

Augustine and dante on sin, virtue, and agency



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“ Here I saw people more numerous than before, on one side and the other, with great cries rolling weights by the force of their chests” (Inferno 7. 25-27)” The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill man’s heart. We have to imagine Sisyphus happy.”—Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

In *Confessions*, Saint Augustine defines sin as alienation from God. Dante, too, affirms this conception in *Inferno*. But whereas Augustine tends to emphasize the negative aspects of human freedom—it triggered the Fall and distanced man from God—Dante practices a discerning syncretism. Probing beyond Augustinian ideas, he defends the possibility of human virtue divorced from God. In *Inferno*, extraordinary characters like Ulysses exemplify this possibility, displaying a uniquely human grandeur. In essence, Dante retains the Augustinian framework but proceeds to poeticize the heroic potential that arises from free will, delineating its power for good and its ability to partly redeem souls languishing in damnation. Augustine renders nearly all judgment relative to an omnipotent God. Such a worldview manifests itself in almost all his rhetoric: “ Who will grant me that you come to my heart and intoxicate it, so that I forget my evils and embrace my one and only good, yourself?” (I. v [5]). Because God is the “ one and only good,” the world of *Confessions* lies along the axis between the corrupted man and the perfect deity. For man to live virtuously, God must enter man, and man must accept God. Only through divine grace can man come to embrace the Lord. And only through this holy embrace can the state of sin, natural to man, be overwhelmed. The universe of *Inferno* has a secular ambience in contrast to *Confessions*. Dante refrains from addressing God in an apostrophe every second stanza. The divine remains restrained to rhetorical flourishes like “ God’s art” (21. 16). Though the godly design of Hell remains implicit at every

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level and step, God himself does not appear. The great chain of being evinced in the second canto, connecting Virgil to Beatrice to Lucia to the Virgin Mary and finally to God, further expresses this immense chasm between man and deity. This celestial silence serves at least two functions. First, it reinforces the concept found in *Confessions* that a great distance exists between the creator and the created, especially sinners. That God shows himself not in the depths of Cocytus makes sense, for the sinners there are physically as well as spiritually far from God. Second, and more significantly, the near absence of an omnipotent deity provides greater elbowroom for human action and thought, allowing Dante to develop a humanistic perspective on will and virtue. Before an exposition of this candle is possible, one must examine the views of Augustine on free will and sin. In reference to his incident with the pears, Augustine recalls that “criminality was the piquant sauce” (II. vi [12]). In other words, he sinned for the sake of sinning. Because of this motivation, Augustine portrays his crime as a recapitulation of the Fall: “I loved the self-destruction, I loved my fall, not the object for which I had fallen but my fall itself” (II. iv [9]). In eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam chose the ability to determine his own actions. Augustine’s crime, too, was an assertion of his own will without need for divine guidance. And he loved the self-destruction because it, paradoxically, was also self-creation; a thrill derived from the feeling of agency. Given such an experience with his own free will in youth, the pessimistic attitude that Augustine develops in adulthood is understandable. Although free will implies neither good nor less good, Augustine focuses on its ability to bring about the latter and take mankind farther from God. He disparages human agency as “making an assertion of

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possessing a dim resemblance to omnipotence" (II. vi [14]). For Augustine, Adam before the Fall lived in perfect innocence and happiness under a divine plan. It was only through free choice that he became tainted. In addressing the other half of the equation, about whether agency can create virtue, Augustine posits that no virtue can exist outside of worshipping God. He states, "The soul fornicates...when it is turned away from you and seeks outside you the pure and clear intentions which are not to be found except by returning to you. In their perverted way all humanity imitates you" (II. vi [14]). Thus, seeking any humanistic definition of virtue will forever be futile. In the Augustinian universe, man's distance from God bars him from exercising an independent will to virtue, the doing of which might resemble perfect divinity. Though men may attempt to imitate the virtues of God, they merely pervert themselves and their secular institutions. Of these men Augustine states, "[T]hey put themselves at a distance from you and exalt themselves against you" (II. vi [14]). In other words, though humans attempt to imitate godly virtue, this attempt ironically takes them farther from God and in actuality renders them less likely to receive divine grace. Augustine provides at least two reasons for why such mortal pretensions to virtue must fail. First, though Augustine does not deny the limited dignity of human moral striving, what he calls the "urge to self-assertion" (II. v [10]), he argues that such progress can never even approach the greatness of God. As an imitation (II. vi [14]) of infinite goodness, progress ultimately rings hollow. Thus, to wholly immerse oneself in the mechanisms of the world would be to lose sight of the end for the means: "We abandon the higher and supreme goods, that is you, Lord God, and your truth and your law" (II. v [10]). As such, Augustine exhorts repeatedly that one must humble oneself before

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God, for the true path to goodness lies not within the lone soul or the collective effort of the world, but through the benevolence of the Lord. Second, Augustine sees humans as essentially not capable of being heroic or virtuous by themselves. Providing ample evidence of his antagonism toward human self-sufficiency, Augustine asserts that “[n]o one who considers his frailty would dare to attribute to his own strength his chastity and innocence” (II. vii [15]). Augustine condemns the frailty of human will and man’s extreme vulnerability to the toxicity of worldly ideas. He then praises the overwhelming grace of God in saving a wretch like man. Such a contrast represents the Augustinian perspective. Man cannot rely on his own strength to achieve chastity and innocence. For such virtues are beyond his lowly reach and only exist through God. Now that the Augustinian view of free will and sin has been sketched, the contrasting presentations in *Inferno* can be related. One locality that especially clashes with *Confessions* is Limbo, the resting place of humans that “did not sin” (*Inferno* 4. 34), whose only fault was the lack of baptism, gateway to the faith (4. 36). Dante grapples with the problem of whether to condemn the pagans for their lack of belief in the Christian God or praise these “people of great worth” (4. 44) for their virtues and achievements in the arts and sciences. That he places them in Limbo and states through Virgil that they did not sin marks a significant departure from the teachings of Augustine, who clearly writes that the soul fornicates when not focused on God (II. vi [14]). It seems evident that Augustine would consider paganism a form of fornication. Dante, however, does not construe paganism as sinful fornication. Because the pagans came before Christianity, it was impossible to have known and adored God (4. 37-8), and therefore their fornication was partially excusable because they did not will it. Dante,

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like Augustine, seems to conceive of sin as inherently related to free will. Unlike Augustine, he seems to grant more recognition to the possibility of virtue in the absence of knowing God. Dante, in declaring Limbo free of sin, must believe that these spirits are paragons despite their secular existences. Only because they did not receive baptism does Dante not place them in a higher realm. But baptism seems almost a technicality, not a justification for damnation. Thus, Dante does not place these souls in Hell proper. Limbo, the realm between that of the saved and that of the damned, seems to radically represent a space for a humanistic construction of virtue. Dante expresses admiration for the grandeur of such a construction. He describes a meadow of fresh green reminiscent of the Virgilian Elysium, populated by “ people with slow, grave eyes and great authority in their countenances” (4. 112-3). He enthuses, “ I am still exalted within myself at the sight” (4. 119-20). The nobility of these great spirits comes across in the poetry. Dante must lift (4. 130) his brow to find himself in the company of Socrates and Plato, who, according to him, still receive honor (4. 133-4). A dimension of human will and virtue, independent of God, finds expression in Limbo. Souls seem larger than life, proud like ancient supermen. Dante portrays humans that display self-sufficiency, clearness in purpose, and lucidity in intelligence. Though they stand apart from God, their portrayal almost suggests that they do not need Him. The caveat, though, is that they live without hope, in desire (4. 41-42). Augustine would not treat such a depiction of Limbo with deference. He would likely re-emphasize the Fall from which sprung Original Sin; man was displaced into a region of dissimilarity from God, into a time after the Golden Age. The salvation of man lies only in submission and humility before God: “ Let not man say ‘ What is this? Why is that?’ Let him not say it, let <https://assignbuster.com/augustine-and-dante-on-sin-virtue-and-agency/>

him not say it; for he is man" (VII. vi [10]). So much for Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, or Ptolemy (4. 137-142). For man to ask why and where was for him to pretend to omnipotence- to pretend to be God. In the mind of Augustine, only in God would all things be made clear. This polemic against any liberal construction of man sees additional force in Augustine's attack on the Neoplatonists, whom he accuses of not learning to possess a "contrite and humble spirit" (VII. xxi [27]). Furthermore, human wisdom and virtue are forever limited, as Augustine proves by citing 1 Corinthians 4: 7: "For what has he which he has not received?" (VII. xxi [27]). In his epistemology, Augustine regards divine revelation as central, for what can be concealed from the wise can nevertheless be revealed to the babe (VII. xxi [27]). Just as Dante and Augustine differ on the damnation of the Paganists, so the two thinkers part on views of human agency. Augustine's Confessions scorns the idea of an intransigent human will, portraying it as barely strong enough to beg for divine assistance to bolster it. Monica, perhaps the most virtuous paragon of all, is the "servant of your servants" (IX. ix [22]), her principal virtues being devotion and patience, not independence. Augustine also rejects the Socratic conception of man, who has the power to do only good provided he has true knowledge of good and evil: "By now I was indeed quite sure about [the truth]. Yet I was still bound down to the earth" (VIII. v [11]). Strength seems only to be associated with people who resolve to approach God, suggesting strength is granted by the grace of the Lord. For example, Victorinus proclaims his faith with "ringing assurance" (VIII. ii [5]). On the other hand, the pagan friends of the young, converted Roman officials are portrayed as "dragging their hearts along the ground" (VIII. vi [15]). Strength is consistently associated with those who

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convert to or practice Christianity, but this strength appears to only endure insofar as one has faith and obedience in God. Other supposed leaders, like Faustus (V. vii [12]), are shown to be incompetent and possess limited knowledge. Dante seems less willing than Augustine to ascribe the fruits of pagan thought and action to a false, proud wisdom. While Augustine puts man in a congenital state of sin, Dante explicitly recognizes the pagans as great souled and free of sin. It is unclear whether Dante rejects Original Sin, but he certainly rejects the vision of man as intrinsically weak and limited. The Italian poet ascribes to man his own kind of virtue, one that depends not on a static state of similarity or dissimilarity, but a dynamic direction of arts, science and progress. Dante even ascribes this direction to himself when he walks "as far as the light" (4. 103) among the illustrious "company of six" (4. 148). In associating with these poets, Dante seeks to elevate, not denigrate, himself. Dante ultimately equates virtue in man with the struggle for the heights, perhaps demonstrated most poignantly in the figure of Ulysses in Canto 26. For Ulysses, nothing "could conquer within me the ardor that I had to / gain experience of the world and of human vices and / worth" (26. 97-9). He continues, "Consider your sowing: you were not made to live / like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge" (26. 118-9). The extreme poetic beauty of these lines reflects Dante's wonder at the glorious strength of the speaker. The beauty lies not so much in a sterile perfection, but in the ardor to gain experience. In other words, a special human beauty comes from the struggle for improvement and progress, a struggle only possible in the face of limitations, away from God. Ulysses did not need God in life and does not humble himself before Him in death; he represents the antithesis to the Augustinian conception of human frailty. Ultimately, the

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interplay between Augustine and Dante manifests itself in how they independently address the problem of evil. Augustine familiarly argues that weak human understanding cannot comprehend that all that exists must be good, and that what we perceive as good in isolation is very good as a totality (VII. xii [18]). Furthermore, human agency cannot prevent a slide from good to less good without the protection of the Lord. This approach destroys evil but also demeans human virtue. For man cannot be perfect like God—he exists always in sin. To save himself, man must seek the Lord. When Augustine makes his premises clear, his position becomes very rational. Dante breaks out from this restrictive conception of sin by incorporating the classical idea that virtue exists in the struggle for the heights. A human will guided by reason and virtue has meaning despite its imperfections. In also addressing the better half of the free will equation, Dante fuses the sin-centered theology of Confessions and the Hellenic humanism of Ulysses in a creative and balanced manner.