



The Ethics of St. Augustine James Bissett Pratt

No other philosopher has exerted so deep and so abiding an influence upon popular thought as has St. Augustine. From his day to our own orthodox theology has been based upon his teachings. All the evangelical denominations borrow their views of God and of morals (though with some modifications) directly from St. Augustine. What he thought, therefore, on the vital question of right and wrong, in God and in man, and the influences which led him to his conclusions, are subjects of real importance even to-day.

Philosophy in St. Augustine's time, was divided into three heads: the moral, the logical, and the physical; and God, according to Augustine, is the principle of all three. He is the Good, the Truth, and the Absolutely Beautiful.

Perhaps by saying God is good I do not represent Augustine's teaching so well as I should if I reversed the expression and said Good is God. God eternally is what He is, and that is good which is in accordance with God's will. All the moral attributes we mortals acknowledge — justice, mercy, holiness, and the like — God has in absolute perfection; yet God so transcends our comprehension that His goodness is as different from our goodness as the heavens are high above the earth. All good things are good because they partake in Good — i.e., in God. And, "discarding these derived goods, conceive, if you can, the good in itself, and it is God which you conceive."

God is righteousness itself; that which He does is right and that is right which He does. Obedience to His will, moreover, is the criterion of right for all His creatures. But Augustine does not stop here as so many theologians do. He adds, It is our duty to do the will of God because His will is our deepest will too. No moral law forced on us entirely from without and foreign to our nature could be morally binding on us. "Departure from God would be no vice unless in a nature whose property it was to abide in God." (*De Civitate Dei*) Even the arch fiend can be called sinful only because it was originally his deepest will to abide in God, and he disobeyed the commands of his own nature; "for if sin be natural it is not sin at all."

What then is sin? This brings us to the great problem of evil, the central point in Augustine's philosophy.

The Manichaeans taught that evil was a substance, a component part of the world, a second and independent principle opposed to God. The Platonists said that matter was evil and that it was eternal and uncreated. Neither of these dualistic views could Augustine accept. Nothing but God could be independent and self-existent, for all things were created by Him. But, the Manichaeans maintained, if God made all things He must have made evil, and so He cannot be good. No, responded Augustine, that does not follow. God made all things yet He did not make evil; and this because evil is not a thing. Evil is entirely negative. It is not a substance but the corruption of substance, the privation of being. "All nature in so far as it is nature is good. For if it is incorruptible it is better than a corruptible nature; and if it is corruptible, since in corruption it becomes less good, it without doubt is good. But all nature is corruptible or incorruptible. Consequently all nature is good." (*De Libera Arbitrio*.) Augustine would say "Whatever is right", and would probably add, Whatever is not is wrong. All being is good, and since God

made only that which is, not that which is not, He cannot be held responsible for evil.

But to be more explicit: evil is a turning away from God, the source of all being — who alone in the fullest sense is — to something which has less of reality, and this turning away is due not to God but to the free will of man. The Manichaeans had said the will was not free, and against this Augustine vehemently protested, as, only by making the will free could the existence of evil, even in this negative form, be regarded as compatible with the goodness of God. Free will is a good and the good God must have given it to the angels and to Adam at creation. And if one objects that the angels who were to fall were given a will such that they would turn from God and that God therefore is responsible, Augustine answers, No! a free will is a free will. That is, it is an efficient, uncaused cause. For if you persist in demanding a cause for the will you only go back to another will, and as there is as much need for asking the reason for this will you are driven backward in an endless regress and never reach a resting place. The free evil will is therefore an uncaused cause.

Moreover the very existence of evil depends on the freedom of the will; “without it there could be neither good nor bad action.” “Whatever be the cause of the will, if one cannot resist it, one yields to it without sin.” (*De Lib. Ar.*) The whole system of Christian theology stands or falls with freedom. “Punishment is unjust and recompense becomes nonsense if man has not a free will.” (*De Lib. Ar.*) It is the will, therefore, and the will alone, that is essentially evil. The thing toward which the evil will turns is neither evil nor good. Nothing is evil but the evil will.

We have seen that the Manichaean doctrine of necessity drove Augustine to elaborate and fortify the doctrine of freedom on which his ethical system was founded. Now no sooner had he finished with the Manichaeans than he found himself in trouble with the Pelagians. The Pelagians made freedom the central point of their doctrines and carried it out to its logical and extreme conclusions — conclusions which Augustine thought subversive to all sound doctrine.

It is possible that when Augustine took up the cudgels in behalf of freedom against the Manichaeans he did not foresee the logical end of the struggle. For if the will is free to choose good or evil then it is possible for us to be good in our own strength, grace is not essential, the redemption was not absolutely necessary, and the power of the church is materially decreased and its sacraments are no longer indispensable. Pelagius and his coadjutor Celestius had the hardihood to follow out this doctrine of freedom even to these lengths; and Augustine felt that here was greater danger to the true faith than even from Manichaeism, and that it was his duty to destroy this new heresy in the germ. Yet a decided difficulty confronted him; for if he admitted freedom how could he consistently avoid the conclusions of the Pelagians? How could freedom and saving grace both be retained?

Briefly it was done in this way: God, said Augustine, gave Adam perfect freedom to choose both good and evil. Adam chose evil and was justly punished by the corruption of his nature and the consequent loss of freedom to choose the good. Now Adam was the representative of the race and all his descendants sinned in him and justly inherited from him his corrupted nature and his inability to choose the right. Therefore, as all men are necessarily sinners, it would only be just if all were eternally damned. But, God out of his mercy has provided for some a way of escape by sending His Son, the Second Person in the Trinity, to offer Himself as an atoning sacrifice and so to satisfy divine justice. As a result of this, God is enabled by the application of grace and of the water of baptism to save certain members of this corrupted and undeserving race whom from all eternity he foreknew and elected unto life. Nor are the elect chosen from any merit of their own, but purely by the will of God. The rest, the great majority of the race, are to receive throughout eternity the punishment which all deserved.

This question of freedom and grace Augustine made, especially in his later years, the vital point of his philosophy. And we ought to consider it somewhat in detail.

And first as to Adam's fall. How was it possible, the Pelagians asked, that we all sinned in Adam? To this Augustine responded that just how we sinned in him was a mystery; but that we did so was proved by many passages of Scripture, such as "In Adam all die" etc. Moreover it was only natural that he, being the representative and progenitor of the race, should transmit his corrupted nature to his descendants. If Augustine had held the generation of souls, the inheritance of original sin would have been much simpler; but at any rate our bodies were descended from Adam, and as he was the first of the race he stood for it and the results of his action were inherited along with our bodies and our animal natures. "God, in fact, the Author of natures and not of vices, created man pure, but man corrupted by his own nature and justly condemned, engendered children corrupted and condemned like himself. We were truly all in him. We had not yet received our individual essence, but the germ from which we were to come already was, and as it already was, and as it was corrupted by sin and bound by a just condemnation, man being born of man could not be born in any other condition." (*De Civ. Dei*) "For nothing else could be born from them (Adam and Eve) than that which they themselves had been." (*De Civ. Dei*) "Thus from the bad use of freedom there originated the whole train of evil" which leads to eternal damnation, — 'those only being excepted who are freed by the grace of God.' (*De Civ. Dei*)

Both Pelagius and Augustine appealed to facts to support their doctrines. Consciousness showed, Pelagius maintained, that we had the freedom of choice; this was the fundamental presupposition of a large part of our thinking. Augustine, on the other hand, pointed out the universality of sin and argued from this that it was not an accident but a fundamental part of human nature. The will was thoroughly corrupted; man of his own strength could not be perfect. No absolutely sinless person could be found. Truly there was a law in our members warring against the law of our mind and bringing us into captivity to the law of sin. Moreover we can see plainly that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children. The laws of heredity, as we would call them, are like the laws of Fate. You can never escape them and you know it. The consciousness of every man bears witness to the corruption of his nature. The blighting, damning effect of original sin is terribly inevitable. Augustine would never admit that he had entirely given up free will; for he himself in his controversy with the Manichaeans had founded his doctrine of evil upon it. The will was still free, he maintained, but "the will makes use of its freedom only for evil and could not do the good without the help of grace." (*De Civ*) Freedom, he says, consists in the power to do as we will. But what we will is determined. We cannot have the power of choice, for that would give too much power to our nature and make good and evil actions spring from the same root. The choice must have a cause and the two real causes are original sin and grace. Man is nevertheless responsible for his actions because he does what he does with his will and not against it.

The Pelagians pressed the matter still further and maintained that what Augustine described as freedom was not freedom at all and that a man must be free to choose either good or evil, or he could not be called either good or bad. To this Augustine responded that good and evil were not conditioned by any such form of freedom. For if that were the only sort of freedom, God and the saints could not be considered free, since they were above the possibility of evil. Free will is not the power of choice; it is, to be exact, "movement of the soul which without outward constraint bears itself toward something it does not wish to lose or wishes to attain." There are three kinds of freedom: that of God, the good angels, and the saints, who are free to do right but not to do wrong; that of Adam before the fall, who was free to do either right or wrong; that of unregenerated men after the fall, who are free to do wrong but not to do right. But "as in Adam all die so in Christ shall all be made alive."

The salvation made possible through the Redemption is applied by means of grace which

is given to the elect and to the elect only; and those to whom this grace is not given, cannot do right. "To turn toward God, that is for us impossible without His excitation and without His help." (*De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione*) The most perfect man without grace cannot do right any more than the most perfect eye can see without light.

Those to whom grace is to be given were from all eternity foreknown and predestinated by God. Their number is definite and cannot be increased or diminished. Those who are elected and predestined to salvation will be saved; the rest will be damned. If there are some who obey but who are elected to death, they will find themselves destitute of the strength necessary to obey, in order that they may cease to obey. The eternal decrees of God are not to be altered by the actions of any mortals. "The human race is so apportioned that in some is displayed the efficacy of merciful grace, in the rest the efficacy of just retribution. For both could not be displayed in all; for if all had remained under punishment of just condemnation there would have been seen in no one the mercy of redeeming grace. And on the other hand, if all had been transferred from darkness to light the severity of retribution would have been manifest in none. But many more are left under punishment than are delivered from it, in order that it may thus be shown what was due to all." (*De Civ*) Those who are elected unto life are no more worthy than those who are elected unto death. It is not for our merits we are chosen; the only basis of choice is the will of God. "Otherwise grace would not be Grace; for Grace is thus called because it is given freely." "It is, then, not in virtue of their merits nor by free will that men are restored, but by grace. The good will comes from God. Repentance itself is the gift of God." (*Encheiridion*) "Within the number of the elect, even those who have led the worst lives are by the goodness of God led to repentance." "The first desire of the good is inspired by God in such a manner that man absolutely does not commence to turn from evil to good if it is not brought about in him by the spontaneous and gratuitous pity of God." (*Contra duas Epistolas Pelagianorum*) "God in fact operates in the hearts of men to incline their wills where He pleases, either to good according to His mercy, or to evil according to their merits." (*De Gratia et Libero Arbitrio*) "None would be exempt from punishment which he merits if he were not delivered by a grace he does not merit, and such is the division of men that one sees in some free pity, in the rest just vengeance." (*De Civ*)

The elect, moreover, cannot possibly fail of salvation. No man, to be sure, need accept grace if he does not want to; but the power of God is so great that he will want to. Grace in short is "insurmountable." "The faith of the elect which Worketh by love either never faileth, or, if it does, is repaired before life is ended; and, all intervening iniquity blotted out, perseverance unto the end is imparted to them." (*De Corruptione*) God makes men to persevere in good." "God makes whom He will religious." "Man never does good things which God does not make him do."

But while the elect are to be saved by receiving the grace of God they can receive it only through the sacraments of the church, especially through baptism. In this act the nature is purified, the corruption of the will is done away, and the ability to do right is restored. Of course none of those predestined to life will fail of it for lack of baptism, and God brings it about that all the elect shall be baptized. And so one can say with assurance that outside the church there is no possibility of salvation. There is only one exception to this. If a man die unbaptized but confessing Christ this confession is of the same efficacy for pardon as if he had been baptized. But this is an extreme case, and if there is an opportunity for baptism mere confession will not save. And good works without baptism of course will not save; for only baptism can, in a mysterious manner, purge the nature and remove the curse of original sin.

To say that none outside of the church are saved is not the same thing as saying that all within the church are saved. On the contrary, a large proportion of those who have received the

sacraments are elected unto death. And no one, not even the holiest, can tell whether or not he is among God's chosen few; for if he knew it, the knowledge might make him proud and sinful. This uncertainty, of course, extends only to those within the church; it is easy enough to tell where all others belong. And inasmuch as within the church alone is there any sort of safety, it behooves all those without it to be baptized and received within the Catholic faith.

All those whom God has not predestined unto life will receive the due reward of their guilty natures and be eternally punished. "Those who are not delivered by grace, either because they could not yet hear, or because they did not wish to obey, or because their age did not permit them to hear; these, not having received the baptism of regeneration which they might have received in order to be saved, are justly condemned." (*De Natura et Gratia*) "But for the rest (those not elected unto life) where are they but in that mass of perdition where the Divine Justice most justly leaves them? — where the Tyrians are and the Sidonians are, who would have been able to believe if they had seen the miracles of Christ; but who, inasmuch as faith was not destined for them, were denied the means of faith as well." (*De Dono Perseverantia*)

The punishment of the damned will be eternal. It must be measured not by the time of their acts but by the nature of their wills. And as they would have wished to enjoy pleasure eternally it is just that they should be punished eternally. And still the condemned soul ought to be grateful to God, for it exists, and existence in any form is better than non-existence.

There may perhaps be degrees in punishment; the infant who dies at birth will not suffer so much as the criminal. Still "for heathen unbaptized children there is no hope in the world to come of ever seeing God. Their punishment may be a thing of degrees, but it will be endless." (*De Civ*) It is only right that infants should be punished, for it is evident that they take the nature of their parents; and as their parents' nature is corrupt, theirs must be. The same may be said of the heathen. To be sure, Augustine says in one striking passage, "All those who having believed in God since the foundation of the world and having had some knowledge of Him have lived in piety and justice, keeping the Commandments, have without doubt been saved by Him." (*Epistole*) Yet this does not refer to the heathen. For however virtuous they may have seemed, such as Fabius, Scipio, Pythagoras, and Plato, their virtues were but "splendid vices," without justice, since justice is impossible without faith. For justice means belief in God — not in any God, but in the one true God — and gratitude to Him. And as these men never heard of the true God they cannot have had faith, and so cannot have been just. "The heathen who have not had the faith of Christ are not just and do not please God, to whom it is impossible to be pleasing without faith. Fabricius will be punished less than Catiline not because he was good but because Catiline was bad; and if Fabricius was less impious than Catiline it is not because he had any real virtues, but because he was not so far removed from the real virtues." (*Contra Julianum Pelagianorum*)

If now one says, as the Pelagians did, that it is not just that the heathen and unbaptized children should be punished, Augustine replies that it would be only just if the whole race were condemned to eternal punishment, and that it is only through the infinite mercy of God that any are saved. But if one presses the question and says that it cannot be just to punish a man whose will is not free, Augustine falls back on the answer that it is a mystery. God's ways are not our ways, neither are His thoughts our thoughts. God's justice is incomprehensible, it is not like our justice and cannot be measured by human standards. We only know that somehow or other His will is perfectly just. And we must stop there.

This in short is Augustine's teaching as to the basis of Right, Sin, and Punishment.

Augustine's doctrine of Right he did not get from the church but apparently worked it out by himself, combining in it the best of Greek and Christian ethics. It is in my opinion not only one of the best things in Augustine's philosophy but also the soundest ethical theory that I know. I

will briefly give my reasons for prizing it so highly.

What, then, is the basis of right? The average theologian of Augustine's day and of our own would respond, Obedience to the will of God. But why obey the will of God? Because He is mighty and will punish disobedience? If you say Yes you have shifted your basis of right from God's will either to might or to the avoidance of suffering, and you tacitly admit that if the devil were the mightiest we ought to obey him. But

you may respond No, we ought to obey God because He is good. And again you have shifted your ground; for in saying this you have admitted a criterion outside of God's will by which His will is judged good. The real basis and criterion of right must evidently be sought elsewhere.

If you say that the criterion of right must be the fulfillment of the demands of the greatest number I ask why ought I to fulfill these demands? And if you respond, Because they will bring about the greatest good to the whole, I ask again, Why is it my duty to seek any one's good but my own? And you cannot answer me without retreating to some new criterion.

In like manner hedonism will never be able to show why pleasure as such should be the chief object of endeavor; nor can the Christian doctrine of gratitude to God answer our persistent "Why?" And the same criticism, I maintain, holds of every system of ethics. However logical they may pretend to be, when you have traced them back as far as they will go, there is always an unanswered Why staring you in the face. As Mr. Arthur Balfour says, "If a proposition announcing obligation requires proof at all, one term of that proof must always be a proposition announcing obligation which itself requires no proof." "If we have a moral system at all there must be contained in it at least one ethical proposition of which no proof can be given or required."

If, therefore, we are to have any basis for our ethics it must be in a region where no answer to the eternal Why is required. And this region can be found nowhere but in the will of the individual. This is, of course, to take refuge in the autonomy of the will and in the ethics of Aristotle. Why ought I to live consistently with my own deepest nature? Why do I like one thing rather than another? Why do I seek for good at all? There is no answer to any of these questions; but the questions, themselves are impertinent. We have reached here an ultimate fact which we must merely accept; we can never get beyond our deepest instinctive nature.

Nothing is good apart from the will. Everything is good so far as it satisfies the will. And the highest good for each man is that which most fully satisfies his most fundamental will. If it is not really my inmost will to obey God there is no sense in which it can be said to be my duty to obey Him. Duty is not a thing that can be forced on me from without. The fundamental basis for all right for me must be found in my own nature.

Perhaps I have read into Augustine more than he really thought, but if I am not mistaken this is what he meant when he said: "Departure from God would be no vice unless in a nature whose property it was to abide in God," and, "If sin be natural it is not sin at all."

But if we accept this view we must not be blind to its logical consequences. If consistency with one's nature be the criterion of right, then it will follow that each man is the measure of morality to himself, and that to a man whose nature was fundamentally impure, impurity would be right and purity wrong. There is no escaping this admission. And I see no way of reconciling the autonomy of the will with the universality of any ethical law except the way that Augustine took; namely, to postulate that, while the basis of right for each man is his own nature, the natures of all men are fundamentally the same; that while we differ in innumerable particulars, the deepest will in us all is identical. Thus the applicability of ethical laws is made universal. But something more than this is needed to give morality the authority which it should have, and this Augustine gives by saying that we are fundamentally alike because we are all made in the image of our Creator; that the deepest will in us is also the will of God. And so a divine sanction

is given to our moral convictions, and the deepest thing in the universe becomes the distinction between right and wrong as we know right and wrong.

I cannot close this essay without saying something on Augustine's doctrine of freedom and grace, although the criticisms to which it is open must be obvious to everyone. The metaphysical question of freedom I will not discuss. It is very possible that we are not free; the majority of philosophers have agreed with Augustine on this point. It is the ethical aspect of freedom that is of importance in considering Augustine's philosophy, and we must consider it here.

And first of all, Is goodness possible without freedom of choice? The natural answer is the one which the Pelagians gave, namely, that goodness depends entirely upon freedom. It seems to me that in this answer goodness has been confused with merit. Goodness, in my opinion, does not depend on free will. It is easy to conceive of perfect goodness, without any real possibility of evil. God is good but it is inconceivable that He should do wrong. A man who loved good so thoroughly that evil could have no attraction for him, but would be to him absolutely and always as disagreeable and repulsive as pain, one who had even no theoretic ability to do wrong, such a man would still be thoroughly good. And a man who loved evil so that he could not possibly do right, the law of whose members perpetually conquered the law of his mind with absolutely irresistible force, a man who had even theoretically no power to avoid evil, such a man would still be thoroughly bad.

And yet neither of these men would have any merit or demerit. Good as the former might be, it would be as absurd to praise or reward him for his goodness as it would be to praise or reward a normal human being for not killing his mother. So, too, while we call God good we cannot say He is meritorious. In like manner we could not blame the bad man. There seem, therefore, to be two ethical standards, one of goodness and one of merit; and while merit is impossible without freedom, goodness is independent of freedom.

Augustine, therefore, was not inconsistent when he said that we were wicked in spite of the fact that we could not do right. But he was wrong when he said that though we were not free still our sins were our own fault and that we would justly be punished for them. Punishment under such circumstances would be as unjust as punishment of the innocent. For if we cannot but do evil the blame does not belong to us but to Him who made us as we are.

If, therefore, we are not free to choose the right, God is responsible for our sin. No juggling with Adam's fall and inherited guilt can change the fact. If God sends us into the world so corrupted that we cannot help sinning, it is not our fault but His. — And this whether our corrupted natures are given us without reason or as a punishment for the sin of our progenitor. And to punish us for such sins is injustice if anything is. In another connection Augustine himself says: "Punishment is unjust and recompense becomes nonsense if man has not a free will." Nor can Augustine avoid this plain result by appealing to a mystery. To say that God's justice is incomprehensible is to say nothing; to say it is different from ours is to say it is not justice at all.

See, then, how Augustine, to uphold the power of his church, has painted the character of God. Before all eternity, He determined to create a world of free human beings. He foresaw that the first pair would make use of their freedom to sin and that He would punish the sin by taking away freedom both from them and from their descendants. Out of His infinite mercy He then chose by caprice certain individuals whom He would save by "irresistible" grace and by the application of the waters of baptism. All others He foreordained should be unable to do right. Foreknowing all this, He created His world. The race fell and all men sinned as He knew they would. And against all but those few whom He had chosen, His righteous vengeance was kindled — against some because their natures, corrupted as a punishment for their ancestor's sin, led them into evil, against others because He had denied them an opportunity of believing

in Him, against others because they died in infancy before being baptized. All these three classes of persons, therefore, constituting the great bulk of the race, will be eternally damned in hell for their infinite guilt — even as God from all eternity foreordained.

The necessity of grace and the consequent loss of freedom by man, Augustine deliberately made the crucial, pivotal doctrine in his religious philosophy. And it has poisoned all the rest. If he had been frankly and avowedly a determinist throughout, his system would at least have been consistent. But desire to keep both freedom and determinism has filled it with self-contradictions. We are free and yet not free, like the Trinity who are one yet not one. The elect are above all possibility of sin, yet cannot know they are elected or they would sin. Evil is founded on freedom, yet there is no freedom. Sin cannot be natural, yet it is natural. Religious effort is necessary, yet it is not necessary, since everything is determined from all eternity, and we cannot change the result. God is merciful, yet He condemns to eternal punishment innocent babes for the lack of a few drops of water. He is just, yet He damns multitudes of men because He has “inclined their wills to evil.”

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