

Review of Eric L. Jenkins, *Free to Say No? Free Will and Augustine's Evolving Doctrines of Grace and Election* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2013)

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## Preview

Eric Jenkins' *Free to Say No? Free Will and Augustine's Evolving Doctrines of Grace and Election* is a relatively concise and highly readable investigation into Augustine's changing position on the freedom of the will and various related doctrines. The author approaches the question historically, tracing the development of Augustine's views throughout a number of primary sources, from which he provides ample quotations, all the while incorporating much of the important secondary literature on the topic. While the author does not claim to make any new or ground-breaking advances, he nevertheless adds to the scholarship his own arguments and exegesis in support of the view that Augustine's mature position on the freedom of the will, which he identifies as a kind of compatibilism, is irreconcilably opposed to Augustine's earlier, more libertarian position. The author also explores various philosophical, theological, and historical reasons for Augustine's change of heart, and presents them in a clear and lively manner.

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The introduction to the book highlights three general scholarly approaches to Augustine's overall position on the freedom of the will and lists some of the proponents of each view, all of which is elaborated on in the chapters to follow. The first approach "seeks continuity by interpreting his [Augustine's] later predestinarian teaching in light of his early teachings on the freedom of the will" (x). This design aims to maintain a consistency throughout the whole of Augustine's writings on the freedom of the will. The second approach "seeks continuity by attempting to harmonize Augustine's early and later works with each other," by interpreting either group in such a way as to sit well with the other (x). The third method recognises a fundamental change in Augustine's later doctrine that is opposed to his earlier claims. That is, Augustine's later alterations to his position "do not express a harmonious development of previously stated principles, but rather, a replacement of early principles 'by their contraries'" (xi). The author is of this third persuasion: "Augustine's early writings appear to affirm the will's ability to either assent to or dissent from the perceptions, desires and influences which present themselves to it. His later writings, on the other hand, tend to present God as the one who predetermines human wills" (xii).

The first chapter, "Augustine's Early Works," deals mainly with Augustine's early *De libero arbitrio (On Free Will)*, though at the end of the chapter, the author also discusses Augustine's *On the Two Souls*. Jenkins' overall

thesis is that Augustine “initially defended a libertarian view of the will, but later switched to a compatibilist view, which denied the power of dissent” (31). Thus, Jenkins supports the interpretation of scholars such as Marianne Djuth versus Katherin Rogers. The latter attempts to identify a kind of compatibilism in Augustine’s early position, which Jenkins contends only appears later in Augustine’s thought. Jenkins asserts that, “the power of assent requires the power of dissent or there is no choice. The will must have freedom to will or refrain from willing something, as well as freedom to do or refrain from doing something” (28). This position, he argues, was Augustine’s in his early works, as set out in the first books of the *De libero arbitrio*. Jenkins identifies this as Augustine’s early libertarian view. He explains: “The will’s freedom to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ is essential to Augustine’s early understanding of sin . . . . [The will] is like a hinge, which can freely move in either direction and say either ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to evil” (29). Jenkins maintains that “Augustine’s belief in free will is unquestionable in the early works” (25). According to Jenkins’ explanation of the positions, the compatibilist believes that “the person chooses to assent to . . .

desires without ever having the power to dissent from them,” that is, his choices are determined by his disposition (28). He explains: “The compatibilist will has only the power to assent or yield to impressions, it does not have the power to dissent from them. It does not choose its own disposition” (27). The libertarian, however, argues for a “more significant level of freedom. It is a freedom which allows the will the power to choose between moral alternatives and decide its own dispositions” (28). The latter maintains that “actions are right or wrong, and punishment and reward make sense only if there is the power to say ‘No.’” a theme to which Jenkins continually returns, thereby contributing to the appropriateness of the title of the book (29).

Jenkins’ thesis of Chapter 1 is expressed in the following: “There is little doubt Augustine was a compatibilist in his later years, but we have observed how his early works defend a libertarian notion of the will, which requires the will to be the ultimate determiner of its own disposition. In his early works, the will must be free to choose between good and evil second-order volitions and also the first-order alternatives of doing or not doing an action. The will must be free to choose what it wills, not just what it does. These teachings are not consistent with compatibilism” (26). Jenkins supports this position with many quotations from Augustine’s texts and arguments from scholars who share his position. Though some more detail concerning the nature of the controversies and debates and what particularly was at stake would help to situate the reader more firmly, the author does supply some of the historical context for Augustine’s views and why they might have changed, including his debate with Fortunatus in 392 and his long-time association with the Manichees.

By the end of the early works, Jenkins maintains that Augustine “has staked out a strong position in defence of free will. Election is God’s recognition of those who by their own free will have chosen to receive his gracious offer of salvation. All have the power to participate in God’s grace and all who hear the Gospel have within their will the freedom to decide whether to be corn or chaff.

The fallen human will has the power to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to sinful impulses and to grace” (25). Thereby Jenkins sides against those who see Augustine as consistent generally, or in particular as a consistent compatibilist, throughout all of his writings.

Chapter 2, “Augustine’s Middle Works,” deals with the complications for Augustine’s theory of free will as it relates to the bishop’s other developing doctrines of grace, election, original sin, and his insistence on the importance and efficacy of infant baptism. The author explains how these other doctrines sharpen and alter Augustine’s position on the freedom to choose. He traces the shift from Augustine’s notion that the human will is free to believe through faith and accept God’s offer of grace, to the idea that perhaps it is God’s grace itself that allows, or even causes, the human will to believe.

While the author cites passages from Augustine’s *Eighty-Three Questions*, and *Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans*, appropriately his *To Simplician* takes centre stage in this pivotal chapter, for it is this text that the author, along with TeSelle, claims is a “crucial moment in Augustine’s theological journey,” representing a dramatic revision of Augustine’s earlier position. Here, Augustine “fully embraces efficacious grace” (38). Jenkins writes: “Now, he [Augustine] appears to be teaching that God causes the willing itself, making a person will what God wants. The will’s consent inevitably follows God’s offer or mercy, rather than being the condition upon which mercy is received” (38-39).

The author also touches briefly on some of Augustine’s other developing doctrines in this period that have an effect on his understanding of free will, which were forged in the crucibles of the Donatist and Pelagian controversies. Augustine’s understanding of the Fall and its consequences for the human ability to choose good or evil, or to be able to choose only among various evils is also explored. Further, as Jenkins points out, “Augustine’s reversal on the doctrine of election is now forcing changes in his understanding of God’s call and grace” (43). Unconditional election, whereby God elects one before one is even born, cannot depend upon any actions or choices of the individual.

The author briefly reviews the relevant passages from the *Confessions*, the nature of the will and habit, and also the *Answer to Felix*, in which Augustine seems to return to his early position on the freedom of the will to choose. Jenkins clearly displays the tension within Augustine’s middle works between the shift in *To Simplician* and Augustine’s tendency to return to his earlier libertarian ideas. Jenkins writes, “Augustine’s vacillating theories of will show us the difficulty he is having balancing free will and unconditional election. In the middle works he attempts to balance them by affirming the will’s power to say ‘No’ to grace, but this is inconsistent with his doctrine of unconditional election” (61).

At the end of the chapter the author deals with Augustine’s *Spirit and the Letter* and examines whether faith is an act of the will or a gift from god, given or withheld prior to the giving. Here, Jenkins asserts, “Augustine is clearly still affirming the ‘helping hand’ model of grace, where grace is offered to all, but the freedom to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to grace is also given” (59). The chapter ends with a

helpful summary of what the author identifies as Augustine's 'middle position': "The gift of faith comes from God alone, as it arises within the free choice of the will, but the will is a neutral power that can choose to receive and have this gift by assenting, or reject this gift and hold God's mercy in contempt by dissenting. Augustine has returned to the position we saw in his early works, where *gratia* is given to all, then humans make a decision of their will to believe or disbelieve the promises of God. All who believe are given *adiutorium* to help them do good works" (60).

Chapter 3 again proceeds chronologically, investigating Augustine's evolving position on the freedom of the will in relation to the Pelagian controversy. Here we see Augustine's focus on the doctrine of original sin and how Augustine is pushed to assert that there are more far-reaching effects of the Fall than merely making humanity inclined to sin. The author contends that in Augustine's later view, faith itself is an act of God alone (66). Jenkins writes: "The congruent call of *To Simplician* is being replaced by a more powerful grace, that does not wait for the will's assent, but actually causes the assent of the will" (67). Though a brief tour of the positions in Augustine's *Grace of Christ and Original Sin*, Jenkins argues that as a result of the Fall, before we receive grace, the will can only choose, to use TeSelle's phrase, within a horizon of sin, and cannot choose good. According to Jenkins, "Augustine believes effectual grace is necessary because the fallen will lacks any power to choose good no matter how much it is helped. The evil will cannot choose good until after it has been converted into a good will" (69).

Again, there is a good mix of contemporary scholarship intermixed with quotations from Augustine's *Letter 194, Answer to the Two Letters of the Pelagians*, the *Enchiridion*, *City of God*, and *Grace and Free Choice*. Ultimately, Jenkins shows how there is a shift in Augustine's mature position. Here, "God does more than simply call the fallen will in a way that suits it. Instead, he renovates the will by removing sinful desires and replacing them with the desire for God and good" (71). That is, "the consent of the will is no longer necessary before conversion. This new concept of operative grace excludes human autonomy from the conversion process. Consent no longer comes from ourselves, but it is the product of grace" (72). Jenkins judges that Augustine has "rejected the libertarian concept of free will found in his early works and has substituted Stoic compatibilism" (76). He summarises his position: "In the initial stage of human willing, God is seen as the sole actor, who causes the good will. Once the good will has been produced, then God works with that will to strengthen it. It must be admitted, however, that the human will in no way assents to this initial act of conversion before it happens. It does not have the power of assent until after it has been converted. The assent of the will never precedes the conversion but is always produced by God's transformative work on the will at the moment of conversion" (80).

However, there is still a lingering notion of some kind of co-operation between God's grace and human willing that creates a tension in Augustine's position: "While Augustine believes human willing and action are essential in the

process of salvation, it is important to remember that this willing and action are produced in a human at conversion. Prior to conversion, the will never assents to grace, but is always resistant to it. Grace produces the assent of the will in an unwilling person” (85-86). Nevertheless, Augustine’s mature view that “there is no human cooperation prior to this gratuitous work” (87).

Jenkins also touches on how Augustine’s doctrine of predestination influences and is itself influenced by Augustine’s questions relating to the freedom of the will. In his *Predestination of the Saints* Jenkins argues that Augustine affirms that “Grace is the means by which God produces in human hearts the will to do all that he has ordained from eternity by his predestination” (95). Jenkins also discusses briefly some of Augustine’s contemporary opponents of his evolved view. Concerned about the dangers of fatalism and moral laziness, they defend Augustine’s earlier position against him. Again, more details about these opponents and their historical contexts might help to contextualise these debates.

At the end of the chapter, Jenkins concludes that Augustine “removes the power to say ‘No’ from the will in both the will to sin and the will to believe. Humans are condemned for a sin they did not participate in with the exercise of their wills and they are further condemned for sin they cannot hold back from. The only remedy to their situation is a grace which is not offered to all and cannot be resisted by any” (100).

In the final chapter, the author reviews some of the pros and cons of Augustine’s changing definition of the will and summarises what he identifies as Augustine’s early, middle, and later positions. Ultimately, the author concludes that in his most mature position, “Augustine’s compatibilist view of free will suggests being ‘free’ is primarily a matter of doing what one wants to do” (106). The author also provides some helpful analogies to show how Augustine’s later position affects his “view of God’s character and relationship to man,” which alters one’s view of God’s justice, love, and mercy. He concludes that “Augustine’s doctrines allow us to affirm God’s love and mercy for the elect, but leave us with no recourse but to deny his love and mercy for the reprobate” (114).

Finally, the author reviews four fundamental ideas that Augustine held which over time shaped his view of free will: (1) his doctrine of unconditional election; (2) the presupposition that God is the only source of Good in the universe; (3) God’s omnipotence; and (4) the need for and efficacy of infant baptism. These premises, the author holds, move Augustine into his final position necessitating “the removal of the will’s freedom to say ‘No’ to original sin and grace” (119). This view, according to Jenkins, is entirely at odds with Augustine’s earlier view concerning the nature of the will and the standards of moral culpability.

The present reviewer cannot resist mentioning some minor stylistic annoyances. Though I am aware that it is not always required, the ubiquitous omission of the introductory ‘that,’ which normally begins an indirect statement, regularly causes the reader to have to re-read many sentences, which he mistakenly began by taking the subject of the indirect statement to be the object

of the main verb. This omission is all-too common today and shows how an economy of words should not always be sought at the expense of ease of reading and clarity.

Also, the present reviewer is also aware of and sympathetic with those who strive for gender neutrality in their language, but there are ways to do this without infringing upon the rules of grammar and causing confusion and ambiguity. The author often uses plural pronouns with singular subjects to avoid the usual “his” and “he,” etc. (e.g., 11, 22, 29, 30, 42, etc.). Granted, this has become commonplace, but it is still wrong and causes philosophical confusion as well. For example, the author writes: “The person may not even be aware their will has been manipulated” (22). Grammatically, the person unaware is distinct from the group of people whose will has been manipulated. To what extent does one’s guilt depend upon the awareness of the manipulation of the will of a group of other people? This, of course, is not what the author intends, for he means that “the person may not even be aware *that his* will has been manipulated.” One can use ‘her’ if one wishes, but one must strive for precision. This habit also regularly causes particularly theological and philosophical befuddlement when, for example, the author discusses the extent to which one is or is not guilty for the sins of Adam, for in this case, one’s guilt might in fact depend upon the sins of another. Or here: “In our human justice systems, we do not judge *someone* guilty of a crime if *they* were powerless to avoid it” (29). Yes, one supposes that one should not judge someone guilty based on the powerlessness of some entirely other group of people to avoid committing a crime!

Finally, unfortunately there is no index, but there is a very useful bibliography of secondary sources that one jumping into this aspect of Augustine’s thought for the first time should find especially useful.

Overall, the book provides a very helpful summary of Augustine’s changing views on the topic, and the author’s thesis, though not new, is very well argued and clearly presented nonetheless. The author weaves together the primary sources and secondary scholarship to make a convincing argument. Appropriately Wetzell, Chadwick, Rogers, Brown, Gilson, Stump, and Rist, among many others, make appearances throughout the work, and the author is also careful to address the arguments of the scholars who oppose his view and who argue for a consistent doctrine over the course of Augustine’s writings. While the author does well to identify these scholars and quote them, sometimes he refers to “some philosophers” and “some scholars” without indicating to the reader who exactly they are (11, 12, 15, 51, 65, etc.). The author also often, though briefly, tells the reader who Augustine’s audiences and interlocutors and their positions are for the various texts under examination, while speculating on the various related doctrines and developments that affect and influence Augustine’s changing ideas. In a longer treatment, more details in this regard would be welcome.

While there is nothing really ground-breaking in the author’s thesis, this is no criticism. The author is claiming that he is siding with an established scholarly position and interpretation of Augustine’s doctrine of the freedom of the

will and how it evolves; he does not make any grander claims than this. Further, the author uses well the work of those scholars who support his position, and he addresses convincingly those who do not. Finally, Jenkins' own close analysis and exegesis of the texts are also helpful and insightful, and he identifies important primary texts in support of this position, adding himself to the names of scholars who are defending this account of Augustine's views by a close reading of Augustine's texts. Readers looking for a broad-ranging, careful, clearly written, and well-sourced account of Augustine's changing position on the freedom of the will would do well to read Jenkins' book.

*Seamus O'Neill*