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## Augustine's ethics

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How to cite:

Chappell, Timothy (2014). Augustine's ethics. In: Stump, Eleonore and Meconi, David eds. The Cambridge Companion to Augustine (2nd ed). Cambridge Companions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 189–207.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/philosophy/classical-philosophy/cambridge-companion-augustine-2nd-edition?f>

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## Augustine's Ethics

The adorned figure of the Emperor, throned among the thirty score of prelates, hearing and declaring with them the witness of all the churches to the apostolic tradition, signifies many things. There the acceptance of time was completely manifested; there a new basis—a metaphysical basis—was ordained for society. The Roman past was rejected; the effort of the Middle Ages was begun. Intellect was accepted; marriage was accepted; ordinary life was accepted. The early vision of St. Peter was found to have wider meanings than had been supposed: “what I have cleansed that call not thou common”. The nature of the Church had not changed... It remained reconciliation and sin redeemed; “my Eros is crucified”; “Another is in me.” It was declared now by all the magnificence of this world, by the all-but-idol of the episcopate. It had become a Creed, and it remained a Gospel. (Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: a history of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (London: Longman's, 1939), p.37)

### 1. The historical context

What Constantine was in the practice of politics, St Augustine was in the theory. With Charles Williams we may say that through Constantine at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), the Christian church became (and I choose the words with care) a worldly order. It became that concrete reality in the public world of human life that, for at least the next thousand years, it was indisputably to be in every part of the Roman or post-Roman world that evaded annexation by Islamic conquistadors, and in many places still is today. For good and for ill—for a very great deal of both—Constantine's achievement was no less than to invent Christendom. Here as elsewhere in theology, the theory followed the practice: the first great theorist of the Christendom inaugurated by Constantine (272-337 AD) is Augustine (354-430 AD), and the central text of his theorising, *De civitate Dei*, “On the city of God”, was completed almost exactly 100 years after Nicaea, in 427 AD.

Two basic problems faced Constantine as a policy-maker. The first was to maintain stability and continuity. This Constantine did in the only way possible in the circumstances, by introducing fundamental change and discontinuity. Thus a private if widespread sect became an imperial and soon a universal church, the emperor himself became an *isapostolos*. Likewise, the keynote of the *City of God* is that the only way for the Romans to stay fundamentally the same is for them to change fundamentally.

One guiding question of the *City of God* is the deeply Constantinian, and Byzantine, question: What is it to be truly Roman? The Romans' own moral tradition, Augustine argues (see especially *City* 4.8-34), is immanently charged with pointers away from the moral and metaphysical confusion, superficiality, and incoherence of their own traditional paganism, towards the clarity and profundity of an ethical monotheism which, once fully understood, turns out to be no less than Catholic Christianity. History, Augustine argues in the *City of God* (especially Books 1-5, 15-18), has a meaning and a direction: its meaning is God's plan, and its direction is towards God's eternal city. This central Augustinian idea, the idea of progress that he forged out of his reading of Roman and Old-Testament history and from the progressivism of the New Testament, is a commonplace in our meliorist culture. It was a novelty to

pessimistic and cyclically-minded pagans, such as many of Augustine's first readers. We might almost say that in the *City of God* Augustine invented the idea of progress. Though Augustine himself—like Hegel, he is the most tradition-minded of progressivists—would undoubtedly (and rightly) have insisted that he was only refining what was already there.

Constantine's second problem was to find a common measure between the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal. How was the church, standing as it did as a sign of the end of the age, also to stand *within* the age—as, in the absence of an immediate apocalypse, it was becoming clear it must? How was the mystics' measureless longing *away* from the world to be modelled by practical policy *in* the world? Above all, what is the proportion between God's infinite initiative and any puny response to him that humans can possibly make? This problem too, in a variety of philosophical inflections, is Augustine's problem. To it Augustine the theorist, no less than Constantine the practical politician—no less than the rest of us since—found no stable satisfactory solution.

## 2. Augustine's personality

We might even say that Augustine himself is a symptom of this incommensurability: that just as there are two cities, so too there is a heavenly Augustine and an Augustine who is of the earth, earthly. The *Confessions* abounds in evidence that Augustine himself is a kind of mystic, even a kind of poet (perhaps *malgré lui*, given his frequent sharp words about the poets (e.g. *City* 1.4)). Ultimately his gaze is turned away from the world not towards it; nothing matters more to him than the direct experience of God.

The mystic, however, is also a controversialist; the gentle rhapsodist of the soul's ascent is also a hectoring professor of oratory. (Augustine happily appeals to Plato as backing for his own criticisms of poetry; he is quieter about Plato's equally critical attitude to rhetoric.) Augustine's close contemporary and correspondent St Jerome (347-420 AD) famously dreamt that he protested to a chorus of angels "I am a Christian!": to which the angels damningly replied "No, you are a Ciceronian". The angels had a point. Jerome often copies Cicero's bad philosophical habits—verbal bullying, heavy-handed hyperbole, unconvincing bluster, mere abuse; indeed these bad habits were still lowering the IQ of debate as late as St. Thomas More and Erasmus. The taint of Ciceronian mediocrity is evident in Augustine's writings too. The model that he tells us he made of Cicero (*Conf* 3.4) was an unfortunate one; Augustine had more philosophical acumen in his little finger than Cicero had in his entire body. The irony—to add a touch of Ciceronian *ad hominem*—is that Cicero was himself an obvious if rather unsuccessful instance of what Augustine plausibly diagnoses (*City* 1.1) as the paradigmatic Roman fault, *libido dominandi*, the urge to dominate others. Well might we wish that the young Augustine had had ready access to (and aptitude for) Plato's books and almost none to Cicero's, instead of, as he tells us (*Conf* 1.14, 7.9), *vice versa*.

It matters, when we try to make philosophical sense of Augustine, that—Ciceronian or not—he is as far as he could possibly be from what seems to be much of modern philosophy's stylistic ideal: that the author should be a nonentity, invisible in his or

her own text. Augustine is never less than a boisterous authorial presence, always as vividly *there* in his writings as another of his masters, St Paul. Like St Paul, Augustine knows both how to delight a reader, and how to madden him. What he does not know is how to bore him. In this too Augustine is quite unlike many moderns.

Perhaps Augustine's own multiply-inflected dualism tended to legitimate this personality-division between Augustine the serene contemplative and Augustine the bruiser of a bishop. As above, it was part of the heritage of Constantine that we have to live in the world, as well as learning to transcend it. We have to do what we can of the impossible task in which only the Messiah himself, the divine Word or ratio, could possibly succeed in full: the task of commensurating the infinite with the finite. Impossible; yet sometimes with Augustine—as with plenty of others—failure seems a little too easily accepted, one way or the other.

Successfully or not, we see three examples of Augustine at work on practical-ethical issues in sections 3-5.

### **3. Just war and the *ordo amorum***

It is no accident that Augustine is generally accounted, among other things, one of the first proponents in Christian ethics of “just war theory”. Wandering mendicant idealists, Jesus for instance, might insist that “those who live by the sword shall die by the sword” (Mt. 26.52), or enjoin their followers to turn the other cheek (Mt. 5.39). In the first- and second-century church, these teachings were commonly taken to imply a universally-binding injunction. But Augustine sees clearly that a church which has become an integral part of an imperial order simply cannot live like that, any more than Israel and Judah in the Old Testament lived like that (or indeed died like that). Offences must come, and when they come—it is licit to defend ourselves from them.

Outside the Christian tradition, accounts of the conditions under which war can justly be begun or waged can already be found in or extrapolated from Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Politics*, Thucydides' *Histories*, and in plenty of other places. Cicero's *De officiis* includes a particularly explicit discussion (1.34-41; cp. 3.107-111) on which Augustine evidently drew; Cicero also reminds us that a code of war, and a religious ritual for declaring war, was part of the customary morals of Rome—the *ius fetiale* (1.36).

The presence of just-war thinking in the pagan world is unsurprising. Given the initial assumption, almost universal in that world, that just people will be found fighting wars, it is merely banal to remark that they may be expected to do so justly. What is surprising is that Christianity should find a home for the initial assumption. Augustine's own teacher St Ambrose (337-397) was one of the first to take a just-war line, and the expediencies that moved him towards it are obvious enough to anyone who reads Ambrose's *De fide ad Gratianum Augustum*, written as its name tells us for the emperor Gratian (in 378 AD, as he was on his way to war). Ambrose's book is mainly about the Trinity, with only the slightest patina of argument for the justness of some war-making—for instance Gratian's.

If these slight *obiter dicta* are enough to make Ambrose a “just war theorist”, then Augustine certainly qualifies: he has many more *obiter dicta* than Ambrose, making more more-substantial points about the conditions for a permissible war. We should perhaps be more sparing with the word “theorist” than that, and insist that there was no true *theory* of just war until the canon lawyers collected and made a system out of these incidental remarks, over 700 years after Augustine's death. Perhaps we should even save talk of a *theory* of just war for another century after that, until the time (c.1240 AD) of St Thomas' treatise on war in *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae.40—where Aquinas obligingly quotes a whole string of relevant remarks by Augustine, probably because he has some canon-lawyer epitomiser open at his elbow.<sup>1</sup>

Still, the scatteredness and unsystematicity of Augustine's remarks about just war does not lessen their interest. As a softening-up exercise against those who are adamant that Christians must be pacifists, Augustine notes (*Epistola* 138) that when soldiers ask Jesus how they should live, what he tells them is not to engage in extortion, and to be happy with their wages (Lk 3.15)—which falls a long way short of telling them to give up soldiery. In *QQ in Hept.* 4.10 Augustine makes the fundamental point that is the basis for the second and third of Aquinas' three criteria of *ius ad bellum* (just cause and right intention): he says that a war cannot be just unless its aim is to put right (or punish) some wrong. He reiterates this in *Epistola* 189, adding the further (potentially sinister) thought that wars can be undertaken for the good of those attacked: “when being defeated takes away someone's freedom to act wickedly, it does him good”. A just war, he notes in the same Letter, is necessarily aimed at the consequence of peace (cp. *City* 19.12). In *Contra Faustum* 22.75 he foreshadows the first of Aquinas' three criteria of *ius ad bellum*, by insisting that a just war must be declared by a legitimate authority. In *Contra Faustum* 22.70 he takes the legitimate-authority point so far as to claim that “living by the sword” (Mt 26.52) means taking up arms *without* due authority—which may seem like stretching a point.

It is from Augustine's just-war teaching that we get the Latin tag familiar in contemporary medical ethics, *primum non nocere*, “above all do no harm”.<sup>2</sup> It is a tag more usually recited than cited (properly), but here it is in its original context (*City* 19.14, my own translation):

Our divine teacher gives us these two master-teachings—the love of God, and the love of our neighbour. In those teachings, man finds three whom he may love: God, himself, his neighbour; and he who loves God will not go wrong in loving himself. Since he has been told to love his neighbour as himself, it follows that he will counsel his neighbour (his wife, for instance, and his children, and his servants, and whatever other people he is able to) to love God, and that conversely he will be willing for his neighbour to give him this counsel, should he need it. Through this disposition he will be in peace with every man, so far as in him lies. That is, he will be in the peace of humanity, which is an ordered agreement with the following content: first that

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1 Another convenient list is Jonathan Barnes' (1982: 771): “the main Augustinian texts [on the just war], in chronological order, are *Contra Faustum* 22.74-8; *Epistola* 138; *De civitate Dei* 15.4, 19.7, 19.12-15; *Epistola* 189; *Sermon* 302; *QQ in Hept.* 4.44, 6.10; *Epistola* 289.” All except the *City of God* texts are cited in *ST* 2a.2ae.40.

2 As it is generally rendered; perhaps a little misleadingly, since Augustine is laying down a necessary condition for right action, not a goal at which it should aim.

he should harm no one, and then that he should also help whoever he can. And the first part of this is that he should look after his own. For whether by the order of nature or by the order of human society itself, he has more convenient and easy access to advising them than others.

Even in the context of expounding a just-war doctrine, Augustine insists here on the absolutely anti-Hobbesian view that peace is the natural condition of human life; his thesis is that no just person will leave that condition, and enter a state of with others, except when he is forced to by others (who will then *ipso facto* be acting unjustly).

The passage is notable for at least two other points too. First, it shows us where Augustine would stand in a familiar modern debate about partiality: in the last sentence he enounces a nearest-and-dearest-first view, though interestingly, he is non-committal about whether the basis for the partiality that he endorses is social or natural. Secondly, the passage is an expression of Augustine's famous doctrine of the *ordo amorum*, his view that there is a hierarchy of value among the things that we might love, and that right living means having a corresponding hierarchy in our loving (*City* 19.13; cp. *De doctrina Christiana* 1.27): “The peace of all things is the tranquillity of order, and order is a disposition to give their places to all things equal and unequal” .

It is against this background, incidentally, that Augustine offers what may be his best-known piece of moral advice: *dilige, et quod vis fac*—“Love, and do what you will” (*Homilies on 1 John*, 7.8). E.M.Forster's old Mr Emerson<sup>3</sup> and Augustine can happily agree that good character leads effortlessly to good action. What Augustine and Mr Emerson do not agree on is what it takes for a character to be good. I don't know about Mr Emerson's, but Augustine's answer to this latter question we see above: it is that a character cannot be good without being truly aligned with the *ordo amorum*.

Most characteristically of all in Augustine's reflections on the notion of a just war—to come back to those—Augustine of course admits that war is at home in the earthly city, not the heavenly (*City* 15.4). And he notes carefully the sheer brutal awfulness of war more than once in *City*. (There is a marvellously eloquent passage about this at *City* 19.7. And the whole vast work opens as it were amid the smoking embers of a fallen Rome, with comparisons with other sackings of other ancient cities, and a curious tone of “It could have been worse” which perhaps arises because Augustine is thinking of the pagan element in his audience—and the Christian element in the Arian Goths who did the sacking.)

Augustine also, elsewhere, poses the question: what is the *real* evil in war? Not the *killing*, he tells us in *Contra Faustum* 22.74. Rather, it is the wicked passions that war unleashes.

What is the evil in war? Is it the death of some who will soon die in any case, that others may live in peaceful subjection? This is merely cowardly aversion, not any religious feeling. The real evils in war are love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, the lust to dominate (*libido dominandi*), and such like; and it is generally to punish these things, when force is required to inflict the punishment, that, in obedience to God or some lawful authority, good men undertake wars.

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3 Old Mr Emerson quotes Augustine's dictum in James Ivory's 1985 film of E.M.Forster's *A Room With A View*; he does not in the book itself.

Jesus stressed the heart as the source of all real goodness and wickedness (Mt. 15.19, 6.21). Likewise Augustine insists that what is morally crucial in war is what goes on in the psyche of the warrior. This too is an application of Augustine's distinction between the two cities, the earthly and the heavenly: it is only what pertains to the heavenly that *really* matters. It is also, of course, an application of Augustine's doctrine of the *ordo amorum*: since the things of the spirit are more important than the things of the body, we are bound to love them or care about them more.

#### 4. The *ordo amorum* and sexuality

A crude summary of Augustine's last-quoted remarks might be: It's all right to kill in war, provided you don't enjoy it. Would it be fair to offer an equally crude summary of Augustine's views about sex—that it's all right to have (marital)<sup>4</sup> intercourse, provided you don't enjoy it?

In fact, Augustine's views are only summarisable this way if *libido* and/ or *cupiditas* should be translated as “enjoyment”. But there is no good argument in favour of this translation, and there is good argument against it. Certainly Augustine's endorsement of the thesis that sexual pleasure is good is less than ringing (*De bono coniugali* 8). Yet he clearly did not hold that sexual pleasure as such is bad; only that *disordered* sexual pleasure is bad. *Libido* and *cupiditas* are his words for “disordered sexual pleasure”. Indeed these (especially *libido*) are his words for disordered pleasure in general, not necessarily sexual: “[*Libido*] is rightly defined as an appetite of the soul whereby *any* kind of good things in this world are preferred to eternal goods” (*De mendacio* 10).

The sense of “disordered” here is given, once more, by the notion of the *ordo amorum*. It is part of that *ordo*, Augustine holds, that the lower parts of the human being should be properly subordinated to the higher. The highest part of all is the reason. The disorderedness of fallen human sexuality is, then, the unbiddability of human sexuality by reason (*City* 14.23):

... this lust, of which we at present speak, is the more shameful on this account, because the soul is therein neither master of itself, so as not to lust at all, nor of the body, so as to keep the members under the control of the will; for if they were thus ruled, there should be no shame... But so long as the will retains under its authority the other members, without which the members excited by lust to resist the will cannot accomplish what they seek, chastity is preserved, and the delight of sin forgone.

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4 Augustine's views on such other manifestations of human sexuality as homosexuality (*Conf* 3.8), promiscuity (*City* 14.18), and transvestism (*Soliloquia* 2.30) are decidedly, as they say, traditional. His aim is to reaffirm and combine what is best in both the Judaeo-Christian and the pagan-Roman moral traditions, and those two traditions, in his view, are solidly non-permissive about such manifestations. This inclination on his part to pass back to other authorities the onus of actual *argument* for his views about sexual ethics makes him less useful than he might be as a source for anti-permissive arguments. (He uses the slogan *contra naturam* often in enough in discussion of these matters. But as usual, it is not clear that any anti-permissive argument can be mined out of that slogan, or out of the notion of “nature” that underlies it, for which there is no analogue-argument on the permissive side.)

The thesis of *City* 14.23—a message which Augustine's often ascetically-inclined society perhaps needed to hear more than our routinely-sensual one does—is that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with sex. (Nor with the body. It is the spirit, not the body, where sin arises: *City* 14.3.) This thesis Augustine takes to be equivalent to, or deducible from, the claim that Adam and Eve could blamelessly have had intercourse, had they lasted long enough in the Garden of Eden to get around to it. However, at least part of what apparently horrifies Augustine about sex is that, in the fallen state of humanity in which we find ourselves, the will cannot directly control the movement and activity of the sexual organs (he is probably thinking primarily of the male sexual organs). It is on this sort of ground that Augustine thinks that for fallen humans completely blameless sexual activity is impossible or close to impossible, because of what he calls *libido* or *cupiditas*. The *inoboedientia carnis* just described (*City* 14.17) is the sign of this.

Augustine also says that the trouble with sexual pleasure is the way it overwhelms our rationality: “it puts the whole man in turmoil” (*City* 14.16). Sexuality is troublesome, for Augustine, because of its *disintegrating* and *disordering* tendency, and because of the way, during strong experiences of sexual pleasure, our rationality tends to be occluded: “at that moment of time when sexual pleasure reaches its extreme, nearly all our acuity and alertness of mind is taken away” (*City* 14.16).

To this a number of obvious objections suggest themselves. For one thing, why should it be thought a problem that sexual arousal causes movements of bodily parts that are not under the will's direct control? So does digestion—but Augustine shows no inclination to view peristalsis as a symptom of the Fall. For another, why should it be thought a problem that sexual arousal causes a kind of disturbance of the mind that brings about a suspension of normal rational control? So do sleep and religious ecstasy—but Augustine is unlikely to see those as threatening our rationality. Such cases are reminders of the essential embodiedness, hence vulnerability, of human reason. We might say that they are reminders of St John's great statement of how the incarnation creates a measure between the eternal and the mortal—“the word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1.14). The natural thing for Augustine to say about digestion is that it is a sign of how we are both physical objects and also not *mere* physical objects; the natural thing for him to say about sleep and religious ecstasy is that these temporary suspensions of normal rational control and psychic integration can, all being well, lead to greater rational control and deeper psychic integration in the long run. Indeed Augustine *does* say this sort of thing about these cases. So Augustine could say such things about sex too. (Sometimes he nearly does, e.g. *De bono coniugali* 9.)

The point here is *not* that human sexuality is just another appetite among others. We may agree with Augustine (and some other writers who follow him, such as G.K. Chesterton in a marvellous passage in Chapter 1 of his life of St. Francis) that sex is special. It is not *just another* appetite; corruptions of it are specially powerful, and need special treatment. What we should deny is (first) that special treatment must necessarily mean specially astringent treatment; and (secondly) that Augustine has hit on what *makes* sex special. He says that sex tends to make our bodies disobey our wills, or to suspend or bypass our rationality, in a special way. True enough; but what *is* that way? No doubt we recognise what Augustine is talking about, so that his observation is not quite as vacuous as it seems. The puzzle remains as to how we might give a fuller philosophical account of that special way, in order to fit sexuality into its correct place in the *ordo amorum*.

Augustine's own account of sexuality comes dangerously close, not just to treating sex as special in a hard-to-define way, but to demonising it. He speaks in *City* 14.19 of the “acts of lust” that “are performed by the sexual organs”; he also says there that “the genital organs have become as it were the private property of lust”. Augustine's own principles surely disallow both remarks. It is not the person's genitals that perform “acts of lust”; it is the person. And no part of the human body belongs to someone *else*, as it were as an outpost of the kingdom of darkness. (If it were such an outpost, then presumably Origen's extreme would be a reasonable response, which Augustine would surely deny.) Rather, the person's body is the *person's*. Or, as Augustine, and many other philosophers at least down to John Locke would prefer to say, it is God's: it is flesh indwelt by the Word, it is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor.6.19-20). The right conclusion is the obvious one, that Augustine—in this well in tune with his contemporaries, both Christian and pagan—is unduly Manichaean in his attitude to human sexuality.

In the case of war, Augustine's attempt to commensurate heavenly ideals with earthly realities led him, like Ambrose, to a rather accommodating position—though not *completely* permissive. In the case of sex, he is rather less accommodating—though not completely negative. In section 5 I turn to a third case-study of Augustine's ethics in action: the case of lying.

## 5. Lying in the *de Mendacio*

Some readers will want to know where Augustine fits into our standard classification of types of ethicist: is his an ethics of consequences, or of principles, or of virtue, or of divine command, or of natural law—or what?

All of these, and none of them. Every notion just listed matters for Augustine's ethics. That does not make him fit our categories; which are, after all, *our* categories. It is hardly surprising if they do not neatly fit Augustine—or anyone else from outside our own little corner of history. I suspect Augustine would be astonished that anyone should try to do ethics without *all* of these notions.

Certainly Augustine has something to offer to modern ethicists from all these categories. He is an important contributor to the tradition of the virtues, in particular because he is inclined to unify the virtues around love of God. (See e.g. *City* 4.20, and *De moribus ecclesiae* Ch.15—the whole of the latter work will repay the study of modern virtue ethicists.) The importance of consequences for Augustine is evident, from one end of his philosophical career to the other, in his stress upon the notion of *felicitas* or *beatitudo* (see e.g. *De beata vita*, *Contra academicos* 1.25, *De libero arbitrio* 1.10, 2.26-27, 3.59, *De Trinitate* 13.4, *City* 4.18, 8.3, 19.11-12). And we have already seen that Augustine has plenty to say about the notion of natural law.

Still, Augustine does sometimes sound very much like a straightforward exemplar of what we today call deontological ethics. His scintillating short work *De mendacio* is a case in point. It contains a remarkably clear and rigorous analysis of what lying is (Chs.3-4), in which Augustine shows his awareness of such subtleties as the possibility of a lie (or “lie”) that speaks the truth (when one intends to say what is false, but is mistaken about what *is* false), or of a knowing statement of a falsehood

with no intention to deceive, but rather to deter (as in “I’ll kill you if you do that again”). Augustine is well aware that language is not necessarily used to assert; his very first point about lies is that jokes, for example, are not lies (Ch.1). There is a classification of eight different types of lie (summarised in Ch.25), with some penetrating psychological observations: Augustine notes, for instance, the familiar human willingness to tell lies merely to make the party swing (Ch.18). Augustine’s clear and forceful arguments against the permissibility of lies of any of these types are summarised in Ch.42. There are striking anticipations of what are now familiar hard cases for a rigorist line about lying, such as the murderer-at-the-door case that Kant also famously discusses (Chs.23-24).

Some of Augustine’s hypothetical cases are as intricate as anything in the modern literature. Consider, for example, this case (*De mendacio* 4): X cares for Y’s well-being. But X anticipates that Y will disbelieve whatever X says. Y is going to Rome; he can take either Road A or Road B. (Both roads lead to Rome.) X knows that there are robbers on Road A. X therefore insincerely warns Y of robbers on Road B, foreseeing and intending that Y will therefore take Road B, which is in fact the safe one. Does X *lie*? If a lie is defined as an utterance intended to deceive, then clearly not—any more than I misdirect you if you ask me to point you the correct way, but I realise (as you do not) that we see each other via a mirror, so that if I want you to go left I must point to my right. What about if a lie is defined as a false utterance? In that case, there is a serious question whether what X tells Y *is* false. If I speak to you in some upside-down code of our own which involves consistently reversing truth-values, then my utterance “not-p” is not a lie relative to the known truth “p”; it is just the correct translation of “p” into our idiolect. The two-roads case seems significantly like this code case, even if X and Y have not *agreed* on the convention that X uses to bring about a true belief in Y.

*De mendacio* also has some striking anticipations of some well-known modern anti-consequentialist arguments. Consider this from Ch.9:

As for those who are outraged and furious if someone refuses to tell a lie to save his own skin, with the result that someone else gets to grow old in this life instead of him—well, what if we could save someone from death by committing adultery, or by theft? Would that be a good reason to steal or to fornicate? Or suppose someone should come to us with a rope and demand sexual gratification from us, insisting that he will hang himself unless we give him what he asks. Those who put this argument are incapable of pushing it so far as to claim that—for the sake of saving a life, as they say—we should agree to *this*.

The point here is not merely that saying that lies may be told for the sake of good consequences opens the door to saying that *anything* may be done, no matter how bad, for the sake of good enough consequences (though Augustine makes that point too, e.g. in Ch.14). The point is that those who are prepared to consider doing anything to avert something else<sup>5</sup> can be pushed into doing some pretty bad things pretty easily. The implementation in agents’ psychology of the kind of disposition that Augustine is

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5 Notice too the asymmetry between concern about what *I do* and concern about *what happens*. This asymmetry is the ground of the action/ omission distinction. It is clear from Augustine’s words in the last quotation that he recognises this asymmetry.

criticising leaves virtue so to speak chasing vice's tail: virtue ends up trying to mitigate vice's badness by acting badly, whenever virtue's acting badly seems necessary to stop vice itself from acting even a little worse. When modern philosophers meet something very similar to this in Bernard Williams, they call it the “Gresham's law” argument (see *A Critique of Utilitarianism* (CUP 1973) pp.131-2).

Or again, consider Augustine's anticipation of the argument usually attributed to David Hodgson (*The Consequences of Utilitarianism*, OUP 1967), that utilitarianism has a self-defeating attitude to truth-telling because it has no commitment to speaking the truth as such, only to saying whatever it is beneficial to say. In Augustine's words: “How can we believe the person whose opinion is that we should sometimes lie? What if he is lying even then when he gives this opinion?” (*De mendacio* 11). The logic of lying, Augustine suggests, leads us into an impasse from which nothing less than a fully restrictive attitude to lying can rescue us. If good people will lie, and say that we should lie, then either we should not believe good people, or we should believe (always) those who we think are lying sometimes. But the first alternative, Augustine says, is “pernicious”, the second alternative “stupid”. The only way out is to deny the antecedent: good people will neither lie nor say that we should lie.

So far, so deontological. But Augustine—unlike many modern philosophers—is not such a mug as to think that there has to be just one answer to the question “What is *the reason* why lying is wrong?”. He thinks all the points just made count against lying, and others too, such as the fact that lying divides the mind against itself, undermines its integration (*De mendacio* 3: “the liar, as the saying is, has a mind divided in two”; cp. the mental disintegration that worries Augustine in the case of sexual pleasure).

Alongside this mix-and-match approach to what we think of as rival moral theories, there is one thing that is recognisably the bedrock of Augustine's case against lying. It is a divine-command point. Everywhere *De mendacio* appeals to positive scriptural authority for a ban on lying; chapters 6-8 are devoted to the corresponding negative proof, that scripture gives no support to the notion that lying is permissible. His three favourite proof-texts are the Ninth Commandment, against “false witness” (*Exodus* 20.16); *Wisdom* 1.11, “The mouth that lies slays the soul”; and Psalm 5.7, “You will destroy all who speak a lie”.

We might wonder about Augustine's rigorist use of these biblical proof-texts, especially when we compare his markedly laxer use of the apparently equally decisive texts against killing (such as the Sixth Commandment: “Thou shalt not kill” (*Exodus* 20.13)). A cynic might wonder what ideology stands behind this differential treatment of what on the face of it seems the same weight of evidence. Whose interest, the cynic may ask, is really served by an ethics which commits the citizen to be prepared to kill sometimes, but never to lie? It is tempting to suggest that these commitments are likely to serve the ruler's purposes of *surveiller et punir* more readily than the subject's project of getting on with her individual life.

Less cynical readers will conclude that Augustine genuinely thinks that it is more important to respect the truth by not lying than to respect the body by not killing; also that he has a reason for thinking this that goes to the heart of his philosophy. Augustine thinks that the body is just the body—a collection of physical matter, good and important in its way, but not *supremely* good or important. But Augustine does

not think, as modern philosophers tend to, that the truth is just the truth—a collection of matters of fact, some of them interesting, some of them less so, of no particular intrinsic value. For Augustine “truth”, *veritas*, is a name for God himself.

So for Augustine knowing the truth, even about trifling matters, is always something sacred and holy, an intimation to us of God's presence; denying that knowledge seems to him a kind of betrayal of this intimation. The bedrock of his argument is, to repeat, the clear divine command against lying that he takes to be present in scripture; understanding his philosophical conception of truth may help us make sense of the way he reads scripture on this topic.

But—a modern philosopher may ask here—why should anyone feel inclined to take divine-command approach to ethics seriously anyway? I work my way towards an answer to that question in section 6.

## 6. Augustine's essentially second-personal ethics

Two great books in the western tradition are called, in English, “The Confessions”: Augustine's *Confessiones* (400 AD) is one, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (1717-28) is the other. In all sorts of ways, the pair make an instructive comparison. One comparison is to do with their address; another concerns their purpose.

The address of Rousseau's *Confessions* is clear from its famous opening. “I have begun on a work which is without precedent”, Rousseau says (a surprise, given his title): “I propose to set before my fellow-mortals a man in all the truth of nature; and this man shall be myself.” His address, then, is other people in general; to put it another way, it is nobody in particular.

And Rousseau's purpose? Bluntly, it is self-justification:

I will present myself, whenever the last trumpet shall sound, before the Sovereign Judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, "Thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I... Power Eternal! assemble round Thy throne an innumerable throng of my fellow-mortals, let them listen to my confessions, let them blush at my depravity, let them tremble at my sufferings; let each in his turn expose with equal sincerity the failings, the wanderings of his heart, and if he dare, aver, I was better than that man."

Here, by the sharpest of contrasts, is Augustine:

Hear my prayer, O Lord, let not my soul faint under thy correction; nor let me faint in confessing unto thee thine own mercies, by which thou hast drawn me out of all mine own most wicked courses: that thyself mightest from hence forward grow sweet unto me, beyond all those allurements which heretofore I followed. (*Conf* 1.15)

Unless we count the imaginary literary conceit quoted above, throughout his *Confessions* Rousseau never addresses God. Throughout *his Confessions*, Augustine never addresses anyone else—unless we count a few literary tropes apostrophising himself or other people or things. The whole book, as *Conf* 1.5 says, is a prayer. It is a confession indeed, both of Augustine's weaknesses and of what he sees as God's mercies.

Augustine and Rousseau are both concerned with truth; but in entirely different ways. The sound of Rousseau's truth is *je, je, je*—I, I, I; the sound of Augustine's truth is *tu, tu, tu*—thou, thou, thou. And, Augustine would say, *tu* not *ego* is what it has to be. For him the first step on the way of moral progress is to turn away from what is private to what is common; and what is most common of all is truth and God.<sup>6</sup> Of course Rousseau thinks something like that in his political philosophy; it is odd and ironic that the author of *du Contrat Social* should also be the author of *Les Confessions*.

Rousseau believes that arriving at the truth about himself is a matter simply of being truthful and free. The only obstacles that could prevent his own sincerity and authenticity from getting at the truth are either incidental (defects of memory) or external (the pressure that society imposes on him to add “superfluous ornament”). Left to himself, left to run his own course, freed from misfortunes and the corrupting pressures imposed by other people, Rousseau thinks he all on his own will *naturally* arrive at the truth—and that this truth will be a truth that very likely does him great and vindicating credit.

Augustine's beliefs about how to write true autobiography could not be more different. “Man is a profound deep” (*Conf* 8.1); “And do we imagine that the heart of man is not an abyss?”, (*En. in Ps. 41.13*); “Here behold is my heart, O God, here behold is my heart, which you have had mercy on in the depth of the abyss” (*Conf* 2.4). Self-knowledge, according to Augustine, is not to be achieved by simply attempting to be “sincere” and “authentic” and “natural”; only disaster can come from such unaided attempts. Rather, real self-knowledge is only achieved when the self comes to be illuminated by second-personal relation with the God who made that self. For God, Augustine finds, has been “closer to him than the closest part of himself, and further above him than the highest he can know” (*Conf* 3.6).

A modern secular reader will find it only too natural to assume that the *Confessions*' ostensible second-personal address—to God—must be a mere literary conceit; that Augustine's *real* audience must be, like Rousseau's, his contemporaries, and that his real intent too must be something rather more like Rousseau's—self-justification. It is hard to imagine a more fundamental misunderstanding. We cannot hope to understand the *Confessions*—we cannot hope to understand Augustine—unless we register that to him God was a person with whom he was in relation: not just a “he”, but a “thou” as well.

Moreover, this relation with God in which Augustine takes himself to stand is, in both directions, a relationship of love and desire. *Te volo*, Augustine says in the closing lines of Book 2, “I *desire* you”: on a Rousseauian conception of God, the sentiment is unimaginable. Whatever other forms of address Augustine's writing may lead him to, that second-personal relation in which he takes himself to stand relative to God is the heart of his theological and philosophical thought, and in particular of his ethics. Unless we understand this, we are almost certain to misunderstand the structure and the dynamics of his thought overall.

For one thing, it explains why Augustine's rule, in *De libero arbitrio* 1.4, *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John* Tractate XXIX (John 7:14-18), §6 and elsewhere, is the rule he bequeathed to Anselm: “believe that you may understand” (*crede ut intelligas*). The point of this often-quoted dictum is not, as is often said, to get us to make an irrational “leap of faith” from one third-personal belief-system into

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6 For God and truth as *commune* see in particular *De libero arbitrio* Bk 1.

another third-personal belief-system. Rather, it is about second-personal trust: trust in a person, confronted not as a *he* but as a *you*, who is already to some extent known; trust given so that, on the basis of that trust, we may come to the kind of understanding that is impossible *without* trust. Nor should it be thought—though apparently it often is—that trust of the specifically religious kind is unique or peculiar in this respect. In Book 1 of the *Confessions* Augustine goes out of his way to illustrate from his own case how *all* human relationships, and *all* trust, are dependent in the same way on a context which is essentially structured by second-personal relations, and is, as they say, “always already” there whenever any individual begins to understand.

The second-personality of Augustine's ethics also brings us back my question at the end of section 5: why Augustine's is a divine-command ethics before anything else, and why such an ethics is credible. For him a divine-command ethics is not what it is often thought to be today—a matter of unquestioning obedience to a set of impersonal and non-negotiable rules handed down without explanation by some cloudy distant inscrutable authority. Rather, it is about seeking to please the person who knows and loves you best, and who matters most to you. We might almost say that it is more like a love-affair or a (happy) marriage than a legal-moral code. If any line of thought in Augustine genuinely promises to fulfil the task that I began by calling impossible, the task of commensurating the infinite with the finite—perhaps this is the one.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Thanks for comments and criticisms to Christopher Coope, Andrew Pinsent, Karla Pollmann, and Eleonore Stump.