

In his work “On Free Choice of Will”, St. Augustine investigates the cause of evil and suggests that all sin is due to ignorance. The term ‘ignorance’, however, is used multifariously, and must be clarified for this teaching to be understood properly.

First, Augustine spoke of sin as behavior for which man is responsible. He wrote that “Evil deeds... would not be punished justly if they had not been performed voluntarily.”¹ Moreover, Augustine asserts that “the knowledge of the eternal law is stamped upon our minds.”² This being the case, it is impossible that Augustine’s notion of ignorance can be equivalent to naivete. Augustine could not mean ignorance to be the cause of sin in the sense that man cannot discern any difference between good and evil. Evodius testified concerning adultery that “I know it is evil because I would not tolerate it if someone tried to commit adultery with my own wife.”³ Augustine’s use of ‘ignorance’, therefore, cannot be confused with naivete, which might free a man from responsibility.

Second, Augustine’s use of the term ignorance cannot be equated with a lack of experience. Evodius asks whether knowledge can be bad and Augustine responds that it could not “unless we are using ‘knowledge’ to mean ‘experience’.”⁴ He makes it clear that experiences can sometimes

¹ Augustine. “On Free Choice of the Will” (Hackett Classics) (p. 1). Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

² Augustine, 11.

³ Augustine, 4.

⁴ Augustine, 13.

be bad, but that the knowledge he speaks of is never bad and, therefore, cannot be equated with experience. Consequently, the ignorance Augustine has in mind cannot be a lack of experience.

Augustine's use of the term 'ignorance' signifies the lack of a certain *kind* of knowledge that distinguishes human beings from irrational animals. He points out that while men and animals both live, only man knows himself to be alive. He says that this knowledge "is a higher and more genuine sort of life."⁵ The ignorance Augustine speaks of is a lack or deficiency in that kind of knowledge which makes man to be man, that by which the ancients urged man to "Know thyself."

Yet, seeing that this knowledge is present, to some degree, in all men by nature, "for they do things that cannot be done without a [rational] mind",⁶ but that many men sin, something more must be added. Augustine goes on to explain that while men possess this knowledge by nature, they do not benefit from it because their minds, in which this knowledge resides, are not in control of their behavior.

Therefore, it appears that by the term 'ignorance', Augustine signifies the lack of wisdom, or the foolishness, by which the minds of men fail to govern the "irrational impulses of the soul".⁷ Since, "all wrongdoing is evil only because it results from inordinate desire"⁸ and inordinate desire operates through a man's lack of control, all wrongdoing, or sin, is consequently owed to this ignorance, or lack of wisdom, in man.

⁵ Augustine, 13.

⁶ Augustine, 16.

⁷ Augustine, 14.

⁸ Augustine, 7.