if Noah, Job, and Abel are not the agents behind the virtuous actions and will, then they cannot be said to be virtuous at all. As God is honest and all-knowing, he would not have lied about their virtue, so they must be virtuous. Therefore a contradiction when we remove the responsibility from the humans involved.

The contradiction created when Augustine removes actual human agency in will and action runs deeper when the evidence Pelagius presents for differing levels of reward in the afterlife is considered as without human agency no human virtue can be judged. If the role of grace is to spare us from judgment entirely, then no distinction in virtue can be made for afterlife destination. Thus again having something to ascribe to humans as agents better fits the scriptural evidence.

The law being written on the hearts of all humankind does not present a clear contradiction for Augustine but does suggest further support for humans having meaningful moral agency. If God created humans with this law in our hearts then presumably he did so with cause. To claim otherwise is to claim God acts without purpose. If we assume humans have no power to will or act for good without direct divine intervention then for anyone in history who has not received the information of God's being and salvation through Christ the law is pointless and God may as well have only given it to the Jews at least until the coming of Christ. On the other hand, if humans can will to do good or evil then having the law to guide us to better serve God fits well within God's goal of creating humans to serve and glorify him. Moreover as God wants human service to be voluntary, moral agency in humans actually allows the service to be voluntary while seizing control of human will voids meaningful voluntarism and rather forces

humans to will good and evil only in an involuntary sense inasmuch as will can be involuntary. Do note that Pelagius does keep God in part responsible for the good willing and actions as his putting the law in human's hearts enabled knowing how to do good and presumably a drive to do good but without violating the requirement of voluntary service as evil could be done nonetheless.

The other point of contention, the contingent transitivity of goodness creates a more complex model for Augustine that ultimately creates more issues that Pelagius avoids. In Pelagius's model since God made humans with a capacity for good, sufficient conditions have been met for willing and acting out the good. On the other hand, in Augustine's model, even though God made humans with the capacity for good, sufficient conditions have not been met for willing or acting out the good as divine grace at each step is also necessary. Thus to Pelagius having the capacity to do good is a positive freedom to do good while to Augustine it's a negative freedom from further restriction, but humans still lack the means. Augustine's definition clashes with the normal conception of capacity as by his meaning I also have the capacity to fly and spit fire—I merely also need other things to be able to do so. A more usual conception would intend capacity to be that ability to do so. Perhaps more egregiously, if we take this unusual definition of negative freedom, humans having the negative freedom capacity for good implies some things do not have the negative freedom capacity to do good. However, the other necessary requirement is that God wills the good. Thus if some things do not have the negative freedom capacity to do good, then God cannot will the good through some things, entailing a restriction on God's power. This contradicts God being all-powerful.

Thus on both of these fundamental issues in how goodness and responsibility transfer between capacity and will and action Pelagius better fits the scriptural evidence as well as logical

and metaphysical ideas inherent to God. From this his model of grace through learning and salvation in Christ's example follow. Thus Christians ought to look at the entirety of Christ's life and emulate as best they can. Furthermore habituation away from corrupting customs and into the law of Christ and atoning the corruption to let the good nature God gave every human reveal its excellence leads to both better serving God as well as ultimately arriving in a better place in the afterlife. Augustine's assertion that human will is unable to do any good on its own may lead to focusing on the wrong things such as signs that God had chosen oneself rather than keeping one's mind on how to live a good life as exemplified by Christ.