## Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Our hearts are cold; Lord, warm them with your selfless love.
Grant to us your servants:
to our God--a heart of flame;
to our fellow men--a heart of love;
to ourselves--a heart of steel.

Almighty God, in whom we live and move and have or being, you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until in you they find their rest. Grant us purity of heart and strength of purpose, that no selfish passion may hinder us from knowing your will, no weakness from doing it; but that in your light we may see light clearly, and in your service we may find our perfect freedom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
--Augustine

## Week #3b: Pelagius and Augustine on Original Sin and Divine Grace

There were various differences that set in motion the Pelagian controversy.
The first was the increasing divergence between the parochial traditions peculiar to North Africa colliding with the spreading of Greek ascetical ideals west into Rome and southern France (Gaul). Advocates of the Greek ascetic ideal had a particular interest in distinguishing the emerging Christian ascetic movement (to which they belonged) from the heterodox asceticism of the Manichaeans (which was based on a view that the body and created realm were not God's original design and were an unfortunate place of slavery which needed to be repudiated).
The differences between these two groups turned on

- how sin had affected us,
- how the penalty of Adam's sin was transmitted to his descendants and
- to what extent God's prior action (e.g. predestination/election and illumination/renovation of the human will) was necessary to bring humanity to salvation.

One of the events that helped to trigger the controversy was the arrival in Rome c. 399 of Rufinus the Syrian (apparently a priest who had resided at Jerome's monastery in Bethlehem and likely helped to prepare the translation of the Pauline Epistles which appears in the Vulgate).
While in Rome, Rufinus commented on one of the issues where the East and West increasingly disagreed:

- Is our mortality (liability to death) a punishment given to Adam in view of his transgression and subsequently handed down to his descendants (who possess this liability even from birth)?
    - The North Africans and many at Rome said yes, citing Rom. 5:12ff.
    - Some of the fourth-century Eastern fathers cautiously agreed with this, but some disagreed, since the East was primarily concerned with different issues, which tended to take the whole discussion in a different direction.

(1) Rufinus the Syrian argued, contrary to the view dominant in the West, that
- death was in fact natural to humanity

(Adam and Eve were mortal by nature, although if they had remained faithful to God, God could have indefinitely extended their lives as a reward for obedience). Thus death (including the death of infants) is not a penalty assigned in view of Adam's sin, but simply our natural lot and what we should expect unless God, for his own purposes, intervened in some extraordinary manner. This was a view that one finds in some early Greek writers from Syria and Asia Minor (e.g. Theophilus of Antioch; fl. 190). It was also useful in arguing against the Manichaeans, who believed that corruption and death were part of the intrinsically flawed nature of the created realm and the body and showed the latter to not be good or part of God's original plan.
(2) Rufinus also criticized the view that Adam's descendants could suffer a penalty assigned to Adam because of his transgression.
- One is punished, Rufinus argued, only for one's own sins, not for the sins of others.
- Our lives and our destinies depend upon the use we make of our free choice (an affirmation directed in part at the seemingly fatalistic views of the Manichaeans, who were active in Rome and from whom every self-consciously orthodox Christian ascetic was careful to distinguish themselves).

Augustine meanwhile, probably largely unaware of the ascetic criticism of traditional Western beliefs at Rome, had recently published a work *Ad Simplicianum* (396, his first literary work as bishop of Hippo) in which he tried to work through these traditional Western beliefs in a new, more systematic way in reflecting upon Romans 7 and 9, where human inability and divine grace are discussed in terms of God's predestination.
The work itself shows Augustine in a process of transition
- from a view (compatible with that of the Eastern ascetics and their anti-Manichaean polemic) that though we are corrupted by sin, we are still able freely to choose to seek God's help
- to a view (which would become the normative view of the Western church) that our salvation rests wholly upon God's predestining grace, which can turn around even the most hard-hearted, spiritually negligent sinners.
    - Augustine is trying to avoid a situation in which one's free choice of God could be seen as introducing some form of human merit into the process of salvation; cf. 1 Cor. 4:7: "What do you have that you have not received?"

- Because all sinners resist God and their minds and wills therefore remain corrupted, the cause of the sinner's turning to God is not some inexplicable change arising from some natural, uncorrupted powers they have retained.
- The process of conversion is instead a divine turning of people who neglect and resist God so that, by the action of divine grace upon the will, they might understand and desire divine truth and return to God.
- This account of grace is worked out in Augustine's account of his own life (the conversion of his own will by the action of divine grace) in the *Confessions* (397-401), which Augustine concludes with the appeal, "Give what you command, command what you will" (*Conf*. 10.31.45).

**Pelagius' Account of Freedom and Responsibility and His Criticism of Augustine's Account of Grace**

When Pelagius (Rome; between 402-405) became familiar with these developments in Augustine's theology, he accused Augustine of turning away from the sound anti-Manichaean position (free will affirmed against the fatalism resulting from the Manichaean account of the power of evil) that had characterized Augustine's earlier works in which he had presented an anti-Manichaean theodicy that saw the free will of created beings as the source of moral evil (e.g. *De libero arbitrio* "On Free Will"; 387-388).

One of the things that bothered Pelagius was that Augustine spoke of human nature as having become a "fallen nature" that was vitiated by sin and had lost its original goodness (remember that for Augustine evil is a deprivation of goodness).

What Pelagius and Augustine meant by nature was different. For Pelagius, following Greek usage nature (Lat. *natura*=Grk. φύσις) meant the fundamental character of a thing, something which a thing cannot be without, which could not be lost unless the thing itself lost its identity and ceased to be what it was, e.g. one might be a young man or an old man, but such a person always remains a man, at least until death should result in their dissolution. From Pelagius' perspective, if there are fallen natures, then we are back in Manichaeism, where there is an evil principle and beings that are evil by nature and the body is viewed as a prison and an obstacle to salvation. This of course was not at all what Augustine was trying to say; he used the Latin word *natura* in a more casual and flexible way to describe how matters currently stood (we have lost goodness), not how things always are and must be (in point of fact, we can regain the goodness we have lost when we are saved and renewed by God's grace).

Pelagius saw God's goodness and grace being expressed to us in forms that did not compromise the control we have over the moral character of our lives through free choice. God provides us with

- natural freedom (can't be lost),
- the revelation of the law/ethical exhortation,
- Christ 's example,
- Christ's promises (as an incentive), and
- the Spirit sent to enlighten and purify those who seek purity and yearn for God.

Because God has set up the environment (or preconditions) for human action in such a favorable manner, we are able to choose/will to pursue a sinless existence.

Granted that there are obstacles at present to carrying this out:

- Ignorance resulting from forgetfulness and "carnal custom" can limit our ability to act in accordance with our nature, i.e. to live as the kind of people we actually are).
- These temporary limitations in no way change our fundamental nature. For example, we never cease to be rational creatures created in God's own image and end up grazing the grass like cows and other irrational animals.
    - Insofar as we always retain the rational nature that God has given us and which characterizes us, an understanding of the demands of the law and a proper exercise of free choice always remains within our power.
    - If we became so corrupt that we lost our rationality and were no longer able to comprehend the demands of the law, then God would be commanding things of us that he knows to be impossible for us and would end up either
        - (a) condemning us for actions he knows we cannot avoid or
        - (b) compelling us by force to do what he desires, thus violating human freedom and subverting both human moral responsibility and divine justice.
            - "Surely it would be fitting for God to have given a command which it is impossible to fulfill, if such a thing is fitting even for a man to do; but if even human nature thinks it unfair to order anyone to do something impossible, how perverse it is to believe God to be capable of something which not even the nature of mortals would respect!"
        - God of course might act in less coercive ways to help us, making it easier for us to do what is good, but this is not because he erred in making us, leaving us unable to do the good without his immediate intervention.
        - No, if we are to avoid accusing God,
            - we must believe that he made us in such a way that we are able to do what he commands and, since this is a part of our nature (as created),
            - we must believe that this capacity always remains with us. Because we have this ability we should understand the seriousness of our life and our choices, for God requires obedience and righteousness from us and threatens the disobedient with eternal damnation.
            - "Is there anyone so thoughtless, so unrighteous, so totally ignorant of equity, as to dare to order a servant or any of his subjects to do what he knows to be beyond his capability? For instance, will any man instruct his servant to complete in one day a journey which takes four days or dispatch him to swim across the waves of the wide sea rather than to sail over them or to climb impassable and inaccessible mountains with slippery peaks or to do anything else beyond his natural capabilities? If he presumed to give such

an instruction, who would not think him not only unfair but mad as well, seeing him impose upon a man instructions which his own natural powers could by no means carry out? And if such a judgment can justifiably be made of a man of this kind, I leave it to your common sense to decide what men would think of a God whom they suppose to have given them an order which is beyond their natural capabilities." (Pelagius' letter *On the Possibility of Not Sinning* in Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*, Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1991, 167)

- To say that, oppressed by sin, we are no longer able to observe the commandment due to defects in our nature, will just encourage sinners to rationalize and excuse their bad behavior and claim they couldn't help themselves. Instead, we should be "encouraging people not to sin, because they have the capacity to avoid it." Thus, one always could have done otherwise if one wanted to; having sinned, we ask them to repent and to admit their voluntary transgression.
    - Cf. Pelagius' *Letter to a Young Man* in Rees, pp. 158 [bottom]-159[top]: "I am unwilling that you should make the same mistake as those who supposed that they can sin with impunity because they are in ignorance of the divine will—unhappy, miserable creatures indeed and utterly ignorant of the truth, if they do not know that the ignorance which is born of knowledge provides no one with an excuse! They do not know what they do not know, because they know what they do not know; for they know that what they do not know is good, and they do not know it because they do; and if they did not know it, then perhaps they could have….But someone nay say, 'It is to my advantage to sin in ignorance rather than with knowledge.' But I maintain that when a man knows what it is that he does not know, it is no longer a matter of true ignorance: perhaps ignorance is able to excuse a man who does not know even what he ought to know." God makes known his commandments, requiring that they should be done.
        - Cf. the legal maxim, "Ignorance of the law is no excuse" (*Ignorantia legis neminem excusat*).
        - Roughly, what Pelagius is claiming is that if one wishes/chooses to know the commandments of God, one can do so.

Having the ability to know them, one is accountable for doing them.

- The alternative would be to imagine that God had revealed his commandments and required them to perform them, but then made it impossible for them to know and/or do what was required. This would require God to be unjust.
- Therefore instead it must be that one did not know what one should have known because one did not wish to (being instead led by the unrestrained pleasures of the body). "For God desires his commandments to be kept under any circumstances, and it makes no difference whether they are neglected knowingly or in ignorance…I do not see how a man can do something without knowing what he is doing."
- Such a person may want to be called a Christian, but is not, because he has not fulfilled the commandments of God and this alone leads to salvation.

**Augustine's Response to Pelagius**

(1) Before the Fall, Adam was **able not to sin** (*posse non peccare*) and therefore had the ability to offer free, conscious and willing obedience to God.

(2) After the Fall, Adam and his descendants experienced, as a consequence of original sin,

- a clouding and darkening of the mind by ignorance and
- a weakness (infirmity) of the will combined with
- the arising of powerful, disordered bodily desires which move one to pursue self-gratification.

Because of this, we find that our lives are disordered by the experience of temptation (suggestions and enticements to commit evil) and our wills move us to pursue not the good known and chosen (preferred) by the mind but the self-gratification proposed by our desires.

We therefore are unsuccessful at holding out against temptation and after a time give in to sin. This giving in to sin generally happens in two stages:

(a) We find pleasure in dwelling upon the thing (contemplating it and savoring its sweetness), giving an <u>initial, unformed consent</u> to the thing (consent to pleasure).

- Thus, for example, I may relish the thought of telling the boss precisely what I think of him and then quitting on the spot. Here I give an initial, unformed consent to my anger and desire for retribution.

- Or, to give another example, perhaps one might savor various sexual images or erotic mental scenarios, replaying them over and over again in one's mind (lust).
- In some cases, what moves one is not pleasure but fear (which like pleasure is a powerful incentive that resists and overrides reason to promote the immediate interests of the self)

(b) After giving initial, unformed consent, one eventually moves on to give explicit consent, which moves one beyond inward commitment to outward action (actually trying to pursue and obtain the object of one's desire).

(c) This will's pursuit of what is pleasant and gratifying to oneself soon gains the force of habit, so that the will moves more easily, impulsive and unreflectively to act in accordance with the pattern that has been established by one's previous actions (creating a sort of inertia).

In this state, in which we are unable to repair the damage to our will, one loses the ability not to sin (*posse non peccare*) and finds oneself **not able not to sin** (*non posse non peccare*). Even though one's reason may still be able to distinguish and choose (prefer) the good, it is often ineffective in directing the will, so that one's will leads one to pursue some other goal (a different course of action).

(3) Christ's work on the Cross secures the forgiveness of our sins, renews us in the image of God and restores to us the freedom not to sin (**being able not to sin**= *posse non peccare*) that Adam had lost at the Fall. It is now possible for

i) the mind to rise above the ignorance that afflicted and limited it and to distinguish and choose the good (it is recognized that God is the supreme good and that he is to be loved for his own sake, not for the benefits he can provide)
ii) the will to act in accordance with what the mind has judged good and chosen (i.e. pursuing God out of love for God, God being loved for his own sake)

Freedom from compulsion by evil habits is nonetheless not sufficient to lead us to the good. Our restored power of choice (insufficient of itself) must be joined with grace and it is this grace that makes it possible for us to do the good we desire.

It is therefore true both that

- the beginning of our salvation rests with God and depends upon divine grace (since we unable to restore the damage done to our wills by sin, but must rely on God to do this--conversion is a divine work rather than a human achievement)
- divine grace is strictly necessary for us to pursue and do the good (undercutting all claims for the sufficiency of human action or human merit)

**Augustine on the Relation Between Divine Grace and Human Action**

God thus requires a confluence of divine and human action in salvation and the Christian life. God's grace is prevenient (i.e. God's gracious action comes before our action, protecting us and preparing us for salvation) and operative (active and at work in bringing us to salvation and sustaining us in the Christian life) but this does not mean that we do not *receive* this grace by way of assent.(i.e. we receive this healing and saving grace gladly and not as something forced upon the compelled and

unwilling). At the same time, even this assent itself owes something to the Spirit's prior gracious action, which

- heals our wills (restoring them to health) and frees them from their bondage to sin so that we are now able not only to aim at and desire the good, but also to do it/carry it out
- turns the will to the good so that it is subject to the Creator (this is conceived of a transfer of the will's allegiance from sin and habitual evils to God)

This turning of the will to the Creator will ultimately (in the next life) lead us to such an intense desire for God that God can effect a perfect unity of our wills with His own will, so that we finally become **not able to sin** (*non posse peccare*) and therefore rise to a height of communion with God and perfection in God that even Adam prior to the Fall had not experienced.

**The Later History of Pelagianism**

With the barbarian invasion of Italy in 409-410, the Pelagians fled to Sicily and North Africa. One of Pelagius' followers, Caelestius, having fled to Carthage in North Africa, made the rather unfortunate move of

- attacking the traditional North African view about baptism (i.e. that infants were baptized due to the sins of another, i.e. Adam) and
- attacking the account of the will's vitiation by sin which was supported by Augustine and many North African clergy.

Having been censured and rejected for ordination to the priesthood by a meeting of North African bishops in 411, Caelestius went to Ephesus in Asia Minor, where he was ordained and wrote a short, polemical work cast in syllogistic form (the *Definitiones*), which emphatically stated the Pelagian position that

- the human will was capable of being without sin, so that it is possible for one (at least after conversion) to lead a sinless life:
    - "If anyone says: 'Can there be a man who does not sin even by word?' the answer must be: 'If God wills it, he can: but God so wills, therefore he can" (quoted in Augustine *De perfectione justitiae hominis* 20.43).
    - He also argued, following Rufinus the Syrian, that
        - death is part of our natural condition and
        - Adam would have died even if he had not sinned and
        - infants do not experience the penalty for Adam's transgression but rather enter into life in the same state of innocence and freedom which Adam initially possessed when given life by God.

Augustine is brought into the debate by letters sent from colleagues in Carthage. Although he was careful not to condemn Pelagius directly, he strongly reaffirmed the traditional North African practice of baptizing infants for the sin of another (i.e. Adam). Infants, Augustine argued, stand in as great a need of regeneration and spiritual renewal as the rest of us and therefore must be reborn by the washing of water and the Spirit in baptism in order that they might be saved rather than condemned.

Augustine incidentally

- criticizes the Pelagian view that we share in Adam's sin only by way of imitation (i.e. by choosing to do the same things that Adam, our bad role model, did) and

- expresses the idea that the liability deriving from Adam's sin is handed down to us by way of propogation (physical descent).

Pelagius meanwhile had moved to Palestine and got into a dispute with Jerome (a Latin-speaker then resident in Jerusalem) over how one should understand Paul's declarations of inability in Rom. 7. Against Jerome, Pelagius took the viewed expressed by Eastern, anti-Manichaean ascetics that Paul was not speaking in his own person and certainly did not mean to imply that he himself was unable to do the good he willed. (The Manichaeans had used this part of Rom. 7 as a proof-text for the truth of their own religion.)

Orosius, a young, hotheaded, heresy-hunting Spanish presbyter, was asked by Augustine to go to Jerusalem to deliver two letters to Jerome (with whom Augustine was corresponding on several issues, including how to understand the origin of human souls). While there, he was asked by the bishop, John of Jerusalem, to attend a synod and inform the others about the accusations made against Pelagius in North Africa. Orosius badly mishandled this, antagonizing John by insisting that John must follow Augustine's doctrines to the letter. John also understood Orosius (in remarks made through a translator) to be claiming that "not even with the help of God was it possible for a man to live without sin," which was at best fatalism and at worst blasphemy. In spite of Orosius' denunciations, Pelagius' orthodoxy therefore was admitted as OK (with a few corrections made) and the matter was referred to the bishop of Rome as a matter for Westerners to worry about.
Innocent, bishop of Rome in 416-417, simply reaffirmed the Western view that infants needed baptism (but not the North African view that infants were baptized to deal with the consequences of another's sin, which had been transmitted to them).
The next bishop, Zosimus, a Greek probably unfamiliar with North African views, initially vindicated Pelagius and Caelestius, which angered the North Africans, who continued to issue canons and write letters to Rome until Pelagius and Caelestius were condemned as heretics by the imperial court, to which Zosimus acquiesced, asking bishops to subscribe to a document condemning the two.

Julian of Eclanum resisted these pressures to sign and was excommunicated together with eighteen other bishops in southern Italy (a center of Greek influence). Not surprisingly, the excommunicated bishops went to the Greek East to find support from sympathetic bishops.

**Julian of Eclanum (b. 380-454)**

- from affluent family in which his father had been a bishop;
- married Titia, who came from a similar background;
- like Augustine, had had a good classical/rhetorical education and some exposure to Manichaeism (without having been a member of it);
- known for charity toward the poor;
- made bishop of Eclanum under Innocent I before 417;

- with 18 other bishops refused to sign Pope Zosimus' *Epistula tractoria* (418), by which Zosimus hoped to pacify the North African bishops and prevent a schism between North Africa and Rome.

At about this time, Augustine's own views were becoming clearer and more systematically developed. Basing himself upon Rom. 5:12-21, he develops a more inclusive conception of the whole human race which made it easier to understand how human beings could be in Adam and affected by Adam's plight (contrast the individualism and rational autonomy/autarchy presupposed by Pelagius and others sympathetic to the Greek ascetic ideal).

To win the debate and be vindicated, Julian tried to show that Augustine had returned to Manichaeism and despised both our created bodily form and the institution of marriage.

- This put Augustine in a very difficult position, since he had come to believe that the legacy we receive from Adam was not merely subjection to death but a certain guilt/fault/debt that results in the appearance of distorted and disordered bodily desires and emotions.
- Augustine included sexual desire within this category because of its ability to move the soul in a powerful, immoderate way that is able to resist reason.
    - This, together with Augustine's speculation in *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.24.27 that the disorder attaching to sexual desire might play a role in transmitting the disorder resulting from Adam's sin to his posterity, made Augustine an easy target for accusations of Manichaeism.
    - It did, however, force Julian to argue that sexual desire (with all its power and independence from reason) was part of God's original creation, as was pain in childbirth and even death. This significantly less than perfect original creation left Julian open to charges that he was making God a faulty creator and therefore, through faulty workmanship, making bodily evils a permanent, inherent part of the world he had created (improperly reading post-fall evils back into God's original good design for the world).

More specifically, the way Julian's controversy with Augustine over the role of marriage and sexuality developed was as follows:
Julian initially (418-419) attacked Augustine's teaching on original sin by arguing that Augustine's understanding of concupiscence (disordered bodily desire, especially for sexual gratification) made it necessary for one to condemn not only sexual desire, but also marriage itself.

Augustine's response: The first volume of *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* (418-419):

- Marriage is good and was instituted by God in paradise prior to the fall;
- Marriage is now soiled by the concupiscence inherited from Adam, so that the sexual organs disobey reason;
- Insofar as intercourse aims at procreation (which is the principal original aim of sexual union) it is not sinful; when, however, it is tainted by concupiscence, this

taint affects the infants conceived so that they must be baptized to remove the guilt of original sin so that the power of the devil over them might be broken.
- While concupiscence remains in the baptized, marriage remains good insofar as it aims at offspring, is characterized by mutual fidelity and images the union existing between Christ and his Church.

Julian's response: *Ad Turbantium* (four volumes)
- Not only is Augustine's doctrine of original sin, marriage and sexuality wrong; it is of Manichaean origin.
- Against this, one must uphold the goodness of God as creator by recognizing that because God is the creator of the sexual differentiation that makes possible the sexual union and procreation that are the appropriate goals of marriage, he is also the creator of the sexual desire which is a precondition of sexual union. Augustine's suggested model of relating original sin, concupiscence and the transmission of original sin through procreation is therefore to be rejected.
- Infants enter this life without stain and become guilty of sin only when they have reached the age of responsibility (i.e. when their powers of reasoning have sufficiently developed to engage in rationally informed choice, so that they are at liberty to abstain from evil but culpable if they choose to pursue it--note that this presupposes our ability even after to do the good out of our created abilities).
- The idea that infants that die unbaptized are displeasing to God and subject to the Devil and condemned to Hell should be rejected.

Augustine's response: The second volume of *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* , responding to a summary version of Julian's *Ad Turbantiam* (420-421), and *Contra Julianum* (421-422), replying to the full text of Julian's *Ad Turbantiam*.
- The Catholic Church teaches that nature was created good but then stained by sin and its effects after the Fall (not that the world was, from its inception, inherently a mixture of good and evil or that any substance of evil exists).
- After the Fall we are unable to do the good unless aided by divine grace, so the Pelagian idea of being able to do the good even after the Fall by virtue of our created abilities is false.
- Pelagians fail to observe the shame associated with concupiscence and erroneously imagine infants to be without stain or fault so that they do not need to be baptized, forgetting that circumcision applied to infants under the Old Covenant is a type of the baptism that is applied to infants under the New Covenant. Unbaptized infants will not receive the severe penalties in the afterlife which God has reserved for the willingly malicious.

Julian's Reply: *Ad Florum* (8 bks.: 421-422; principally responding to the second volume of Augustne's *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*
- Augustine's view of original sin is incompatible with free will and moral responsibility.
- Adam's sin therefore injured only himself

- Adam's death and our death are to be explained by the fact that we were created mortal, not by reference to a punishment incurred by Adam and transmitted to his descendants.
- Furthermore, an examination of the (alleged) letter of Mani to Menoch is held to reveal the Manichaean origin of Augustine's conceptions of concupiscence and original sin.

Augustine's (Unfinished) Reply: *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum* (428-430)

- Sexual desire did not exist in paradise before the Fall