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Augustine's ethics

Augustine regards ethics as an enquiry into the *Summum Bonum*: the supreme good, which provides the happiness all human beings seek. In this respect his moral thought comes closer to the eudaimonistic virtue ethics of the classical Western tradition than to the ethics of duty and law associated with Christianity in the modern period. But even though Augustine addresses many of the same problems that pagan philosophers do, he often defends very different answers. For him, happiness consists in the enjoyment of God, a reward granted in the afterlife for virtue in this life. Virtue itself is a gift of God, and founded on love, not on the wisdom prized by philosophers.

The art of living

In Book 8 of *De civitate Dei* Augustine describes “moral philosophy” (a Latin expression), or “ethics” (the Greek equivalent), as an enquiry into the supreme good and how we can attain it. The supreme good is that which we seek for its own sake, not as a means to some other end, and which makes us happy. Augustine adds, as if this were an uncontroversial point, that happiness is the aim of philosophy in general.¹ Book 19 opens with a similar discussion. In his summary of Varro’s treatise *De philosophia*, Augustine reports that no school of philosophy deserves to be considered a distinct school unless it differs from others on the supreme good. For the supreme good is that which makes us happy, and the only purpose of philosophizing is the attainment of happiness.² Both of these discussions cast philosophy as a fundamentally practical discipline, so that ethics appears to overshadow logic, metaphysics, and other comparatively abstract areas as a philosopher’s chief concern. Notice, though, that Augustine does not present this as a distinctively Christian view, much less as some innovation of his own; he reports it as an opinion common among pagans.

However odd by today’s standards, Augustine’s conception of both philosophy in general and ethics in particular was shared by all leading philosophers of the period. After the death of Aristotle, philosophy became more and more the

“art of *living*,” an expression one might run across without noticing it in Augustine’s summary of Varro.³ Ethics emerged as the dominant part of the discipline, with more speculative areas like logic and the philosophy of nature (alias “physics”) gradually being downgraded to subordinate roles. As ethics gained ascendancy, so philosophy as a whole took a strongly practical turn. Hellenistic philosophers⁴ saw it as their mission to reflect upon the ultimate human goal, *eudaimonia*, to share their understanding with others, and to live by it themselves. The practical, eudaimonistic framework of Greek philosophy during the Hellenistic period became even more pronounced in the heyday of the Roman empire. Augustine’s focus on what true happiness amounts to, and whether our everyday conduct brings us any closer to this goal, accordingly represents the rule, not the exception, for contemporary philosophical discourse.

As philosophy was far more practical than it is now, so, too, was it much closer to what people now regard as religion. All self-respecting philosophers offered a view of God, or the gods, and the implications of their view for everyday human conduct. Small wonder, then, that pagans would regard Christian intellectuals as philosophical rivals, even as Christians would claim to offer the one true philosophy: the only one that lives up to its own promises of teaching people what genuine happiness is and how it can be attained. St. Paul’s experience in Athens may serve as a reminder of the intellectual milieu. When Paul taught in the marketplace, Epicurean and Stoic philosophers came to debate with him.⁵ By Augustine’s time, some three centuries later, pagan philosophy had moved even closer to religion, becoming concerned with what might be called both “conversion” and “salvation,” even demonstrating a growing penchant for monotheism.⁶ The affinities between Neoplatonism and Christianity were especially striking, so that Augustine’s praise of “the Platonists” would not have been surprising at the time.⁷

The ultimate end

To say that all human beings seek the same ultimate end, happiness, seems to be true from one standpoint and false from another. The claim is plainly false if one means to suggest that all individuals have the same conception of happiness. On the other hand, it seems to be true insofar as happiness is the final explanation that people typically give when repeatedly pressed to explain their various choices and activities. Imagine, for example, the following dialogue:

Q. Why are you studying for a bachelor’s degree?

A. Because I want to become a stockbroker, and most firms require a bachelor’s degree.

Q. Why do you want to be a stockbroker?

A. Because I want to get rich.

Q. Why do you want to get rich?

A. Because I want to retire by fifty and spend my time traveling.

Q. Why do you want to retire by fifty and spend your time traveling?

A. Because this would make me happy.

Up to this point the questioner might be regarded as naive, or annoying, or both, but not as entirely unreasonable. If, however, she proceeds to ask, "Why do you want to be happy?" the dialogue has taken a strange turn. Having related his various choices and activities to the ultimate end of happiness, the student has given all the explanation necessary to make sense of them. Ask him why he wants to be happy, and he might simply reply, "Doesn't everyone?"⁸

Classical philosophers took "What is *eudaimonia*?" – or the Latin equivalent, "What is *beatitudo*?" – to be the most important question of ethics, for one's answer goes a long way towards determining how virtue should be characterized and the role it should play in human life. Some scholars prefer to translate these words not as "happiness" but as "blessedness," "flourishing" or "well-being," all of which correctly suggest a stable condition open to assessment by objective standards: a condition in many respects analogous to health, not merely the ephemeral, subjective feeling that present-day English speakers often refer to as "happiness." "Blessedness," however, seems to imply the existence of some divine blesser, which neither *eudaimonia* nor *beatitudo* does (they only leave this possibility open.) "Well-being" has no convenient adjectival form, since "well-off" may mean nothing more than well-heeled, and "flourishing," unlike *eudaimōn* or *beatus*, could describe potted plants just as well as human beings and gods. Despite its drawbacks, "happiness" therefore seems the best of the available translations for the *beatitudo* so often discussed in Augustine's works.

The importance of happiness in Augustine's ethics can scarcely be overestimated. Of his surviving works, the very first he completed is a dialogue entitled *De beata vita* – an early indication of issues he continued to reflect upon to the very end of his career. On at least two broad points he agrees with standard philosophical teachings. First, all human beings desire happiness. Indeed, Augustine recognizes that the skeptical Cicero himself chose "We certainly all want [or will] to be happy" when seeking an assertion that nobody doubts.⁹ Second, only "people who like to argue" equate happiness with merely living as one wants. No serious philosopher would take such a view, for who could be more miserable than someone who lives as he wants but wants something inappropriate?¹⁰ Imagine wanting to live on a diet of gin and chocolate, or any of the various self-destructive desires that people actually have. Augustine again sides with Cicero in claiming that we are often better off in failing to get something that we want than we would be in simply wanting something inappropriate, because fortune does less to make us happy than our own minds do to make us unhappy. For example, someone might buy what turns out to be a losing lottery ticket week after week, year after year, without feeling distressed at the failure to strike it

rich. (There is nothing wrong with wanting to be rich, just as long as we do not pin our happiness on it.) On the other hand, somebody with an excessive desire for wealth might possess millions and still continue to labor, miserably and compulsively, at acquiring even more. A radical decline in his wealth might likewise plunge such a person into despair, as it did some of the millionaires who saw their investment portfolios devastated by the US stock market crash of 1929. In Augustine's view, wanting wealth is one thing, loving it another. We must always be on guard against falling in love with objects unworthy of love.

Epicureans and Stoics likewise argue that unhappiness arises mainly, even entirely, from the individual's own beliefs, values, and attitudes; but they argue for the correlative position as well: that happiness depends mainly, even entirely, on the same individual characteristics. While ordinary pagans continued to believe that happiness owes much to sheer luck, or the favor of the gods, or both, philosophers emphasized just how much lies within the human being's own control. These disagreements about how much depends on the individual reflect deeper disagreements about what constitutes the happy life. If it requires little or nothing in the way of wealth, or fame, or even ordinary worldly success, one can make a plausible case for a high degree of individual control. Most Hellenistic philosophers take this route, describing the happy life as a life characterized by completeness and self-sufficiency (the secure possession of everything one needs), and especially by freedom from all trouble and anxiety. The happy life, in a word, is one of *tranquillity*, a goal supposed to be best attained by the practice of philosophy, which helps people reorder their priorities and thereby avoid needless distress. Academic skeptics diverged from the intellectual mainstream in treating philosophical enquiry as an end in itself. Even skepticism, however, cannot be considered a complete hold-out. The Academics themselves came under attack by Pyrrhonian skeptics, who taught that skeptical suspension of judgment does more than to safeguard one's intellectual integrity: it leads to tranquillity.

Augustine criticizes all pagan philosophers for giving a false account of happiness, bad advice on how to attain it, or both. Again and again he argues that philosophers' teachings fail even by their own standards. The Academics become a target of such criticism in Augustine's dialogue *De beata vita*. Replying to their description of the happy life as one spent searching for the truth, Augustine observes that they must want the truth and yet have thus far failed to find it, else they would not be searching. But how can people who lack what they want be the model of happiness? Would happiness not lie in finding the truth instead of merely searching for it it?¹¹ The skeptical rejoinder that human beings are unable to find the truth, that even the wise can know nothing at all, receives extended consideration in Augustine's dialogue *Contra Academicos*. He stands with the philosophical majority in arguing that human knowledge is indeed possible, and

that the happy life is a life in accordance with what is best in us, namely, the mind or reason.

Augustine later regretted this second assertion. In the *Retractationes* he writes:

Insofar as human nature is concerned, there is nothing better than mind and reason; and yet the person who wants to live happily should not live according to this, for then he lives as man lives, although in order to be able to attain happiness he should live as God lives. To attain this, our mind should not be self-contented but should be subjected to God.¹²

The *Retractationes* include many other passages where Augustine expresses reservations about works he wrote in the first decade following his conversion. He regrets that he gave more praise to the Platonists than any pagan philosophers deserve, that he placed too much emphasis on expertise in the liberal arts, and that he overrated the importance of knowing immutable truths, which many Christians do not learn until the afterlife, while pagans who have attained such knowledge perish.¹³ He also regrets suggesting that perfect virtue can be attained in this life, instead of only in the next, and that happiness in this life depends strictly on the state of one's soul, so that a wise man is happy regardless of the condition of his body – when in fact, the only life deservedly called happy is one where the body cannot suffer or die and obeys the mind without resistance.¹⁴

In sum, the youthful Augustine looked to the older Augustine like something of an intellectual snob, still too much under the influence of Hellenistic philosophy. Though even his mature writings reveal such influence, some of the earlier arguments and positions drop out, and Augustine's conflicts with pagan thinkers become more clearly defined. His efforts to meet them on their own ground nonetheless continue.

Happiness, morality, and immortality

According to Augustine, immortality ranks high among the prerequisites for true happiness. Materialists like the Epicureans and the Stoics, he argues, are especially misguided on this point. On the one hand, they firmly declare that every human being wants happiness, which they interpret as freedom from all suffering and anxiety. On the other, they deny the immortality of the soul, believing that the only happiness we shall ever enjoy must come from the lives we have now: lives subject to countless troubles, all the way from the common cold and anxieties about exams to such agonies as bone cancer and grief at the death of a loved one. Noticing the tension between these two positions, they ought to reconsider whether their denial of immortality might be wrong. Instead, Augustine argues, they choose to redescribe the ideal of happiness in such a way that it becomes attainable in this life. They lower the goal all the more in an effort

to place an individual's happiness within his own control, for no better reason than that they want to claim credit for making themselves happy.¹⁵

The Platonists, praised by Augustine as the best of the pagan philosophers, have enough wisdom to teach the immortality of the soul, but they too go awry on crucial points, especially in declaring that the human soul will be happiest when liberated from the body. Having himself believed this during his Manichaean period, Augustine argues all the more passionately later on against denigrating the body. Indeed, Christian doctrine on the resurrection of the body, a source of dismay to the Athenians who heard St. Paul preach, was one of the main issues dividing early Christianity from all contemporary pagan schools of philosophy. Far from equating the human being with the soul, Augustine insists that human beings are by nature embodied – that God created us this way, so that we should never regard our bodies as prisons or punishments. He thinks the Platonists go even more disastrously wrong in failing to acknowledge Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God, as both the teacher and redeemer without whom no human being could ever succeed in attaining happiness.¹⁶ For all their impressive insights, even the Platonists share the fatal, blinding pride demonstrated by other pagan philosophers.

In arguing that happiness requires immortality Augustine tries to show that his opponents' own assumptions should lead them to agree with him. Consider, for example, the famous Epicurean dictum "Death is nothing to us," a position defended in the belief that there are no punishments in some imagined afterlife to be feared, nor any rewards to be hoped for. While one might reasonably fear the pain of *dying*, Epicureans argue, death itself should be no cause for concern, for when we are *dead*, we no longer exist. So what is there for any right-thinking philosopher, as opposed to some superstitious peasant, to worry about?¹⁷ Augustine challenges the coherence of Epicurean doctrine. It claims that we all want happiness, even insists that everything we do, we do for the sake of happiness; but since we cannot be happy without being alive, why should Epicureans not agree that the ultimate in the way of happiness requires the ultimate in the way of life? When our lives are happy, or happy enough to satisfy us, we want them to continue indefinitely. When they are unhappy, perhaps we would willingly have them end, but then how, *ex hypothesi*, could this willingly lost life be described as happy?¹⁸ Either way, Augustine thinks it strange that Epicureans could insist so strongly upon happiness as the universal human goal while denying not only immortality but even the inevitable human longing for it.

Augustine questions whether anyone, including someone who commits suicide, truly wants her life to end. When I deliberately swallow fifty sleeping pills, am I actually aiming at non-existence? Or am I rather yearning for peace, for an end to all my suffering, only too muddled at the time to recognize that the experience of peace presupposes life, just as all experience presupposes life? Do

people who kill themselves really aim at non-existence, or do they aim instead, without being clear about their own goal, at a continued but pain-free existence?¹⁹ Augustine argues that even suicides aim at the goal of the happy life, only misunderstand exactly what it is that they want.

Stoicism rates higher in Augustine's judgment than Epicureanism, for the Stoics taught that happiness comes not from the pleasure of the body but from the virtue of the mind.²⁰ Agreeing that the virtue of the mind is a necessary condition for happiness, Augustine concentrates on arguing that it cannot be a sufficient condition. One objection, already made by his philosophical predecessors, says that the Stoic view flies in the face of common sense. Anybody who insists that "a man can be happy on the rack" must be so much in the grip of a theory that he can no longer recognize the obvious: that human beings are not merely minds but composites of bodies and minds, so that we cannot be happy when suffering intense physical pain, regardless of how virtuous we might be. Augustine adds to this standard objection that Stoics err in the direction of arrogance, just as Epicureans err in the direction of sordidness; as Epicureans overweight pleasure, so Stoics overweight glory. In praising virtue as the highest human good, says Augustine, the Stoics try to make other people feel ashamed. They themselves should feel ashamed of whittling down the supreme good to such a point that they can claim to be the sole cause of their own happiness, instead of acknowledging that mere human beings cannot make themselves happy. Even if the Stoics were correct in teaching that a virtuous mind suffices to make a person happy, they would still be mistaken in failing to recognize that the mind's virtue is itself a gift of God, not a triumph of human achievement.²¹

Augustine's mature works initially appear inconsistent regarding our prospects for happiness in the present life. Some texts seem to suggest that at least Christians can be happy now, by living in hope of union with God after death; other texts seem to deny that even the greatest degree of hope suffices to make anyone happy in the present. When speaking with precision, Augustine says that nobody can attain happiness in the present life, and yet anyone who accepts the present life with firm hope of the afterlife "may without absurdity be called 'happy' even now, though rather by future hope than in present reality."²² This carefully nuanced position reflects his concern to avoid downgrading the ideal of happiness while still providing some grounds for the use of "happiness" in everyday speech.

Despite his attacks on philosophers' pretensions that genuine happiness can be attained here and now, Augustine never reduces the present life to some miserable waystation on the train route to heaven. *De civitate Dei's* notorious, often-reprinted catalogue of all the troubles of mortal life – a staple of late twentieth-century anthologies – comes followed by a much less noticed catalogue of all the *goods* of the present life.²³ These include not only God-given

virtues, which enable us to work at attaining salvation, but also human accomplishments such as science, music, art, and literature. According to Augustine, God did not make the world strictly as a means for us to survive now and to work toward happiness in the afterlife; he made it for our aesthetic pleasure, too, sometimes even at the expense of practicality. How else can one explain why God gave men nipples, which serve no useful purpose, but did not give women beards, which would have served to protect their faces? Secularized or puritanical visions of God as some austere celestial bookkeeper, obsessed with keeping track of our moral merits and demerits, accordingly cannot claim Augustine as their authority. Augustine's God always appears more as the lover and the artist than as the bookkeeper or the judge.

Augustine's teachings on happiness nonetheless raise troubling questions, not only about the status of virtue in his ethical theory but even about the status of God. Pagan philosophers had labored for centuries to prove moral virtue a constitutive feature of the happy life. Against popular opinion, which often praised good conduct only as the means to avoid punishments and reap rewards, philosophers steadily proclaimed that virtue has intrinsic value. (Recall that Plato devotes roughly nine books of his *Republic* to arguing that virtue is desirable for its own sake, allotting scarcely more than half a book to confirming the popular opinion that virtue has beneficial consequences, too.) A quick look at Augustine's ethics might give the impression that he himself aims to revive the very opinion that high-minded philosophers had so long worked to discredit. If everything we do, we do for the sake of happiness, and happiness itself comes in the afterlife, as a reward for virtuous conduct in this life, how can virtue in this life have intrinsic value? Does it indeed have intrinsic value, or is it merely a means of attaining our ultimate, otherworldly end? Considering the doctrine of hell, one might wonder whether Christians are motivated to virtuous conduct even more by fear of eternal punishment than by hope of eternal reward.

Pause to consider the place assigned to God, and one may become all the more troubled by the eudaimonistic cast of Augustine's ethics. Today eudaimonism counts as one approach to ethical theory, deontology as another. The first takes as its starting point happiness, the ultimate end that all human beings seek; the second takes as its starting point our duty or obligation to respect the moral law, regardless of the costs to our own happiness. Although Augustine appears to favor something roughly approximating the eudaimonistic framework of ancient ethical theory, he never forgets that Christ gave us two commands: to love God above all, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Christ did not command us to seek happiness or to love ourselves. How, then, can the Gospel be reconciled with eudaimonistic ethics? If Christians seek God as the provider of complete, everlasting happiness, do they love God for himself or merely as the source of their own satisfaction? If the latter, do they truly love God, or do they only love themselves?

Love of God and neighbor

Augustine draws an important distinction between two kinds of value.²⁴ One is the value that something has intrinsically, according to the natural hierarchy created by God. On this scale, living beings are always worth more than inanimate objects; among living beings, those with reason and free choice are worth more than animals; and God's worth is infinite. Augustine claims that human beings continue to have greater natural value than animals even when we abuse our God-given powers. As a runaway horse is still better than a stone, so a sinful human being is still better than a well-behaved horse.²⁵ The other kind of value is that which we assign to beings or things according to the utility they happen to have for us. Utility value may be so high that we even casually use the term "love" in referring to it, as, for example, when one says, "How I love lobster!" Of course, the meaning of "love" in such statements differs greatly from the meaning in such a statement as "How I love my son!" The value that lobster has for me is purely instrumental: when I profess to love lobster, what I actually mean is that I love the pleasure I myself derive from eating lobster. While I might likewise derive pleasure from reading to my son, playing with him, and many other experiences that I could not have without him, so that he does have utility value for me, surely he has intrinsic value as well, as evidenced by my willingness to promote his interests even when they conflict with my own.

Beginning with this common-sense distinction between natural, intrinsic value and utility value, Augustine proceeds to demonstrate its moral significance. First, he reminds us that we routinely judge according to the utility scale of value, despite serious conflicts with the natural scale. "Would not anyone prefer to have food in his house, rather than mice, or money rather than fleas?" he asks.²⁶ Readers often chuckle at this question, only to wince at Augustine's next observation: that we commonly assign less value to other human beings than we do to animals and inanimate objects, as when we pay more for a horse or a gem than we would for a servant. Pause to compare the vast sum that people willingly pay for a new car, even though their present car remains functional, with the small donation they willingly make to feed the starving or shelter the homeless, and one may begin to develop the feeling of moral discomfort that Augustine believes all reflective persons should have.

By emphasizing the difference between these two scales of value, Augustine wants to highlight the discrepancy between the value judgments we make, or would make, when judging as free, rational agents, and those we make in everyday life, when driven by our own needs and desires. Where reason can see the values that things have in their own right, our drives look always to the value that things might have in serving our own purposes. Thus "What is this worth to *me*?" tends to become the ruling standard for everyday value judgments. The standard

is seriously flawed because answers to this question typically reveal more about the human subject's individual constellation of fears, ambitions, cravings, and needs than they do about the intrinsic value of the object. Virtue requires that we love others as they deserve to be loved, according to their intrinsic worth, instead of in proportion to how well they happen to serve our own interests or satisfy our own desires.²⁷ The virtuous person will therefore never regard others as merely the means to her own ends.

Christ's command to love our neighbors as ourselves automatically prohibits "instrumentalizing" our fellow human beings. Elaborating on this command in *De vera religione*, Augustine explains that we must love our neighbor as a human being, for his intrinsic worth, not for some pleasure or advantage that we hope to derive from him, as if he were no more than an amusing parrot or a beast of burden.²⁸ To put the point another way, we must love people because they belong to God, not because they belong to us. Augustine goes so far as to declare it more *inhuman* to love somebody because he is your son than because he is a human being, made in the image of and belonging to God.²⁹

How could partiality for one's own family be reckoned inhuman? Aristotle regards it as thoroughly human, and most readers will agree. Augustine explains that this tendency arises from merely biological relationships contingent upon birth, that it represents the same mindless preference for kin that animals display – a classic example of what he dismisses as "carnal custom," i.e. human conduct and values produced by habituation but running counter to human nature as created by God. Partiality for kin represents one more case of judging the value of someone in relation to us, to our own private advantage, instead of considering the person's intrinsic value. (From this perspective one might question how well I actually do love my son: Do I love him in his own right and for his own sake or because he is *mine*?)

The interpretation of Augustine just presented does, however, seem contradicted by *De doctrina christiana*. There we find his pronouncement that God alone is to be loved for his own sake, i.e. to be "enjoyed," and that all human beings are to be loved for the sake of God, i.e. to be "used."³⁰ This notorious passage nonetheless tends to mislead, for two reasons. One is that "use" (*usus*) does not have for Augustine the inevitable connotations of manipulation and exploitation that "using" has for us now; the other is simply that his conception of "use-love" is far wider in *De doctrina christiana* than it is in *De vera religione*. In works written after *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine prudently retreats from his claim that human beings are to be "used" while God alone is to be "enjoyed," returning to something closer to the ordinary meaning of these terms. He teaches that we should love people for their own sakes as well as for the sake of God, or more briefly, that we should enjoy them as related to God. We should enjoy *ourselves* in the same way.³¹ In other words, while we ought to appreciate the value

that all people have in their own right, we must never forget that none of us has value independent of God. The value we have simply as human beings, as beings with a certain kind of nature, we owe to God as the creator of nature. The additional value we might have thanks to virtue we likewise owe to God, for virtue itself is a gift of God.

Now we may be in a better position to understand why Augustine does not regard virtue as merely a means to an end, but neither does he regard it as something to be desired and exercised purely for its own sake. The theoretical balancing act is difficult, with mistakes very easy to make on both sides. On the one hand, Augustine defines virtue as rightly ordered love.³² Because all true virtues are forms of love rooted in charity, the love of God and neighbor commanded by Christ, virtues are by their very nature other-regarding. Apparently good conduct motivated mainly by the individual's fear of punishment would therefore not be virtuous; nor would conduct motivated mainly by the individual's desire for reward, whether now or in heaven. In all such cases the self-regarding overshadows the other-regarding: self-love clearly predominates over love of God and neighbor. On the other hand, virtue must never be allowed to supplant God as the supreme good, as the sole good to be loved purely for its own sake and without reference to any higher good.

Augustine attacks the Stoics for having made the second mistake. To his mind, the Stoics heap praise upon virtue, oblivious of the fact that virtue itself is God-given. Do they not teach, in effect, that a human being's state of character is the highest good in the cosmos? But how could any reflective person hold such an opinion? Augustine suggests two possibilities: either the Stoics are secretly aiming at "glory" – that is, their greatest desire is to be praised and admired by other human beings – or they actually do value their own virtue more highly than anything else – in which case they look to Augustine like nothing more than sophisticated narcissists.³³

One might reasonably reject Augustine's bleak view of the Stoics and yet concede his basic point. Ethical theories that regard virtue as the product of natural aptitude, sound upbringing, individual human effort, and a just community (or some combination of these) do indeed differ significantly from ethical theories that regard God as the creator of nature and the giver of virtue. Once God has been recognized as the supreme good, immeasurably higher than any other good, human virtue can at best occupy second place. If the supreme good alone is to be loved purely for its own sake, without reference to any other good, then Christian ethics in general must to some degree be committed, just because it is Christian, to "instrumentalizing" virtue. Notice that Augustine shares the Stoics' conviction that we can be made happy only by that through which we are made good,³⁴ but disagrees, vehemently, about what this is. In Stoic ethics, that which makes us good and happy is our

own character, whereas in Augustine's ethics, it is God: a divine being, not a human state of mind.

Augustine himself sees no serious conflict between declaring happiness our supreme good and declaring God our supreme good, for love itself works to overcome the distinction. Even in ordinary human love at its best, the division between self and other tends to break down, so that what might otherwise have been a self-sacrificing act, willingly but joylessly done for the sake of another, becomes instead an act done with pleasure and essential to one's own happiness. Recall the great "sacrifices" that parents will happily make for their children, or that spouses will make for each other, and we can find in our own experience something roughly approximating the kind of love that Augustine prizes so highly. An ethics that might initially appear to exclude self-love and to require self-sacrifice proves far more subtle on closer examination.

Why, for example, does Christ command us to love God and our neighbors but not to love ourselves? According to Augustine, there is no *need* for such a commandment. By our very God-given nature we love ourselves and cannot help loving ourselves, so that Christ might as well command us to breathe.³⁵ Augustine goes still farther in arguing that it is improper not to love oneself and not to do for oneself what one does for a neighbor. Christ's command is to love one's neighbor *as* oneself, not to love him *more than* oneself.³⁶ We must be especially careful not to serve the interests of another at the expense of our own ultimate good. However admirable it is to risk one's bodily life to save another's, it would be wrong to risk one's immortal soul. The individual's own soul has more value than anyone's body. Augustine would therefore be horrified by the notorious case where a woman arranged a murder in order to improve her daughter's prospects of making the cheerleading squad. Shall one commit a mortal sin and lose one's own soul merely to advance someone else's worldly ambitions? When the good that a person sacrifices has far greater intrinsic worth than the good thereby achieved, she has effectively substituted her own scale of values for God's.

For all his praise of love, Augustine never forgets the power of human love to warp the priorities that one ought to have. When speculating in the *Confessions* about his own youthful motivations for stealing a neighbor's pears, he calls attention to the pleasure that he took simply from having partners in crime.³⁷ As the human craving for companionship has its advantages, so it also has its dangers. In later works Augustine claims that it was this very craving that led Adam, the "father" of all future human beings, to disobey God's command. Although Eve was deceived by the serpent's false promises, Augustine argues, Adam was not deceived when Eve repeated those promises. Instead, Adam accepted Eve's invitation to eat the forbidden fruit because the two were so closely bound in partnership that he refused to be separated from her, not even when the only way he saw to preserve their bond involved sharing her sin.³⁸

We need not worry that God requires us to be self-sacrificing in loving our neighbors or even in loving him, for in Augustine's view, nobody can truly love God without learning how to love herself.³⁹ In understanding what makes God so supremely worthy of love, one also comes to understand the elements in oneself that make one worthy of love. Exactly what is it in *yourself* that you ought to value? If you value most highly your muscle tone or your wealth, your expertise in abstraction or your flair for amusing remarks, even your loyalty to fellow human beings, regardless of what they want you to do (recall the loyalty of German soldiers to their Nazi leaders), you have gotten your priorities wrong. You ought to value most highly your patience, kindness, willingness to forgive, the courage to do the right thing despite the worldly costs, and other virtues exemplified by Christ. For this reason Augustine declares Christ's entire life on earth a splendid education in morals. Not only was God's son poor, uneducated in theoretical abstractions, and destined for the agonizing, shaming execution usually reserved for the dregs of human society – the ultimate “anti-hero” by pagan-philosophical standards – Christ also shared the normal human fear of being tortured to death, even pleaded with his father to spare him, yet ended his prayer humbly, saying, “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.”⁴⁰ Once we do learn what we should value in ourselves, Augustine believes, we must perforce develop humility, since we shall recognize that the best elements in us we owe far more to God's generosity than to our own accomplishments, and that his will is simply better and more important than our own.

Pride and fear

Scholars sometimes suggest that Augustine developed a far more negative attitude toward self-love as he grew older.⁴¹ In later works, such as *De civitate Dei*, he appears to draw a sharp dichotomy between self-love, on the one hand, and love of God, on the other. Indeed, the very division between the city of God and the earthly city may be thought to reflect Augustine's belief that love of God and love of self are mutually exclusive. A closer reading nonetheless reveals more a change in emphasis than a change in substance. Consider, for example, Augustine's famous description of the two cities:

And so the two cities were created by two loves: the earthly city by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the heavenly city by the love of God reaching the point of contempt for self. In fact, the earthly city glories in itself, the heavenly city in the Lord. While the one looks for glory from human beings, the greatest glory for the other lies in God, the witness of conscience.⁴²

Augustine begins not by denigrating self-love as such but by criticizing self-love that has grown beyond its proper bounds, warping one's priorities so badly that

the individual comes to see himself as the highest being in the universe. He does not bother to repeat this qualification in the second sentence, though he alludes to it in the next, in declaring that the greatest glory for the heavenly city (as distinct from the only glory) lies in God. Later in *De civitate Dei* Augustine also says explicitly that in the two rules, love of God and love of neighbor, “a person finds three objects of love – God, himself, and neighbor – so that someone who loves God does not do wrong in loving himself.”⁴³

As reflection upon God’s commands reveals nothing intrinsically wrong with self-love, so too does reflection upon primal sin. Augustine describes the rebellious angels who founded the earthly city as motivated not by self-love but rather by *pride*, a perverse and highly specific kind of self-love that leads one to arrogate to oneself a place that properly belongs to God alone. Cain, described by Augustine as the human founder of the earthly city, largely followed the angelic precedent. Cain was so consumed by the destructive lust of envy, so eager to glory in the exercise of his own power, that the very thought of having to share power, even with a human partner, was intolerable to him. He killed his own brother in a futile effort to establish himself as the sole ruling power.⁴⁴

We sin, then, by loving the inferior aspects of ourselves, or by loving ourselves to excess – by claiming for ourselves God’s place, and in the process grossly perverting what true love actually is. True love, as Augustine sees it, does not seek private advantages. It recognizes that the common good has greater worth than the private, merely individual good. Love heals divisions and eliminates competition. Far from being possessive, love seeks to share its happiness, thereby uniting all servants of God, both angelic and human, in peaceful association.⁴⁵ Although we find in pagan philosophers of the time a comparable view of humans as naturally social creatures who can be happy only as members of a community, Augustine diverges in two important respects. First, he argues that the only true community is a just one, but that no such community can be created by human beings on earth, so that we cannot be entirely happy until we join in the afterlife the community governed by God.⁴⁶ Second, Augustine repeatedly contrasts human nature as created by God and human nature in its present condition, crippled by original sin. In describing our present condition he emphasizes our egoism, our pride and lust for glory, our struggle to dominate others, even our tendency to feel more satisfied from the knowledge that others are worse off than ourselves.

Again and again, Augustine’s observations seem to anticipate the bleak description of human nature presented over a thousand years later by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*.⁴⁷ Remember, though, that what Hobbes takes to be natural Augustine himself believes contrary to human nature as created and hence as it ought to be. However universal our present condition, it remains in Augustine’s view both *unnatural* and morally reprehensible. That we make ourselves and

each other so unhappy should therefore come as no surprise. Power and glory "addicts" are every bit as dangerous and self-destructive as drug addicts.

The tensions between loving God and fearing him are more troubling than those between loving God and loving ourselves. Of course, love can trigger fear; arguably, in normal human experience, it is only because people love that they do fear. If we did not love our own bodily lives, why should we be as frightened as we are of dying? But we usually learn the lesson long before we are driven to confront our own mortality. Only pause to consider the wrenching anxieties that parents suffer regarding a child who should have been home from school many hours earlier, or the queasiness that a child feels about misbehaving, just from fear of disappointing her parents, and the connection between love and fear in everyday life should be evident.

Fears such as these are nonetheless more admirable, reflective of a higher stage of moral growth, than the primitive, self-centered fear of punishment. When Joe refrains from tormenting his little sister because he fears disappointing his parents, he has at least advanced beyond the stage where he refrained only because he feared getting caught and being given a spanking. Ideally, Joe will one day outgrow both his fear and his penchant for sibling rivalry. He will stop regarding love as a scarce, non-renewable resource, on a par with petroleum, as if any bit of it given to his sister or to someone else inevitably endangers his own supply. Ideally, he will grow beyond mere avoidance of tormenting his sister: he will learn to help her, and to want his parents to smile upon her, simply because he loves his sister, loves his parents, and recognizes that the whole family, himself included, is happiest when each willingly seeks the good of all the others.

These prosaic observations regarding human love and moral development may shed some light on Augustine's ambivalence about the fear of hell as a motivation for obeying God's "rules." Since fear of God's punishment often leads people to conduct themselves better than they would otherwise do, it has its value as a first step in moral education and should not be considered a dead loss. On the other hand, fear of punishment is never more than a first step. If a person progresses no farther, then one of the most important messages of Christianity has been lost. Unlike Pelagius, Augustine tries to avoid preying on people's terror of the Last Judgment.⁴⁸ He even issues a solemn but tart warning against the dangers of being driven by fear:

He, then, is an enemy to righteousness who refrains from sin only through fear of punishment; but he will become the friend of righteousness if through love of it he avoids sin, for then he will be really afraid of sin. For the person who only fears the flames of hell is afraid not of sinning but of burning . . .⁴⁹

On the whole, Augustine prefers to highlight the difference between Christianity's vision of God as a loving father and the view of popular pagan

religion, which encourages people to see the gods mainly as sources of rewards and punishments. As pagan belief in an afterlife spread, so too did belief in divine rewards and punishments in the afterlife, along with people's anxieties about how they might fare. Epicureans worked to relieve such anxieties by denying that there is an afterlife, much less one in which we experience divine rewards or punishments.⁵⁰ Augustine instead chooses to contrast the slavish motivation of fear with the liberating motivation of charity. The one true God, he reminds us, expressly asks that we call him "father" (as opposed to "master"). So if all we see in him is the same prospective source of punishments that the pagan gods are taken to be, have we not missed the very message that God steadily teaches?⁵¹

The divided will

Augustine writes at length in his *Confessions* of feeling two wills at war in himself. He longed to convert to Christianity, yet he continued to resist and delay: a conflict so painful, he says, that it tore his soul apart. We are all familiar with milder versions of inner conflict, as when people want to stop drinking, or smoking, or even to get out of bed when their alarm clock first buzzes, but somehow cannot seem to muster the will to do it. Augustine himself shifts in a single chapter from the dramatic image of a soul torn apart to the mundane struggle to get out of bed, thereby reminding readers that internal conflicts are the stuff of everyday life, not some special problem experienced only by the religious.⁵²

In analyzing the conflict he himself experienced, Augustine distinguishes between his new will to follow God and his old will, which forged the very chains of habit (or custom: *consuetudo*) in which he had come to be trapped. Far from believing himself imprisoned by some Prince of Darkness, as Manichaean doctrine suggested, Augustine emphasizes that his bondage was *self*-created. There were not two selves in him, nor was there one true (good) self at war with some alien (evil) force. The two wills were both expressions of a single self, however sorely divided:

When I was deliberating about serving the Lord my God, as I had long meant to do, it was I who willed to do it, I who refused. It was I. Neither did I wholly will nor did I wholly refuse. Thus I struggled with myself and was torn apart by myself, an experience I underwent although I did not want to, and which nevertheless did not reveal the nature of some alien mind, but rather the punishment of my own mind.⁵³

The Latin text is more powerful than an English translation can convey, thanks to Augustine's steady repetition of "*ego*" ("I"). Latin authors need not use the

pronoun "I" to say, for example, "I run" or "I exist." The first-person form of a verb, such as *sum* ("I am, I exist") suffices without the pronoun, as in Descartes's well-known pronouncement, "Cogito ergo sum." Augustine, however, repeatedly uses the emphatic *ego*. It was *I* who willed, *I* who refused, *I* who tore myself apart: it was *I*.

The centrality of the will in this analysis marks a major change from ancient moral psychology.⁵⁴ Although philosophers such as Aristotle discuss rational appetite, decision, intentional, uncoerced action, and other notions associated with the later concept of the will, they are most impressed by the division between the soul's rational and non-rational powers. Regarding intellect, the rational power *par excellence*, as the true self, they tend to treat ordinary emotions as non-rational and hence as in some sense external to the true self. In contrast, Augustine attributes three powers to the soul: reason or intellect, memory, and will. As the will comes to supplant the intellect as the true self, the morally responsible "I" becomes less the "I" who knows, believes, speculates, and reasons and more the "I" who loves, fears, struggles, and chooses. Not only does Augustine posit no basic division between will and emotion, he also suggests that different emotions might even be understood as different kinds of volition:

The important factor is the quality of a person's will, because if the will is perverse, it will have these perverse affections, but if it is right, they will be not only blameless but even praiseworthy. The will is in all of them; indeed, they are nothing other than expressions of will. For what are desire and joy but the will in agreement with that which we want? And what are fear and grief but the will in disagreement with that which we reject?⁵⁵

Exactly what does Augustine mean by "the will"? What is this power that human beings and angels supposedly have and animals supposedly lack? Quasi-formal definitions of the "will" prove virtually useless. To understand Augustine, one does better to ponder the theoretical work that he believes the concept of the will is needed to do.

Begin with a thought experiment that Augustine proposes: Suppose that there are twins, precisely the same in mind and body, social conditioning, personal histories, and all other respects, who find themselves in the same situation, equally attracted by the same forbidden object. One succumbs to temptation, the other does not. How can we explain this phenomenon, Augustine asks, except with reference to the will?⁵⁶ Of course, a skeptic would remain unpersuaded. The problem itself is spurious, the skeptic might retort, because two persons who are so much the same would in the same situation do precisely the same thing. The suggested thought experiment "proves" the existence of the will only by tacitly assuming it.

Augustine, however, does not believe the concept of the will necessary for

descriptive psychology so much as for *moral* psychology. If human beings sin, and God justly punishes us for it – two assumptions Augustine considers indisputable – then we ourselves must be morally responsible for sinning. It is precisely to explain moral responsibility that we must posit the will. Pause to reflect upon Adam and Eve, the premier example of human sin.⁵⁷ They had no unsatisfied needs; they suffered no agitations of mind or body; and God gave them only a single command, supremely easy to obey. How can we explain why they nonetheless disobeyed? Contrary to the psychological theories of pagan philosophers, the explanation cannot lie in ignorance, faulty reasoning, or emotional disorder. Nor can it lie in some defect of nature that made it impossible for Adam and Eve to obey, since God would not have punished them for what they could not help doing. The only explanation Augustine can conceive is that their sin arose from an evil will which itself had no prior or external cause. Either the will is the first cause of sin, not merely one more link in a chain of natural efficient causes, or there is no sin.⁵⁸

Does Augustine's argument for positing the will depend for its validity upon the assumptions that God is just and that human beings sin? It seems rather to depend on two weaker but still disputable assumptions: (1) We are justified in holding people, but not animals, morally responsible for their actions; and (2) we would not be justified in holding people morally responsible if they did not have a will which somehow transcends natural appetite and the natural order of efficient causes. Kant presents an argument along roughly similar lines, without any references to God, sin, or other theological concepts.⁵⁹ Despite their many differences, both Augustine and Kant take as a starting point the moral practices of praise and blame, reward and punishment. Both assume that these practices are justified only if people *deserve* to be praised, blamed, punished, or rewarded. It is not enough that the practices may have the beneficial consequence of modifying people's behavior and thereby producing a more peaceful community.⁶⁰ To be morally responsible, people must deserve their punishments and rewards; otherwise they do not differ significantly from dogs, whose behavior can likewise be modified by "conditioning."

Augustine and Kant further agree that moral desert or merit depends less on the ability to perform one physical action or another than on the capacity for certain kinds of motivations. Artificial intelligence, for instance, might one day be developed to the point where it could exceed human beings in all intellectual calculations and physical actions, could learn from experience, and so could be more successful than we are at ensuring its own survival. It could be supremely rational, yet if it could not act from love (in Augustine's view) or from duty (in Kant's), it would still lack the status of a moral agent. We see in Augustine, then, the beginnings of a Western tradition that treats the distinction between will and nature, which lies chiefly in motivations, as indispensable

for any adequate account of moral responsibility. This distinction cuts across the ancient distinction between rational and non-rational powers rather than duplicating it.

Shared, flawed humanity

The consequences of Adam's sin prove just as important as its cause to the development of Augustine's ethics. As we share in Adam's humanity, so we share in his guilt and punishment. Even when the guilt of original sin is forgiven in baptism, the punishment remains, particularly in the form of concupiscence, a radical disorder in our desires alien to human nature in its original condition. In his early works, Augustine confesses, he underestimated the extent of the damage to human nature. His own thinking changed owing to continued reflection upon St. Paul's lament in Romans 7:

I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want [or will], but the evil that I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me . . . For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!⁶¹

At first Augustine believed that Paul was describing how he felt before becoming a Christian. Only gradually did he decide that Paul was speaking in his own voice, as a Christian with the gift of God's grace. Without grace, how could Paul delight in God's law? Without such delight, how could the very conflict he describes even be possible? Of course, Augustine does not think the passage should be taken to mean that Paul continued to do wrong or that he even had sinful intentions. When Paul writes of "doing" the evil that he hates, all he means, says Augustine, is that he continues to desire what he should not desire, a failing he abhors; but precisely because he does not consent to the urgings of concupiscence, Paul can justifiably say, "It is no longer I that do it."⁶² Augustine's new interpretation of Romans highlights the profound damage to human nature by original sin and hence the continued, profound dependency on God's grace, even by the best of us.

The works of Pelagius and his followers declare it absurd to suggest that Adam's sin damaged anyone but himself, except in the trivial sense that Adam set a bad example. Every one of us, in their view, is born in the same condition that Adam was before his fall, with a will entirely free and no need of external aid in order to be good. This holds for pagans no less than Christians. We have as evidence the injunction of Jesus: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your hea-

venly Father is perfect.”⁶³ How could anybody have an obligation to be perfect if he lacks the ability to be? Could God justly command of us what we are unable to do? If we *ought* to be perfect, Pelagians argue, it follows that we *can* be perfect, so that we shall richly deserve the punishments of hell if we fail. As for Romans 7, Augustine’s interpretation must be rejected. Writing in the voice of someone who has yet to convert, Paul laments not the damage of original sin but only the necessity arising from his own individually self-created bad habits.⁶⁴

Most modern readers, especially Americans, find the Pelagians’ teachings far more appealing than Augustine’s. Not only does Pelagian doctrine give full moral credit to persons of other faiths, even of no faith at all, it also treats us all as individuals, individually responsible for our own fortunes. Each of us is free to succeed or fail, depending entirely on his own efforts – a theological doctrine later secularized and politicized by such authors as Andrew Carnegie and Horatio Alger. Indeed, the Pelagian bishop Julian of Eclanum carried the defense of human freedom so far as to pronounce us “emancipated from God.”⁶⁵ In giving each of us the power of free will, God grants us our independence, so that we need worry only about using the gift well enough to “pass” when we must finally face God’s judgment.

Why does Augustine argue so vehemently against the Pelagians? First and foremost, he faults them for ignoring the sheer universality of human failings. If Adam’s descendants are indeed able to be perfect through their own efforts, why can we not find in the whole of human history a single one who actually was perfect, including even so great a saint as Paul?⁶⁶ Before dismissing Augustine’s assessment of the human condition as excessively negative, recall that the center of the moral life is for him overwhelmingly internal to the individual’s own soul. He has a sharp eye ever trained on the wide variety of wishes, fantasies, and emotional reactions that never translate into action but are nonetheless real and morally revealing.⁶⁷ The slothful yearning to offload one’s own duties onto a family member or colleague, the thrill of pleasure at seeing a competitor fail, the fantasy of revenge against an enemy, the fury at being criticized, however deservedly, and so on, endlessly – our inner lives have a streak of ugliness that seems to endure no matter how well we learn to control our speech and actions. Augustine scorns the suggestion that we are born innocent and good and grow worse only as a result of social conditioning. Babies, he points out, cry, throw tantrums, and are veritable monsters of jealousy and selfishness. If we regard them as *innocentes* (in Latin, either “innocent” or “harmless”), we are thinking about the weakness of their bodies, not about any quality of their minds.⁶⁸

To the Pelagians’ complaint that Christ could not justly command us to be perfect if we were unable to be, Augustine has roughly three replies. The first challenges the Pelagians’ narrow understanding of how imperatives are actually used, and hence what might justly be commanded. Christ might justly command

us to be perfect in the same way that he could justly command a lame man to walk. In trying to walk, only to discover that he cannot, the man would learn first-hand his own inability, his own need for a physician to cure him, and thus his own need to be healed by Christ, the one true physician of the soul.⁶⁹ Even in everyday human discourse, commands may be given in order to teach, not merely to produce obedient performances.

Augustine's second reply challenges the Pelagians' literalist interpretation of the word "perfect." Granted, if what one means by "perfect" is a purity of soul so complete that it allows no space for vengeful fantasies, lustful cravings, and so on, no human being can be perfect in this life. But why restrict the word's meaning so drastically? If "perfect" is going to play any useful role in everyday moral language, we should apply it to those making *progress*, i.e. moving in the right direction and well advanced in their journey to God, regardless of their continuing flaws. St. Paul deserves to be called "perfect" in this sense, all the more because he attained such a degree of self-knowledge and humility that he ceased to blush at confessing his own enduring imperfections.⁷⁰

Augustine's third reply challenges the Pelagians' interpretation of "I am able" (or "unable"), along with the excessively individualistic perspective it reflects. Is this individualistic perspective even consistent? When we inherit our parents' good looks, their physical health, their IQ, their talents for music or mathematics, and their material wealth, all without complaint – as if we somehow deserved these legacies – how can we reasonably complain if we likewise inherit their weaknesses, illnesses, and debts? In fact, no human being comes into this world as some atomic individual. Every one of us is born into a massive, massively complicated, nexus of assets we did not individually earn, though we shall benefit from them, and liabilities we did not individually incur, though we shall suffer from them. Thus we are justified in saying "I am able to do x," when what we mean, strictly speaking, is "I am able to do x with the help of others I count upon to help me." In the same way, we might reasonably say "I am able to be perfect" when what we mean, or ought to mean, is "I am able to be perfect with God's help."⁷¹ Here again, Augustine's conception of moral progress plays a role, for he has confidence that God purifies all persons who make progress in observing his commandments and forgives their sins, just as they forgive the sins of their neighbors.⁷²

As Augustine emphasizes what we are able to do with God's grace, so he emphasizes what we are unable to do on our own, thanks to the nature we share with Adam. On the one hand, the nature created in Adam, endowed with the power of free choice, makes all human beings moral agents. (To this limited extent Augustine accepts the principle that "ought" implies "can": if human nature had not been created with free choice, people would have no more moral responsibility than cats do.) On the other hand, we all sinned "in Adam," so that

we now suffer the consequences: the inability to be good without God's grace.⁷³ Contrary to the Pelagian view that all sins are individual, and that Adam's sin damaged nobody but himself, Augustine insists strongly upon what we share. Along with our individual, personal lives we have a common, damaged nature. As a result, we are all equally in need of healing by Christ, "the second Adam." Notice that the doctrine of our oneness in Adam has as its happier correlate our oneness in Christ. While we suffer the consequences of a sin that none of us individually committed, we may also benefit from a sacrifice that none of us individually made.⁷⁴

Augustine's reflections upon human imperfection ultimately led him to attack the inseparability of the virtues, a doctrine central to ancient and Hellenistic ethics. His arguments on this topic are all the more noteworthy because they were revived over eight centuries later by Christian theologians concerned that Aristotle's influence was inspiring a neo-pagan movement in the universities.⁷⁵

True imperfect virtue

Despite serious disagreements on other issues, all leading ancient philosophers defend a position that most present-day readers find bizarre: that the moral virtues are inseparable. No one can truly have courage, justice, or temperance without practical wisdom (*phronēsis* or *prudentia*), nor can one truly have practical wisdom without courage and the other moral virtues. The inseparability thesis embraced in antiquity takes roughly three forms. The identity version, presented by Socrates in Plato's *Protagoras*, makes every virtue identical with the knowledge of good and bad. Thus words like "courage," "temperance," and "justice," while different in meaning, nonetheless all refer to the same single state of mind. The unity version, defended by the Stoic Chrysippus, acknowledges a plurality of virtues, each with its own chief area of concern, but claims that all virtues belong to the mind, have the same end, and share the same principles. The reciprocity version, presented in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.13, both acknowledges a plurality of virtues and distinguishes the virtues of character ("moral" virtues) from those of intellect. Even though Aristotle grants that certain intellectual virtues can stand on their own – a craftsman, for instance, may have no virtue other than skill – he still argues for a reciprocal dependence between the moral virtues and the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom. Nobody can have any moral virtue in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor can he have practical wisdom without *all* the moral virtues; so what appear to be freestanding moral virtues turn out to be merely "natural dispositions," "natural virtues," or "imperfect virtues" called "virtues" only in a loose sense.

Ancient theories about the inseparability of the virtues never enjoyed wide support among persons untrained in philosophy.⁷⁶ Philosophers' teachings

suggested, contrary to common-sense intuitions about morality, (1) that perhaps no human being on the face of the earth has ever been so excellent as to meet this high standard of virtue, and (2) that any individual who did manage to become virtuous must have progressed in an instant from possessing no genuine virtue to possessing them all. Since we have already considered Augustine's thoughts about (1), we turn now to difficulties concerning (2). Whichever version of the thesis an ancient author adopts, the implication does indeed look to be the same: whoever truly has one moral virtue must have them all; whoever lacks one cannot truly have any. If, for example, a courageous soldier drinks too much while on leave, his defect in temperance shows that he lacks practical wisdom, which in turn proves that he has no true moral virtue, and, by corollary, no true courage. Of course, we might continue to describe the soldier as courageous, but we would not be speaking with the precision expected of philosophers.

Augustine attacks this all-or-nothing perspective in a letter written in 415, one of the last in his long, rather strained correspondence with Jerome.⁷⁷ His stated purpose is to make sense of James 2.10: "Whosoever shall keep the whole law but offend in one point is guilty of all." Augustine recognizes that the passage from James might easily be explained by philosophers' teachings on the inseparability of the virtues. The inseparability thesis, however, holds no attractions for him. He himself works to interpret the passage from James in a manner consistent with scripture, especially with the teachings of St. Paul, but not with the teachings of the Stoics or pagan philosophers in general. In the *Retractationes* Augustine expresses satisfaction with his letter and reports that he published it after Jerome's death.⁷⁸

Quite early in the letter Augustine expresses distaste for the paradoxes that Stoic philosophers derive from their all-or-nothing view of moral character: a person has no wisdom at all until he has perfect wisdom; there are no degrees of virtue and vice; the transition from vice to virtue must accordingly be complete and instantaneous, as when someone drowning suddenly bursts forth into the air; and all faults (or sins: in Latin, *peccata*) must therefore be equal, for even if one person is only a hand's breadth beneath the surface while another is fathoms deep, both are equally drowning. Augustine does not make it as clear as he should that reactions against these doctrines were already common in the pre-Christian Roman empire. But at least he moves beyond reciting standard objections to offering criticisms of his own:

The saying, "Who has one virtue has them all, who lacks a particular one has none," is not a divine judgment but only the judgment of human beings – of great cleverness and with time and zeal for learning, to be sure, but still human beings. But I do not know how I can deny that even a woman – to say nothing of a man (*vir*), from whom the word "virtue" (*virtus*) is derived – who remains faithful to her husband, if she does this because of God's commandment and promise and is

faithful to him above all, has chastity; nor would I say that chastity is not a virtue or only an insignificant one. And the same is true of a husband who remains faithful to his wife. Yet there are many such people, none of whom I would say is without some sin, and certainly that sin, whatever it is, comes from some vice. Hence conjugal chastity in devout men and women is unquestionably a virtue – for it is neither nothing nor is it a vice, and yet it does not have all the virtues with it. For if all the virtues were present, there would be no vice; if no vice, absolutely no sin; but who is without some sin? Who, then, is without some vice . . . ?⁷⁹

From Augustine's perspective, ancient philosophers are mistaken in thinking that any human being can be morally flawless. They are equally mistaken in believing knowledge or wisdom the foundation of all moral virtues. Virtues are not unified through wisdom; they are unified through charity. The more charity someone has, the more virtue; the more virtue, the less vice; yet no one can attain complete charity in the present life.⁸⁰ The passage from James, then, can be explained: it means that all sins are contrary to charity, and because the whole law of God depends on charity, any sin represents a failure to keep the law.⁸¹

We cannot be surprised that Augustine should reach such a conclusion, when he had already come to regard St. Paul as less than the flawless moral paragon he originally believed. Consider the implication: if even the saints among us are morally flawed, then we never meet virtues except in the company of vices. Moral progress for every one of us accordingly becomes what R. A. Markus aptly describes as "a lifelong process of convalescence," never entirely complete in our mortal lives.⁸² This may help to shed light on Augustine's description of the virtue of temperance in *De civitate Dei*:

. . . What is the activity of virtue in this life but a perpetual battle with vices, and those not external vices but internal, not vices alien to us but quite clearly our own, our very own? This is the particular struggle of that virtue called *sōphrosynē* in Greek and "temperance" in Latin, which bridles the lusts of the flesh to prevent their gaining the consent of the mind and dragging it into every kind of disgrace . . . What do we want to achieve when we will to be made perfect in the supreme good, other than an end to conflict, so that the desires of the flesh do not oppose the spirit, and there is no vice in us for the spirit to oppose? But will as we may, we lack the strength to achieve this in our present life . . .⁸³

Augustine does not mean that the struggle to control one's own emotions is intrinsically good, only that it is an ineliminable feature of our mortal lives. Nor does he adopt the pagan-philosophical conception of virtue in general or of temperance in particular, merely postponing its achievement to the afterlife. Pagan virtue is what makes a person *excellent* or *perfect*; by its very nature, only an elite few will ever attain it, and those who do will attain it only after the long years of study and self-development necessary to acquire practical wisdom. The core notion is that of successful accomplishment, founded on superior intellectual

insight. Augustine, in contrast, regards virtue as that which makes us *good*, albeit well short of perfect. Virtue is a threshold, not the end of the road of moral development, so that we are justified in considering people virtuous if they are only moving in the right direction, are steadily *trying*, and have already made noteworthy progress. The unity of the virtues in charity is a motivational unity, a unity of love, belonging far more to the will (or the “heart”) than to the mind.

Where ancient philosophers typically regard habit as the genus of virtue, Augustine tends to regard it as the enemy of virtue.⁸⁴ Moral character is not the combined product of native aptitude and appropriate habituation, much less an expression of one's success or failure in attaining wisdom. Nor does moral development follow the horticultural model, where good “root stock,” appropriate soil and climate, and other fortunate circumstances prove indispensable for the production of an outstanding, flourishing specimen. Character depends on the will, by which one might break the bonds of habit and turn away from one's own past. Hence the importance of conversion, the “turning around” that marks the decisive moment in a Christian's life.

Although the mature Augustine believed that God alone can turn someone away from her own dismal past and produce the correct orientation, he still saw in human beings a power ever capable of responding to God. We are by our very nature surprising creatures: never completely past hope of salvation, never completely beyond danger of degeneration, never thoroughly predictable to mortal observers. Given the vast human penchant for self-deception, we can never even be sure that we know ourselves, much less feel confident in predicting our own moral futures.

Augustine himself sees nothing anxiety-producing in his vision of humanity's moral condition. Were God committed to judging brute performance, as Pelagians teach, we would surely all be doomed. But because God is loving and gives full credit for progress and having “one's heart in the right place,” every one of us has reason to try her best and to hope for God's grace. The strangely democratic aspect of Augustine's ethics, often unnoticed, is that neither native intelligence, nor wealth, nor sound “parenting,” nor a well-ordered political community, nor any combination of these makes any great difference to whether we shall eventually become virtuous and attain true happiness. Without God's grace, the most brilliant, aristocratic philosophers and the most illiterate, penurious peasants are all in the same boat; and those with God's grace have no reason to feel proud.

NOTES

1 *De civ. Dei* 8.8. All translations in this essay are my own.

2 *Ibid.* 19.1–3.

3 *Ibid.* 19.1.

- 4 The three most influential schools of Hellenistic philosophy were Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Skepticism, with the last divided between Academics and Pyrrhonists. For translations of the sources and helpful commentary, see Long and Sedley 1987.
- 5 Acts 17.18–32.
- 6 Probably the best introduction to this vast topic is given in Nock 1988, esp. ch. 11–14.
- 7 Illuminating essays concerning the complex relations between Christianity and Neoplatonism can be found in Armstrong 1979. See also Frede 1997.
- 8 For insightful, detailed analysis of Hellenistic ethics see Annas 1993.
- 9 “*Beati certe esse volumus*,” a line from Cicero’s lost dialogue, the *Hortensius* (frg. 36), is quoted by Augustine in *C. Acad.* 1.2.5. Recall his report in the *Confessions* (3.4) that it was reading the *Hortensius* that converted him to philosophy.
- 10 This lesson, too, can be found in the *Hortensius* (frg. 39), quoted by Augustine in *De beata vita* 2.10, and again in *De Trin.* 13.5.8.
- 11 *De beata vita* 2.14.
- 12 *Retract.* 1.1.2.
- 13 *Ibid.* 1.1.4, 1.3.2, 1.10.1.
- 14 *Ibid.* 1.6.5, 1.2.
- 15 See e.g. *De Trin.* 13.7.10.
- 16 See e.g. *Conf.* 7.9; *De civ. Dei* 8.8–10.
- 17 Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, A124–127, in Long and Sedley 1987, 149–150.
- 18 *De Trin.* 13.8.11.
- 19 See e.g. *De lib. arb.* 3.8.
- 20 Augustine’s repeated contrast between Stoics and Epicureans unfairly presents the Epicureans as sensualists. This calumny was, however, quite common among the pagan authors Augustine read. He repeats it but hardly invented it.
- 21 Although Augustine explains in many works what he takes to be the differences between Epicureans and Stoics, his briefest, most eloquent account is given in *Sermons* 150.
- 22 *De civ. Dei* 19.20: “non absurde dici etiam nunc beatus potest, spe illa potius quam re ista.”
- 23 *De civ. Dei* 22.24.
- 24 *De civ. Dei* 11.16.
- 25 *De lib. arb.* 3.5. What some would now consider the radical devaluing of animals was common in Hellenistic philosophy. For background see Sorabji 1993.
- 26 *De civ. Dei* 11.16.
- 27 In some places, as in *De civ. Dei* 11.16, and *De lib. arb.* 3.5, Augustine refers explicitly to the intrinsic worth (*dignitas*) of human beings. In other places, he uses a passive participle, such as *amandum*, to signify more generally what is worthy or deserving of love. For an example see *De civ. Dei* 15.22 (below, n. 32).
- 28 *De vera relig.* 46, 87.
- 29 *Ibid.* 46, 88.
- 30 *De doct. christ.* 1.22.20.
- 31 *De Trin.* 9.8.13.
- 32 *De civ. Dei* 15.22: “Nam et amor ipse ordinate amandus est, quo bene amatur quod amandum est, ut sit in nobis virtus qua vivitur bene. Unde mihi videtur, quod definitio brevis et vera virtutis ordo est amoris; propter quod in sancto cantico canticorum [2.4] cantat sponsa Christi, civitas Dei: ‘Ordinate in me caritatem.’”
- 33 *De civ. Dei* 5.19.20; *Sermons* 150.5–9.
- 34 See e.g. *Ep.* 130.2.3.

- 35 *De doct. christ.* 1.26.27; *Sermons* 179A, 4; *Ep.* 155.
- 36 *De civ. Dei* 21.27; *Enchiridion de fide, spe et caritate* 76.
- 37 *Conf.* 2.8.
- 38 *De civ. Dei* 14.11; see also 1 Timothy 2.14.
- 39 *De civ. Dei* 10.5.
- 40 Matthew 26.39; *De vera relig.* 16.31–32.
- 41 See e.g. O'Donovan 1980, 93–97.
- 42 *De civ. Dei*, 14.28: “Fecerunt itaque civitates duas amores duo, terrenam scilicet amor sui usque ad contemptum Dei, caelestem vero amor Dei usque ad contemptum sui. Denique illa in se ipsa, haec in Domino gloriatur. Illa enim quaerit ab hominibus gloriam; huic autem Deus conscientiae testis maxima est gloria.”
- 43 *De civ. Dei* 19.14: “Iam vero quia duo praecipua praecepta, hoc est dilectionem Dei et dilectionem proximi, docet magister Deus, in quibus tria invenit homo quae diligat, Deum, se ipsum, et proximum, atque ille in se diligendo non errat, qui Deum diligit . . .” See also *Sermons* 179A, 4.
- 44 *De civ. Dei* 12.8–9, 15.5, 15.7.
- 45 *De Trin.* 8.8.12; *De civ. Dei* 19.17.
- 46 *Ibid.* 4.5, 19.21.
- 47 See especially *Leviathan* I, chs. 13 and 17.
- 48 For an example see *Epistola de malis doctoribus et operibus fidei et de iudicio futuro* 15, where Pelagius (or possibly one of his early disciples) offers a memorable description of the unquenchable fires and the gnawing of immortal worms that sinners will ultimately suffer.
- 49 *Ep.* 145, 4: “Inimicus ergo iustitiae est, qui poenae timore non peccat, amicus autem erit, si eius amore non peccet; tunc enim vere timebit peccare. Nam qui gehennas metuit, non peccare metuit sed ardere . . .”
- 50 Augustine reports in *Retract.* 2.43 that he wrote Books 6–10 of *De civitate Dei* partly just to debunk the idea that sacrifices to pagan gods would improve one's fortunes after death. Regarding popular belief in divine punishments in the afterlife Nock (1988) remarks, “It was not a wholly imaginary bogey from which the Epicureans sought to free mankind” (ch. 7, esp. 103); see also Brunt 1989.
- 51 In his later works, where Augustine worries that the Pelagians are exacerbating popular fears of divine punishment, he returns again and again to the profound differences between love and fear. Some examples: *De spiritu et littera* 26; *De civ. Dei* 14.9; and esp. *Sermons* 156.14–15.
- 52 *Conf.* 8.5.
- 53 *Conf.* 8.10: “Ego cum deliberabam, ut iam servirem domino deo meo, sicut diu disposueram, ego eram, qui volebam, ego, qui nolebam; ego eram. Nec plene volebam nec plene nolebam. Ideo mecum contendebam et dissipabar a me ipso, et ipsa dissipatio me invito quidem fiebat, nec tamen ostendebat naturam mentis alienae, sed poenam meae.”
- 54 For detailed discussion see Kahn 1988.
- 55 *De civ. Dei* 14.6: “Interest autem qualis sit voluntas hominis; quia si perversa est, perversos habebit hos motus; si autem recta est, non solum inculpabiles, verum etiam laudabiles erunt. Voluntas est quippe in omnibus; immo omnes nihil aliud quam voluntates sunt. Nam quid est cupiditas et laetitia nisi voluntas in eorum consensione quam volumus? Et quid est metus atque tristitia nisi voluntas in dissensione ab his quae nolumus?”

- 56 Ibid. 12.6.
- 57 Ibid. 12.7–8, 14.11–15.
- 58 *De lib. arb.* 3.17; see also *De civ. Dei* 12.6.
- 59 See, for example, Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant, trans. Ellington, 1981), sect. III.
- 60 Augustine's eudaimonism should never be mistaken for utilitarianism or some other form of consequentialism. Important distinctions are explained in Kirwan 1999.
- 61 Romans 7.18–25. In *De pecc. merit. et remis.*, written in 412 AD, Augustine acknowledges the change in his thinking about this text in *Retract.* 1.22. For more detailed discussion see Burns 1979.
- 62 *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1.30–31; *Contra Julianum* 6.23.70–73.
- 63 Matthew 5.48.
- 64 The Pelagian proposition that “If a person ought to be without sin, he can be,” formulated with impressive succinctness by Caelestius, is quoted and criticized by Augustine in *De perfectione iustitiae hominis* 3.5. For a helpful survey of Pelagian teachings see Brown 1967, 340–352, 365–397.
- 65 Augustine quotes Julian's remark in *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum* 1.78. In Roman family law, a son was “emancipated” from his father when he came of age; hence Augustine's retort (*ibid.*) that if a man is emancipated from God, he is no longer within the father's family.
- 66 *De pecc. merit. et remis.* 2.6–7, 12–17. While Augustine grants the possibility that someone could be perfect in this life through the grace of God, he insists that no one ever has been.
- 67 Augustine's favorite example is the lust felt by St. Paul against his own wishes, and to which Paul did not consent (see e.g. *De perfectione iustitiae hominis* 11.28). Related philosophical problems are explored in Mann 1998.
- 68 *Conf.* 1.7.
- 69 *De perfectione iustitiae hominis* 3.6.
- 70 *De pecc. merit. et remis.* 2.13, 2.15–16.
- 71 Ibid. 2.6.
- 72 Ibid. 2.16.
- 73 Our “oneness in Adam” runs like a leitmotif through Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings. An excellent analysis, with extensive citations of secondary literature as well as sources, is provided in Rist 1994, 121–140.
- 74 For an example of the powerful connection between Augustine's understanding of Christ and his doctrine of original sin, see *De perfectione iustitiae hominis* 7, where he claims that if a man can live without sin strictly through his own efforts, Christ died in vain.
- 75 Excerpts from scholastic texts on the inseparability of the virtues are published in Lottin 1942–1960, 3, pt. 2, 197–252; 4, pt. 3, 551–663.
- 76 For further discussion see Irwin 1996.
- 77 *Ep.* 167. Much of this letter is summarized in Langan 1979.
- 78 *Retract.* 2.45.
- 79 *Ep.* 167, 3.10: “Non enim et ista divina sententia est, qua dicitur: Qui unam virtutem habuerit, omnes habet eique nulla est, cui una defuerit. Sed hominibus hoc visum est multum quidem ingeniosis, studiosis, otiosis sed tamen hominibus. Ego vero nescio, quem ad modum dicam non dico virum, a quo denominata dicitur virtus, sed etiam

mulierem, quae viro suo servat tori fidem, si hoc faciat propter praeceptum et promissum dei eique primitus sit fidelis, non habere pudicitiam aut eam nullam vel parvam esse virtutem; sic et maritum, qui hoc idem servat uxori. Et tamen sunt plurimi tales, quorum sine aliquo peccato esse neminem dixerim, et utique illud quaecumque peccatum ex aliquo vitio venit. Unde pudicitia coniugalis in viris feminisque religiosus cum procul dubio virtus sit – non enim aut nihil aut vitium est –, non tamen secum habet omnes virtutes. Nam si omnes ibi essent, nullum esset vitium; si nullum vitium, nullum omnino peccatum; quis autem sine aliquo peccato? Quis ergo sine aliquo vitio . . . ?” See also *De pecc. merit. et remis.* 2.15.

80 *Ep.* 167.3.11.

81 *Ibid.* 167.5.16.

82 Markus 1990, 54.

83 *De civ. Dei* 19.4: “Quid hic agit [virtus] nisi perpetua bella cum vitiis, nec exterioribus, sed interioribus, nec alienis, sed plane nostris et propriis, maxime illa, quae Graece *sōphrosynē*, Latine temperantia nominatur, qua carnales frenantur libidines, ne in quaeque flagitia mentem consentientem trahant? . . . Quid autem facere volumus, cum perfici volumus fine summi boni, nisi ut caro adversus spiritum non concupiscat, nec sit in nobis hoc vitium, contra quod spiritus concupiscat? Quod in hac vita, quamvis velimus, facere non valemus . . .”

84 Augustine's views on *consuetudo* are analyzed in detail in Prendiville 1972.