PAPER 3 · TOPIC 01

Augustine's Teaching on Human Nature

Augustine's account of the Fall, original sin, the bound will and the necessity of grace - set against Pelagius, his main opponent on human freedom.

Key Terms

Glossary

Original Sin - Augustine's doctrine that Adam's sin is inherited by all humanity through sexual reproduction (concupiscence). All humans are born in a state of sin, with disordered desires that override reason.
Concupiscence - Disordered desire; the post-Fall condition in which appetite overrides reason.
Divine grace - God's freely given help, unearned, without which humans cannot choose good or be saved.
Predestination - God, in his foreknowledge, chooses the elect for salvation.

Key Scholars

Augustine of Hippo - 354-430 CE
Pelagius - c.360-418 CE

Learn: AO1 knowledge

Key thinkers

The Fall - Genesis 3

Augustine interprets the Fall **literally and historically**: Adam and Eve were created perfect but chose to disobey God. This was the **original sin**.

Human nature before and after the Fall

Before the Fall (Pre-Lapsarian)	After the Fall (Post-Lapsarian)
Perfect union with God	Separation from God
Reason in control of desires	Concupiscence - disordered desires
Free will able to choose good	Will is "bound" - cannot freely choose good
Immortality (conditional)	Subject to physical and spiritual death
Posse non peccare - able not to sin	*Non posse non peccare* - unable not to sin

Will, grace and predestination

Humanity needs **divine grace** to do good. Grace is not earned - it is given freely by God. Without it, humans cannot choose good or be saved.

Augustine argues that God, in his foreknowledge, predestined some for salvation (*the elect*) and others for damnation. This was later developed radically by Calvin.

Image, likeness and the purpose of created freedom

Augustine's account begins with creation rather than sin. Human beings are made by God, bear the divine image and possess goods such as reason, sociability and will. This prevents his theology from being simply pessimistic: evil cannot be the essence of humanity because whatever has being is created and, to that extent, good. Before the Fall the will is genuinely capable of ordering lower goods-bodily pleasure, status and material possession-towards the highest good, God. The first humans are not robots programmed for obedience; the possibility of turning away belongs to the freedom of a mutable creature.

The distinction between *image* and moral *likeness* helps explain why freedom matters. A rational creature can reflect God yet fail to love in the right order. Augustine's term *ordo amoris*, the right ordering of loves, is therefore more precise than saying that Christianity opposes desire. Food, friendship, sexuality and political belonging are real goods. They become sinful when a finite good is treated as ultimate or possessed without reference to God and neighbour. Pride is the root distortion because the self attempts to be its own source and measure. This framework allows an essay to test whether Augustine condemns embodied life or instead condemns the will's misranking of embodied goods.

Original sin: solidarity, deprivation and inherited responsibility

The strongest modern presentation distinguishes an inherited *condition* from an inherited personal act. The Catholic summary in §§404-405 of the Catechism describes original sin as contracted rather than committed: descendants do not repeat Adam's individual decision, but enter a human nature deprived of original holiness and a world already structured by disordered desire. Concupiscence is the continuing inclination towards sin, not a second substance inside the person. Human nature is wounded, not erased; reason and choice remain, but neither operates with original integrity.

This distinction answers the crude objection that Augustine simply blames a baby for an ancestor's behaviour, yet it leaves difficult questions. If propagation is biological, the doctrine appears tied to an historical pair and an outdated account of reproduction. If it is social or relational, the doctrine can describe how language, institutions and damaged relationships shape agents before deliberate choice, but it may no longer mean what Augustine meant by participation in Adam. Pauline Adam-Christ typology in Romans 5 presents humanity corporately: one history of disobedience is answered by a new history of grace. The evaluative issue is whether corporate solidarity can transmit vulnerability and corruption without transferring guilt in a way that violates individual justice.

The divided will and the difference between liberty and moral freedom

Augustine's mature psychology is not that fallen people make no choices. They deliberate, form habits and act voluntarily, so coercion does not explain their wrongdoing. The deeper bondage is motivational: the person cannot secure lasting righteousness simply by issuing a command to the self. In Confessions VIII, competing loves produce a divided will; repeated choice becomes habit and habit feels like necessity. The analysis anticipates the insight that knowing a good is not identical with being able to desire and sustain it.

Different meanings of freedom must therefore be kept separate. *Liberty of choice* can mean acting from one's own desire rather than external force. *Moral freedom* can mean being able to love the good consistently. Augustine can say that sinners choose voluntarily while also saying they need grace to become free in the second sense. Pelagius fears that this removes responsibility: if only grace can heal the will, failure seems attributable to the giver of grace. Augustine replies that grace does not force an alien choice but liberates the will to delight in the good. The unresolved issue is distributive: if efficacious grace is not given equally, predestination seems to place the decisive difference between saved and lost outside their responsibility.

Niebuhr: an Augustinian account of social sin without fatalism

Reinhold Niebuhr moves the debate beyond a simple Augustine-Pelagius binary. Niebuhr agrees that rational education cannot remove sin. Individuals can recognise moral duties, yet groups defend status, disguise self-interest as principle and magnify pride through national, racial or economic power. This gives original sin a political dimension: evil is not only a private appetite but a collective capacity to make partial interests appear universal. Optimistic programmes that assume more knowledge will automatically produce justice underestimate this mechanism.

Niebuhr is nevertheless less fatalistic than a reading in which fallen agents can do nothing except wait for grace. Humans retain creativity, reason and love because they remain images of God; political action can restrain injustice even when it cannot create a perfect society. His Christian realism therefore supports responsibility while warning against utopian self-confidence. It also permits an updated account of inherited sin as participation in institutions whose benefits and harms precede individual consent. The limitation is that a sociological account of pride may not establish Augustine's stronger claims about an historical Fall, biological propagation or predestination. It retrieves Augustine's diagnosis of self-deception more successfully than his entire metaphysics.

Close reading Genesis 1-3: creation, vocation and rupture

Augustine reads the Fall against the repeated affirmation that creation is good. Genesis 1 gives humanity a shared vocation as image-bearers within an ordered creation; dominion is received, not self-originating. Genesis 2 then represents human dependence through dust and divine breath, the command concerning the tree and the declaration that solitary life is not good. These details matter because they locate freedom inside gift, relationship and limit. The prohibition is not best read as a random trap. It gives the creature a concrete way to acknowledge that wisdom and life are received from God rather than possessed autonomously.

The serpent's question destabilises trust before any fruit is taken. It reframes the command as divine deprivation and makes likeness to God appear available through seizure. The woman's perception that the tree is good for food, pleasing and desirable for wisdom shows that sin works through created goods. Augustine's account of disordered love fits this narrative structure: the object is not evil in itself; the act becomes evil through a will that takes a lower good against the order of the highest good. The pair's immediate concealment then reveals internal and relational fracture. They hide from God, experience shame and shift blame. Sin damages truthful presence before it produces an external penalty.

Genesis 3:16-19 describes pain, domination, resistant labour and mortality. An interpreter must decide whether these are direct punishments individually imposed, natural consequences of alienation, or an ancient theological explanation of shared human conditions. Augustine connects them to a historical primal act and inherited corruption. A more symbolic reading sees the narrative as exposing what every human community reenacts. The historical reading gives a temporal origin to an otherwise good creation but faces scientific and moral difficulties; the archetypal reading preserves existential truth but can make it unclear why all persons inevitably repeat the pattern. Both should be tested against the text's movement from gift, through mistrust, to fractured relationship.

The narrative also contains signs of continued grace. God seeks the hiding humans, clothes them and prevents endless life in a corrupted state. Expulsion is judgement, but it is not annihilation. This complicates any account in which the Fall leaves only depravity. The human vocation continues under damaged conditions, and the later biblical story addresses restoration rather than replacement of creation. A sophisticated Augustine essay can therefore use Genesis not as a list of facts but as a theological grammar: creaturely limit, misdirected desire, alienation, judgement and preserving mercy.

Augustine's intellectual route: Manichaeism, Platonism and Christian conversion

Augustine's mature doctrines answer problems formed during his own intellectual and moral development. As a young man he was attracted to Manichaeism, which explained evil through conflict between principles of light and darkness. That scheme relieved the good soul from full responsibility by locating evil in a hostile material power, but it divided ultimate reality and made material creation suspect. Augustine's eventual rejection of Manichaeism helps explain the force of privation theory: if the one good God creates everything, evil cannot be an independently existing stuff.