Saint Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* is one of the classics of Christian apologetics. It is immediately and superficially a defence of the Christian faith against those who saw Christianity as responsible for the ‘fall of Rome’ in 410, but of course its scope and intention are much wider than this. It is a full-scale review of both the resources and defences of Christendom made by its greatest strategist, made with a specially careful eye to the weak points in this already formidable empire, undertaken and carried through with such thoroughness and foresight that this empire could not only withstand all future vicissitudes of world history, but could use them to extend its frontiers.

Yet the paradox is that the weak points are still weak, and were not in fact made any stronger by Augustine’s sensitive exploration of them. At least this is true, it seems to me, in the case of the question I wish to examine here, that of reconciling man’s freedom with God’s action. I say that there is a paradox here, for though I will argue that Augustine’s subtle ploys do not really work, yet it will also be clear that this particular weak point will not be breached by the enemy.

I

I am concerned specially and exclusively with Chapters IX, X and XI of the Fifth Book of the *De Civitate Dei*. In this Fifth Book, the culmination of the first part of the work, Augustine is concerned with the virtues and triumphs of pagan Rome, but before considering the significance of this great human achievement he feels constrained to consider the whole question of chance, fate, human freedom and Divine ordinance. He has to find his way between those who say with the Stoics that everything is predetermined by fate, and those, like Cicero, who deny this, and also deny all Divine foreknowledge and predetermination — this in the name of human freedom. Augustine rejects both points of view with great force and assurance, and puts forward the Christian viewpoint, as he understands it, which affirms *both* human freedom and the divine foreknowledge and creativity. The problem he has to face in these Chapters is that of reconciling the two.

If we leave aside the repeated rhetorical restatement of his position we are left with two lines of argument aiming at a reasonable reconciliation of the two poles of the affirmation. The first is by way of a distinction between *voluntas* and *potestas*. Speaking of God, the uncreated spirit, he says:
In eius voluntate summa potestas est, quae creatorum spirituum bonas voluntates adiuvat, malas iudicat, omnes ordinat et quibusdam tribuit potestates, quibusdam non tribuit. Sicut enim omnium naturarum creator est, ita omnium potestatum dator, non voluntatum. Malae quippe voluntates ab illo non sunt, quoniam contra naturam sunt, quae ab illo est.

(Chapter IX, Book V)

So, all power comes from God, and this includes the power exercised in the willing and doing of evil deeds. And all good willing, i.e. all free acts that are also good, come from God. But free acts that are evil (malae voluntates) do not come from God. We must remember that he has argued at length in the De Libero Arbitrio that the source of moral evil is not in God but in the evil will.

Now, even though the malae voluntates do not come from God, yet God places them in the order of events (omnes ordinat). But, and this is really disconcerting, he does not give power to these malae voluntates: quibusdam non tribuit. Yet evil willing is very real in the world, very powerful. If its power does not come from God whence does it come?

Earlier in Chapter IX Augustine has quoted Psalm 62:

Semel locutus est Deus, duo haec audivi, quoniam potestas Dei est, et tibi, Domine, misericordia, qui reddis unicuique secundum opera eius.

It is from here that he takes the word potestas, and as he understands the word here it refers to ultimate power and the ultimate disposition of things in which evil has no part. God has spoken once and for all, and this can be called fatum (a fando), and in this sense Augustine will accept fate, though not in the Stoic sense which would destroy human freedom. For among the things God orders is human nature and human freedom.

Here Augustine comes up with a very subtle argument. Freedom, he says in effect, is either something or nothing. If it is nothing it cannot be predetermined by God, for predetermination and foreknowledge is of what is. It is preordained only if it is something, i.e. if in fact human freedom exists. So far then is divine preordination from destroying freedom that it is essential to it: the two belong together.

I shall return to this argument in a moment. It still remains to make real sense of the assertion that evil willing is not given any power. Let us assume that there is question of ultimate power, that is to say a place in what an Irish poet has called 'the final shake-up'. It yet does have power, enormous power, here and now, and we are still left with the question of the source of this power. The scholastics will later distinguish between the order of being and the order of specification, saying that in evil willing, the being of the act is given by God but it is man himself who specifies the act. If one presses this distinction it seems to lead back to a meontic view of evil, that the evil
act is good as far as it goes, but is simply lacking in human fulness of scope and order. For example the love A has for B is good, but is it good enough to let B go free if that is best for B?

This of course is good Augustinism, but is it what Augustine has in mind here? It may well be at the back of his mind, but it is surely very far back and can scarcely be called on to explicate the text before us.

II.

Let us look at another paragraph of the same Chapter IX of Book V of the *De Civitate Dei*. This comes immediately before the subtle argument about something and nothing, and it runs as follows:

Sunt igitur nostrae voluntates et ipsae faciunt quidquid volendo facimus, quod non fieret si nollemus. Quidquid autem aliorum hominum voluntae nolens quisque patitur, etiam sic voluntas valet, etsi non illius, tamen hominis voluntas; sed potestas Dei, (Nam si voluntas tantum esset nec posset quod vellet, potentiore impediretur; nec sic tamen voluntas nisi voluntas esset, nec alterius, sed eius esset qui vellet, etsi non posset implere quod vellet.) Unde quidquid praeter suam voluntatem patitur homo, non debet tribuere humanis vel angelicis vel cuiusquam creati spiritus voluntatibus, sed eius potius qui dat potestatem volentibus.

(Chapter IX, Book V)

Here again the distinction between *potestas* and *voluntas* is crucial. There seems to be a kind of parallelism between the two which sometimes runs smoothly and sometimes does not, and this paragraph is concerned with those occasions when it does not. The will wills, but the *potestas* is not available. This blocks the will but not in its willing. This is as free as ever. As far as *voluntas* goes the blockage does not matter.

Augustine is not here making the point that the will cannot be coerced, that nothing can touch a man's inner freedom. This is true only of some wills, though it might be argued that only in such cases is will true to itself as free will. But here the point seems to be that the will has its own sphere, its own world, its own reality. And Augustine is arguing both that the will is and does something (and so comes under an all-embracing providence and divine causality) and that of itself and by itself the evil will does nothing, has no *potestas* at its disposal.

How is one to resolve this contradiction? I am not sure that it can be resolved. I am not sure that Augustine is dealing with realities here rather than words? Is it all simply a piece of rhetorical sleight-of-hand? Or is Augustine a victim of his own subtlety, his own persuasive apologetic?

Perhaps, however, we may find a clue in the statement that the *malae voluntates* are *contra naturam* (Chapter IX). For nature is what flows from God, and where the *potestas* flows from God into the good acts of willing then what is willed is both something and also preordained. But what if this
good willing is blocked? What if the act of willing runs counter to the flow of nature? This (evil) act is not from God, for it has no place within the final ordering of things, no place then within the present flow of things. So we can say that this (evil) act has no real power within the order of nature, within the order of the ultimate and the finally real. Of course the (evil) act is effective here and now, and seems just as powerful as the good act. But in truth the evil act in itself is nothing and in itself achieves nothing; the power that attaches to it belongs in fact entirely to God who disposes all power according to his own will. In doing this God draws good out of evil, or rather transforms what seems evil into good. Later, Aquinas will say that it is thus most of all that God manifests his goodness, in the power not simply of creating but of creating out of the most recalcitrant material. We might say that God not only created out of nothing but out of that minus-infinity that is at the other side of nothingness. Perhaps the creative genius of Michelangelo will serve as an analogy of the creative genius of God. Michelangelo made his statue of David from a block of marble that was flawed and this flaw became that marvellously beautiful twist of the young man’s body. One can imagine that the block of marble was perfect and that the sculptor came along to find an enemy hacking at it; instead of stopping him, turning off the power as it were, Michelangelo recognising the challenge to his own creative power allows the destructive activity to go ahead, at least up to a certain point. It is possible to complete the analogy by supposing that the enemy is sustained in being by the sculptor, who hopes that he will finally turn from his evil ways and become himself creative.

Semel locutus est Deus: the final pattern and the great purpose shines out like the sun and it penetrates to the very depths of all man’s ways and days, illuminating man’s freedom, so that the good will shine with new radiance and the specious light of the bad will disappear. It is as if the divine light discovered itself within the points of light that mark the pattern of the humanly free and good. God’s locutio, God’s fatum does not destroy man’s freedom but rather sustains, affirms and transforms it.

III.

Let us look again at the passage quoted above from Chapter IX: In eius voluntate etc.

It will be clear by now, I think, that there is a triple dichotomy in this passage: that between voluntas and potestas, that between good and bad acts of willing (bonae and malae voluntates), and that between fulfilled and unfulfilled acts of willing (quibusdam tribuit potestates, quibusdam non tribuit). Our first reading assumed a parallel between the second and third dichotomy which is not there. Good acts may be fulfilled or unfulfilled; bad acts may be fulfilled or unfulfilled. It is true that only good acts receive
divine assistance (bonas adiuvat) but this assistance must be distinguished from potestas. The good act of the will may not get beyond the point of decision, may be frustrated in the external order, as may happen also with the bad act. There is a sense in which the divine action is the total cause of the good act, even though it is completely free, for all being derives from God and free action is a category of being. But this is not the order of assistance which involves the co-operation or synergy of God and man. It is because they ignored this distinction that some of Augustine's later commentators and followers fell into the trap of predestinationism and the denial of human freedom. In saying that God is the 'giver' (dator) of freedom Augustine assumes that the gift is, in fact, freedom which requires, further, divine assistance for its proper use. In fact it is only because freedom, precisely as freedom, is something that it comes under God’s creative activity.

But what of the evil act? Insofar as it is effective its power comes from God and it is fitted into the final pattern. But the act itself, the evil decision, is not given by God, cannot be counted among his gifts. But surely the evil will, the act of evil willing can be very real, is a very definite entity? After all it brings, in Augustine’s own principle, heavy judgment and heavy punishment. Is it not freedom just as much as the good decision is freedom? Here again, and finally, we reach the crux, the apparent contradiction in Augustine’s position. What is to become of the entity of evil acts in a system in which all entities come from God, and where it is denied that evil acts come from God?

It would seem that for Augustine the evil act (as decision, leaving out of question its effectiveness, its external coefficient) is somehow absorbed into the pattern of the divine plan, has its reality only as having ordinatio in this plan (omnes ordinat). But is not this plan already there, already determined in God’s mind and purposes, and with it the evil acts that form part of it? But the evil acts have no positive reality; they are flaws in nature, non-entities. It is true that the divine activity flows into these crevices of human freedom, creating anew and transforming the whole of creation.

But surely evil acts have evil consequences? Yes, but, for Augustine, these consequences are simply part of the flawed world that awaits transformation and receives it.

This is perhaps as far as one can press the matter along Augustine’s own track of thought.1 He was on the road away from dualism. It was perhaps a longer road than he thought. What is clear from the above analysis is that

he will refuse to lighten his pack by casting away either Divine omnipotence or human freedom. Or, to change the metaphor, Augustine will continue to defend the exposed turret of human freedom within the City of God even though it continues to draw the enemies' fire. He will not pull back to where so many of his followers have barricaded themselves, in the secure fortress of predestination.

For the rest, it would seem that Augustine was battling with a problem the solution to which forces the Christian apologist towards a very sensitive and spiritual concept of the divine omnipotence (as an expression of love), and a relational concept of human freedom (as the capacity to respond or not to respond to the invitation of love). We are still searching for this.