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Introducing the Issues

The aim of this study is to arrive at an understanding of the meaning that Augustine gave to the ideas of virtue, vice, and sin, ideas which lie at the very heart of his thought and which are key to understanding the contribution that he made, not only to moral thought but also to political and social thought and to Christian doctrine itself. My study is timely because over the last two or three decades, there has been a growing interest in 'virtue' ethics as an important and distinctive approach to moral philosophy. I seek to provide insights into the historical development of this normative approach, in particular, to shed light on the crucial transition between classical 'pagan' Greek and Roman ideas of virtue and vice, and Christian ideas of virtue and vice. There have been many distinguished contributions on the subject of Augustine's ethics; in what follows I acknowledge the assistance that these writings have provided me and seek to weave the insights found in these works together with my own insights derived from a fresh reading of important passages in Augustine's writings. The resulting synthesis offers original insights on a topic about which there has been too little clarity, namely, what Augustine meant by the key notions of virtue and sin. My belief is that clarifying this will add in a significant way to the existing scholarship on Augustine's ethics.

A study focused upon the meaning that Augustine gave to the ideas of virtue and sin is long overdue. More than eighty years ago, Joseph Wang Tche'ang-Tche began his monograph *Saint Augustin et les vertus des païens* by emphasising that any study of Augustine's moral philosophy needed to begin by investigating the meaning that he assigned to the term

"virtue."[1] Wang noted that the notion of virtue was fundamental for understanding Augustine's thought, and criticised those who ignored the need to investigate its precise meaning and who thereby were in danger of offering explanations of his moral thought which had "nothing Augustinian" about them.[2]

I will return to what Wang had to say about virtue below. His warning that we cannot assume that we necessarily know what Augustine meant by the ideas of virtue and sin, and the related ideas of "good deeds" and "bad deeds," and their many cognates, is the starting point for the present study. In what follows, I begin with the assumption that these are all notions which require careful investigation to establish their frame of reference for Augustine, much as we would investigate the meaning of any other important idea in his writings.

Given the centrality of virtue and sin in his thought, the absence of a study dedicated to his understanding of these ideas is a significant lacuna in the extensive scholarship on Augustine and his legacy. While my main purpose in what follows is to remedy this, I also have two further aims. An additional reason for undertaking this study lies in the possibility that Augustine's moral thought in some way broke with the moral traditions of Greece and Rome. Augustine claimed to see shortcomings in the moral traditions that he had inherited from classical antiquity, and to have improved upon them, and these claims deserve to be investigated. Establishing whether and in what sense his moral thought was innovative is an important purpose of the present study.

Augustine's moral thought is of inherent interest for a further reason. He was clear that to be a Christian was to be virtuous; the acquisition of Christian faith was the moment of acquiring virtue. Hence, his understanding of virtue offers an insight into how he understood the nature of Christian conversion and the meaning of the Christian life. What did he see in Christian faith which made the presence of virtue in the Christian believer inevitable? What was virtue that it was inseparable from Christian faith? In claiming that virtue was found only among Christians, and that it was necessarily found among them, Augustine also declared that virtue could not be a human achievement but must be given by divine grace. How did he explain this claim? Augustine is one of the most influential figures in western Christianity, and, as such, his

[1] Joseph Wang Tche'ang-Tche, *Saint Augustin et les vertus des païens* (Paris: Études de Théologie Historique, 1938).
[2] Ibid., p. 7.

understanding of what it meant to be a Christian merits being made the focus of critical study. Exploring his moral thought is a key means to do this, and this is the third main purpose for undertaking the present study.

Thus, this study has three principal aims: to offer a systematic account of Augustine's ideas of virtue and sin, to explain in what sense his understanding of these ideas broke with the non-Christian moral philosophies that preceded it, and to understand Augustine's claim that to possess Christian faith was to be virtuous. While these are my main aims, this study also seeks to achieve one more thing. Current assessments of Augustine's social and political thought are closely tied to a certain interpretation of his moral thought. Hence, by offering an in-depth analysis of his views on virtue and sin, this study also offers a critical evaluation of the current understanding of his social and political thought. In numerous studies of his political outlook, his conviction that human beings were incorrigible sinners until they were assisted by grace is read as leading him to reject the idea that non-Christians could achieve social and political justice.[3] In examining what Augustine meant by sin and virtue, including the virtue of justice, the following assesses whether or not such a reading of his views on politics and society is in fact correct.

Augustine discussed the virtuous and the sinful in nearly every work which he wrote, from his sermons and letters, which frequently deal with moral themes, to his formal treatises, including his anti-heretical writings, his works of exegesis, and his major works on the Trinity and the City of God. Given the impossibility of dealing adequately with all these writings in the course of one monograph, any work such as mine needs to make choices about how to navigate this sea. One choice which scholars sometimes make is to package his work chronologically, dealing with either his early writings, his writings from mid-career, or his later thought. Another choice is to study a discrete set of writings which spans his whole career, such as his sermons or letters. I am not satisfied with the utility of either of these approaches when it comes to exploring such a major theme in his thought as the nature of virtue and sin. Both approaches run the risk of missing important statements about virtue and sin which would help to clarify allusions found elsewhere in his writings. Instead, my approach has been threefold. First, I make use of writings known to contain

[3] A number of these studies are discussed in more detail below. See also Katherine Chambers, "Augustine on Justice: A Reconsideration of *City of God*, Book 19," *Political Theology* 19 (2018): 382–396, for a discussion of those scholars who have found this view in *City of God*, Book 19.

explorations of themes of central relevance to this topic, such as *On the Happy Life*, *The Catholic Way of Life*, *Confessions*, *On the Spirit and the Letter, On Christian Doctrine*, and *The City of God*. Second, I have been guided to texts, or passages from texts, by discussions in the scholarship on Augustine's moral and political thought. I have not depended on these secondary writings for my understanding of Augustine's thought, but I have used them to ensure that I have not overlooked important passages. Third, I have used Augustine's discussion of certain biblical passages (such as 1 Corinthians 13:3 and Philippians 3:6–9) as a guide, exploring his comments on these passages wherever they occur in his writings. Augustine's writings are copious, and I certainly do not claim to have found every passage which could be usefully discussed in relation to my theme; nonetheless, I have endeavoured to be as comprehensive as possible.

LOVE AND ACTIONS

In some well-known passages, Augustine defined virtue as a kind of love: this love had as its central characteristic the fact that the Christian God was loved.[4] In a number of other passages, he identified sin with another kind of love, namely, carnal concupiscence, which he associated with the love of temporal things.[5] He also indicated that people sinned in loving

[4] In *De Moribus Ecclesiae*, 15.25, Augustine wrote, "I would not define virtue in any other way than as the highest love [*summum amorem*] of God... Now since this love, as I have said, is not of things in general, but rather love of God ..." (the Gallaghers' translation reads "the perfect love of God," but I prefer the more literal "the highest love of God"). In Letter 155, at 4.13, he declared, "And yet even in this life there is no virtue but to love what one should love." In Letter 167, at 11 and 15, he stated, quoting from 1 Timothy 1:5, "For *love from a pure heart and a good conscience and faith unfeigned*, is the great and true virtue, for it is *the goal of the commandment*... And to summarize in a general and brief statement the notion that I have of virtue, insofar as it pertains to living well, virtue is the love by which one loves what should be loved." Teske's translation reads "love ... is a great and true virtue," but I have followed J. G. Cunningham's translation here, which I think is more consistent with the second statement that "virtue is the love by which one loves what should be loved." Finally, in *De Civitate Dei*, 15.22, he wrote, "it seems to me that a brief and true definition of virtue is the order of love (*ordo amoris*)" (I have changed Bettenson's "rightly ordered love" to the more literal "the order of love").

[5] For example, he writes in *De Perfectione Justitiae*, 13.31, "Concupiscence, that is, the sin dwelling in our flesh." This quote comes from Jesse Couenhoven, "Augustine's Doctrine of Original Sin," *Augustinian Studies* 36.2 (2005): 359–396 at 376. Other passages discussed by Couenhoven (pp. 372–379) include *De Nuptia et Concupiscentia* 2.9.22, *Ad Simplicianum* 1.2.18 and *De Perfectione Justitiae*, 6.12 and 6.15, *Contra Julianum Opus Imperfectum* 6.41. See also Jesse Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ:*

themselves to the contempt of God.[6] Among modern scholars, these statements about virtue and sin have been interpreted in two different ways. I will begin by outlining the first of these interpretations, before turning to discuss the scholarship in which this interpretation is found, sometimes only implicitly; then I will discuss the alternative approach.

To date, the most influential interpretation of Augustine's view of virtue is the one that informs accounts of his social and political thought. This reading accepts that he defined virtue as loving God, and then finds that by defining virtue in this way, he implicitly identified it with doing the things that God wanted us to do in all areas of our lives. According to this interpretation, Augustine's view was that until we loved God we would often lack a reason to do the actions that God wanted us to do and also often lack the knowledge of what these actions were. God wanted us to do things like give money to the poor, minister to the sick, preach the Christian gospel, and serve others in numerous other ways. This interpretation concludes that only people who were virtuous through loving God would be regular doers of these actions. In this way, this view considers that, for Augustine, while virtue was a matter of our loves, it was also, in effect, a matter of our actions: it was only through loving the Christian God that we would be inspired to be consistent doers of the actions that God required of us.

These studies also argue that Augustine considered that what God wanted us to do was often hard to decipher and that this also helps to explain the importance that he placed on love for God as virtue.[7] According to this view, Augustine held that human ignorance of God's will meant that we required the written moral teachings found in the Bible; in addition, since explicit rules for conduct might prove an insufficient guide to God's will in some situations, we could only be sure of doing God's will in everything by totally surrendering ourselves to loving God and hence being guided by God in all our actions.

Agency, Necessity and Culpability in Augustinian Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 31–37.

[6] *Civ. Dei* 14.28, "We see then that the two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self."

[7] Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), has laid particular stress on the idea that Augustine thought that fallen human beings were often ignorant of what God wanted them to do in their social and political lives and consequently dependent on God's direct guidance to conduct themselves appropriately in these spheres.

Thus, even though the above interpretation notes that Augustine defined virtue in terms of love, it nonetheless considers that he looked upon actions as implicitly a part of the meaning of virtue. In particular, it considers that, for Augustine, the presence or absence of love for God in itself determined the kind of actions that we did. The result is that this reading finds that he could have defined virtue equally well in terms of what we did – he defined being virtuous as loving God, but, according to this reading, he could equally well have defined it as being a consistent doer of sociable, other-oriented actions and of all those other things which, in any given situation, God wanted us to do.

This reading of Augustine's moral thought explains his understanding of sin, or vice, along similar lines. It finds that he defined all sin as an excessive love for the self, and then interprets this sinful self-love in a certain way. In particular, loving ourselves excessively is understood as entailing a failure to do the things that God wanted us to do: God set down rules for our conduct, including the requirement that we looked after our neighbours' physical and spiritual welfare ("love your neighbour as yourself"), and, moreover, God offered to guide our behaviour at all times, but sinners gave to themselves the love that was owed to God and hence they flouted God's rules and refused to seek God's guidance. Instead, their self-love led them to seek to advance their own temporal interests, whether in pursuing physical pleasures, material riches, political power, or popular renown at all costs and by any means.

In this way, this reading likewise holds that Augustine understood sin as having unambiguous implications for our actions: it recognises that Augustine defined sin in terms of love, but holds that he understood this love in such a way as to mean that he saw being a sinner as just as much a matter of our actions as of our loves. In particular, being a sinner is taken to refer to being the kind of person who did not choose to seek God's guidance for one's conduct and normally did not choose to act sociably towards other people. Instead, being a sinner is understood to mean having a tendency towards doing all those things which God did not want us to do, including things which harmed others, such as seizing more than one's fair share of earthly goods and oppressing and tyrannising anyone weaker than oneself.

Thus, this interpretation of Augustine's understanding of virtue and sin finds that, while he defined virtue and sin in terms of differing loves, these terms also, in effect, described the fact that we either did or failed to do the things that God wanted us to do. For this reason, this interpretation has been particularly influential in shaping twentieth- and

twenty-first-century accounts of Augustine's social and political thought. For example, this view of virtue and sin can be found in Herbert Deane's classic study, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (1963). Deane takes Augustine's understanding of "sin" to equate to socially destructive selfishness or egoism: "the fraternity and concord natural to human society have been shattered by the egoism of sinful men."[8] He notes that Augustine distinguished "sin" from "sins": for Deane, the former described something fundamental about a person's character, namely, their arrogant egoism; the latter described actions which were condemned by God.[9] In this way, Deane finds that, in Augustine's eyes, sin in the form of egoism produced in sinners a tendency to commit "sins" – a sinful person was possessed by an overweening self-regard ("each man, from the moment he is born, is infected with the original sin of pride and the blasphemous desire to place himself at the center of the universe"[10]), and this attitude led to a desire to acquire for oneself power over everyone else and more than one's fair share of earthly goods: "once the nature of man has been corrupted by sin each man seeks to gain possessions and wealth at the expense of others and each seeks to gain mastery over others."[11] "To the citizens of the earthly city, however, wealth, fame and power are the highest goods, and they will do anything necessary to obtain them."[12] Hence, Deane observes, "in the earthly city ... there is constant conflict and strife, not only against the good but among the wicked themselves, since each man and each group seeks a larger share of material goods than the others and each strives for mastery and power over the rest."[13]

Deane's work concludes by finding that Augustine was a political realist.[14] This reading of Augustine as a political realist or political pessimist has become standard in histories of political thought.[15]

[8] Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 95.
[9] Ibid., pp. 16–17. [10] Ibid., p. 17. [11] Ibid., pp. 93–94. [12] Ibid., p. 34.
[13] Ibid., p. 33. [14] Ibid., p. 221.
[15] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," in Robert McAfee Brown, ed., *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986; first published in 1953), states that realism means taking into account "the factors of self-interest and power," and so having no "illusions about social realities" (p. 123). "Augustine was, by general consent, the first great 'realist' in Western history" (p. 124). Mikka Ruokanen, *The Theology of Social Life in Augustine's "De civitate Dei"* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), notes that this reading of Augustine as a political realist dates from the middle decades of the twentieth century (pp. 15 and 83–90).

In particular, Augustine is taken as repudiating classical humanism's positive evaluation of human beings' natural capacity to choose sociable conduct, and replacing this political idealism with his political realism or pessimism. For example, one of the most influential texts in this field – Quentin Skinner's *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978) – maintains that the foundations of modern political thought lie partly in the early *quattrocento* humanists' recovery of this classical idealism and their consequent rejection of Augustine's assumptions about the inability of human beings to acquire the political or civic virtues except with the assistance of grace.[16] Skinner claims that the Renaissance humanists rejected "the entire Augustinian picture of human nature."

> St Augustine had explicitly laid it down in *The City of God* that the idea of pursuing *virtus*, or total human excellence, was based on a presumptuous and mistaken view of what a man can hope to achieve by his own efforts. He himself argued that, if ever a mortal ruler succeeds in governing virtuously, such a triumph can never be ascribed to his own powers but "only to the grace of God."[17]

Skinner holds that the recovery of the optimistic ancient belief in the unaided human ability to act sociably and promote the common good "represents an almost Pelagian departure from the prevailing assumptions of Augustinian Christianity."[18]

Behind the conclusions of Skinner lies the work of Deane, and also of Robert Markus, whose study, from 1970, of Augustine's theology of society is one of the most influential statements of the view that Augustine's moral pessimism equated to a social and political pessimism.[19] Markus finds that from the 390s, Augustine came to see that his theology, especially his conception of fallen humanity's helpless enslavement to sin ("the endemic liability to sin"; "Augustine's sombre vision of the nasty brutishness of man in his fallen condition"[20]), entailed a rejection of a sense of humanity's progress through history towards perfection.[21] For Markus, Augustine realised that human beings would always remain sinful, and hence that the laws and policies which they devised to shape their social lives would always be inadequate to create a truly just society. Even the coercive measures taken by governments to eliminate our anti-social actions

[16] Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Volume 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 93.
[17] Ibid., p. 91, quoting from *Civ. Dei* 5.19. [18] Ibid., p. 95.
[19] Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
[20] Ibid., pp. 85 and 95. [21] Ibid., p. 81.

and impose concord upon us would have only a limited degree of success: our social and political lives would remain deeply imperfect; at best, government could eliminate some, but not all, social ills.

> The condition of man consequent on Adam's fall does not allow for the achievement of the harmony and order in which alone man can find rest. Tension, strife and disorder are endemic in this realm. There can be no resolution, except eschatologically. Human society is irredeemably rooted in this tension-ridden and disordered *saeculum*. It was this radically "tragic" character of existence for which ancient philosophy, in Augustine's view, could find no room.[22]

Markus emphasises that this viewpoint was the product of a development in Augustine's thinking about society: his initial views held more in common with the idealism of ancient Greek and Roman political thought, namely, "that politics was a matter first of discerning the lineaments of the right ordering of society in the natural world, and then embodying this discovered order in social arrangements."[23] For Markus, as Augustine's thought developed, he came to the view that this right ordering escaped both human beings' ability to discern and their ability to implement and held instead that the achievement of the right order in social affairs lay in the next life, not in this one.[24] Hence Augustine came to conceive the function of the state as restricted to performing the valuable but limited task of "securing some precarious order, some minimal cohesion, in a situation inherently tending to chaos."[25]

Thus, Markus saw Augustine's mature view of political life as rejecting the optimism of classical antiquity. For Greek and Roman political thinkers, life in the *polis* was understood as promoting virtue. This is the ancient Greek idea of *paideia*: the cultivation of ideal citizens who uphold the values of the *polis*. In contrast, for Augustine, according to Markus's reading, government simply acted as a bulwark, holding in check to some degree our competitiveness and lust for power: at best, we were forced through the threat of punishment into maintaining a kind of imperfect and temporary peace with our fellow citizens.

The view of Augustine as a political pessimist remains the consensus among modern commentators on his political and social thought. Recent interpreters of Augustine, however, have been particularly interested in the question of the extent to which he thought that Christians could free themselves from the sinfulness engulfing the rest of humanity and accomplish the deeds that God wanted them to accomplish, thereby having an

[22] Ibid., p. 83. [23] Ibid., p. 75. [24] Ibid., p. 84. [25] Ibid., p. 95.

impact on their societies for the good. This issue is explored especially in the work of Robert Dodaro. Dodaro has developed the insight that Augustine considered that sinners' inability to shape their social and political lives in conformity with justice was the product as much of "ignorance" as of "weakness": "In Augustine's view, all these philosophies [Pelagian, Stoic, Manichean, Platonist, Donatist and "ancient and contemporary political culture"] hold that, in principle, the human soul is able to know what is required for the just life, even without divine assistance."[26]

Dodaro sees Augustine as arguing, in contrast, that Christian piety was an essential characteristic of the good political leader because people were only relieved of their ignorance of what constituted a truly just thing to do in a given situation through this piety: the Christian graces of faith, hope, and love alone allowed public officials to grow in the knowledge of the nature of what judgements and decisions ought to be made in the social and political spheres. Hence, Christians were able to administer their states differently to non-Christians, aligning their decisions more closely with God's will for the conduct of human affairs, because they were guided by faith, hope, and love. Thus, Dodaro argues that what Augustine offers in his letters to public officials "is a set of religious practices through which Christian statesmen undergo transformation through a deepening of their love of God that results in a gradual deepening of their political wisdom."[27]

As a result, Dodaro's work has encouraged scholars to attribute a guarded political optimism to Augustine – he is read as being deeply pessimistic about the actions of those outside grace, but guardedly optimistic about the ability of Christians, aided by grace, to bring about social and political improvements in their societies. For example, Bruno writes that an "Augustinian" political theory necessarily tempers pessimism with a recognition of "the positive effects that Christians can have in public office"[28]; "Christian virtue is necessary to produce the limited good that is possible in human society."[29]

[26] Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 212–213.
[27] Dodaro, "Ecclesia and Res Publica: How Augustinian Are Neo-Augustinian Politics?," in Lieven Boeve, Mathijs Lamberigts, and Maarten Wisse, eds., *Augustine and Postmodern Thought: A New Alliance against Modernity?* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2008), pp. 245–246.
[28] Michael Bruno, *Political Augustinianism: Modern Interpretations of Augustine's Political Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), p. 300.
[29] Ibid., p. 309.