

Augustine and Philosophy
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Augustinian Compatibilism and the Doctrine of Election

What do we want the concept of free will for? If we are philosophers or theologians, at least three reasons come to mind:

- (1) free will helps explain the origin of evil
- (2) free will is necessary for moral responsibility
- (3) free will gives persons control over their own moral character.

Augustine is a pioneer of the kind of reasoning involved in (1), beginning early in his career when he argues against the Manichaeans that evil is neither eternal nor a creation of God, but results from rational creatures misusing the good gift of free will.¹ He was also clear from the beginning on the importance of (2). In one early text, for instance, he lays it down that God punishes sin, that unmerited punishment is unjust, and that no merit (good or bad) is possible without free will.² The unstated but unmistakable conclusion is that free will is a necessary condition of the justice of God. This of course is a compelling reason for Christians to believe in free will.

However, in the last decade of his life Augustine develops a view of free will that does not include (3). This view is closely connected with his doctrine of divine election (where "election" is simply a Latinate way of saying "choice"). According to Augustine's doctrine, God's choice is to give grace to some people rather than others, thus determining not only who shall become a good (or righteous) person but also who shall ultimately be saved. God does not

do this without the human will or in violation of its freedom, but precisely by turning human free will toward the good. Thus one of the things God can choose is what human free choices will be. As Augustine puts it, "God works in the hearts of human beings to bend their wills wherever he wills."³

Call this "Augustinian compatibilism." It is not a compatibilism about free will and determinism generally, for Augustine firmly rejects any determinism of fate or physical necessity.⁴ It asserts specifically the compatibility of free will and God's power to determine what human beings shall will, both of which Augustine affirms in his mature theology of grace. Whether one finds Augustine's compatibilism convincing depends in part on whether one is willing to affirm (1) and (2) without (3). This in turn depends on whether one can believe in a free will that makes us responsible for evil but not capable of good. The issue is closely connected, as theological conceptions of free will typically are, with questions of divine justice. Augustine thinks a free will that makes us responsible for evil is not only necessary for divine justice but sufficient, because justice is the ground of eternal punishment but not of eternal salvation. But while divine punishment must be just, the salvation of sinners such as ourselves can only be an act of mercy, which like the forgiving of a debt is not unjust but is much more than mere justice.⁵ Unaided by grace, our free will is not capable of any good that divine justice must reward. Our free will does contribute something indispensable to the process of salvation, but its contribution is not possible without the help of God causing us to (freely) will the good. Our freely choosing the good is therefore a necessary condition of salvation, but God's choice that we shall freely choose the good is both necessary and sufficient. We freely choose the good because he chooses we shall do so. In this sense our salvation is ultimately determined by God's choice, not ours.

To be an Augustinian Christian is to find such a view of divine grace and justice believable, even beautiful, and to try to live by it. Augustinian spirituality involves praying for a grace one could not have merited by good works, and being grateful, delighted, and encouraged when it is given. From that perspective it is good news that God moves our wills when we can't, causing us to love and choose and do good things of which our free wills are incapable without the help of grace. For Augustinian Christians, Augustinian compatibilism is not only believable but a great comfort, a source of strength and hope.

But there is a further question of justice which troubles the Augustinian tradition. For while Augustinian compatibilism is good news for those who receive grace, it is bad news for those who do not. The contrast between the two is built into Augustine's doctrine of election, which conceives of God choosing to give grace to some people rather than others. As we shall see, Augustine argues that the resulting distribution of grace, though unequal, is not unjust. This argument has not convinced everyone, however, and lately it has even begun failing to convince a great many Augustinian compatibilists. Hence what I propose to explore in this article is how an Augustinian compatibilist might reject Augustine's doctrine of election. I contend that the Biblical conception of God's choices is different from Augustine's, and when combined with Augustinian compatibilism does not raise the same worries about divine justice as Augustine's doctrine. It does, however, preserve a strong sense of God's choices being beyond the grasp of human reason, which serves to mark an important boundary where the Christian religion surpasses the limits of philosophy.

Prevenience and the Power of Grace

To begin with, let us see why Augustine develops his distinctive sort of compatibilism. It takes shape as he elaborates his conception of prevenient grace in the later phases of his polemics against Pelagius and his followers, in the years 417-430. The term "prevenient" is post-Augustinian, but it arises from Augustine's use of the verb *praevenire* (literally, "to come before") to describe how God's grace comes before any good merits of our own.⁶ In the early years of the Pelagian controversy (412-417) Augustine's focus is on grace that God gives in response to prayer.⁷ Taken by itself, such grace is not prevenient, because it comes after the good will of the faith in which one prays, and such good will can be said to merit grace.⁸ Hence it was a new challenge when Augustine learned, sometime in 417, that Pelagius had conceded our need for the help of God's grace but had added that "God gives all graces to him who has been worthy of receiving them, just as he gave them to the apostle Paul."⁹ It seems there could be such a thing as Pelagian grace, so long as it is merited.

Augustine's objection to this Pelagian move is hardly surprising. Grace (*gratia*) that is merited is not gratuitous or freely-given (*gratis*) and therefore is not really grace at all.¹⁰ So although grace does come in response to our prayers, there must also be grace that comes before our prayers, before the faith in which we pray, before any meritorious act of the will whatsoever. This is prevenient grace, the divine mercy that "comes before me," as the Psalm says.¹¹ The apostle Paul himself is a perfect example of prevenient grace, as he is converted on the Damascus Road from unbeliever to believer. Far from being worthy of receiving grace, as Pelagius thought, the man on the road to Damascus is violently hostile to Christ's grace and the faith by which it is received, actively persecuting Christ and all who believe in him. So here is a clear case in which no good will, faith or merit precedes the gift of grace. What God's grace

gives Paul is a faith he has not deserved and does not even want. He is converted, as Augustine puts it, from unwilling to willing.¹² "Conversion," in Augustine's usage here, means that God works inwardly to turn (*convertere*) the will. As Paul himself says, "God works [*operatur*] in you both the willing and the working"¹³ Hence the grace by which God converts us comes to be called operative grace: it refers to God working in us by operating or acting directly on our wills, turning them toward the good, changing them from unwilling to willing.

God can do such a thing because, in the first place, he has power over all that he has made. "He who made everything he willed in heaven and on earth, works [*operatur*] also in the hearts of human beings."¹⁴ So "the Almighty acts [*agit*] in the hearts of human beings even on the motion of their wills."¹⁵ But Augustine's doctrine of operative grace rests on more than an appeal to sheer omnipotence. The language of turning should not lead us to picture God as exerting some sort of mechanical force on our insides. For the action of grace involves final more than efficient cause. Grace works in us by causing us to desire our ultimate end, as "the love of God is poured out in our hearts" by the gift of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶

The explanation Augustine gives of this makes use of the Platonist conception of love as erotic desire for the beautiful.¹⁷ The highest Beauty of all is also the highest Good, which to attain is our deepest desire and the substance of our eternal happiness.¹⁸ This explains why God's working inwardly on the will is not coercion: grace does not compel us from without but delights us from within.¹⁹ God is the inner Truth we seek to understand, the supreme Good we long to possess, and the eternal Beauty that fills us with unending delight. That is why, as Augustine puts it in the famous saying at the opening of the *Confessions*, "our heart is restless until it rests in You."²⁰ Grace turns our will by causing us to delight in that which leads us to the only thing that can make us truly and permanently happy. Apart from the details of the Platonist

psychology, the key notion is that our ultimate happiness consists in right relationship with God, so that grace is irresistible the same way our ultimate happiness is. Of course we are capable of turning away from our ultimate happiness (we do it all the time) but only because something is wrong with us: we have some sinful defect of mind or will that prevents us from perceiving and loving what makes us truly happy. Grace repairs that defect so that we experience delight in God, our true and ultimate happiness--and that is why our will is in the power of grace.

Without grace we are capable of turning away from the Good that makes us eternally happy, but only with grace are we capable of willing that Good as we ought. Augustinian compatibilism thus assumes two asymmetries: we are capable of evil not good, and we are by nature fitted for good not evil. The first asymmetry explains why Augustinian compatibilism holds (1) and (2) but not (3): we are not in control of our own moral character, because apart from grace our free will is capable of evil but not of good.²¹ The second is a fundamental assumption about the intrinsic goal of free will, without which the grace that causes us to will the good can only appear as coercion.

Free will, for Augustinian compatibilists, is a teleological concept. As the eye is designed to see the light and the mind to see the truth, so free will is designed to love the good, and thus to arrive in the end at the ultimate happiness of embracing the supreme Good. This design and its ultimate goal belong to the very nature of free will.²² We cannot choose that something other than God will make us ultimately happy, for nothing else really can. Only the one eternal Good makes us eternally happy. So God in his goodness designed us for nothing less than Himself.²³ Of course we can choose not to love the good, and we can try to find ultimate happiness in good things that are not the supreme Good--in pleasure or alcohol or art or friendship--but this is folly as well as sin. The early books of the *Confessions* try to convince us

of this, to get us to feel it as well as understand it. Even friendship, which is literally the best thing on earth, is not good enough for us. There is no lasting happiness in "loving those who will die as if they will not die."²⁴ All our friends will die, and our grief when this happens should teach us that "unhappy is every soul chained by love of mortal things; it is torn apart when it loses them, and then feels the unhappiness with which it was unhappy even before it lost them."²⁵ It is not that mortal things should not be loved at all (for all things God made are good) but that we should not be chained by love of them, tied up so that we do not love God with our whole heart and mind and strength of will. We should love things in the right order: God first, then neighbor and self--and the kind of love which seeks ultimate happiness and eternal rest should be directed to God alone.²⁶ So our duty to love God is not an externally-imposed obligation but stems from the deepest truth about who we are. God is Truth, and our happiness consists of "taking joy in the Truth."²⁷ Our free will is inherently oriented to that joy as the mind is oriented to the splendor of truth and the eye to the goodness of light.

But because of the first asymmetry, we cannot reach our ultimate goal—and cannot even get properly started on our way to it—without the help of grace. We are incapable of what we were designed for. This may sound paradoxical, but it is a familiar enough phenomenon in our bodily lives: it happens whenever we suffer an illness that renders us incapable of some bodily good that is natural to us. So metaphors of disease and infirmity are pervasive in Augustine's writing. A sick body may not be free to do the good that is most natural to it. A starving man may lose his appetite.²⁸ A diseased eye may be dazzled by the light of the sun and prefer to look at shadows.²⁹ In such a way our free will is sick, too weak to choose the good that makes it truly happy. Moreover, it is responsible for its own sickness, having freely made the kind of choices that led to its state of moral ill health. So it is a just penalty that "someone who did not will to do

right when he was able, should lose the ability to do so whenever he wills."³⁰ It is as if we must now dwell in darkness because we liked living in the shadows so much that our eyes have grown incapable of bearing the sunlight.³¹ Yet the will's natural orientation toward the happiness of the good remains, just as the starving man still requires food and the eye that prefers darkness can only function as an eye by receiving the light. Even the diseased and blinded will finds true happiness only in God. Its disease is precisely its incapacity for its own happiness.

This intimate and ineradicable relation between God and free will explains why God's grace is so effective, working irresistibly on our will but without coercion: it restores to the sick soul a glimpse of its long-lost happiness.³² With that glimpse comes the capacity to delight in the Good and to seek it wholeheartedly—i.e., to love God with the whole heart and mind and, we must add, with a whole will. This wholeness of will comes to us as a gift from the same Good we previously willed in a half-hearted way.³³ There is nothing strange in this, since all that is good in us—even the goodness in our will—comes ultimately not from our own will but by participation in the unchangeable Good.³⁴ Thus Augustine's Platonism dovetails perfectly with a text from Paul that serves as a keynote of his doctrine of grace, "What do you have that you have not received?"³⁵ As Augustine once put it in a sermon on Acts 17:18, the Epicureans try to find their good in the body (pleasure) and the Stoics try to find it in the mind (virtue), but the true source of any good in us is God.³⁶ Augustine's treatises against the Pelagians thus repeatedly warn against trusting in our own virtues or the strength of our free will (a kind of Christian Stoicism) and instead urge us to be grateful for a gift of good will we receive by participation in the supreme Good (a form of Christian Platonism).³⁷

Always the most powerful weapon in Augustine's polemics against the Pelagians, however, is a type of argument that requires no particular metaphysical assumptions. It is an

argument based on the practice of Christian prayer. We pray to become good people, we pray for our wills to be strengthened in goodness, and we pray to be given the gift of charity, a love which not only delights in the good but can do it. If we can pray for this, God can give it. This is the rationale for Augustinian compatibilism in a nutshell: if it makes sense for us to ask God to change our wills, then changed wills are a gift God can give.³⁸ To this extent, Augustinian compatibilism coheres with a familiar modern form of compatibilism originating with Harry Frankfurt.³⁹ We can think of the Augustinian prayer for grace as a second-order desire to have the first-order desire called charity. When God gives us this new first-order desire, he is responding to our previous second-order desire. In this regard God respects our will even while changing it.

The problem is that prevenient grace goes back further in our lives than this, and thus goes beyond the limits of Frankfurt's approach. Since grace is prevenient, it comes before our prayers as well as after them. We pray in faith for God to change our wills, but God's grace gives us the gift of faith without which we cannot willingly pray in the first place.⁴⁰ So like Paul, we find that "faith is granted even when not asked for, so that other things may be granted when faith asks."⁴¹ Thus even our good second-order desires are themselves the gift of God, like all good things in us. Otherwise Pelagius has the last word, and God gives his grace only to those who somehow deserve it.

To agree with Augustine rather than Pelagius on this point is to endorse what can be called the logic of prevenience. Prevenience requires that grace be gratuitous, which implies it is not merited or deserved. It follows that grace is given not only in response to our prayers and faith but also prior to any meritorious act of our will, including acts of faith and prayer. This is a causal, not just temporal priority. By Augustine's reckoning it is not enough to say merely:

before we can believe, God must first call us to faith (e.g., by sending someone to preach the Gospel to us, so that we may choose to believe the message). For then it might ultimately be up to us to decide whether or not to believe.⁴² That would make the actual giving of grace causally dependent on our choice to believe and receive it, which would mean grace is given to people who in some measure deserve it, just as Pelagius said. So the logic of prevenience requires that grace be a sufficient as well as necessary condition of our choice to believe. God's grace does not merely make faith possible for us, it causes us to believe. We come to faith because God chooses to draw us, as Augustine argues, quoting John 6:44 where Jesus says, "No one comes to me unless my Father draws him."⁴³ When the Father draws us in this way, however, we are not dragged against our will but drawn by our own desire and delight.⁴⁴ This divine gift of delight is irresistible, in the sense that it is a sufficient cause of our belief. As Augustine explains, using another quotation from the same chapter, "Everyone who has learned from the Father not only *can* come but *does* come."⁴⁵

Justice and Inscrutable Election

The Western Christian tradition as a whole has followed Augustine rather than Pelagius. The most influential and beloved theologians of the West are Augustinian compatibilists. This is not merely "Calvinism," as it has sometimes been labeled, but the common Augustinian legacy shared by the likes of Calvin, Luther and Aquinas.⁴⁶ It comes connected with a widely-shared set of assumptions about the nature and destiny of the soul, the universal disease of sin, and the nature of ultimate happiness or beatitude, roughly as sketched above. Most fundamentally, it means agreement about the doctrine of election: that it is God's choice that determines who shall be saved and even who shall become a good person—and that this is a good thing. It is good

news that our salvation and even our moral character are ultimately in God's hands rather than our own.

Of course this is easier to believe if you feel yourself to be the beneficiary of God's grace. The Augustinian spirituality of the West cultivates the experience of grace by devotional practices of repentance, prayer and gratitude: confessing the failures of our free will, praying to be given a clean heart and a willing spirit, and rendering thanks when such gifts result in good works. It is not hard for people who cultivate such practices to be glad that their salvation and even their own moral character is ultimately in the power of God's choice rather than their own. Their religious lives are built around tasting that the Lord is good and seeing that this explains even their own good wills.

But it is one thing to trust that God will give you saving grace, and another to consider that there are some to whom God gives no such grace. The great pastoral problems of the Augustinian tradition arise when individuals get worried that they are among the latter. But the root problem remains even for those who trust that they are among the elect. It is a problem of equity and therefore of justice: why does God choose to give grace to some and not to others? The logic of prevenience rules out the answer that some are more deserving than others. In fact, Augustine argues, if God gave us only what we deserved then none would be saved.⁴⁷ That is the crucial premise in his argument for the justice of divine election. Before we receive grace, we merit only eternal punishment. So when God chooses to save some human beings, it is an unmerited gift. When he does not choose to save others, this results in their merited condemnation. No one gets unmerited punishment, but some get unmerited (i.e. gratuitous) grace and salvation. Though this is clearly unequal treatment, Augustine argues that it is not unjust.⁴⁸

The great difficulty with Augustine's argument at this point is that he pushes the logic of prevenience back to the very beginning of every human life. It is not as if God chooses those who are less undeserving or somehow closer to salvation. He can choose to save the chief of sinners, such as Paul.⁴⁹ Indeed his choice is made before any human being has merited anything besides eternal punishment, so there is no morally relevant difference at all between those who are chosen for salvation and those who are not. To illustrate this point Augustine turns repeatedly to what Paul says about God's choice of Jacob over Esau, which was announced "when they were not yet born and had done nothing good or evil" (Romans 9:11). Augustine himself was initially inclined to think there must be some distinction of merit between the two—perhaps one which God foresaw in their future—which could be the basis of God's choice. For, as he argues in one early treatment of this text, "If it is not by any merit, then it is not a choice. For prior to merit everyone is equal, and there can be nothing called choice amongst things that are entirely equal."⁵⁰ In the treatise in which he changes his mind on this point, he begins by stating the same problem. Without some morally relevant difference, he says, not only divine justice but even divine choice appear impossible:

How is it just, how is it even a choice, when there is no distinction? If Jacob was chosen for no merit (being not yet born and having done nothing) he couldn't be chosen at all, since there was no difference by which to choose.⁵¹

The question of the justice of election is thus closely connected with the question of the intelligibility of divine choice. A just choice is based on some "difference by which to choose" and is to that extent intelligible. Or so one might think. But this is precisely the assumption Augustine ends up denying. In his mature doctrine of grace he teaches that God's judgments are just but inscrutable, precisely because there is no morally relevant difference between a Jacob

and an Esau. God is just in saving Jacob and in damning Esau, but inequitable and inscrutable in differentiating between the two. This is what is logically most strange about Augustine's doctrine of grace.

For Augustine, God's inscrutable choice is the ultimate source of the difference between the saved and the damned. For although the damned are the ultimate cause of their own damnation—by the evil merits of their own free will—God is the ultimate cause of salvation for all who are saved. And since all would be damned without God's grace, it follows that God's choice is what makes the difference. Augustine uses a logically elegant metaphor to illustrate this point, taken from the same chapter of the Bible in which Paul speaks of Jacob and Esau. Due to our equal involvement in original sin, we all start out in an undifferentiated mass of damnation, like a lump of clay from which a potter takes one portion to make a vessel for honor and another for some ignoble use (think of the difference between a sacred vessel used in the temple and a chamber pot). Nothing in the original mass of clay makes the difference in their ends. The difference is entirely due to the potter's choice. And the potter has every right to choose to set apart one portion of the clay for a noble purpose that will bring it honor, while leaving the other portion for some ignoble purpose that will result in its destruction. In the same way God separates some undeserving sinners from the common mass of damnation and brings them to salvation and glory, leaving the rest to suffer the well-earned penalty of eternal destruction. So at least goes the governing metaphor in Augustine's argument for the justice of election.⁵² But the same metaphor also sets forth the logical problem of his doctrine of election with admirable clarity. For if there really is no relevant difference between one portion of a mass of clay and another, then a potter's choice to use the one portion rather than the other can only be made arbitrarily and at random. Likewise, if the original mass of human damnation is entirely

undifferentiated in all respects relevant to moral character and salvation, then there can be no reason why God chooses one portion of it for salvation rather than another.

We can think of this logical problem in both Platonist and Leibnizian terms. First of all, Augustine's doctrine reverses the usual Platonist understanding of the relation of one and many. According to that understanding, all things come from one source or first principle, which is the supreme Good. The many that come from this One may differ in goodness, but only insofar as they differ from the ultimate and original Good. For the One is the source only of good things, not of evil. So the morally relevant differences between good and evil persons must originate not in the perfect goodness of the One but in the imperfections and defects of the many. Evil differentiates; Good unites. That is the pattern of Augustine's early anti-Manichaean arguments, where diverse free wills make the ultimate moral difference between persons. The differing degrees of access that souls have to the Truth and Wisdom of God within them is due to how their wills differ in goodness.⁵³ The difference between good and evil persons originates not with the good but with the evil, for if there were no evil choices all would be united in good.⁵⁴ Rather than choosing out of an undifferentiated mass, God's judgments respond to prior moral differences among souls by imposing one and the same law equitably on all, punishing the evil and rewarding the good. Moral differentiation between persons thus originates in a differential falling away from the good, not in the choices of the Good itself, which is the source of nothing but unity in goodness and just punishment for those who are not good.

The radical new doctrine of Augustine's mature anti-Pelagian works reverses this relation of one and many. Though the origin of moral evil still lies our free will, the original evil of Adam's sin serves not to differentiate human beings but to unite us all in one mass of damnation. The profoundly unPlatonist thought here is the conception of an original unity in evil. Of course

this can only work historically rather than ontologically: our unity in evil stems not from our very nature but from a contingent historical event, a catastrophic first sin. But the reversal of the Platonist way of relating the one and the many is no less stunning for all that. For Augustine's doctrine of grace implies that evil generates a kind of oneness, while the Good brings the many into a state of ultimate and irreconcilable difference. God's goodness does not unite all, nor is it extended equally to all, nor does it even treat similar cases similarly (as the case of Jacob and Esau illustrates). God chooses to differentiate some undeserving sinners from the original mass of damnation rather than others, thus making the ultimate moral difference between the just and the unjust. Solidarity in sin comes from us; the difference between the saved and the damned comes from God.

The Leibnizian version of the problem is that there appears to be no sufficient reason for God's choice to differentiate one person from another. Augustine is aware of the logical generality of the problem, for he sees that the same issue is raised by the popular belief that God created the world at some particular moment of time. Apparently a number of good Christians had asked him the question: why did God create the world at this point in time rather than that, when there is no good reason to prefer the one to the other? Augustine's standard answer is that there is no time before creation.⁵⁵ But in one discussion he is willing to affirm another answer, at least hypothetically. Suppose (he says in response to an imagined interlocutor asking this question) that there is not only an infinite amount of time before the existence of the world, but likewise an infinite space outside it. Then we can ask: why did God create the universe at this precise place as well as this precise time? The place where the world is actually located has "no superior merit" to the infinite number of equally available places, just as "there is no difference by which one time can be preferred to another in choosing it."⁵⁶ So what makes the difference?

God's incomprehensible choice, which occurs not fortuitously but by divine reason. It's just that it is a "divine reason which no human reason can comprehend."⁵⁷ As Augustine clearly sees (and hints by his vocabulary) the answer he gives here has the same logical form as his conclusion about the mass of damnation: in both cases God's choice or election is the ultimate cause of differentiation between items in which there is no relevant difference on which to base a choice.

Augustine is Leibnizian enough to say that there is a reason for God's choice, but unLeibnizian enough to say it is altogether hidden from human reason. The cause for such differentiation between one person and another, he says on several occasions, may be inscrutable but it cannot be unjust.⁵⁸ As in the choice of when and where to create the world, there is indeed some reason for God's choice, else there would be no ground for calling his choice wise. Yet Augustine leaves us nowhere to look for this ground. This is not accidental. Augustine cannot give us anywhere to look for it without undermining the prevenience and gratuity of grace, which exclude any antecedent human merit as the basis of God's choice. Divine election is *necessarily* inscrutable to us.

The language of inscrutability is one more element of Augustine's doctrine of grace taken from the apostle Paul. When pressed to answer the question why God chooses one person rather than another, Augustine regularly quotes the conclusion of the same Pauline discussion that had begun with Jacob and Esau:

O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God,
how inscrutable are his judgments
and unsearchable his ways!⁵⁹

In its original context this is a doxology, an outburst of praise, but Augustine reads it as a cry of terror, a shudder of horror at unfathomable depths.⁶⁰ Calvin is echoing Augustine when he says

the eternal decree of election is "indeed horrible"⁶¹--the Latin *horribile* meaning literally, "giving cause to shudder." We could say: here human reason shudders.

Three Problems and a Biblical Revision

Thus Augustine's theology of grace poses at least three interrelated problems, concerning free will, justice and reason. One need not take the same attitude toward all three. The first problem is whether Augustinian compatibilism actually succeeds in upholding a credible concept of free will. I have suggested it is rational to accept the Augustinian view of free will if one is a person who prays for grace and thanks God even for the gift of faith which makes it possible to pray. Such persons can be logically consistent in claiming responsibility for their own sins while also being grateful to God for turning their will in the right direction. The second problem is more difficult, for it requires us to consider those who are in no position to be grateful for grace. God's choice may treat each individual no worse than he or she justly deserves--and often a great deal better--yet nonetheless individuals are not treated equally, and this raises a question of justice. Is it really just for God to give grace to some and not others, when there is no difference of merit? I will soon give reason for thinking that Augustine's response to this second problem is inadequate. The third problem is about our inability to know the reason for God's choices. Augustine has no answer to the question why God chooses to give grace to some rather than others, except to refer to the inscrutable judgments of God. His insistence on this non-answer sets a definite limit to what human reason can understand. This limit is not the familiar philosophical doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God (which Christians share with pagan Platonists like Plotinus)⁶² but the conviction that the reasons for God's choice to give grace or not cannot possibly be available to us. In short, the problem is not the incomprehensibility of the

divine nature but the inscrutability of the divine will. I will argue that this would indeed be a good place to locate one of the deep limitations of human reason, if only the answer to the problem of justice were more satisfactory. So it is the second problem that is the most serious difficulty in Augustine's position, which I suggest needs to be revised in favor of a more Biblical doctrine of election.

But first notice that predestination does not count as one of the really important problems here. Augustine does have a doctrine of predestination, but it adds nothing new to the three problems already listed. Predestination, by Augustine's definition, is simply God's foreknowledge of his own good gifts, including in particular the gifts of grace.⁶³ Divine foreknowledge, for Augustine as for Boethius, does not really mean a foreseeing of the future but rather an unchanging knowledge of what for us is past, present and future, seen all together in an eternal now.⁶⁴ So Augustine's writings contain a precursor of the Boethian argument that God's knowing our future free actions does not make them necessary, but rather sees them for what they are--thus knowing them precisely as free actions.⁶⁵ But this argument, even if successful as a defense of the compatibility of free will and divine foreknowledge in general, does not apply to the specific foreknowledge involved in predestination, which concerns not merely how God knows our free choices but how he causes them by his grace. Predestination is God's foreknowledge of the good he will cause in our wills.⁶⁶ It is not as if God first foreknows who will be good or faithful, and then determines in advance to give such people grace (as in the doctrine of predestination held by many theologians who reject Augustinian compatibilism). Rather, for Augustine God foreknows to whom he will give the prevenient grace which causes them to be good and faithful in the first place (so that Jacob, for instance, is chosen not only before he was born, but "before" all time, in an eternal knowledge).⁶⁷ Thus the divine

foreknowledge in predestination amounts to God knowing his own choices in his eternal now. Predestination, in effect, is just divine election plus eternal knowledge. This adds nothing of importance to the interrelated problems of Augustinian compatibilism. To the claim that God chooses to turn Jacob's will toward the good but not Esau's, all the doctrine of predestination adds is the claim that God knows this from eternity. But if God can choose to do such a thing without injustice to Esau and without violating Jacob's free will, then his choosing to do so from eternity is not an issue. So if you can live with the first problem of the Augustinian doctrine of grace (concerning free will) then you can live with Augustinian predestination.

Likewise, if you can live with the second problem (concerning justice), then you can live with the third (concerning reason). Indeed, anyone whose religion is not purely philosophical should expect some such problem as the third. Divine choice must somehow surpass human reason, or the divine is not a person but a principle. In Plotinian Neoplatonism, for instance, the divine first principle, called "the One" or "the Good," does not make choices. It can be said to have a kind of will, by which it loves its own goodness, but it does not choose between particular possibilities outside itself.⁶⁸ So it has will but not election or choice (since all choices, as Aristotle points out, are about particulars).⁶⁹ If divine judgment is possible at all under such a metaphysics, it must be rigorously equitable, treating similar cases similarly, precisely by subsuming particulars under the universal law of their common Forms, so that by one and the same Law the good are rewarded for their merits and the evil are punished as they deserve. The divine being may be incomprehensible, but its judgments cannot be inscrutable, precisely because it is metaphysically incapable of favoring one particular person over another, except according to their deserts. The God of the philosophers could not prefer Jacob to Esau, as if it had a favorite son. Any story about gods and their dealings with favored mortals is, from this

purely philosophical standpoint either falsehood or an allegory about how the divine discriminates between the just and the unjust.

In other words, any revealed religion which cannot give a convincing account of divine choices that are inscrutable to reason is liable to be reduced by Platonically-inclined philosophy to the status of myth, a story whose true meaning is about the unchanging justice that rules all our changing ways. Pagan philosophy had already treated classical mythology in this way, and it is hard to imagine a polytheist mythology that could escape such treatment: either the gods are petulant oversized human beings behaving rather badly or they are symbols of some deeper, eternal justice and truth. Of all the gods proposed for human belief, only the God worshiped in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is likely to survive this kind of demythologization. Only the God who chooses to reveal himself to Abraham is one whose choices could plausibly be held to be both inscrutable and wise. The doctrine of election thus marks the difference between religion and philosophy, or rather the boundary beyond which religion surpasses philosophical reason (for there is a great deal which religion and philosophy have in common, especially if the philosophy is Platonism). We can gain some sense of the wisdom of God's choices after the fact by their fittingness (their *convenientia*, as Aquinas calls it) but they cannot be reduced to any rational principle known to us. They are irreducibly choices about particulars. It is as if God himself could fall in love (taking his chosen people as his bride) with all the devotion to particular persons which that involves—and without tracing that particular love back to any higher and more universal loveliness. We can see no reason why God would decide that "Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated."

The difficulty, of course, is that the exclusive devotion to a particular person that is entirely appropriate in human marriage looks like favoritism when it comes to the source of all

being making a choice between two brothers. Here the problem of justice and the problem of reason meet. In the Scriptures, God is a father who has a favorite son. In the Hebrew Bible, this favorite son is called Israel—the new name God gives to Jacob after wrestling with him all through the night.⁷⁰ Israel of course is the ancestor of the nation which bears his name. Thus "Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated," in its original context, means that the nation of Israel rather than the nation of Edom (descended from Esau) is God's chosen people.⁷¹ In this sense God calls the people of Israel "my first born son,"⁷² just as Jesus is God's beloved and only-begotten Son.⁷³ Since the Scriptures themselves are full of narratives of the jealousy of brothers such as Jacob and Esau, we can well ask: why shouldn't those who are not favored by God's choice be jealous? Jacob has stolen his brother's blessing and made off with his birthright,⁷⁴ and God has evidently approved. The Jews are God's chosen people, and where does that leave the Gentiles? Jesus is God's favorite son, and where does that leave everyone else?

The Biblical answer to these question is good news. Christ is the elect, the one chosen from before the foundation of the earth to be the savior of the whole world. So God's choosing Jesus for special favor (and a special task) is good news for all the rest of us. Election, in this case at least, does not mean God chooses to save some rather than others. It means God chooses one for the salvation of all the rest. This is how Judaism has always understood election as well. Jacob, that is Israel, is chosen for the blessing of all nations. The logical structure of the Biblical story of the chosen people follows the pattern of the original blessing of Abraham, the father of Isaac, the father of Jacob, in which God promises to bless those who bless him, and curse the one who curses him.⁷⁵ So a curse upon Israel's enemies is part of the Biblical story, which is why God frees his firstborn son by destroying Pharaoh's,⁷⁶ but the end of the story, its *telos* as well as its happy ending, is not curse but blessing. The calling of Abraham concludes, "All families of

the earth shall be blessed in you."⁷⁷ Jacob, like his grandfather Abraham as well as his descendent Jesus, is chosen for the blessing of all. Esau is not excluded from this blessing, though much later in the Biblical story the nation of Edom, which descends from him, is destroyed because of its hatred of Israel.⁷⁸ Thus "Esau have I hated" is an instance of "I will curse the one who curses you." But this is a far cry from Augustine's reading of the text, according to which God chooses to give grace to Jacob but not to Esau, with the result that Esau is damned. On the standard Jewish understanding, God's choice of Jacob is a blessing for Esau, though one he can refuse.

This Jewish understanding of God's choices, which conforms so much better to the logical structure of God's choice of Jesus Christ, provides us with a more Biblical doctrine of election than Augustine's. The logical structure of election is not that God chooses some rather than others, but that God chooses some for the sake of others. It is like the difference between cutting all your children except one out of your will, and giving all your money to one daughter with the charge that she invest it for the purpose of sending all her siblings to college. In both cases one person is specially favored, but in the second case the choice is not bad news for everyone else. Thus Jacob, like Jesus, is a favorite son chosen for the blessing of all nations, not for the damnation of Esau or the Gentiles. So in the Jewish understanding of God's choice the Gentiles need not be jealous of God's chosen one, but rather should be willing to receive the divine blessing through him. This is an understanding Christians should share, for the New Testament teaches that salvation comes to the world from the Jews,⁷⁹ and in particular from the one Jew, Jesus Christ. What is both hard and beautiful about this Biblical doctrine is that it means we receive our blessing indirectly, through other human beings chosen for this purpose. This, I suggest, is the Biblical reason why we should be glad to affirm that our moral character is

not in the power of our own free will. God gives us the blessing of becoming good people through those outside of us, and if we are Gentiles, specifically through the Jews. Gentiles have every reason to be grateful, therefore, that the Jews are the chosen people.

The really odd part of the story, as Paul tells it in the portion of his letter to the Romans to which we keep returning, is that the reverse is now also the case. The Jews receive their blessing through the Gentiles, who have believed in the Messiah that Israel has not been quick to welcome. For Paul is hopeful that the Jews will become jealous of the blessing that has come upon the Gentiles through Christ, and will thereby be saved.⁸⁰ How exactly this is to happen he does not say--perhaps he hopes Jacob will steal the blessing back, as he did in the first place! But in any case Paul clearly thinks that what is happening to Israel is not an accident but part of God's predestined plan to bring about not the exclusion of Israel or the nations, but their reconciliation in Christ.⁸¹ So the fullness of the good news of election is that not only are the Gentiles blessed through the Jews, but the Jews are blessed through the Gentiles. Each is blessed only through the other.⁸²

The problem with Augustine's doctrine of election is that, in contrast to the Biblical doctrine, it is bad news for those who are not chosen.⁸³ This means that the unequal treatment of Jacob and Esau amounts to injustice. Of course Augustine is right that inequality need not imply injustice. For example, in Jesus' parable about the day-laborers who are jealous of latecomers, everyone gets paid at least as much as they have earned, and some get more than that.⁸⁴ There is a kind of inequity here, but no injustice. Augustine's doctrine of election is different, however. It is not a matter of workers getting paid but of criminals getting punished, which means that those who get no more than they deserve are not well paid, as in Jesus' parable, but damned forever. It is as if two men who took equal part in a murder were sentenced unequally, the one

deservedly hanged and the other graciously pardoned.⁸⁵ It is hard to see how this inequity could be anything but unjust, precisely to the extent that there is no difference in merit between the two. If the man sentenced to hang claims to be unfairly treated, who could gainsay him? Even the man who is acquitted ought to agree--and we could understand and even approve if he were noble enough to regret being the one who was saved. In this way salvation itself can have a bitter taste in the Augustinian tradition, where Jacob is saved at the expense of Esau. How can we imagine Jacob dwelling in eternal happiness, unless he has somehow lost all sympathy for the brother who is now damned but was originally no different from himself?

The Biblical doctrine of election sets limits for reason in the right way, I suggest, precisely because it safeguards the prevenience of grace without giving us reasons to mistrust God's justice. God does not treat everyone equally, but this means mercy and blessing for all. He does have a favorite son, whom he chooses not for any antecedent merit but out of overflowing kindness and love. (Augustine points out that this is particularly true of Jesus, a man who could do nothing to deserve being the Son of God, because he did not exist prior to being the incarnate Son of God).⁸⁶ Why God chose this one human being rather than another must remain a mystery to us (especially if we use the word in its Biblical sense of a secret long hidden but now revealed),⁸⁷ but not one in which we can see no wisdom or justice. We can perceive something of its fittingness after the fact, the way we can see that a shocking turn of events in a story is in fact the consummate plot twist of a well-told tale. In general, this is how God's choices in the Biblical story do look. They are surprises--not hidden from us but revealed--inscrutable in their origins but glorious in their outcome. God's judgments are inscrutable not because they appear to violate the Leibnizian principle of sufficient reason but because they are like the choices of a great artist who brings a beautiful work to completion in a stunningly unexpected way (for

instance, by insisting that his chosen people to be blessed by the Gentiles' belief in the Jewish Messiah). This goes beyond reason in the sense that human reason could never have figured it out in advance or *a priori*--just as reason could never have known until after the fact that a man named Jesus is the incarnate Son of God. The divine choice about this particular person--that Jesus the Jew is Lord of all nations--is the deepest of the mysteries of God.⁸⁸

Nor is this choice unjust. The God of Abraham lavishes his gifts on humanity with an abounding and gracious love, and therefore unequally, beyond the calculations of justice about how much is due to each. But the inequality implies no unfair distribution of punishment but rather an exuberant bestowal of gifts. The Biblical doctrine of election gives us no reason not to hope that all shall be saved. It does not exclude the possibility of divine punishment or curse, but it does imply that the end of punishment is blessing for all. It gives us no reason to think that the distribution of good things may not in the end be just like that in Jesus' parable, where no one lacks any good thing that another has, yet claims of equity in merit are sovereignly disregarded. Not that our free will does not matter: by the end everybody works in the vineyard of their own free choice. But our free will does not determine the distribution of God's good gifts, and does not make the ultimate determination of what kind of person each of us is and where we end up. God does that, and it is good. At least that is how Augustinian compatibilism looks when combined with the Biblical rather than the Augustinian doctrine of election. If this sketch of the Biblical doctrine is correct, I think it is sufficient to show that Augustinian compatibilism need not undermine free will (our first problem), nor require us to believe in a divine judgment that is unjust (our second problem) nor commit us to a religion that is irrational (our third problem).

¹ Most important here is the early treatise *On Free Choice (De Libero Arbitrio*, often translated *On Free Will*) written in the years 388-395, long before Augustine had ever heard of Pelagius--and thus representing a stage of his thought much earlier than the anti-Pelagian doctrine of grace which gives rise to Augustinian compatibilism. Nevertheless, the contention that free will is the origin of evil remains central to Augustine's theology throughout his career, as for instance in *City of God* 12:1-9 (on the fallen angels) and 14:10-15 (on the fall of humanity).

² *On Eighty-three Different Questions*, question 24.

³ *On Grace and Free Will* 43. All translations in this article are mine.

⁴ *City of God* 5:9.

⁵ See *To Simplicianus* 1:2.16.

⁶ E.g. *On the Proceedings of Pelagius* 34, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* 2:21, Letters 186:10 and 194:9 (these letters are not private correspondence but important documents in the public controversy over Pelagianism). Note in all these passages Augustine's use of Psalm 59:10, which the King James Version translates "The God of my mercy shall prevent me," reflecting the presence of *praevenire* in the Vulgate and in Augustine's own Latin rendering, *misericordia ejus praeveniet me*.

⁷ Most notably in *On the Spirit and the Letter* 22 and 51-52. See also the argument from the necessity of praying for the help of grace in the episcopal correspondence between Africa and Rome which secured the initial papal condemnation of Pelagianism. The African bishops' letters are included as numbers 175-177 in the collection of Augustine's letters, and were likely composed by Augustine himself (see Letter 186:2).

⁸ The mature Augustine is willing to say that faith merits grace, though only in contexts where he quickly adds that faith itself is a gift of grace (e.g. Letters 186:7-10, 194:9).

⁹ *On the Proceedings of Pelagius* 32 (Augustine is quoting Pelagius). For the crucial developments in the years 417-418, which mark the beginning of what I am calling Augustine's "mature" doctrine of

grace, see J.Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1980), chapters 4 and 5.

¹⁰ *On the Proceedings of Pelagius* 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 34, alluding to Psalm 59:10.

¹² *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* 1:37-38 (commenting on Acts 9:1-19). Augustine can make the same point about Paul as example of prevenient grace using materials from Paul's letters without reference to the experience on the Damascus Road, as he does in his immediate response to Pelagius' point in *On the Proceedings of Pelagius* 36, using 1 Corinthians 15:9-10 ("I am not worthy to be called an apostle, for I persecuted the Church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am").

¹³ Philippians 2:13. Augustine's Latin rendering is *Deus operatur in vobis et velle et operare*, e.g. in *To Simplicianus* 1:2.12, *On the Grace of Christ* 1:26, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* 1:36. See also *On Grace and Free Will* 32-33, where the implication that God causes us to will the good is made particularly clear.

¹⁴ *On Grace and Free Will* 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *On the Spirit and the Letter* 5, quoting Romans 5:5. Augustine interprets "love of God" here to mean our love for God.

¹⁷ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) includes a very influential but controversial account of the importance of a Platonist concept of love in Augustine's thinking (p. 449-558). In contrast to Nygren (p. 468-470), I see Augustine's Platonism underwriting rather than conflicting with his doctrine of prevenient grace, and thus take a position closer to John Burnaby's in *Amor Dei* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938).

¹⁸ See *Confessions* 10:27.38 ("Late have I love you, O Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved You. And look! You were within, and I was outside and sought you there...").

¹⁹ See the emphasis on inward delight in *On the Spirit and the Letter* 5, 16, 26, and 28, as well as the important observations of Peter Brown in *Augustine of Hippo*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California, 2000) p. 148-149.

²⁰ *Confessions* 1:1.

²¹ Even in the case of Adam, "free will is sufficient for evil but not enough for good, unless helped by omnipotent Good" (*On Rebuke and Grace* 31).

²² Later Roman Catholic theology speaks more cautiously at this point, allowing for the possibility of a "pure nature" that is not oriented to the supernatural happiness of beatific vision (see Pius XII, *Humani Generis* 26, as well as the discussion in von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992] III,2, pp. 267-325). But I do not think there is any room for such a possibility in Augustine's theology; see Cary, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Origin of the Thomistic Concept of the Supernatural" in *Pro Ecclesia* 11:3 (Summer 2002) 340-355, as well as *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) chapter 5. Thus what I call here "the very nature" of free will in Augustine appears in contemporary Roman Catholic theology as concrete or actually graced human nature rather than "pure nature," which remains an abstract but unrealized possibility.

²³ See again *Confessions* 1:1. "You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You."

²⁴ *Ibid.* 4:8.13.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 4:6.11.

²⁶ See how Augustine situates Jesus' twofold command of love (God first, then neighbor as oneself) in the context of his strongly teleological ethics in *On Christian Doctrine* 1:3-28, a discussion which had an immense influence on Western thinking about ethics and human happiness throughout the middle ages and beyond.

²⁷ *Confessions* 10:23.33.

²⁸ See *ibid.* 3:1 and *On the Usefulness of Belief* 29.

²⁹ The metaphor of the diseased eye of the mind dazzled by the light of God is everywhere in Augustine; see for example *Soliloquies* 1:12 and 1:23 (with strong echoes of Plato's Allegory of the Cave), *On Free Choice* 2:36, *Confessions* 7:16 and 7:23, *City of God* 11:2, and *On the Trinity* 1:4 and 8:3. And this is just a small sampling.

³⁰ *On Free Choice* 3:52. See also the elaboration of this point in *On Nature and Grace* 81. The point is familiar to Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 3:5, 1114a13-22. How this notion of moral illness applies to infants born in original sin is another story, leading to a large set of questions that I must leave aside here.

³¹ *On Free Choice* 2:43, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* 11, *On the Usefulness of Belief* 4. This metaphor for our moral condition derives of course from the Plato's Allegory of the Cave (*Republic* 7:514a-517a).

³² We seek God in memory, as a happiness we have lost but desire to find, like the woman in the parable seeking the lost coin (*Confessions* 10:18.27-20.29).

³³ Wholeness of will is the fundamental gift of grace given in response to our prior good will in prayer. See the relation between good will and "great will" in *Confessions* 8:8.20-9.21, echoed decades later in *On Grace and Free Will* 31.

³⁴ Letter 140:31.74. In *Retractations* 2:36 Augustine describes this very long letter (composed so early in the Pelagian controversy that only its later chapters are clearly directed against the Pelagians) as a treatise bearing the title, *On the Grace of the New Testament*.

³⁵ 1 Cor. 4:7. See its use in Letter 140:21.52, *On the Merits and Remission of Sins* 2:28, *On the Proceedings of Pelagius* 34, Letter 194:15, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* 1:38 (end) and 2:15, and Letter 214:3 (which serves as a preface to *On Grace and Free Will*), *On Rebuke and Grace* 4 and 10, and *On the Gift of Perseverance* 43.

³⁶ Sermon 150:8.

³⁷ See the later portions of the treatise *On the Grace of the New Testament* (=Letter 140:29.69-37.85) where the ontological grounding of Augustine's doctrine of grace is a concept of participation in the supreme Good.

³⁸ Among many examples, see Augustine's argument that since the church prays for God to give the gift of faith to unbelievers, God must be able to turn their wills to believe, *On Grace and Free Will* 29, *On the Predestination of the Saints* 22, and *On the Gift of Perseverance* 15.

³⁹ See especially "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility" and "Free Will and the Concept of a Person," now in Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁰E.g. Letter 194:10, "it is faith that prays, which is given to one who does not pray—indeed unless it were given, one could not pray."

⁴¹ *On Grace and Free Will* 28.

⁴² Augustine takes this view in some of his early works (*Exposition of Some Propositions from Romans*, 60-62), rejects it in the pivotal treatise *To Simplicianus* 1:2.12-13, and makes this rejection a centerpiece of mature theology of grace in *On the Proceedings of Pelagius* 34, *On Grace and Free Will* 27-32, and *On Predestination of the Saints* 3-6, which is followed by an retrospective account of how he came to this change of mind in *ibid.* 7-8.

⁴³ *On the Grace of Christ* 1:11, *On Two Letters of the Pelagians* 1:6, and *On the Predestination of the Saints* 16.

⁴⁴ Sermon 131:2 and *On the Gospel of John* 26:4.

⁴⁵ *On the Grace of Christ* 1:15, alluding to John 6:45: "Everyone who has heard my Father and learned, comes to me."

⁴⁶ See Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will* and Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I, 23, the question "On Predestination." Probably the most influential theologian who is not an Augustinian compatibilist is John Wesley.

⁴⁷ *On Nature and Grace* 5 and *Enchiridion* 27.

⁴⁸ See especially letters 186:16 and 194:5, and the references to the "mass of damnation" below.

⁴⁹ See Sermon 175, on 1 Timothy 1:25 ("Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief"); see also Sermon 176:3-5.

⁵⁰ *Exposition of Some Propositions from Romans* 60. Note also the argument made by one of Augustine's interlocutors in his early philosophical dialogue *On Order* 1:19: God is just "by distributing to each his due [*sua cuique distribuendo*]. But what distribution can there be to speak of, where there is no distinction?"

⁵¹ *To Simplicianus* 1:2.4.

⁵² See for example *To Simplicianus* 1:2.16-17, *City of God* 15:1 and 21:12, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* 2:14-15, *On Rebuke and Grace* 12, *On the Gift of Perseverance* 35.

⁵³ *On the Teacher* 38, *On Free Choice* 1:23-30.

⁵⁴ *On Free Choice* 2:37.

⁵⁵ *Confessions* 11:12.14-13.16.

⁵⁶ *City of God* 11:5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ E.g., *On the Merits and Remissions of Sins* 1:29, Letter 149:22 and 194:10.

⁵⁹ Romans 11:33, quoted in whole or in part in answer to a question of the form "why some rather than others?" in *To Simplicianus* 1:2.16, *On the Merits and Remission of Sins* 1:29-30 (where it is repeated as a kind of refrain), Letter 194:10, and *On Rebuke and Grace* 17, *On the Predestination of the Saints* 16, and *On the Gift of Perseverance* 30.

⁶⁰ *On the Merits and Remission of Sins* 1:29; see also *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* 2:15.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 3:23.7.

⁶² The reasons why most Christians share this doctrine are, however, specifically theological and indeed trinitarian, as I argue in "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Origin of the Thomistic Concept of

the Supernatural."

⁶³ *On the Gift of Perseverance* 35. This is a companion treatise to *On the Predestination of the Saints*.

However, both topics (perseverance and predestination) are treated in a more systematic and illuminating way in the slightly earlier treatise *On Rebuke and Grace* 10-25.

⁶⁴ *Confessions* 1:6.10 and 11:31.41; *City of God* 11:21; see Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* 5:6.

⁶⁵ *City of God* 5:10. See also *On Free Choice* 3:9-11.

⁶⁶ *On the Gift of Perseverance* 47 (end).

⁶⁷ *Enchiridion* 98 and *On the Predestination of the Saints* 34-39.

⁶⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead* 6:8.13, 15 and 21. Thomas Aquinas agrees with the theses Plotinus develops here, that God necessarily wills his own goodness and that in God will and being are one (see *Summa Theologica* I, 19.1 and 19.3), which is why Thomas must take very seriously the question whether God wills things other than himself (ibid. 19.2).

⁶⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2:1,1110b7-9. Notice how this sets a limit to the value of general rules in ibid., 2:1,1104a6.

⁷⁰ Genesis 32:24-31. This takes place the night before Jacob's reconciliation with Esau.

⁷¹ See Malachi 1:2-5.

⁷² Exodus 4:22.

⁷³ For example, Matthew 3:17 and 17:5 (Jesus' baptism and transfiguration), John 1:14 ("only-begotten," the same term used to describe Abraham's favorite son in Hebrews 11:17, which echoes the description in Genesis 22:2 of the command that Abraham sacrifice "your only son, whom you love.") I am grateful to Rev. Peter Rogers, St. John's Episcopal Church, New Haven, for pointing out the latter connection in a sermon.

⁷⁴ Genesis 25:29-34 and 27:1-40.

⁷⁵ Genesis 12:3.

⁷⁶ Exodus 4:23.

⁷⁷ Genesis 12:3.

⁷⁸ See especially the little Biblical book of Obadiah.

⁷⁹ John 4:22.

⁸⁰ Romans 11:11-14.

⁸¹ Cf. Ephesians 4:11-16.

⁸² To see this Biblical understanding of the divine blessing worked out more fully, see R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), chapters 5-8.

⁸³ Cf. Karl Barth's argument that a properly Christian doctrine of election must be seen as "the sum of the Gospel," which means good news in Christ, *Church Dogmatics* II/i (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957) 32.1, esp. p. 12-18. Barth's proceeds to re-orient the doctrine of election around Jesus Christ, in a discussion which is of decisive importance for the approach to the Biblical understanding of election taken here.

⁸⁴ Matthew 20:1-16.

⁸⁵ I owe this illustration to discussion with Prof. Joseph Betz of Villanova University.

⁸⁶ Jesus is thus the supreme example of unmerited grace in Sermon 174:2, *On Rebuke and Grace* 30, *On the Predestination of the Saints* 30-31, and *On the Gift of Perseverance* 67.

⁸⁷ See the use of the Greek term *mysterion* (still rendered "mystery" in most older translations) in Rom. 16:25, Eph. 3:4-5, Col. 1:26-27, and note the connection with divine choice and predestination in Eph. 1:4-9.

⁸⁸ See John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, sections 9-11, where the supernatural mystery that is beyond the reach of reason is none other than the history of Jesus Christ.