

How Augustinian Is Aquinas's Basic Account of Free Decision?

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Introduction

Questions about Augustine's influence on Thomas Aquinas are always interesting. In the previous century, leading Thomists such as Marie Dominic Chenu, Jean-Pierre Torrell, and Étienne Gilson wrote about the influence of one great master on the other. However, no one thinks the investigation is complete: the contributions of the new century have begun and are expected to continue.¹ In this article, I would like to consider how Augustine influenced Aquinas's account of something known to both authors as *liberum arbitrium*: free choice, or free decision.² When we speak of grace and

¹ A good listing of significant authors from the twentieth century and a good selection of new contributions in the twenty-first is found in *Aquinas the Augustinian*, ed. Michael Dauphinais, Barry David, and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

² I think it best to translate *liberum arbitrium* as “free decision” in writing about both Augustine and Aquinas. The more common translations of “free will” or “free choice” are quite attractive. However, from a literal point of view, *arbitrium* is a different word from *voluntas* (“will”) and *electio* (“choice”). *Arbitrium* has legal connotations and is tied with judgment, determinations, and decision. Aquinas considered it a valid question whether *liberum arbitrium* was will or not, and Augustine, though he says *liberum arbitrium* is “of” the will, does not clearly indicate that it *is* will. Translation as “free will” thus forces an interpretation. Similarly, though Thomas is clear that choice is the activity of *liberum arbitrium*, Augustine is not: thus, translating as “free choice” forces an interpretation. The occasional reader believes that, since *liberum arbitrium* has no

human freedom, Aquinas's debt to Augustine and the extent of his fidelity to the master have been frequently explored.³ The same is true with regard to the fairly advanced question of the relation between human freedom and divine foreknowledge.⁴ But in this article I would like to consider Thomas's treatment of what we might call the basic questions surrounding man's ability to choose freely—questions about its essence and its existence. What *is* this *liberum arbitrium*, which Augustine repeatedly calls “a gift of nature”? How should we understand its activity? How should we understand its origin? Thomas Aquinas deals with *liberum arbitrium* as a power of the soul in question 83 of *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, in question 24 of *De veritate*, and in chapter 48 of *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] II. These texts are not about the role of grace or the causality of God—though they prepare for the discussion—but simply about the powers of an intellectual nature. How Augustinian is Aquinas's account in these texts?⁵

clear translation into English, it had no clear referent in the minds of the authors who used it. Such persons feel that it is the scholar's duty to forbear talk of “free decision” and talk about something else instead, such as will, rational judgment, or some kind of sequential action theory. This is mere prejudice. Admittedly, there is a nebulous quality to the phrase despite its constant, easy use by Latin authors. However, each author works to draw out its meaning in his own way. Thus, in English translations, I will replace “choice” or “will” with “decision” when the Latin uses a form of *arbitrium*.

- ³ Michal Paluch lists the citations from Augustine in each of Aquinas's treatments of predestination in *La profondeur de l'amour divin: évolution de la doctrine de la prédestination dans l'oeuvre de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 2004); see esp. 68–69 for the commentary on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, 118–21 for *De veritate*, and 190–93 for the *Summa theologiae* [ST].
- ⁴ See especially Thomas Osborne, “Augustine and Aquinas on Foreknowledge Through Causes,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 6, no. 1 (2008): 219–32.
- ⁵ I apologize in advance to those who—naturally enough—expect to see a treatment of Augustine's and Aquinas's accounts of *voluntas* in this article. Free decision does belong to will, for both authors. But both wrote too much material on will to deal with carefully in a short piece, and the interpretations of *voluntas* in Augustine vary widely; see John Rist, *Augustine Deformed: Love, Sin, and Freedom in the Western Moral Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 29–32, and Sarah Byers, “*Voluntas* in Augustine,” *Augustinian Studies* 37, no. 2 (2006): 171–89, for an introduction to these debates. I intend to confine myself mostly to texts in which Augustine or Aquinas refer literally to *liberum arbitrium*, with or without the genitive *voluntatis*. “Will” is discussed only in a supporting role. For similar reasons I will limit the discussion of consent and say relatively little about how the authors understood *libertas*. Interesting starting points for those interested in *libertas* are François-Joseph Thonnard, “La notion de liberté en philosophie augustiniennne,” *Revue des études augustiniennes* 16 (1970): 243–70, and Jamie Anne Spiering, “What is Freedom?: An Instance of the Silence of St. Thomas,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 89, no. 1 (2015): 27–46. A thorough and

I will try to explore the question with reasonable thoroughness in this paper.⁶

It will surprise no one to hear that my answer to “was Aquinas an Augustinian in his basic treatment of free decision?” is “in a way, no, and in a way, yes.” It is both surprising and notable how significantly Aquinas departs from the Augustinian path. The first part of this paper will discuss three major ways in which Aquinas's account of *liberum arbitrium* breaks openly (by medieval standards) from the type of careful loyalty we see in earlier authors. In the second part of the paper, I will argue that Aquinas's account follows Augustine in distinctive ways: instead of prioritizing Augustine's context and preferred evidence for free decision, Aquinas does more to locate free decision within the quest for happiness which provided the ultimate pattern for Augustine's thought. He *is* an Augustinian, but of a very different kind.

Aquinas's Treatment of *Liberum Arbitrium* Represents a Significant Break with the Augustinian Tradition

It simply was not Thomas's practice to write statements such as: “I am going to treat this topic in a way different from that of Augustine, and I plan to make significant improvements.” How, then, can we understand whether, and to what extent, he made a break with Augustine's ideas? Direct comparison of the authors' works is the obvious strategy, but such comparison is complicated by our ignorance of whether Aquinas had actually seen the work in question or was only familiar with quotations from it. So I will employ an additional strategy to reveal Aquinas's breaks with Augustine: I will compare Thomas's work to that of Peter Lombard and Anselm of Canterbury. We know Aquinas had read Peter's work thoroughly, because

recent work on Augustine's theory of will is Han-luen Kantzer Koline, *Augustine on the Will: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2020).

⁶ There are a great many surveys discussing the developments of the concepts of will and its freedom. Odon Lottin, *Psychologie et morale aux XII^e et XIII^e siècles*, vol. 1, *Problèmes de Psychologie* (Gembloux, Belgium: J. Duculot, 1948–60) esp. ch. 1 (“La Nature du Libre Arbitre”), and Michael Frede's *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) are fairly good starting points. I am aware of two texts which specifically discuss Aquinas's engagement with Augustine on the definition and existence of free decision: Mary Clark's chapter “Development of the Augustinian Notion of Freedom by Thomas Aquinas,” in *Augustine: Philosopher of Freedom* (New York: Desclée, 1959), and Rist's chapter “‘Augustine’ and ‘Aristotle’: The Problem of Thomas Aquinas,” in *Augustine Deformed*. Clark thinks Aquinas is in complete harmony with Augustine; Rist thinks Aquinas is conflicted but removing himself from Augustine in important ways. I hope to add detail to both descriptions.

he wrote a commentary on it, and citations in *De veritate* reveal that Thomas knew at least the highlights of Anselm's work on free decision. Both Peter and Anselm are faithful to many aspects of Augustine's treatment: they follow him in the way they contextualize the topic, and they are careful to use Augustinian language in defining it. Aquinas does not. He radically shifts the context for the *liberum arbitrium* discussion and rejects definitions that use Augustine's formulations. He uses a boldly Aristotelian framework to replace a number of elements in Augustine's treatment. Finally, unlike Augustine, Peter, or Anselm, he asks about the proximate causes of free decision rather than its ultimate causes and its effects, and he looks to its objects to grasp both its activity and its essence.

The Change in Context: From Sin and Guilt to Human Nature

Almost every Augustinian scholar emphasizes that Augustine was primarily a controversialist, engaged in living debate whenever he wrote. This quality of Augustine's writing affords us the first illuminating contrast with Aquinas. We find that Augustine almost always treated free decision while he was engaged in controversy about the origin of evil and the accountability of humans for their sins. For instance, the first line in his *De libero arbitrio* reads: "Tell me, please, whether God is not the cause of evil."⁷ In each of the anti-Pelagian works, free decision is defended as the source of responsibility for sin while it is rejected as inadequate to prevent us from sinning without the aid of grace. In the anti-Manichean works, and in the *Confessions*, Augustine brings up *liberum arbitrium* while he discusses the quest to understand where evil comes from, using it to show that God is not the cause of evil.⁸ It is immediately obvious that both Peter and Anselm, whatever limitations they had in their Augustinian sources, continued to uphold Augustine's context. Like him, they approached the topic of free decision through questions about sin, responsibility, and the need for grace. The first question in Anselm's *De libertate arbitrii*, for instance, is framed in these terms:

⁷ Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 1.1.1 (in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* [CSEL] vol. 74; English from *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Anna Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff [New York: Macmillan, 1964], 3; for the remainder of the article, for all works, page numbers cited in subsequent notes are from the English editions). As Robert O'Connell notes, a more revealing title for the first two books of *De libero arbitrio* "might well have been *De Peccato*" ("*De libero arbitrio* I: Stoicism Revisited," *Augustinian Studies* 1 [1970]: 55).

⁸ See *Confessiones* 7.3. In the anti-Manichean works, see *Acta seu disputatio contra Fortunatum Manicheum* 20–22 and *Contra Felicem Manicheum* 2.4–8.

I want to know what this freedom of choice is, and whether we always have it. For if freedom of choice is the ability to sin and not to sin, as some are accustomed to say, and we always have that ability, then how is it that we ever need grace? On the other hand, if we do not always have it, why is sin imputed to us when we sin without free choice?⁹

Similarly, Peter introduces his treatment of free decision by asking whether the first man was able to avoid sin or not: "It is necessary to investigate with diligence what grace or power man had before the Fall, and whether or not he was able to stand firm through it."¹⁰

Thomas Aquinas notably removed his discussion of free decision from the context of sin and our responsibility for it. In commenting on the *Sentences*, of course, he follows Peter's order. But in the *Summa theologiae*, where the order is his own—a good ordering of questions is one of the primary goals of the work—he introduces the treatise on free decision not by questions about whether *liberum arbitrium* is the ability to sin, but by simply asking whether man has free decision or not. The opening controversy displayed in the objections is not about sin either: their focus is on whether humans can cause their own actions.¹¹ The words "sin" and "evil" are absent in the first article. Unlike Peter, who treats *liberum arbitrium* while discussing the state of man before the Fall and the need for grace,¹² Thomas locates his treatise

⁹ Anselm, *De libertate arbitrii* 1 (in *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi opera omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt. [Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946–1961], vol. 1; English from *On Free Choice of the Will*, in *Three Philosophical Dialogues*, trans. Thomas Williams [Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002], 32). Williams uses "freedom of choice" here to translate *libertas arbitrii*. Rist also notes the similarity of context between Anselm and Augustine: "Like Augustine, Anselm is concerned with freedom only insofar as it relates to moral responsibility and hence salvation." (*Augustine Deformed*, 88).

¹⁰ Peter, *Sentences* II, d. 24, ch. 1.; in *Sententiae*, vol. 2 (ed. I. Brady [Grottaferrata: Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, 1971] ; English from *The Sentences*, trans. Giulio Silano [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2008], 107).

¹¹ Daniel Westberg has noted this contextual shift: "Thomas placed his discussion of *liberum arbitrium* (ST I 83) after a general treatment of intellect, will, and other psychological powers. This removed it from the context of sin and grace where it had normally been discussed, . . . placing in under the doctrine of creation and anthropology" (*Right Practical Reason: Aristotle, Action, and Prudence in Aquinas* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1994], 87).

¹² Peter's discussion of *liberum arbitrium* is in *Sentences* II, dd. 24–25. In d. 24, the article on free decision is sandwiched between the discussion of the power of man before the Fall and the order of sin in our first parents. Distinction 25 ends with a discussion of the difference between the freedom of grace and natural freedom, opening up for d. 26, whose topic is grace.

on *liberum arbitrium* in a section on the nature of man and the powers of the human soul. His treatise in the *Summa theologiae* occurs eleven questions before his treatment of the state of man before the Fall, and 144 questions away from his treatment of the necessity of grace. Likewise, in *De veritate*, the question on free decision is situated among questions that deal with other powers, such as will, the sensitive appetite, and the passions. Although the last half of this article takes up questions about grace, the first six articles are not driven by questions about sin and responsibility: they discuss *liberum arbitrium* in the context of human nature. Overall, the context Aquinas chooses does not reflect the Augustinian concern for explaining free decision's salvific significance. He treats it simply as one more power of the soul, along with will, intellect, and sensitive appetite—in other words, he dealt with free decision as a topic in natural philosophy. Augustine always introduces free decision in a narrative and dramatic context; it has a role to play in the drama of salvation, either as villain or as hero. As we shall see, like the protagonist in a story, free decision changes and develops its character as the story goes on. Aquinas's description, like the descriptions of the powers of the soul that Aristotle offers in *De anima*, is atemporal and undramatic. He has removed all the trappings of evil and sin, the hope of heaven and the fear of hell. Free decision is simply a stable part of the natural world.

This break away from the Augustinian context of sin and responsibility points the way to a second break with Augustine: in giving his formal definition of free decision, Aquinas deliberately avoids Augustinian phrasing. He also removed the ambiguity between human nature and human status that was an important part of Augustine's account.

The Change in Definition: From Augustinian to Aristotelian

As is the case with many another concept, Augustine did not provide a formal definition of *liberum arbitrium*.¹³ When Julian of Eclanum suggested that he provide one, Augustine snapped: "Were the apostles, then, who did not begin their discussions with a definition, not learned? And yet they were

¹³ A number of authors have worked to sort out Augustine's pronouncements about free decision. For a more thorough discussion of his account than I can give here, see M. Huftier, "Libre Arbitre, Liberté et Pêché chez S. Augustin" *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 33 (1966): 187–281. Huftier offers a wide set of texts and gives the Latin for all of them. See also Étienne Gilson, "Christian Liberty," ch. 3 in *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960); Byers, "Voluntas in Augustine"; Clark, *Augustine*; T. D. J. Chappell, *Aristotle and Augustine on Freedom* (New York: St Martin's, 1995).

teachers of the nations.”¹⁴ However, when Scholastic methods began to call for formality, loyal Augustinians worked to craft formulas that embodied his thought as carefully as possible. Peter's first definition of *liberum arbitrium*, for instance, reads: “free decision is a faculty of reason and will, by which the good is chosen with the assistance of grace, or evil without its assistance.”¹⁵ This definition is basically a synthesis of Augustine's anti-Pelagian contentions—Peter uses almost the exact words Augustine uses in *On Rebuke and Grace*.¹⁶ Here, as elsewhere, Peter uses “the good” and “the bad” as the objects of choice; meaning thereby the morally good and the morally bad.

Peter's loyalty finds no echo in Thomas's definition of free decision, which is outlined most clearly in the last three articles of question 83 in *ST I*. In these articles, Thomas defines *liberum arbitrium* as “nothing else but the power of choice.” He defines the activity of choice as “to desire something for the sake of something else.” He argues that *liberum arbitrium* is the same power as the rational appetitive power known as will, but its activity, choice, is distinguished from desire broadly taken: choice is the act of willing means rather than of ends.¹⁷ The breaks with Augustine are numerous. The language is almost entirely Aristotelian, and Thomas's definition does nothing to uphold anti-Pelagian teachings. Like Peter, Aquinas looks at the object of choice to understand free decision. However, instead of considering the person as making a choice between the good and the bad, he talks about “the good which is the object of appetite,” in other words, about the good as desirable rather than a good which is explicitly known to be “moral” or “right.” Aquinas does not seem to consider the moral and salvific role of *liberum arbitrium* to be particularly important in grasping its essence: the object of *liberum arbitrium* can be any good whatsoever that is desired as a

¹⁴ Augustine, *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum* 1.77 (CSEL vols. 85/1–2; English from *Answer to the Pelagians III: Unfinished Work in Answer to Julian*, trans. Roland Teske [Hyde Park, New York: New City, 1999], 108).

¹⁵ Peter, *Sentences* II. d. 24, ch. 3, no. 1 (p. 109).

¹⁶ Augustine, *De correptione et gratia* 31: “Free decision is sufficient for evil, but is too little for good, unless it is aided by omnipotent Good” (in *PL* vol. 44; English from *On Rebuke and Grace*, trans. Holmes et al., in *Saint Augustine's Anti-Pelagian Works*, ed. Philip Schaff [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997], 484; page numbers in further citations are from this English translation). Peter himself cites texts from *De correptione* in the previous chapters. Another Augustinian text which is close to Peter's definition is in *De Spiritu et littera* 3. “A man's free decision, indeed, avails for nothing except to sin, if he knows not the way of truth” (in CSEL vol. 60; English from Schaff, *Saint Augustine's Anti-Pelagian Works*, 84–85).

¹⁷ *ST I*, q. 83, aa. 2–4.

means to an end, whether it is a breath mint or an assault rifle, and whether the end is flattery or justice.¹⁸

Anselm's definition of free decision—"the power to preserve rectitude of will for the sake of rectitude itself"¹⁹—is even more thoroughly Augustinian than Peter's. He adheres carefully to Augustine's practice of evaluating human activities through their purpose, which is righteousness. All human actions should strive to be "upright"—just, or measured by truth.²⁰ Thus, free decision is understood through its goal, rectitude, which is also its object. Augustine frequently speaks of free decision as "that without which there is no righteous life,"²¹ and Anselm merely puts this insight positively when he defines *liberum arbitrium* as "the power to preserve a righteous will." Like Peter's, Anselm's definition is crafted to preserve Augustine's anti-Pelagian contentions. If *liberum arbitrium* is the power to preserve rectitude, we can explain how man can have free decision by nature, yet be unable to achieve righteousness by his own choice: "It is never in his power to acquire rectitude when he doesn't have it; but it is always in his power to preserve it when he does have it."²²

Aquinas does not show Anselm's loyalty to Augustine either. Instead of trying to grasp the essence of *liberum arbitrium* through its God-given purpose, Thomas employs distinctively Aristotelian methods. He works to understand the action (in this case, the activity of choice) through the object (what is chosen is means to an end), and thus to come to grasp the nature of the power, following the path recommended by Aristotle in *De*

¹⁸ For Thomas, free decision is not "indifferent" to the good—in fact, goodness is its proper object. He does say that "Free decision is indifferent to good or evil choice." (*ST*I, q. 83, a. 2 [Leonine ed. vol. 5]; English from the Dominican Fathers translation). But here he is arguing that free decision is not a habit by contrasting it with a virtuous habit such as temperance: temperance leads to a "good choice"—that is, a virtuous choice—but free decision does not. Free decision *does* however, always lead to a "choice of a good." The good chosen, since it might be six martinis in two hours, is not necessarily a temperate choice—but Thomas does not say that free decision is indifferent to *goodness*, only to *virtuous action*.

¹⁹ Anselm, *De libertate arbitrii* 3 (p. 36).

²⁰ Augustine, *De Trinitate* 8.7, 10: "This is true love, that cleaving to the truth we may live righteously" (in *Corpus Christianorum Scriptorum Latinorum* [CCSL] vol. 50; English from *On the Trinity*, trans. Haddan and Sheppard, in *St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956], 122). See also *De libero arbitrio* 1.14.100: "those who are happy . . . [are happy] because they will to live rightly" (p. 29).

²¹ See Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 2.18. See also *Retractationes* 1.9.4 and *De spiritu et littera* 7/5.

²² Anselm, *De libertate arbitrii* 11 (p. 48).

anima.²³ The question of whether free decision is a power or a habit is based on a division Aristotle makes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.²⁴ The question of whether *liberum arbitrium* is an appetitive or a cognitive power is also based on distinctions Aristotle made, both in book 3 of *De anima* and in two passages from the *Nicomachean Ethics*.²⁵ Finally, Aquinas's argument that the activity of choice falls under will in a manner analogous to the way the activity of reason falls under intellect is based on Aristotle's account of the two activities of intellect in the logical works.²⁶ For Thomas, the object of *liberum arbitrium* is not righteousness, but rather any good which is a means. Whether that good is desired as part of a righteous act or as part of an unrighteous act makes no difference.

One of the distinctive aspects of Augustine's discussion of free decision especially clashes with Aquinas's definition of it. Annoyingly, Augustine said both that free decision could not be lost²⁷ and that it was forfeited by sin, and thus it *could* be lost.²⁸ But how can *liberum arbitrium* be always present in human nature yet also lost by those who sin? Peter's and Anselm's definitions allow a fairly friendly approach to Augustine's ambiguity. Their

²³ Aristotle, *De anima* 2.4.415a16–23: "If we are to express what each is, namely what the thinking power is, or the perceptive, or the nutritive, we must go farther back and first give an account of thinking or perceiving, for in the order of investigation the question of what an agent does precedes the question what enables it to do what it does. If this is correct, we must on the same ground go yet another step farther back and have some clear view of the objects of each; thus we must start with these objects, e.g. with food, with what is perceptible, or with what is intelligible" (trans. J. A. Smith, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon [New York: Random House, 1941]).

²⁴ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.5, and Thomas's commentary. The early parts of *NE* 2.1 are also relevant here.

²⁵ See Aristotle, *De anima* 3.9–10, where mind and appetite are contrasted, and *NE* 3.2 and 6.2, which distinguish between knowing and desiring. Rist argues that Augustine would never have separated the appetitive and the cognitive in this way (*Augustine Deformed*, 82–83). Rist's mention of the Trinity cuts both ways, though: if the Son and the Spirit are analogized to knowing and willing, they are not separable, but neither can one be reduced to the other. (I am grateful to my colleague Andrew Salzmann for his well-informed guidance on Trinitarian reasoning.)

²⁶ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 2.19 describes the basic framework for the two types of intellectual activity.

²⁷ Augustine, *Contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum* 1.1.5: "Who of us will say that by the sin of the first man free decision perished from the human race?" (*CSEL* vol. 60; English from Schaff, *Saint Augustine's Anti-Pelagian Works*, 378).

²⁸ Augustine, *Enchiridion* 30: "It was by evil use of his free decision that man destroyed both it and himself" (*PL* vol. 40; English from *The Enchiridion*, trans. J. F. Shaw, in Schaff, *St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, 247). Peter cites this text in *Sentences* II, d. 25, ch. 7, no. 2.

definitions permit an *activity* of free decision to be lost while the ability itself remains. Peter's "faculty of reason and will" cannot perform the activity of choosing the good when it is unaided by grace.²⁹ Similarly, Anselm's "ability to preserve rectitude" cannot perform the activity of preserving when there is no rectitude to preserve.³⁰ Aquinas's definition of free decision does not lend itself to this solution. Since the object of *liberum arbitrium* for Aquinas is not described as the moral good (as opposed to the morally evil), but simply as the desirable good (as opposed to the undesirable), the object is not out of reach when the agent is a state of sin—the sinner can desire ends and choose means for achieving them, just like anyone else, and thus the activity of choosing can take place in all its essentials.³¹

A related clash is Thomas's definition of *liberum arbitrium* as a power, not a habit. A great many of the things Augustine says about free decision fit more with the idea of a *habitus* like strength or health. Augustine says not only that free decision can be gained or lost, but that there are lesser and greater types of it, and that it develops (or possibly is replaced) through time, whether in the history of the human race or in the life of a single human person. Adam had greater freedom of decision than fallen men do, those without grace have less freedom of decision than those with grace, and those in heaven have the highest freedom of decision possible.³² Aquinas

²⁹ Despite the ultra-loyalty of his definition, in d. 25, chs. 7–8, Peter suggests a different solution to the lost / not lost contradiction. Free decision is not lost, he says, in the sense that we never lose freedom from coercion. However, we may lose freedom from sin. Aquinas accepted this solution and used it, as will be clear below. Clark believes that Augustine himself made this distinction between free decision and freedom (*Augustine*, 45, 90–91), but I cannot agree, largely because in *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum* 1.87, Julian offers what seems to me the same distinction: "Freedom, after all, is a term we use in many senses: in this passage [John 8] it means holiness, . . . but that term is also used for free decision. Let us separate these cases so that the realities which are very different are not confused because of their common name." Augustine refuses to accept the suggestion, asking how *liberum arbitrium* could possibly be free after sin.

³⁰ See Anselm, *De libertate arbitrii* 3: "Even though they subjected themselves to sin, they could not destroy the natural freedom of decision within themselves. What they could do, however, was to make themselves unable to exercise that freedom without some additional grace" (p. 35).

³¹ Aquinas thought Augustine supported his claim that free decision can accomplish some goods even when unaided by grace: he cites a text by a pseudo-Augustinian author saying that man can "cultivate fields, build houses, and do a number of other things by his free decision without actual grace" (*De veritate*, q. 24, a. 14; Leonine ed. vol. 22/3; English from *Truth*, trans. Robert Schmidt [Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954]). See also *ST* I-II, q. 109, a. 2.

³² The two most common states or types of *liberum arbitrium* that Augustine describes

was aware of these pronouncements³³ and he simply rejected them all when he defined free decision as *potentia* rather than *habitus*. He explicitly rejects Augustine's claims that free decision could be diminished, saying that the powers of the soul are goods of nature which are "neither destroyed nor diminished by sin."³⁴

Thus, not only does Thomas's definition of free decision reject Augustinian phrasing, but it also does not prepare for anti-Pelagian teachings; nor does it provide a friendly resolution to Augustine's claim that free decision can be lost. In addition, Thomas makes many distinctions that Augustine avoided: between reason and will, between will and choice, and between habit and power. By doing so, Thomas presents a more divided portrait of the soul than Augustine does, and he rules out several Augustinian contentions about the way *liberum arbitrium* changes.

*The Change in Causal Explanations: From Looking at
Free Decision's Effects to Looking at Its Proximate Causes*

Thomas broke with the Augustinian tradition both in contextualizing the debate about free decision and in the definition of it he gave. Let us now turn to a third major break: Aquinas looks at the causes of free decision in a way that is different from the way Augustine considers them. In all of his discussions of free decision, Augustine reaches his conclusions about it through its effects, and in fact through one particular effect: moral accountability. We know free decision exists because without it, neither God nor our fellow man could justly reward or punish us:

If man did not have free decision of the will, how could there exist the good according to which it is just to condemn evildoers and reward

are those in Adam, who was able not to sin, and in the blessed, who are not able to sin (*De civitate Dei* 22.30; *De correptione et gratia* 12.33; *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum* 5.56.3). However, he also describes free decision in fallen man as unable not to sin (*De natura et gratia* 58), and free decision in the believer who has received grace as "not obeying the sin which is unto death" (*De correptione* 35). In *Augustine on the Will*, Han-luen Kantzer Koline gives a very thorough discussion of the way in which Augustine's whole concept of will is differentiated according to these states: "Augustine will come to see the will not as an unchanging entity whose character and operations are an inviolable and unchanging feature of human existence, but rather as something whose limits and possibilities vary drastically depending on how the will relates to key events depicted in the biblical narrative and on how these events are brought to bear in the story of a person's life" (55).

³³ Peter describes the four states in *Sentences* II, d. 25, ch. 6.

³⁴ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 85, a. 1.

those who act rightly? What was not done by will would be neither evil-doing nor right action. Both punishment and reward would be unjust if man did not have free will. Moreover, there must needs be justice both in punishment and in reward, since justice is one of the goods that are from God. Therefore, God must needs have given free will to man.³⁵

Often it appears that “principle of accountability” is not just the core meaning, but the only meaning of *liberum arbitrium* for Augustine. He does not clearly say that free decision deals with alternate possibilities, nor does he say that it involves self-motion or consent, nor does he say that its act is choice, nor does he say whether it involves means or ends. What he *does* clearly say is that, whatever it is, it is sufficient for grounding our responsibility.³⁶ Since Augustine grasps free decision through its effect of accountability, if he is asked *why* humans have free decision, there are only two obvious answers: (1) God gave it to us because without it we could not act righteously, or (2) God gave it to us so that there could be justice in punishment and reward.³⁷

Aquinas opens his discussions of the existence of *liberum arbitrium* along the same lines: “Man has free decision; otherwise counsels, exhortations,

³⁵ Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 2.7 (p. 36). See also *Acta seu disputatio contra Fortunatum Manicheum* 15 and *De vera religione* 14.27. In *De gratia et libero arbitrio* 2–3 and *Contra Felicem Manicheum* 2.4, Augustine points to the existence of commands as evidence of free decision, and in *Contra Felicem* 2.8, he points to the phenomena of repentance—one does not command those who do not have the power to obey, and one does not repent of what is not in his power. The close ties to moral accountability are evident.

³⁶ To illustrate Augustine’s obscurity on these issues, pairs of quotations are helpful. About alternate possibilities, Chappell says that “Augustine’s very phrase *liberum arbitrium* . . . implies the presence of a condition about ability to do otherwise” (*Aristotle and Augustine*, 145), while David Schindler argues that Augustine believes in freedom apart from options (“Freedom Beyond Our Choosing: Augustine on the Will and Its Objects,” *Communio* 29 [2002]: 618–53). About consent, Clark says that Augustine “would not permit the dismissal of man’s prerogative of free consent” (*Augustine*, 94), while Rist says that “man is a puppet, free only in the sense of being arranged to act in a way which is not subject to external pressures” (“Augustine on Free Will and Predestination,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 20, no. 2 [1969]: 422–47, at 440). With regard to means and end, Augustine himself describes free decision both as desiring happiness (thus, its object is the last end) and as choosing evil (thus, its object is for the sake of the end).

³⁷ Kantzer Komline notes that this is characteristic of Augustine’s investigation of will in general: “What preoccupies Augustine is not so much what happens to the will as what happens as a result of the will” (*Augustine on Will*, 57).

commands, prohibitions, rewards and punishments would be in vain.”³⁸ After making this point, though, he departs from Augustine's practice rather sharply. He says that the existence of free decision is revealed by evidence apart from that of accountability, and works out proofs which will, in his words, show “the origin of free choice.”³⁹ Unlike Augustine—or Peter and Anselm, who are loyal to him in this—Aquinas seeks to understand free decision not just through its effect (moral accountability), but through its causes in the natural order. To put it in Aristotelian terms, as Thomas would certainly have done, accountability, as an obvious phenomenon which can only be the effect of free decision, is the cause of our knowledge that free decision exists. But what causes our knowledge of a thing is not always identical to what causes the thing itself, just as the daytime darkness which causes our knowledge of eclipses is not what causes an eclipse.⁴⁰ And so Aquinas breaks with Augustine in order to give a different kind of evidence for the existence of free decision. In the context of sin and responsibility, the question “why does man have *liberum arbitrium*?” is most naturally answered by saying that God gave it to us so that we might merit the reward of our actions. But in Thomas's context of human nature and human powers, that question is most naturally answered by talking about the distinct character of human reasoning.

It is obvious enough that our rationality accounts for free decision in *some* way, but how? When defining free decision, Thomas follows Aristotle's advice: begin with an object (like food), and from there work to understand the activity (such as digestion), and through the activity, the power. In trying to uncover the proximate causes of free decision, he uses the same technique. The texts we are considering involve eight arguments that the activity of choice comes from the agents themselves, is not determined to a single outcome, and does not take place of necessity. Each argument works from premises about the *objects* of reason, will, and choice: the character of what

³⁸ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 83, a. 1 (Leonine ed. vol. 5). See also *De ver.*, q. 24, a. 1: “Without free decision there cannot be merit and demerit, or just punishment and reward.”

³⁹ Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 24, a. 1. See also *ST I*, q. 83, a. 1, “Ad cuius evidentiam . . .” and *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] I, ch.48 (Leonine ed. vol. 13), which is structured as a list of arguments for the presence of *liberum arbitrium*.

⁴⁰ See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 1.13.78b7–9, where Aristotle explains that our observations of the way the moon waxes lead us to conclude that the moon is spherical. However, although the observed changes cause our knowledge that the moon is spherical, the waxing is not the cause of the moon's actually *being* spherical. Thomas commented carefully on this passage (*In I post. analyt.*, lec. 23, nos. 3–8). He also makes use of this distinction in the second question of *ST I*—although God's effects are the cause of our knowledge of him, they are not the causes of God himself.

is known, desired, and chosen points the way to freedom. The summary that follows—necessarily a brief one—illustrates this.

In *De veritate*, Aquinas argues that man has free decision because a human's interior principle of motion is rational judgment, and man judges for himself. How do we know that the judgment is our own? Thomas points to the objects of knowledge: unlike the other animals, man knows "the meaning of an end and of a means to an end, and the relationship and order of one to the other."⁴¹ A spider builds a web to catch prey, but does not understand the overall meaning of "catching prey." As a result, a given species of spider cannot decide to do something besides spinning webs to catch flies, such as setting out rotten meat as bait.⁴² Yet a man, knowing not only his end of catching an animal but also the *ratio* of this end, and the relationship of various means to it, can do more than set out traps of various kinds; he can also hunt actively with various weapons. If he sets a snare, he does so "for himself"—from his own judgment.

In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas repeats the claim that man acts from his own judgment, but offers a different explanation of how reasoning renders man free:

Reason in contingent matters may follow opposite courses, as we see in dialectic syllogisms and rhetorical arguments. Now particular operations are contingent, and therefore in such matters the judgment of reason may follow opposite courses, and is not determined to one.⁴³

Here, the objects which reason contemplates—particular operations—are contingent matters. They could be otherwise than they are—and thus, when reason understands this about them, it shares in their contingency. Without the power of reason, the human being would be like a fly that slams itself into a windowpane again and again. We might say that the fly has options: it could fly into another room, or bash into a different window. But really, these options do not exist *for the fly* because it has no intellectual capacity by

⁴¹ Aquinas, *De ver.*, q. 24, a. 1.

⁴² Perhaps Thomas is underestimating the ability of some of the higher animals. However, there is no doubt that understanding of their end is often absent in the non-human animals, and knowledge of the *essence* of the end—"What *is* shelter?"—seems entirely lacking.

⁴³ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 83, a. 1. Note that Thomas does not speak of reason as following opposite courses of truth and falsity: rather, in rhetorical arguments we can reach opposite conclusions because there is some truth in both views, and total truth in neither.

which these options can be made real for it. Because of reason's property of "following opposite courses"—which involves the awareness that there *are* alternate courses—two courses of action are real for human agents.

In the *Summa contra gentiles* Thomas likewise talks about the movement of judging for oneself, saying that "only an intellect" can move itself to judge. Why? Thomas elaborates in two ways. First, such movement can be made only by beings who apprehend "the very intelligible essence of the good or the fitting, in the light of which judgement is made of any determinate good or fitting thing."⁴⁴ Thus, for example, a dog in heat does not judge for herself that mating here and now is a good plan; instinct takes care of this for her. A human, however, can look at a possible course of action in the light of universal concepts. Knowing what is good and what is appropriate universally is required to judge *for oneself* whether a specific action is good and appropriate right now. And second, since we act by applying a universal conception to particulars, and "the universal conception contains many particulars potentially," as a result "the universal conception can be applied to many and diverse things."⁴⁵ This is why humans, who know the universal concept of "shelter," can make shelters of many kinds, while all swallows build their nests alike.⁴⁶

Augustine surely agreed with Aquinas that only rational natures can have free decision. The fact remains, however, that Augustine did not tend to look to the properties of reason as an explanation for the *existence* of free decision.⁴⁷ When an explanation of it is needed, Augustine looks to God, who gives it to us so that we may act rightly and be judged justly. Activities of reason such as applying the universal to the particular, being able to reach

⁴⁴ Aquinas, *SCG* II, ch.48: "Si igitur iudicans ad iudicandum seipsum moveat, oportet quod per aliquam altiore formam apprehensam se moveat ad iudicandum. Quae quidem esse non potest nisi ipsa ratio boni vel convenientis, per quam de quolibet determinato bono vel convenienti iudicatur" (English from *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, bk. 2, trans. James Anderson [New York: Doubleday, 1956]).

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *SCG* II, ch.48.

⁴⁶ Aquinas gives these examples in other texts. In *De malo*, q. 6, a. 1, the architect knows the universal form of a house, but under that form, potentially, are houses of many different shapes, so he can be inclined to build a house which is square, or circular, or some other shape. In *De ver.*, q. 24, a. 1 he says that all swallows build their nests alike, and bees have skill at making nothing but honeycombs.

⁴⁷ There is one possible exception: in *De Genesi ad litteram* 9.14.25, Augustine speaks of the irrational animals as not being able to consent to impressions received because they lack judgment, while humans can consent or not consent by the decision of will (*voluntatis arbitrio*). Aquinas seems to have been familiar with this passage, based on *ST* I, q. 82, a.2, obj. 2 and the reply. This text could be a source for the discussions which contrast human and animal judgment in all three of the texts we discuss.

opposite conclusions, or apprehending the essence of the good simply are not part of the story. Anselm and Peter followed him in this. Peter called free decision a faculty of reason because an act of reason is necessary for moral accountability.⁴⁸ In order for us to rightly praise or blame an agent, she must *know* what she is doing and *judge* whether the proposed action is right or wrong. Anselm similarly speaks of reason's role in free decision as being that "by which we can know rectitude."⁴⁹ In contrast, Thomas uses the distinct truths of which humans are aware and the human mode of knowing them to explain the indeterminacy and ownership of someone's choice, rather than her moral accountability.

A second line of argument for the existence of free decision became available to Aquinas once he had made the claim that choice was an act of will. This is because he had earlier used reasoning about the will's objects to claim that we do not always will of necessity. Will is necessarily moved by the last end of happiness,⁵⁰ and in fact it is in virtue of this unchanging orientation that will can move itself to choose other things.⁵¹ However, will is not necessarily moved by some of the means toward happiness: I must desire to be happy—I need not desire a milkshake, and thus, since choice is a kind of desire, I need not choose it. Why not? Aquinas points toward limitations in the desired objects themselves. In *De veritate*, Thomas's premise is that "there are many ways of reaching the last end, and for different people different ways prove suitable."⁵² In the *Summa theologiae*, he speaks in slightly more detail: "There are certain individual goods which have not a necessary connection with happiness, because without them a man can be happy."⁵³ Humans can be happy without a milkshake, and so, though I may well desire one and choose one, I do not desire or choose it of necessity.

The reply to the second objection in this article also illustrates Thomas's

⁴⁸ Peter, *Sentences* II, d. 24, ch. 3: "It is called 'free' with regard to the will, which may turn itself to either of them; but 'decision' in regard to reason, whose faculty or power it is, and to which it also belongs to discern between good and evil" (p. 109).

⁴⁹ Anselm, *De libertate arbitrii* 4.

⁵⁰ See Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 82, a. 1, and *De ver.*, q. 22, a. 5. A good treatment of Thomas's teaching on the will's naturally necessary desire is Robert Sullivan's "Natural Necessitation of the Human Will," *The Thomist* 14 (1951): 351–99; for the necessary desire for happiness, see particularly 367–80.

⁵¹ Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 9, a. 3

⁵² Aquinas, *De ver.*, q. 22, a. 6. Thus, for instance, both teaching and farming are means by which humans seek the ultimate goal of happiness; I chose one, my brother chose the other. This text provides two further reasons for why the will is not determined, but time prevents a full discussion of them.

⁵³ Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 82, a. 2.

move from the character of objects to our freedom with regard to them. In response to the claim that the object of will is a mover and movement should necessarily follow in its presence, Thomas says: "As the capacity of the will regards the universal and perfect good, its capacity is not subjected to any individual good. And therefore it is not of necessity moved by it."⁵⁴ In other words, because of the will's orientation toward happiness, which is the perfect good containing all goods (for Thomas, the vision of the divine essence, Goodness itself), will is not necessarily moved by many of the lesser objects of desire which are chosen to attain that end.

There is no parallel to all this discussion about the limited goodness of non-God objects in Augustine's treatments of *liberum arbitrium*. Augustine does consider whether a temptation can overcome the will. But his focus when discussing whether will can be coerced is either the undeniable fact of responsibility or the lived experience of willing as one's own act,⁵⁵ and Peter and Anselm followed him in this.⁵⁶ Augustine does not look at the character of the goods we desire to find out why, when presented with an object of desire, we can take it or leave it. Aquinas most distinctively does.

Thomas's Treatment of Free Decision Is Driven by Augustine's Ideas

At this point, Aquinas begins to look like a fairly serious revolutionary.⁵⁷ His discussion of *liberum arbitrium* was deliberately re-contextualized. The questions, goals, and premises involved in Aquinas's definition and

⁵⁴ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 82, a. 2, ad 2: "Cum autem possibilitas voluntatis sit respectu boni universalis et perfecti, non subiicitur eius possibilitas tota alicui particulari bono. Et ideo non ex necessitate movetur ab illo."

⁵⁵ For Augustine's appeals to immediate experience, see *De libero arbitrio* 3.3.27: "Nothing is so completely in our power as the will itself, for it is ready at hand to act immediately, as soon as we will" (p. 92). See also *De duabus animabus* 14: "Everyone who does a thing unwillingly is compelled, and every one who is compelled, if he does a thing, does it only unwillingly. . . . Nature itself proclaims these things in all men" (*CSEL* vol. 25; English from *On Two Souls*, trans. Albert Newman, in *The Writings against the Manicheans and against the Donatists*, ed. Philip Schaff [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983], 103).

⁵⁶ For Anselm, see ch. 5 of *De libertate arbitrii*: "He cannot will against his will, since he cannot will if he is unwilling to will. For everyone who wills wills his own willing" (p. 39). For Peter, see *Sentences II*, d. 24, ch. 12: "It is not possible for sin to be . . . committed effectively, unless that intention of the mind, which has the supreme power to moves its members to the deed or to restrain them from it, also gives in to the evil action" (p. 114).

⁵⁷ It is worth noting that Aquinas was neither the first nor the only one to make these types of changes. Philip the Chancellor, Albert the Great, and Bonaventure take similar steps in their treatments of *liberum arbitrium*.

causal explanation of *liberum arbitrium* are not just heavily Aristotelian, but significantly and intentionally different from those of Augustine. However, although true, this is a very incomplete picture. A more serious look at Augustine's thought reveals that Aquinas's account is extremely Augustinian, in a fresh and distinctive way. Let us return to the three areas we have discussed—context, definition, and causality—and take a fresh look.

The Context of the Topic as Guided by Augustinian Insights

It is true that Aquinas removed the discussion of free decision from the Augustinian context of sin and evil. But I would argue that Aquinas is in fact paying Augustine the ultimate compliment: he is letting Augustine's conclusions, rather than the errors of his adversaries, provide his context. Although Augustine discussed *liberum arbitrium* in the context of evil, he consistently concluded that it was not *about* evil. No matter where the dialectic of the moment took him, Augustine established two things: free decision is a good gift of God, and despite its limitations in our fallen state, it is not to be defined as the ability to do evil. These points are made clear in several ways. First, and most simply, everything made by God is good,⁵⁸ and since free decision is made by God, free decision is good. Secondly, whatever is necessary for righteousness is good, and free decision is necessary for righteousness, and thus free decision is a good.⁵⁹ Finally, Augustine points out that removing the ability to do evil does not damage or remove free decision, but rather perfects and fulfills it.⁶⁰ After all, God has free decision, yet he cannot sin.⁶¹ When Julian argued that "to be able to do evil is evidence of freedom," Augustine rejected the claim.⁶²

By looking at free decision in the context of human nature, then, Aquinas is treating it as Augustine argued that it ought to be treated: as a good gift

⁵⁸ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 11. 22. See also *Confessiones* 7.12–13.

⁵⁹ Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 2.18.186–89. *De vera religione* 14.27.

⁶⁰ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 14.11: "Evil is removed, not by removing any nature, or part of a nature, which had been introduced by the evil, but by healing and correcting that which had been vitiated and depraved. The decision of the will, therefore, is then truly free, when it is not the slave of vices and sins" (CCSL vol. 48; English from *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods [New York: Modern Library, 1993], 458).

⁶¹ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 22.30. See also *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum* 5.38: "In God himself who cannot sin in any way, there is the highest form of free decision."

⁶² Augustine, *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum* 1.81. See also 5.38: "You suppose that this belongs to the nature of free decision, namely, that it can will both, that is, both to sin and not to sin. And you think that man was made to the image of God in this respect, though God himself cannot will both."

of God, given as a fitting part of the rational nature.⁶³ By minimizing the presence of sin and evil, Thomas shows his acceptance of Augustine's view that the ability to do evil is not a defining characteristic of *liberum arbitrium*.⁶⁴ Removing the context of sin shows that Thomas has learned a further lesson from Augustine. Despite all the time he spent talking about it, Augustine concluded that evil is not a primal reality. True, it casts a dramatic shadow in the marketplace of ideas. But evil is a mere privation, and an evil will has no agent cause.⁶⁵ Explanations cannot be found in this absence of being and causality. In diminishing the role of sin in grasping *liberum arbitrium*, Aquinas shows himself more loyal to Augustine's core teachings than those who carefully copied his debates and, thus, contextually perpetuate the idea that we must think about sin to understand freedom, and that the relevant option when we make choices is the option to do evil.

Aquinas does not explicitly speak of *liberum arbitrium* as a gift from God or as having the goal of righteousness. However, in some ways his new context does this for him. If free decision is, indeed, a good gift of God, the context of created nature is the most appropriate place to talk about it. And if the goal of free decision is to achieve what is good, then it is quite fitting to remove the discussion of the essence and existence of free decision from the distracting scenery of sin, temptation, and punishment.

The Definition of Free Decision as Guided by Augustinian Insights

Changing the context of *liberum arbitrium* to one that fit with Augustine's contentions made it possible for Thomas to move further in developing a loyal account of it. To see this, let us look once more at his definition of free decision. We have noted that, by insisting that *liberum arbitrium* was in no way a habit, Aquinas made the dramatic status of the human being—whether saint or sinner, whether in heaven or on earth—accidental to free decision.

⁶³ Several texts in which Augustine describes free decision as natural are in *De Spiritu et littera*, where he calls it "naturally implanted in us" (naturaliter insito libero adhibeatur arbitrio); "naturally assigned by the creator to the rational soul" (liberum arbitrium naturaliter adtributum a creatore animae rationali); and "created naturally in us" (ex libero arbitrio est, quod nobis naturaliter concreatum est). Julian seems to have tried to separate will from nature, but Augustine insists that acts of will are natural acts: "What is an act of the mind but an act of a nature? For the mind is undoubtedly a nature; hence, will is an act of a nature, since it is an act of the mind" (*Contra Julianum opus imperfectum* 5.40).

⁶⁴ Thomas is explicit on this point in *De malo*, q. 16, a. 5, where he says that being able to choose evil does not pertain to the power of free decision *per se*; evil is chosen because of a defect, and no power is defined by its defects.

⁶⁵ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 12.6–7.

We also saw that Aquinas's definition of *liberum arbitrium* shows no signs of being designed to uphold anti-Pelagian doctrines: Aquinas refuses to say that free decision is incapable of performing its proper act in a state of sin.⁶⁶ If Augustine's highest priority in discussing free decision is grasping its role in the narrative of sin and grace, Aquinas simply fails to follow him.

However, suppose we take a slightly broader view of Augustine's priorities. What matters most to him in describing human desires and choices overall? Étienne Gilson describes Augustine's attitude as "thorough-going Eudaemonism."⁶⁷ Augustine returns in almost every writing, early or late, to one thoroughly evident premise: we all seek happiness.⁶⁸ In fact, we never stop seeking and willing to be happy⁶⁹—we are all searching, as Gilson puts it, for "the kind of good whose possession will satisfy every desire and bring peace." This emphasis on happiness is usually part of Augustine's broader context for the discussion of free decision. In *De libero arbitrio*, for instance, the nature of the happy life is one of the key themes the speakers try to pin down: the connection between the happy life and free decision is eventually made by arguing that man has a happy life when free decision, a mediate good which can be used either well or badly, clings to the immutable good.⁷⁰ In the *Incomplete Work Against Julian*, Augustine draws an even stronger connection between free decision and the desire for happiness: he says they are the same thing. "If we look for the free decision of a human being that is inborn and absolutely unable to be lost, it is that by which all will to be happy, even those who do not will those things which lead to happiness."⁷¹ In the last chapter of the *City of God*, when Augustine describes the eternal felicity of the blessed, he makes it a point to argue that free decision is part of this scene.⁷² It seems that what is most fundamental to Augustine in understanding that the principles of human action is not sin, and not even grace, but the quest for happiness. If we consider the matter from this

⁶⁶ Rist argues that Aquinas's account of free decision does so little to prepare for his contentions about grace that it is "de-theologized" (*Augustine Deformed*, 116–18).

⁶⁷ Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960), 1.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 1.14.99: "Who doubts that every man wants a happy life?" (p. 28). See also *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 3.4: "We all certainly desire to live happily; and there is no human being but assents to this statement almost before it is made" (PL vol. 32; English from *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, trans. Richard Stothert, in Schaff, *Writings against the Manicheans*, 42).

⁶⁹ See Augustine, *De natura et gratia* 54.

⁷⁰ Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 2.196–97. Augustine re-asserts this in *Retractationes* 1.9.

⁷¹ Augustine, *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum* 6.11 (p. 865).

⁷² Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 22.30.

perspective, Aquinas is considerably more loyal to Augustine than Anselm and Peter are. Anselm does not make use of the word *beatitudo* at all in his *De libertate arbitrii*.⁷³ Peter confines himself to a passing reference. Despite whatever disloyalties his faculty psychology involved, Aquinas did succeed in one thing: in defining free decision as the power whose object was means to an end, he made it intrinsically involved with happiness. Happiness is the ultimate end, and all choices are of means toward it. And thus, Thomas's *liberum arbitrium* is firmly situated in Augustine's broadest context: the quest for the happy life.

It is thus only partially correct to say that Aquinas's definition does not prepare the ground for the necessity of grace. Because all choices are made in order to attain the ultimate end of happiness, Aquinas orients free decision, by its proper activity, toward the enjoyment of God. It only makes sense that it is by God's help that we reach his presence, so the context of happiness is a solid, though different, preparation for the doctrine of grace. The nature of the end—possession of God as the ultimate true and the ultimate good—means that God's help is required to reach it.⁷⁴

The Causal Explanation of Free Decision as Guided by Augustinian Insights

Having looked at two ways in which Thomas's treatment of free decision involves unique fidelity to Augustine's views, we can move on to talk about whether his causal account of its existence does so. For Augustine, the effect of accountability is paramount. He does discuss some causes, but his gaze is fixed on the ultimate causes most relevant to responsibility. There is an agent cause of free decision (God, the creator, who gives it as a gift of nature), and there is a final cause of free decision (righteousness, or living rightly, which

⁷³ The fact that Anselm does not talk about happiness in *De libertate arbitrii* has a complex explanation. Anselm *does* regard the desire for happiness as playing a role in choice, but we must look at *De casu diaboli* to see this. There, Anselm says there are two wills, the desire for happiness and the desire for justice, and freedom is created by the contrast between them. Calvin Normore summarizes this very helpfully: "The Anselmian agent has an innate direction to two ends, happiness and justice. . . . Thus in a given choice problem the Anselmian agent may have to act on one ultimate end rather than on another. It is this feature of his model which Anselm is convinced saves free choice" ("Picking and Choosing: Anselm and Ockham on Choice," *Vivarium* 36 [1998]: 23–39, at 31).

⁷⁴ This would explain why, in the question about the necessity of grace in the *ST*, Aquinas begins with questions about our positive orientation toward the truth and goodness, asking whether we can know truth or do good without grace (I-II, q. 109, aa. 1–6).

is found in the possession of God).⁷⁵ In *De libero arbitrio*, for instance, God asks the sinner, “why have you not used free decision for the purpose for which I gave it to you, to act rightly?”⁷⁶ Thomas does not disagree with Augustine’s view of the final and agent causes of *liberum arbitrium*, but as we saw, he found these causes useless for understanding its essence or showing the reasons for its existence. For Aquinas, reason and will and their relation to their objects are, quite literally, causes of *liberum arbitrium*, and almost nothing in his arguments reflects Augustine’s writings.

I would like to suggest, however, that Aquinas’s causal account of *liberum arbitrium* is truly Augustinian. True, Thomas did not see free decision according to the narrative of development that Augustine favored. But every story has an end, and in his descriptions of the end and fulfillment of the human story, Augustine clearly presented free decision as something other than a responsibility condition. Thomas was aware of these passages,⁷⁷ and he was also aware that these texts suggest a third Augustinian cause of *liberum arbitrium*: God is not just its agent and its end, but also its exemplar. The most familiar of these texts is from the end of *City of God*, where Augustine describes the life of the blessed in heaven:

Neither are we to suppose that because sin shall have no power to delight them, free decision must be withdrawn. It will, on the contrary, be all the more truly free, because set free from delight in sinning to take unfailing delight in not sinning. For the first free decision which man received when he was created upright consisted in an ability not to sin, but also in an ability to sin; whereas this new one shall be superior, inasmuch as it shall not be able to sin. This, indeed, shall not be a natural ability, but the gift of God. For it is one thing to be God, another thing to be a partaker of God. God by nature cannot sin, but the partaker of God receives this inability from God. . . . The first free decision consisted in his being able not to sin, the new one in his not being able to sin. And thus piety and justice shall be as inde-feasible as happiness. For certainly by sinning we lost both piety and

⁷⁵ The purpose can also be described as understanding the truth; see Epistle 214: “It is for this very purpose, that is, that we may have a wise understanding, that there is free decision” (CSEL vol. 57; English from Schaff, *Augustine’s Anti-Pelagian Works*, 438).

⁷⁶ Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 2.1.7 (p. 36).

⁷⁷ Peter explains Augustine’s teaching about free decision in God and the blessed by citing *De civitate Dei* 22 in *Sentences* II, d. 25, chs. 1 and 3. He also cites a parallel text from *Enchiridion* 30 in chs. 3 and 4, and gives the gist of a third text from *De correptione* in chs. 5 and 6.

happiness; but when we lost happiness, we did not lose the love of it. Are we to say that God Himself does not have free decision because He cannot sin? In that city, then, there shall be free will, one in all the citizens, and indivisible in each, delivered from all ill, filled with all good, enjoying indefeasibly the delights of eternal joys.⁷⁸

I believe Thomas noticed something here: just as happiness ultimately matters more to Augustine than sin does, the eternal divine free decision and our participation in it are ultimately of greater importance to him than our accountability. When he asserts that *liberum arbitrium* applies to God, Augustine does not use any absurd need to hold God accountable as evidence. This assertion arises from a different instinct entirely: a certainty that God is the paradigm for free decision. In getting closer to God, humans become more fulfilled in three ways: the truth they know is the highest truth, the paradigm of it; the good they love and rest in is the highest good, source and pattern of the others, and in a like fashion, the freedom they have is more free; they share in the source and pattern not just of *libertas*, but of *liberum arbitrium*. Aquinas's causal account of free decision relates to Augustine's claims about free decision as an exemplar in one very significant way: Thomas provides support for the claims about eternal freedom that Augustine makes.

The fact is that Augustine did not support his talk of free decision in the blessed and in God. *Why* is there more perfect *liberum arbitrium* when we are not able to sin? It is all very well to say that we are more free because we are more like God, but why call God free in the first place? If we are more free because we are more good, this means there is some identity between freedom and goodness. But on what grounds can this identification be made? Augustine appeals only to Christian intuition—we simply *know* God must be free.⁷⁹

Because he had identified some causes of free decision, however, Aquinas could offer some middle terms to connect God with freedom of choice. Since God knows the truth (himself) and he acts in virtue of it, he knows and can make many particular creatures which reflect this ultimate truth; since God

⁷⁸ *De civitate Dei* 22.30 (p. 865). It is not clear to me whether Aquinas ever saw this chapter of book 22. However, he was familiar with its major claims because Peter quotes them in *Sentences* II, d. 25, chs. 1–4.

⁷⁹ Several suggestions using Augustine's thought could be made—for instance, that God cannot be coerced, since he is all-powerful, or that God acts from love, and love is always free. My point is that Augustine does not directly offer such reasoning. *Why* we instinctively assert the divine freedom is an open question.

is the highest good, he can choose to direct creatures back to himself in a variety of ways, just as humans can choose a variety of means to achieve the same end.⁸⁰ Strangely, then, despite the fact that Aquinas's definition of free decision used no Augustinian language, his definition is more successful than Anselm's or Peter's in supporting Augustine's beloved and oft-repeated assertion that God has whatever *liberum arbitrium* most properly is.⁸¹

Aquinas does break with Augustine on whether the blessed in heaven exercise free decision. In his view, the act of choice is for the sake of an end, and the blessed are *at* the end. They have no more choices to make. And yet, as we have seen, Thomas saw the source of human free decision in reason's knowledge of the essences of things and its capacity for the universal. We know and judge for ourselves in the light of the *ratio* of the good. Moreover, we can freely reject lesser goods in virtue of our capacity for the universal good. Finally, we are self-movers through our necessary and never-ending desire for happiness. For Thomas, then, when humans achieve their happiness in the vision of God as truth itself and goodness itself, they are united to all three sources of their free decision. The truth and goodness that made their earthly choices "free" (both in the sense that the choices were their own and in the sense that these choices were not necessary or determined to a single path) are fully possessed when they are in heaven. Though the blessed do not choose, they are united with the sources of freedom of choice, and thus Aquinas echoes Augustine's contention about the eternal freedom of the blessed.

I do not think it is chance that the account of free decision that Thomas develops provides support for the most exalted—and least supported—claims Augustine makes about it. Aquinas is simply a very different kind of Augustinian. Instead of following in the footsteps of the master, he paid attention to what was ultimately of the greatest importance to him, and thus developed an understanding of free decision which upheld the greatest claims Augustine made about it.

In the end, how Augustinian is Thomas Aquinas's basic account of free decision? Thomas goes against Augustine by removing the context of sin, by rejecting the idea that *liberum arbitrium* is like a habit in any way, by restricting its act to the choice of means rather than characterizing it simply

⁸⁰ For Aquinas's accounts of divine freedom, see *STI*, q. 19, a. 10 (which builds on reasoning from a. 3), and *De veritate*, q. 24, a. 3 (which builds on reasoning from q. 23, a. 4).

⁸¹ Anselm himself thinks his definition applies to God, as is clear from ch. 14 of *De libero arbitrio*. However, it seems odd to speak of God as "preserving rectitude"—the definition is derived from human life and attributed to God by extension. Peter explains that his definition does not apply to God in *Sentences* II, d. 25, chs. 1–2.

as desire or love, and by looking for explanations of its freedom apart from the phenomena of moral accountability. And yet, unlike those who are more literally loyal, Thomas follows Augustine in what we might call his highest teachings about it. He locates free decision in the context of happiness and supports Augustine's claims about the freedom enjoyed by God and those who have achieved happiness in his presence.

Conclusion

Anselm and Peter, like Augustine, treat free decision in the context of evil. At least in my experience, this is a tendency which Christians have not abandoned: all too often, discussions of free will among Christians begin with, dwell on, and eventually fall back upon versions of the "free will defense." But Aquinas notices that Augustine has more to offer than insistence on an accountability condition. By treating free decision outside the context of evil and sin, Thomas breaks an Augustinian tradition, but he also opens up a way of understanding choice where its options are not viewed as "good" and "evil," but "good" and "another good." This simple move liberates the discussion from the stultifying context of evil, following Augustine's refusal to grant evil any status as the option which gives meaning and essence to free decision.

Again, Anselm and Peter follow Augustine in understanding free decision through its final end of righteousness. Again, this tendency is still very much with us: from the writings of St. John Paul II to the humblest student paper, we find the insistence that "true freedom" is found only in moral goodness or rightly ordered action. But there is some danger of unrealistic idealism here: no matter how hard young Christians stare at the concept of moral goodness, they cannot, by sheer force, discern in it the completely distinct concept of freedom of choice. Further, when carelessly interpreted, their equivalency between the free and the morally good seems to leave Christians vulnerable to the charge of determinism: are decisions to shoot up a school or cheat on a test not made freely? Thomas departs from the Augustinian tradition by arguing that all the elements essential to the act of free decision are present in the choices made by sinners, just as they are in the choices made by the virtuous. At the same time, though, he notices that Augustine had more to offer than a vague connection between freedom and righteousness. Augustine does not just say that God is free: he says that God has free decision and is the exemplar of it. And he further adds that those who share in the divine life are not just perfected generally by becoming good, but perfected distinctly in their free decision. Thomas follows Augustine's lead on this

point: he explains that the distinct freedom attributed to our power to make choices is rooted in our capacity for the highest good and the universal truth. This makes it possible for Thomas to logically argue, rather than just piously assume, that free decision is present in God, who exemplifies the causes of the particular kind of freedom we attribute to human choice. That is why the blessed in heaven are perfected distinctly in their free decision: when they are united to God, they are united with the sources of this distinct gift of freedom. Augustine and Aquinas may not agree on how to describe the sinner. Fittingly enough, however, they are reunited in their philosophical accounts of the blessed and their joyful participation in the divine freedom. By both breaking with Augustine and following his lead, Thomas Aquinas achieves a basic account of free decision in which goodness, truth, and God play a more important role than sin, justice, and guilt—in fact, the kind of account that Augustine would have approved. N.V