

## **Introduction**

The aim of this essay is to explore early theological discussions of the human person and of divine grace, their respective natures and how they relate to each other. In order to explore this topic the relevant theological understandings of both Augustine and Pelagius will be explored. Resources relating to the theology of Augustine and the controversy involving the Pelagians will form the basis for exploration of these topics as well as primary documents relevant to this period. Once this is done, the conflicts arising from these different positions which surfaced in the Pelagian controversy will be explored along with their theological implications.

## **Theological issues**

### **Concerning human nature**

#### **Pelagian Perspective**

Pelagius viewed free will as a central part of the human person, namely the ability of the human to choose between goodness and sinfulness.<sup>1</sup> He also maintained that God alone should be correctly thought of as being wholly wise and good in nature but that God gave the gifts of goodness and wisdom to humanity as part of the act of creation.<sup>2</sup> When these two points are considered together Pelagius understood that the capacity of the human person to choose to avoid sin is critical to their nature as human.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bonner, *Church and Faith in the Patristic Tradition*, 354.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Bonner, *Church and Faith in the Patristic Tradition* (Brookfield, VT: Variorum, 1996), 353.

<sup>3</sup> Bonner, *Church and Faith in the Patristic Tradition*, 354.

Attention will now be turned to the effect of the fall and the sin of Adam. Pelagius understood that from the beginning humanity was created mortal and that death did not come simply as a result of sin.<sup>4</sup> He understood that Adam and Eve alone bore the guilt of their sin, leading to the conclusion that infants are born into the same state as Adam prior to the fall and are already in possession of eternal life.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore his understanding developed the idea that sin can only be committed if deliberately chosen,<sup>6</sup> meaning that infants are not even viewed as being capable of sin. Simply put, this ability of the human to choose good over sin is viewed as a part of human nature, something that cannot be taken away.<sup>7</sup>

Given all of this Pelagius maintained that simply through their own will and making use of the gifts God gave them from birth, a human could theoretically live a life free from sin.<sup>8</sup>

### **Augustine's Perspective**

Like Pelagius, Augustine was sure to emphasise the inherent goodness of creation, not wanting to diminish God's gifts to humanity.<sup>9</sup> Augustine also affirms the initial goodness of humanity, unaffected by Sin at the creation but now being in a damaged state.<sup>10</sup> Augustine understood that the fall resulted in human nature being damaged. Humans, while being good are no longer what they once were

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<sup>4</sup> W. H. C. Friend, *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church* (London, UK: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1985), 129.

<sup>5</sup> Friend, *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church*, 129.

<sup>6</sup> *Constantine to C. 600*, ed. Augustine Casiday and Fredreck W. Norris, *The Cambridge History of Christianity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 514.

<sup>7</sup> B. R. Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1988), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Friend, *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church*, 122.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen A. Cooper, *Augustine for Armchair Theologians* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 210.

<sup>10</sup> Saint Augustine, "On Nature and Grace," ed. Kevin Knight (newadvent.org).Ch III

and no longer fully functional.<sup>11</sup> This damage covers all aspects of the person from the physical body and to intellectual and moral faculties.<sup>12</sup> Humanity is now seen as having turned away from God and now in need of external divine revelation in order to find truth.<sup>13</sup> The result of these limitations is that any human reasoning and action independent of divine grace, even with seemingly complete and pure intent to do good, will ultimately result in some evil being done.<sup>14</sup>

Augustine's understanding of the fall also places human pride as a central cause, with the resultant state now requiring emphasis on faith and humility for any good work to be achieved.<sup>15</sup> It is from an understanding of this inherited damage that Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin emerges, a doctrine central to his understanding of human nature.<sup>16</sup> Important also is that Augustine viewed Original sin as more than just inherited sinfulness resulting from the damaged humanity. He understood that all humanity shared the guilt for Adams first sin, in that he understood all humanity as having actually participated in this sin.<sup>17</sup>

Given this, Augustine's theology holds that humanity finds itself in a state of guilt for the sin of Adam and also unavoidably inclined towards further sinfulness.

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<sup>11</sup> Cooper, *Augustine for Armchair Theologians*, 212.

<sup>12</sup> Cooper, *Augustine for Armchair Theologians*, 212.

<sup>13</sup> Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 29.

<sup>14</sup> Cooper, *Augustine for Armchair Theologians*, 213.

<sup>15</sup> Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Gerald Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*, 3rd ed. (Northwich: Canterbury Press, 2002), 370.

<sup>17</sup> Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*, 371.

## Concerning Devine Grace

### Pelagian Perspective

Pelagius had a unique understanding on the topic of divine grace for his time.

Although using the same language as others in the church it became apparent in his writings that he defined grace very differently to what was perceived as the true doctrine of the church as defended by Augustine.<sup>18</sup>

Pelagius argues that the nature of God's creation and those gifts given through it are in themselves a means of Grace.<sup>19</sup> Firstly as discussed earlier, Pelagius saw the giving of capacity to discern good from evil through free will as an act of divine grace. To further this, Pelagius also understood that the revelation of God through The Law, prophets and the example of the life of Christ to also be means of grace with which the humanity can know how to live righteously.<sup>20</sup>

Pelagius proposed that since death did not afflict humanity as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, then it is not Christ's resurrection which offers eternal life.<sup>21</sup> In his understanding however, Pelagius makes a distinction between 'Eternal Life' and 'The Kingdom of God',<sup>22</sup> with the death and example of Christ being necessary only for the latter.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*, 362.

<sup>20</sup> Bonner, *Church and Faith in the Patristic Tradition*, 111.

<sup>21</sup> Friend, *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> Friend, *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church*, 129.

<sup>23</sup> Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic*, 10.

God's grace is to be further understood through Christ who is seen as the saviour in the sense that a person may choose to be dependent on the work of Christ. This benefit is received through baptism to cleanse past sins and empower for a future life of faithfulness in following Christ's example.<sup>24</sup> This also led to an understanding of the work of Christ in which does away with any notion of grace at the final judgement, but that all will be held accountable for their own sins at this time.<sup>25</sup> Important however was the insistence by Pelagius that there were those who without sin in times before the incarnation.<sup>26</sup>

### **Augustine's Perspective**

Like Pelagius, Augustine's theology of grace depends heavily on his understanding of human nature which is closely tied to his doctrine of Original Sin. Augustine however understood God's grace to humanity as an external influence,<sup>27</sup> quite different to Pelagius understanding it largely as part of creation.

For Augustine, humanity could never return to its pre-fall state so grace was central and continually necessary for humanity to fully realise good actions.<sup>28</sup> Augustine then goes on to say that grace is even required for the human to seek God's revelation and come to faith.<sup>29</sup> This can be highlighted in Augustine's understanding of the source of faith behind his several conversions leading to

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<sup>24</sup> Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic*, 92.

<sup>25</sup> Friend, *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church*, 124.

<sup>26</sup> Friend, *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church*, 129.

<sup>27</sup> Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*, 358.

<sup>28</sup> Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity*, 110.

<sup>29</sup> Saint Augustine, "On the Spirit and the Letter," ed. Kevin Knight (newadvent.org), Ch III.

Christianity. In reflection he interprets these as him being continually rescued from error through divine acts,<sup>30</sup> not through his own work and learning.

Grace is also central in Augustine's understanding of the work of Christ. Through being born from a virgin, Christ is himself seen as free from Original Sin.<sup>31</sup> The atoning death of Christ is seen as being the means by which, through baptism humanity can be cleansed of their Original sin which they have received from Adam.<sup>32</sup> More importantly, unlike Pelagius, Augustine understood that grace was to be seen as a free and unmerited gift from God.<sup>33</sup>

For Augustine, God's grace does not simply stop at the act of conversion. His understanding of grace is such that even after God has caused a person to respond in faith, the essential nature of that person remains corrupt and will still tend to sinfulness.<sup>34</sup> It is only then through an ongoing act of grace through the work of the Holy Spirit that the believer may be equipped to achieve good works.<sup>35</sup>

### **Conflict arising from these positions**

One of the major sources of disagreement between Pelagius and Augustine came out of their understanding of the nature of the fall and the state of the human person after this event. For Pelagius, the only the relationship between the fall and humanity today is simply one of following the bad example set by Adam.<sup>36</sup>

This brings him into sharp conflict with Augustine who, as mentioned earlier

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<sup>30</sup> Friend, *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church*, 127.

<sup>31</sup> Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity*, 110.

<sup>32</sup> Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity*, 109.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, "On Nature and Grace," Ch IV.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine, "On the Spirit and the Letter," Ch III.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, "On the Spirit and the Letter," Ch III.

<sup>36</sup> Friend, *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church*, 130.

understood the fall of Adam as resulting in irreparable damage to human nature, such that completely non-sinful action could no longer be achieved.

This difference in understanding the nature of humanity after the fall also has major implications for their understanding of the work of Christ. For Pelagius this habit of sinfulness, imitated from Adam simply becomes so engrained in the life of a person that they cannot any longer know or do good.<sup>37</sup> He understands that the sacrificing work of Christ is required through baptism to break a person from the pattern of sinfulness,<sup>38</sup> but at the core of his understanding the sinful tendencies of humanity can be understood as little more than a bad habit.

This understanding of human nature conflicts sharply with Augustine's doctrine of the human person and causes major issues for his doctrine of grace. Augustine saw the potential adoptions of Pelagius's theology of human nature as significantly diminishing the importance of ongoing divine grace and significance of the work of Christ.<sup>39</sup> The uniqueness of the incarnation was also important as Augustine also wanted to protect the notion that Christ be considered as the only human who was ever sinless.<sup>40</sup>

Augustine also took issue with the notion that infants were born into a state of sinlessness. He had reflected upon what he observed to be the sinful behaviour of infants as well as his experience growing up and arrived at the conclusion that sinful behaviour is consistently part of the human experience, certainly not

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<sup>37</sup> Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity*, 104.

<sup>38</sup> Bonner, *Church and Faith in the Patristic Tradition*, 111.

<sup>39</sup> Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic*, 33.

<sup>40</sup> Friend, *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church*, 130.

needing to be taught.<sup>41</sup> This contrast of his understanding about basic human nature can also be seen when Augustine makes the point that none can come into saving knowledge of God simply through God's revelation in creation,<sup>42</sup> striking at the very heart of Pelagius's understanding of grace.

Concerning the state of the Christian after baptism, the two different understandings of the human condition and the nature of grace again come into conflict. For Pelagius, God has already provided everything in creation through grace, all that the human needs for them to exercise their free will in such a way as to learn what is good. They can then use this to work towards attaining sinless perfection and entering the kingdom of heaven.<sup>43</sup> As mentioned previously though, Augustine's lived experience and doctrine again causes him to reject this Pelagian notion. He maintains that humans are, even after baptism still incapable of doing good on their own and that divine grace requires ongoing intervention through the Holy Spirit for the believer to accomplish good acts.

Finally one major point of disagreement between these two schools of thought concerned the nature of free will itself. Augustine understanding of the human condition and divine grace lead him to come to the conclusion that God's grace was irresistible.<sup>44</sup> An understanding of predestination emerges as a result of this which leads some to suggest that it leaves no room for true human responsibility or initiative.<sup>45</sup> This idea stands against Pelagius's notion that true free will was of

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<sup>41</sup> Cooper, *Augustine for Armchair Theologians*, 25.

<sup>42</sup> Augustine, "On the Spirit and the Letter," Ch 20.

<sup>43</sup> Bonner, *St Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*, 363.

<sup>44</sup> Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity*, 112.

<sup>45</sup> Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity*, 113.

central importance if there was to be any real value in the choice of a person between good and evil.<sup>46</sup>

## **Conclusion**

After exploring the theologies of both the Pelagians and Augustine it is apparent that what may on the surface seem to be a minor distinction in the understanding of human nature leads to considerable differences in understanding divine grace. What further complicates this issue is that at times Pelagius's arguments were written in such a way as to seem quite Orthodox. It should be noted however that primary sources from Pelagius are limited, with many of the key texts being lost as well as some diversity present amongst the interpretation of what is known about Pelagius himself and his actual arguments.

This said however it is quite clear from what resources are available that although these differences in theology seemed quite subtle, were indeed valid motivations behind Augustine's effort to bring attention to, and teach against Pelagius's perceived heresy. While Pelagius did raise valid questions about the place of free will in relation to human nature and divine grace, his solution ultimately seems to have created more problems than it solves. This controversy highlights just how dependant doctrines within the faith are upon one another and how a seemingly minor change to one doctrine can have a major impact upon many others.

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<sup>46</sup> Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity*, 111.

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