

Reading 9: Saint Augustine's Ethical Theory

Background

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of St. Augustine (354-430 AD) in shaping Christian doctrine and so the way in which we think about ourselves and the world in which we live.

We know a considerable amount about Augustine's life, especially from his own account of the first part of it in his *Confessions* (400).

Augustine was born in at Thagaste in what is now Algeria in 354. Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman in 312 and Augustine's mother Monica was a Christian. Augustine was trained in rhetoric at a university at Carthage and was a brilliant student. He was not at the time attracted to Christianity and pursued what he later represented to be a rather dissolute way of life. In particular he lived with a woman in a then common arrangement whereby she was to be dismissed as soon he had acquired enough money and fame to make a suitable match. Augustine had a son Adeodatus who died in his teens but who appears as an interlocutor in some of his philosophical dialogues. In his late teens Augustine became involved with the Manicheans, a group of self-styled Christians who followed the Persian Mani. They held that the history of the world and human beings' place in it was to be understood in terms the conflict between a positive force of good (light) and a positive force of evil (darkness). For an elite group of followers they promised liberation from this life. Augustine followed the group for about ten years but eventually became disillusioned. Many of his writings are anti-Manichean and he is particularly concerned to insist against them that evil is nothing positive but rather only an absence of a good which should be present.

In 383 Augustine, aged 28, left Carthage for Rome to seek a better teaching job and was soon offered a professorship at Milan. He was now in a position to make a better marriage and so dismissed his concubine but soon took up with another woman. Augustine was at this time attracted to scepticism but soon rejected it in favour of Neo-Platonism. He later attacked scepticism in his book *Against the Academic Sceptics*. Neo-Platonism provided Augustine with a philosophical system which was relatively easily transformed by him to provide a theoretical framework for Christian doctrine.

Under the influence of his mother and Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, Augustine converted to Christianity, rejecting his earlier way of life but not the philosophy of the Platonists. After a brief period of seclusion with a few companions he returned in 388 to North Africa to become fairly soon Bishop of Hippo. He spent the rest of his life there involved in the pastoral concerns of a bishop but also producing an enormous output of writing. He died in 430.

In his writing Augustine built a theoretical framework for Christian doctrine upon Neo-Platonic foundations. Crucially important works in this project are *On Free Choice of the Will*, *The City of God*, *On the Trinity*, *Enchiridion* (i.e. *Handbook*), *On True Religion*. Much of his writing is polemical. First against the Manicheans and later against various other perceived threats to orthodoxy. Particularly important here are his writings against the Pelagians, the followers of the British monk Pelagius¹, who rejected the notion of original sin which Augustine championed. In his later writings Augustine comes more and more to insist upon the need for

¹From the name 'Pelagius' we get the word 'Pelagianism' for the theory that human beings are able to choose to act correctly without the aid of divine grace.

divine grace in any good human action and to concede less and less to human volition to the extent that it is hard to see that he leaves us with anything which we can call freedom of choice.

Readings:

The first part of the reading, from *The Way of Life of the Christian Church*, discusses the supreme good for human beings. Aristotle had argued that the supreme good is happiness (*eudaimonia*) and that this consists in living a certain kind of life. There is no suggestion at all in Aristotle that the goal for humans is something outside of our present spatio-temporal existence. He rejects explicitly the Platonic notion of a form of the good and in other works the Platonic theory of the soul as separable from and existing apart from the body both before birth and after death.

To understand the development of mediaeval thinking about ethics it is crucial to realise that Aristotle's writings on ethics were not available until they were translated into Latin at the end of the twelfth century. Augustine and so Neo-Platonism provided the framework for Christian ethical thinking and Aristotle had to be reconciled with this already established system of thought. Thomas Aquinas' great project was to provide this reconciliation.

In the first part of the reading Augustine argues that the supreme good for humans must be something that cannot be taken from us against our will. In his book *On Free Choice of the Will* he defines sin in terms of a disordered desire to possess or retain something that can be taken from one against one's will. The only thing that cannot be taken from us against our will, he argues is the good will itself. All other things are transitory and corruptible.

Note that Augustine apparently holds that the supreme good for humans is the supreme good without qualification. This, again, is quite different from Aristotle. The supreme good for humans according to Aristotle is a certain way of life, perhaps the life of contemplation, and in this we come closest to the supreme good itself - the unmoved mover. Aristotle would deny, however, that humans can have any access to the unmoved mover.

Augustine argues that to discover what the supreme good for humans is we must discover what if anything is better than humans. Like Aristotle, in his 'Function Argument' he argues that we thus need to know what it is to be human. Unlike Aristotle, however, he characterises being human in a Platonic fashion as a union of soul and body and so investigates just what the character of the union is and what it is that is properly called human. He concludes that the soul is superior to the body and so the supreme good for humans is the supreme good for the soul.

Again like Aristotle - but also like Plato - Augustine locates as virtue as the good for the soul. Virtue, he claims in chapter 6, 'perfects the soul'. The highest good is thus what guarantees the possession of virtue. Augustine's answer to the question of what the soul has to do to attain virtue is quite unlike Aristotle's. To attain virtue the soul must strive to attain something outside itself. It must strive to attain God.

The second part of the reading, from *The City Of God*, Book XIX, develops the claim that the supreme good for humans is eternal life with God by arguing against various Greek philosophies - in particular that of the Stoics - which held that the good for humans was something attainable, and only attainable in this life. Augustine argues that the claims made by the Stoics that we can be happy in this life without any reference to another life is absurd. This life is full of misery and the claim that happiness lies in virtue is refuted by examining what role virtue plays in our life. The existence of the

cardinal virtues of temperance, fortitude, prudence and justice, is he argues, compelling evidence that our earthly life is miserable and that if there is a good for us it lies outside of this life.

The third part of the reading is Augustine's account of the nature of evil from *On Free Choice of the Will*. Here Augustine argues that the human will is radically free because it is entirely self-determining - we cannot blame anything for the choices which we make. In the passage in the Reading Augustine investigates the nature of evil and argues that it is ultimately the will to preserve for ourselves things which can be taken from us against our will. He uses the thought-experiment of a slave who kills his master in order to preserve his own life to test his theory. The same thought-experiment is used by Peter Abaelard in developing his account of evil in the reading for week 12.

The final part of the reading, from *The City of God*, is a famous, and extraordinarily influential, discussion from *The City of God* of lust as the consequence of Adam and Eve's original sin. Their sin was disobedience and their punishment according to Augustine was disobedience. Their bodies, and most particularly their sexual organs would no longer be under the control of the will and consequently. As a result humans experience shame about their bodies.