

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 23 | Issue 2

Article 3

4-1-2006

Pride and Preference: A Reply to MacDonald

William E. Mann

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Mann, William E. (2006) "Pride and Preference: A Reply to MacDonald," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol23/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

PRIDE AND PREFERENCE: A REPLY TO MACDONALD

William E. Mann

In "Petit Larceny, the Beginning of All Sin: Augustine's Theft of the Pears" (this journal, October 2003) Scott MacDonald argues for an interpretation of Augustine's account of his youthful theft of pears in book 2 of the *Confessions*. Central to MacDonald's interpretation are the theses that all sins are cases of preferring lesser goods over greater goods and that all sins are motivated ultimately by pride. I offer reasons for thinking that Augustine relies on neither thesis and that neither thesis is a part of Augustine's anti-Manichaeism. Instead, I defend an interpretation according to which Augustine's theft was a case of sinning solely for the sake of sinning.

Scott MacDonald's "Petit Larceny, the Beginning of All Sin: Augustine's Theft of the Pears" is likely to become a classic in the philosophical literature on Augustine on sin.¹ MacDonald offers something he once described Augustine as offering—a "patient and subtle pathology of sin in general and primal sin in particular."² The particular account of sin that MacDonald examines is Augustine's account, in Book 2 of the *Confessions*, of his youthful, nocturnal, collaborated theft of pears. I wish to file a dissent from the case that MacDonald makes, a dissent that veers respectfully but sharply from that case.

One of the several merits of MacDonald's essay is that it leads us to distinguish between two questions when trying to understand Augustine's analysis of sin. What makes any action a sin? For any sinful action, what motivates it? According to MacDonald, Augustine's resolution of the theft of the pears requires not just *separation* but *stratification* of the two questions. It is not merely that answering the first leaves the second unresolved. It is that asking the second question "moves us to a deeper level of explanation" (*PL*, 408). There might be those uniformitarians who had hoped to kill two inquisitive birds with one explanatory stone, maintaining that any adequate answer to one question also answers the other. On MacDonald's view, such uniformitarian accounts of Augustine's analysis of sin fail. But not all is lost for the uniformitarian ideal. For it is MacDonald's thesis that Augustine's answer to the first question with regard to the theft of the pears is perfectly general: what makes *it* a sin is exactly the same thing that makes *anything* a sin. In similar fashion it is MacDonald's contention that the answer to the second question with regard to the theft of the pears is also perfectly general, that is, the same motivation lying behind Augustine's theft lies behind *every* sinful action. One size does not fit all, but two sizes will do.



What makes an action a sin? Sin “consists in the loving of lesser, created goods in preference to God, the highest and immutable good”: it is metaphorically “a kind of fornication,” literally “giving one’s best love inappropriately and unrestrainedly, thereby joining oneself to goods whose value to us is out of all proportion with their real value” (*PL*, 394–95).³ Call this “the inferior preference thesis.”

What ultimately motivates every sinful act?

[I]mitation of God in the form of prideful self-assertion is at the bottom of all sin. . . . When sinners (irrationally) prefer lesser goods to higher ones, they are in essence determining for themselves how goods are to be ranked relative to one another, disregarding their objective value and rankings. But that is an act of self-assertion, claiming for oneself a power one does not and cannot possess, the power to determine by one’s own will the relative values of things. All sinners, then, whatever the species of their sin, insofar as they love something inordinately, exemplify the sort of over-reaching self-assertion that Augustine calls pride. (*PL*, 408–09)

Call this “the pride thesis.” Note that the pride thesis contains at least three claims. One is a claim about the *ultimacy* of pride. Particular sins can have a wide variety of motivations appearing on their surface. But underlying them is pride (although this does not preclude pride from manifesting itself on the surface at times), occupying such a fundamental position that there is no further, more fundamental motive that explains pride’s presence. Another claim, perhaps entailed by the ultimacy of pride, is a claim about the *ubiquity* of pride. Pride is not just scattered hither and yon among sins. *Every* sin has pride at its heart. And a third is a claim that Augustinian pride essentially involves a particular act of self-assertion, “the power to determine by one’s own will the relative values of things.”

MacDonald acknowledges that imputing the pride thesis to Augustine is more ambitious than establishing the inferior preference thesis: the evidence is more indirect and the text in the *Confessions* does not proceed in a way one would expect if Augustine’s purpose were to get us to see the ultimacy and ubiquity of pride in the commission of sin. In particular, the imputation of the pride thesis requires that we see Augustine as finally rejecting a diagnosis of his theft that he repeats several times, namely, that he committed the sin solely for the sake of committing the sin. I shall begin by raising some doubts about the pride thesis. Then I shall focus attention on pursuing the implications of the inferior preference thesis. There is no reasonable doubt that Augustine does believe that when people sin, they pursue a lesser good when they could have pursued a greater good. But we go astray, I shall suggest, if we take the inferior preference thesis as specifying, on Augustine’s behalf, what sin *is*. Finally, I shall offer a defense of Augustine’s initial diagnosis, that he sinned for the sake of sinning.

My doubts about the pride thesis are textual and philosophical. To begin with the textual ones, let us look at Augustine’s *De libero arbitrio*, a work completed shortly before the *Confessions*. MacDonald cites Augustine’s account in *De libero arbitrio* of the fall of the devil as a “striking parallel” to

Augustine's account of the theft of the pears. As MacDonald presents the passage he takes to be crucial—a passage describing a mind that becomes so pleased with itself that it wills to enjoy its own power in a perverse imitation of God—the passage epitomizes this mental process with an allusion to Ecclesiasticus 10:13: “This is ‘pride, the beginning of all sin’” (PL, 407). Now MacDonald's translation of the passage leaves Augustine off in mid-sentence. Augustine's sentence in full is “This is ‘pride, the beginning of all sin’ and ‘the beginning of human pride is apostasy from God’” (Ecclesiasticus 10:12). Augustine might have omitted the Ecclesiasticus 10:12 passage: that he chose to include it suggests that he thought it was consistent with Ecclesiasticus 10:13 and that both passages were consistent with his own interpretive enterprise.

The conjunction of the two passages is puzzling once we note on Augustine's behalf that apostasy from God is itself a sin. If pride is the beginning of *all* sin, then it follows that pride is the beginning of apostasy. But how can pride be the beginning of apostasy while at the same time apostasy is the beginning of pride? I can think of two ways of responding. One is to urge that we not take the term ‘beginning’ literally in the sentence, “the beginning of human pride is apostasy from God.” It specifies neither temporal nor logical priority between pride and apostasy but rather *identity*: pride just *is* apostasy from God. The problem with this response is that parity demands that we interpret “pride is the beginning of all sin” similarly. When we do so we get the dubious claim that all sin just is pride. It is hard to know how to evaluate this claim. Our philosophical forebears would have cried “category mistake,” alleging that the claim confuses actions with motives. MacDonald's stratification strategy especially must not fall prey to that confusion: sins are inferior preferences; pride is their *ur*-motive. If we suppose that all thefts are sins, as Augustine is inclined to suppose,⁴ it still seems that some thefts, like Jean Valjean's theft of a loaf of bread, involve desperation, not pride. And if we claim that even here, prideful self-assertion lurks at a deeper level of explanation beneath the surface desperation, we will not find support for that claim in the flat-footed assertion that sin just is pride. In sum, washing out the term, ‘beginning,’ in favor of identity denies textual warrant for the ultimacy of pride.

The second way of responding to the Ecclesiasticus passages preserves the literal meaning of the term, ‘beginning,’ in both verses, but it limits the term, ‘all,’ in Ecclesiasticus 10:13 so that it now reads ‘the beginning of all *subsequent* sin is pride.’ In that case, however, pride loses its primacy: the primal sin is apostasy. Moreover, this interpretation will not sustain the ubiquity of pride thesis. Think of the assertion, “Turning down that job offer was the beginning of all my troubles.” Its speaker is most naturally interpreted as making an etiological claim about the initiation of a chain of woeful events, not a claim to the effect that each subsequent woeful event is itself triggered by a new job refusal. On this interpretation of Ecclesiasticus 10:13 all subsequent sins can trace their ancestry back to an initial act of prideful self-assertion—there is no doubt that Augustine holds this view—but it does not follow that every ensuing sin is itself motivated by pride. Clearly, then, the second response does not support the ubiquity of pride, and is therefore at odds with the pride thesis. So, adopt the first

response to Ecclesiasticus and you lose the ultimacy of pride. Adopt the second and you lose warrant for the ultimacy and ubiquity of pride. Either way is contrary to MacDonald's pride thesis. Perhaps there is some third interpretation one can give to Ecclesiasticus. My own conjecture is that what we should carry away from this puzzlement is the suspicion that we should not view Augustine as using the biblical text to bolster a philosophical thesis. That suspicion is strengthened by an examination of other Augustinian texts.

First, there is Augustine's procedure in *De libero arbitrio*, the text from which MacDonald draws the case of the devil's fall. In Book I Augustine floats the thesis that *libido* or lust "rules every kind of evildoing."⁵ In Book III Augustine cites with approval the passage in 1 Timothy 6:10 that says that the root of all evil is *avaritia* or greed.⁶ Lust, greed, pride: now we have too many candidates! And greed has a biblical pedigree every bit as good as pride. What to do? One could argue for the *unity of vices*. A strong version of such an argument would have it that 'lust,' 'greed,' and 'pride' are just three names for the same vice—on analogy to the case of 'Venus,' 'The Morning Star,' and 'The Evening Star'—and that whichever term is most appropriate to use to describe a particular sin depends on the circumstances in which the sin occurred: A weaker version would maintain that lust, greed, and pride are distinct yet inseparable, necessarily coextensive, so that any sin exemplifying one of them ipso facto exemplifies the others. The problem with both these strategies, from MacDonald's point of view, is that they are too egalitarian. They do not accord pride of place to pride. In order to harmonize *De libero arbitrio* with MacDonald's interpretation of the ultimate and universal motivation behind sin, lust and greed must somehow be *subordinated* under the banner of pride.

It counts as some evidence for MacDonald's case that in *De Genesi ad litteram* 11.15.19 Augustine considers the Ecclesiasticus and 1 Timothy passages side by side, proposing that when Paul says that greed is the root of all evil, we should understand greed in a broad and general sense of the term, that is, as not simply the craving for money (as the Greek *philarguria* suggests) but rather as the desire for more than one merits, based on perverse self-love. Augustine adds that this kind of greed is pride, the selfsame pride that brought about the fall of the devil. This passage tells in favor of the opinion that pride either is greed or trumps greed, but one is left wondering about whatever became of lust. Moreover, we still have no warrant for the ubiquity of pride thesis; for all that 1 Timothy 6:10 says, it may be that greed is simply the initial sin that opened the floodgates to all the other sins.

Second, In one of Augustine's anti-Pelagian works, *De natura et gratia*, most likely written in close temporal proximity to the writing of Book 11 of *De Genesi ad litteram*, Augustine explicitly denies the thesis, which he attributes to Pelagius, that all sins are sins of pride.⁷ Some sins, Augustine says, are committed by the ignorant, by the infirm, and by those "weeping and moaning": although Augustine does not tarry to identify the latter, I assume that it includes those who act in desperation or under duress.⁸ There is no trace here of an inclination on Augustine's part to maintain that in these cases, even though the proximate motive was something else, the motive *au fond* was nonetheless pride. Indeed, Augustine's gloss here

on the Ecclesiasticus 10:13 passage confirms the suspicion that pride is the beginning of all sin only in the sense that it was the historically first sin that brought about the fall of the devil, to which all subsequent sins can trace their ancestry.⁹

If it was ever Augustine's intention to get us to see that *every* sin, including his theft of the pears, is rooted in pride, he certainly masked that intention. As I read the texts they do not reveal an author campaigning for the ubiquity of pride thesis.

I turn now to the philosophical doubts I have about the pride thesis. Recall that MacDonald says, apropos of the pride thesis, that (1) the preference for lesser goods over greater goods is irrational and that (2) this very preference is tantamount to a prideful act of self-assertion, claiming for oneself "the power to determine by one's own will the relative values of things." On this account, then, sinners are *transvaluators*, and doomed-to-be-fekless transvaluators at that, since they cannot have it in their power to alter the relative rankings of things in an objective hierarchy of values validated by God.¹⁰ It thus appears that on MacDonald's pride thesis sinners are irrational twice over, irrational in their preferences and irrational in their necessarily futile attempt to restructure an unrestructurable hierarchy of values.

MacDonald's picture of the psychology of sinners is incomplete. According to it we are to suppose that sinners prefer goods that are inferior to what they could and should prefer. And we are to suppose that sinners are simultaneously engaged in an exercise of transvaluation, asserting that what they prefer is actually better than what the established value hierarchy claims to be more preferable. But if we describe their situation in this way and say nothing more, then it seems as though sinners are *triplly* irrational, irrational in their preferences, irrational in their efforts as transvaluation, *and* irrational in holding simultaneously that the good they prefer is inferior and not inferior.

This way of summing up the irrationalities is the observer's way, a way that would be appropriate, for example, for the adult Augustine to follow in examining, retrospectively, his own youthful career. One thing that is missing from it so far, however, is a consideration of the doxastic states he might have been in at the time he was committing the theft. What beliefs might he have had about his preferences and about the implications of his activities? Did he believe at the time of the theft that the good that he preferred was inferior to what he could have and should have preferred? Was he aware that he was engaged in transvaluation?

There are two reasons for assuming that Augustine believed that he was pursuing an inferior good in a culpable way. First, the assumption agrees with Augustine's description. As Augustine says, "Your law, Lord, which clearly punishes theft, has been inscribed on human hearts. Not even wickedness itself can erase it."¹¹ We need only suppose, then, that whatever else cardio-inscription might entail, it confers belief. Second, to suppose that Augustine did not believe that the good he preferred was inferior—here I take "did not believe" to cover the possibility that he believed that the good he preferred was not inferior *and* the possibility that he had no doxastic attitude with respect to his preference—complicates the issue whether his preference was sinful. For on the supposition that

Augustine did not believe that the good he preferred was inferior, his case would appear to have been a case of mistake or of ignorance. Depending upon further elaboration of the circumstances it might have been that his being mistaken or ignorant was itself culpable. But it is not obvious that his *preference* would have been sinful in the absence of a belief that he was preferring a lesser good over a greater good.¹² To suppose that his suboptimal preference was sinful, no matter what his doxastic state, would seem to commit one to supposing that all sins are “strict liability” sins, sins, that is, for which there is no requirement of *mens rea*. And Augustine is far from supposing *that!*¹³

So Augustine, we may assume, believed at the time that the good he preferred was inferior. But inasmuch as he was a sinner, by MacDonald’s lights, Augustine was a transvaluator, shaking his fist heavenward, as it were, and claiming the right to promote his favored good to the top of the heap of goods he might have chosen. “As it were”: must Augustine have been aware that this was what he was up to? I daresay that many sinners would be surprised to hear that they are transvaluators, and perhaps would even disavow this analysis of their behavior. But as Freud has taught us, an agent’s agenda may be hidden from the agent: surprise and disavowal to the contrary notwithstanding, it might be that MacDonald’s analysis is correct. I doubt, however, that MacDonald wants to maintain that sinners are *never* aware of their attempts at transvaluation. I believe that MacDonald supposes that the particularly defiant ones—the devil¹⁴ and the youthful, pear-stealing Augustine—are fully aware of their transvaluational proclivities. If so, then the youthful Augustine quite consciously hit the trifecta of irrationality mentioned above: by stealing the pears he was irrational in his preference, irrational in his attempt at transvaluation, and irrational in simultaneously believing that his preference was justified and unjustified.

I cannot clear Augustine in juvenile court of all charges of irrationality. I wish, however, to induce a verdict of “not proven” against the charge of transvaluation, inasmuch as the charge is based solely on the imputation of pride. If you look in the Oxford Latin Dictionary under *superbia*, the term for “pride,” you will find its primary meaning is “lofty self-esteem, disdain.”¹⁵ You will *not* find that the OLD goes on to say “invariably accompanied by a desire to determine the relative values of things.” Now of course one cannot expect a dictionary to trace out all the necessary connections of a term. But because I am a native user of English and have never associated the English term, “pride,” with an impulse towards transvaluation, I am emboldened to suggest that there is no necessary connection between pride and a desire to determine the relative values of things. Surely a person can take pride in her accomplishments without at the same time asserting some sort of power to redefine the standards against which her accomplishments are gauged. Indeed, recognition of and acquiescence in the fixed standards is frequently a source of the pride.

This leads me to suggest an alternative interpretation of Augustine’s theft of the pears. Distinguish between a revolutionary and a scofflaw. A revolutionary seeks to establish a new regime. A scofflaw seeks not to overturn the existing system—it may in fact be to his advantage if everyone else were to conform to it—but to *flout* it. MacDonald’s youthful

Augustine is a revolutionary. But if Augustine had been a transvaluational revolutionary he would not have regarded his action as a sin, let alone as an instance of sinning for the sake of sinning, except in a scare-quotational sense of 'sin.' So I suggest that Augustine is a scofflaw. Do not, however, sell my Augustine short. Ordinary scofflaws disobey the law because they see some advantage therein to themselves and because they think or feign to themselves that the law they transgress is not *that* important. As Augustine takes pains to point out, no advantage accrued to him by means of his theft, nor did he anticipate any. And he insists that the law he flouted is no petty, merely conventional human law, like an ordinance forbidding parking on the wrong side of a two-way street. So although Augustine's theft may not have been the action of an ordinary scofflaw, it was the action of an out-of-the-ordinary scofflaw. What makes his theft out of the ordinary? If I understand MacDonald correctly, the case is supposed to be salient for Augustine in part because its agent seems to aim at no good whatsoever. The action's lack of any apparent good then is supposed to force us to see what we might miss in most cases of sin—cases in which an inferior good is sought—because when an inferior good is detectable, we tend to be satisfied with its presence as fully accounting for the sin. That is, the presence of the inferior good interferes with our being able to perceive what drives every sin, pride. The theft of the pears, on MacDonald's account, is salient because it removes that interfering factor.

MacDonald thus claims that Augustine subsequently denies what Augustine initially proposes about the theft, that it is out of the ordinary because it is sinning for the sake of sinning. I wish to reinstate Augustine's initial proposal, but before I do, I want to examine briefly the inferior preference thesis.

Recall how the inferior preference thesis was expressed: sin "consists in the loving of lesser, created goods in preference to God," and that to sin is to give "one's best love inappropriately and unrestrainedly, thereby joining oneself to goods whose value to us is out of all proportion with their real value" (*PL*, 394–95). We can discern two conceptions of sin here:

- (A) x sins if and only if x prefers a lesser good over God.
- (B) x sins if and only if x prefers a lesser good over a greater good.

Given that God is the highest good, (B) entails (A). But only one of the two conditionals contained in (A) is obvious, namely,

- (A') If x prefers a lesser good over God, then x sins.

To whom does (A') apply? I suspect that it is a rare sinner whose sin can correctly be described as preferring a lesser good over God. Perhaps Scarpia, who sings "Tosca, mi fai dimenticare Iddio!" But Scarpia's character is thereby shown to be shocking in its depravity. So while we may grant that (A') is true, it leaves many sinners unaccounted for.

As for the other conditional contained in (A),

- (A*) If x sins, then x prefers a lesser good over God,

it is questionable whether (A*) is generally true. A contemporary Dives might have a set of preferences such that he prefers accumulating wealth over aiding the needy, but nevertheless ranks God over Mammon. Dives

thus sins (by omission, at least) even though there may be no lesser good that he prefers over God. One might try to salvage (A*) by maintaining, in the right tone of voice, that in this case, Dives really does prefer wealth over God. I shall not attempt to resolve the status of (A*), choosing instead to point out that if (A) gives us too narrow a notion of sin and (A*) is questionable, then, since they are jointly entailments of (B), we should suspect that there is something wrong with (B).

As it stands (B) is too inclusive to give us a characterization of sin. Consider the poor soul, call him "Oompah," who dedicates his life to preserving and propagating the music of John Philip Sousa. Oompah cheerfully acknowledges that Mozart's music is better than Sousa's, but persists in his obsession with Sousa nonetheless. Whenever he could have listened to the Sinfonia Concertante, he finds himself cuing up "Stars and Stripes Forever." There is much to find wanting in Oompah, but I for one am unwilling to call his passion sinful. Oompah is incontinent, to be sure, but incontinence is not the same thing as sinfulness. (B) at best identifies the former but it does not pin down the latter.¹⁶ In his classic "How is Weakness of the Will Possible" Donald Davidson offers this definition of incontinence:

In doing *x* an agent acts incontinently if and only if: (a) the agent does *x* intentionally; (b) the agent believes there is an alternative action *y* open to him; and (c) the agent judges that, all things considered, it would be better to do *y* than to do *x*.¹⁷

Davidson's definition does a tolerably clear job of explicating the inferior preference thesis, as encoded by (B), but it cannot be taken as a definition of sin (and thus neither can the inferior preference thesis). Oompah the Sousaphile provides one counterexample: here is another that cuts more deeply. Leibniz is famous for having argued that in creating this world God must have created the best possible world. As far as I can tell, Augustine is no Leibnizian; he stakes out no claim that God must create the best.¹⁸ One reason that a person might have for demurring from that claim is provided by the thought that there may *be* no best possible world. It might be that for *any* world God chooses to create, there is a better possible world that God could have created. If so, and if the inferior preference thesis adequately delineates the notion of sin, it would seem to follow that omniscient, omnipotent God sins no matter what world he chooses to create and perhaps also sins if he chooses *not* to create (if it plausible to think that some of the worlds God might have created would have yielded a better state of affairs on balance than the state of affairs of his not creating any world).

Clearly something has gone wrong. The simplest diagnosis is to suggest that the inferior preference thesis gives, at best, a necessary consequence of, but not a sufficient condition for, an action's counting as a sin. In claiming that (B) was too inclusive to capture the notion of sin, I supposed that incontinence was a genus, of which sin is a species. The simplest and most obvious way to provide the differentia is to suggest that what makes an action a sin is its violation of a divine command or edict, like the prohibition against theft, presumably inscribed on human hearts in indelible ink

but obviously not hardwired into the human will. That is, we can enhance (B) in this fashion:

(B') x sins if and only if (1) x prefers a lesser good over a greater good and (2) x 's preference is contrary to a command of God.

In the absence of a divine command regarding artistic tastes, (B') enables Oompah the Sousaphile to avoid the charge of sinning (but not the charge of incontinence). (B') also shows that God does not sin in creating a less good world than he might have created, for he violates no divine command in doing so.¹⁹ Can God, unlike Oompah, be cleared of a charge of incontinence? If the sequence of better and better possible worlds is infinite, then there is no the best world among them, and it cannot be weakness of will for one not to choose what one knows does not exist.

Since I am disinclined to say that pride lurks at the bottom of every sin, disinclined to regard Augustine's theft of the pears as a case of transvaluational activity, and disinclined to think that the inferior preference thesis gives a sufficient account of sin, I owe you some account of why Augustine chose the theft as his flagship case of sinning, and why he seems to find the theft both repellent and perplexing.

Sinning for the sake of sinning is perplexing enough, by Augustine's lights. Some truly heinous acts are nonetheless at least intelligible because they are instrumentally rational, given the goals of the agent, such as Catiline's killing people just to keep in practice.²⁰ Other actions may have no purpose other than their own performance—thus not rising to the threshold of instrumental rationality—but nevertheless be blameless, such as whittling on a lazy summer afternoon. But by categorizing his theft of the pears as sinning for the sake of sinning, Augustine blocks the attribution to his action of either instrumental rationality or blameless recreation. Augustine knew full well that what he was doing was forbidden, so the action cannot be subsumed under the categories of ignorance or mistake. How then can sinning for the sake of sinning be made intelligible?

Consider an analogy. Suppose that some modern-day Croesus spends several million dollars for a Monet painting at auction and then sets fire to it. Appalled by his action, we seek an explanation. Here is a transcript of an imaginary interview.

Interviewer: Do you have any idea of Monet's importance?

Croesus: Of course. I have an MFA and I concentrated on the French Impressionists. In fact I'm fortunate enough to have acquired two other Monets for my private collection.

I: Ah, so you wanted to drive up the value of those two paintings by reducing the number of surviving Monets in the world.

C: Heavens no. I don't believe that the economics of the art-world works that way. The number of Monets was already small enough to guarantee an inelastic demand curve. As far as I can tell, I took a financial loss by burning the painting.

I: Then you must really have disliked that particular painting.

C: Surely you jest. The use of the palette, the spontaneous brushwork, the dynamism . . . you've seen reproductions of it. It really was one of Monet's finest.

I: Perhaps you harbor some disapproval of Monet's character?

C: No, he seems to have led an exemplary life. Now Caravaggio, that's another story.

I: Was this some sort of publicity stunt?

C: You should know better than that. The only reason the public knows that I burned the painting is that one of my employees leaked the news to the press, to my chagrin. The only witness to the burning was my friend, Midas.

I: So you did it to impress Midas, as if you were one of those nineteenth-century tycoons who lit their cigars with one-hundred-dollar bills?

C: No, not really. It's true that had Midas not been there to give me moral support, I wouldn't have burned the painting. But I didn't do it in order to impress him; friends don't need to impress friends.²¹

I: Then I'm at a complete loss to explain your action. In addition to being barbaric, it now seems utterly senseless.

C: That was the point: I wanted to do something aesthetically dreadful just for the sake of doing something aesthetically dreadful. It was barbaric, it was utterly senseless, and I did it for that reason alone.

I: I presume it hasn't escaped your attention that as a person of considerable financial power, your action appears to the general public as an arbitrary but arrogant and prideful assertion of that power.

C: I regret that the public has that perception. I wasn't proud of what I did at the time, and I'm certainly not proud of it now. In fact, I've recently established a foundation whose aim is the preservation and restoration of works of art.

I: You said earlier that the sole reason you burned the painting was to do something aesthetically dreadful. That's not to offer a reason; that's to confess that your action had no reason.

I submit that by making appropriate transformations in the dialogue above, we can convert it into Augustine's adult interrogation of his adolescent self. And, just as our interviewer is continually frustrated in trying to understand the springs of Croesus's action, I offer the conjecture that the adult Augustine is frustrated, *remains frustrated*, and *intends his reader to come away frustrated*, in trying to comprehend his youthful theft. Why is that? Let me gesture towards an answer.

Plato famously claims that virtue is knowledge and that all wrongdoing is the result of ignorance. Contrary to Plato, Augustine presents a case in which he knowingly engages in wrongdoing. Plato is not without his defensive resources. One species of ignorance reveals itself in mismeasurement, for example, in estimating incorrectly the value of a commodity, or in discounting the future too steeply.²² Augustine's case appears tailored to rebut that charge of ignorance. In particular, the theft resists description

as a bad deal, the trading of a superior commodity for inferior goods. For if the sole point of the theft was to commit the theft itself, it was not the goods that were sought after; the pears, to recall, were thrown to the pigs. If, as Augustine famously claims in his own right, all evil is non-being, then sinning for the sake of doing evil is sinning for the sake of—nothing. Thus Augustine's point is that his theft of the pears is an example of complete senselessness, a brute slap in the face of Plato's rationalistic optimism. In response to a question I raised earlier, his theft *cannot* be made intelligible. This surd provides repulsion and perplexity enough.

Having staked out an interpretation according to which Augustine believes that he sinned for the sake of sinning, I am obliged to respond to what I believe is MacDonald's most profound reason for disallowing the interpretation: the interpretation would deny Augustine "the conceptual leverage he needs to overturn his Manichaeian convictions:"

he comes to see that all of God's creatures are good and that sin, the first and fundamental evil in creation, arises from creaturely free choices that aim essentially (and inordinately) at genuine goods, things in which it is wholly appropriate to take some measure of delight. To allow that there are sins in which sinners aim at no good, sins in which sinners find no recognizable delight, would undermine the foundations of Augustine's theodicy and thereby the entire edifice of his Christian intellectual enterprise. (*PL*, 402)

We enter into waters deeper than can be fathomed here. I can offer only the sketchiest of sketches of an alternative understanding of Augustine's anti-Manichaeianism.

The baseline assumption is that everything that exists is good because everything that exists either is God or is created by supremely good God. To be sure, some created things are better than others. In *De libero arbitrio* Augustine classifies the human will as an intermediate good, higher than any material object because the former but not the latter is necessary for living rightly, but lower than the virtues because while the virtues cannot be misused, the will can.²³ The will is misused when it chooses, freely and culpably, a lesser good over a greater good. What the will cannot do is choose a created *thing* that is utterly devoid of goodness: if the thing were utterly devoid of goodness, it would not exist. But Augustine's anti-Manichaeianism does not rule out the possibility of one's *choosing* in a way that is, objectively speaking, devoid of goodness even though both the instrument of choosing and the object chosen must be good to some degree. Perhaps in all such cases the agent feigns to himself that there is a kind of goodness in the choosing, the thrill of doing something forbidden for its own sake. Thus, to recall MacDonald's subjective constraint on motivation,

If an agent *S* voluntarily performs some action (Φ s), then there must be something, *D*, in or about Φ ing that delights *S* and (for that reason) moves *S* to Φ . [*PL*, 399]

I maintain that Augustine's anti-Manichaeianism is fully compatible with his allowing, as a legitimate substituent for the variable, '*D*,' the

phrase, 'the prospect of sinning for the sake of sinning.' Augustine's will is an intermediate good. Its freedom, the very gift that enables its possessor to live rightly, carries with it the liability of choosing wrongly, very wrongly. Augustine's anti-Manichaeism does not make sinning for the sake of sinning metaphysically or psychologically impossible. It does not require that one choose something in creation that has positively evil existence. But Augustine's anti-Manichaeism, coupled with his conception of the will, does allow for the liability that one will choose wrongly just for the sake of choosing wrongly.²⁴

University of Vermont

NOTES

1. *Faith and Philosophy*, 20 (2003), 393–414; cited hereinafter as *PL*.
2. Scott MacDonald, "Primal Sin," in *The Augustinian Tradition* ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 113.
3. Compare to *Confessions* 2.5.10 (MacDonald's translation): "Sin is committed for the sake of all these [lower goods] . . . when by virtue of a desire that is inordinate (since these are the lowest sort of good) better and higher things are abandoned. For these [lowest goods], too, have their own delights" (*PL*, 405).
4. See *Confessions* 2.4.9.
5. *Clarum est enim iam nihil aliud quam libidinem in toto malefaciendi genere dominari. De libero arbitrio* 1.3.8. The speaker is Evodius, not Augustine, but Augustine shows no subsequent sign of demurring from Evodius's opinion.
6. *De libero arbitrio* 3.17.48.
7. *De natura et gratia* 29.33.
8. Aquinas understands Augustine's opinion in this way and endorses it. See *Summa Theologiae* 2-2, q. 162, a. 2, ad 1.
9. Slightly earlier in the same work Augustine observes that pride is unique in that it can arise from the commission of good deeds (*De natura et gratia* 27.31). But this observation provides no grounds for thinking that every sin has a foundation in pride.
10. I leave it an open question here whether for Augustine God's "validation" is (1) his unerring intellectual recognition of the hierarchical structure intrinsic to values in creation, (2) his conferring of relative values on created things by his unimpedible will, or (3) both (1) and (2).
11. *Confessions* 2.4.9, MacDonald's translation.
12. There is a remarkably compressed argument in *Meno* 77d–e to the effect that the person who desires bad things, believing that they are good, actually desires good things.
13. Legal scholars credit Augustine with initiating a condition of *mens rea* for wrongdoing, although the inspiration may have come from Seneca. See Jerome Hall, *General Principles of Criminal Law*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), 79–80.
14. Well, maybe. Milton's Lucifer says:

So farewell hope, and, with hope, farewell fear,
Farewell remorse; all good to me is lost.
Evil, be thou my good. (*Paradise Lost*, Book IV, lines 108–10)

Is Milton's Lucifer a transvaluator?

15. You will also find that superbia can be used to allude to a variety of *pear*, the superbus! More grist for MacDonald's mill?

16. MacDonald prefaces the expression of (B) with the remark that "sin is a kind of fornication," but it is hard to know the cash value of the remark since fornication itself is a kind of sin.

17. Donald Davidson, "How is Weakness of the Will Possible?" in *Moral Concepts* ed. Joel Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 93–113; the definition appears on p. 94. Davidson later suggests a modification:

In doing *x* an agent acts incontinently if and only if: (a) the agent does *x* for reason *r*, and (b) the agent has a reason *r*¹ that includes *r* and more, (c) on the basis of which the agent judges some alternative *y* to be better than *x*.

The ingredients for the modification appear on p. 111; I have regimented them into the format of the original definition.

18. For further discussion of this point see my "Augustine on Evil and Original Sin," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine* ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43.

19. Beware the proposition, "God created a less good world than he might have created." Aquinas in effect claimed that it was true in one sense and false in another. It is true that God could have created a world populated by better components than this world. But it is false that God could have done a better job of ordering the components that he has actually decided to bring into existence. For citations and discussion, see Norman Kretzmann, "Goodness, Knowledge, and Indeterminacy in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 80 (1983), 631–49, and Norman Kretzmann, "A Particular Problem of Creation: Why Would God Create This World?" in *Being and Goodness: The Concept of the Good in Metaphysics and Philosophical Theology* ed. Scott MacDonald (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 229–49.

20. *Confessions* 2.5.11.

21. Gareth B. Matthews probes the psycho-dynamics of gang activity in *Augustine* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), chap. 13, while pointing out that Augustine "never withdraws his insistence that his pleasure lay in committing the act itself (p. 121)."

22. See *Protagoras* 356a–357e.

23. *De libero arbitrio* 2.19.50.

24. An early version of this paper benefitted from comments from David Barnett, Sin yee Chan, David Christensen, Mark Moyer, Derk Pereboom, and Adam Wager. A later version was read at a symposium on "Augustine on Wanting Bad Things" at the American Philosophical Association's Pacific Division meeting in Pasadena in 2004; co-symposiasts were Scott MacDonald and Gareth B. Matthews. William Hasker saved me from a couple of blunders in an even later version.