

Augustine: free choices of will

[Religion](#), [God](#)



St. Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will* elaborates on the relationship between God, free will, and evil. During the very beginning of Book One, he asks the question, "isn't God the cause of evil" (Cahn 357). From this question, it can be ascertained that he searches for a connection between God and evil (sins), which inferred in the writing to be connected though free will. He believes that God does not create evil, but rather that evil is simply the lack of good, since God is completely good and, therefore, cannot create evil.

God not being the source of evil is then further elaborated through his explanation of a crime and how it is caused by inordinate desires and human abuse of good things (Cahn 360). By explaining things this way, he shows that humans are responsible for evil, through their own wills. Of course, being that God is supposed to be in control, he further elaborates that God gives us free will in order to punish us righteously for this.

He believes that God has given humans free will so that they would be able to sin and justifies God by writing that "the very fact that anyone who uses free will to sin is divinely punished show that free will was given to enable human beings to live rightly, for such punishment would be unjust if free will had been given both for living rightly and for sinning" (Cahn 361). Essentially, he is writing that God gives humans free will as a way to measure whether or not they can live righteously, while being tempted with 'evil' desires.

I agree with Augustine's logic regarding free will being the cause of evil, but there is a major fallacy which I will also explain. Augustine argues that "God is a cause of the second kind of evil, but in no way causes the first kind... for

there is no single cause of evil” (Cahn 357). While this statement is logical, since it can be said that God’s creations are the cause of evil and not God, it can also be somewhat interpreted as being flawed in the same sense. If God is the creator of everything, then does he not also have a hand in the creation of his creations?

He is supposed to be the omnipotent being that has the master hand in every sense of life, so he should have more than just a secondhand blame for the creation of evil. However, since he is not directly the creator of evil and everything is inherently good, Augustine’s argument that God’s hands are ‘clean’ of evil is logically sound. Augustine’s assessment of free will being the cause of evil is also a logically sound argument. By providing an example of a mistreated slave killing his owner as a result of his innate desire (Cahn 360), he shows that it was through the slave’s ‘free will’ that evil was done.

This shows that God, since he has given humans free will, had no part in said evil, since if he has indeed given the slave free will, then the creation of evil was entirely in the slave’s hands. If free will is indeed given to humans by God for the purpose of deciding if they can keep righteous through temptations, then it is clearly shown here that this is true. What a person manufactures in his mind is influenced by his surroundings and himself (multiple factors) and what he decides to do (free will) is completely in his hands. This logic shows that free will is the cause of evil.

However, there is a major factor which I also disagree with and unravels much of the argument for me. The main issue is that God is omnipotent, but has given humans free will. That in itself is a huge contradiction, which

Augustine attempts to answer by saying that “ God foreknows this power [our will]... since he whose foreknowledge never errs foreknows that I will have it” (Cahn 366-367). This sounds like he is simply speaking in circles about the subject. He tries to say that God knows about the future, but he knows about our free will, which will give us the power to decide things, but in the end is also foreknown by God.

This is where I start to defer from his beliefs, since I believe that free will is the cause of evil, but that God should be taken out of the equation. While it can argued that God only knows of all the possibilities and not what will directly happen, which would make it so that he is providing free will and is part of a triangle relation between himself, free will, and evil, it is simply much more logical to believe that if there is a God, then there is no free will, and if that is such, God is the originator of evil.

Augustine’s work is extremely logical and provides much evidence proving that free will is the cause of evil. He explains very clearly that evil is a result of human desire and their free will to do what they want. The most major flaw in his argument is that there is an omnipotent being that controls everything, yet doesn’t control everything, which would unravel his entire argument, resulting in evil being created by said being.

Thus, the message that God exists would actually be detrimental to the argument that free will is the cause of evil. However, Augustine writes that “ I hold by faith, not by something I see for myself” (Cahn 362), which means that God is not proven, so logically he doesn’t exist. Therefore, if God were to not exist, humans were innately given free will, and evil is not created

from another source, it can be logically deduced that Augustine's analysis of free will being the cause of evil is correct.