Introduction: A La Recherche du Temps Perdu

> I, for one, would no sooner think of consulting your average moral
> philosopher over a genuine moral problem than of consulting a
> philosopher of perception about an eye complaint.
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> C. O. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (cited by B.
> Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* 220)

Philosophers usually start out testing the ideas of their teachers and imme-
diate predecessors, wanting to discuss what is 'on the table', 'in the air'.
This may lead to a vicious regress, since the teachers have treated their
own teachers in the same way. What if the problems my teachers have set
me are wrongly framed or depend on dubious or false assumptions inher-
ited from earlier teachers, whose work they may have tried to correct, may
have rejected or accepted? Clearly, as each generation passes, the number
of false problems and false assumptions will increase exponentially. I argue
that this is what has happened in key areas of Western thinking about eth-
ics and meta-ethics since the fifth century of the Christian era.

The cultural – as distinct from the philosophical – origins of those
problems in moral philosophy and philosophical psychology that I shall
consider are to be found in Augustine, the Catholic bishop of Hippo
in present-day Algeria,[1] who dominated intellectual life for hundreds of
years and hence bequeathed a variety of unresolved difficulties that his

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[1] For a recent restatement of the foundational role of Augustine, and that the nature of his work
must be understood if we are to grasp the basic thrust respectively of ancient, medieval and modern
thought and the proper relationship between these very different intellectual animals (against the
'narratives' of such as Milbank, De Libera, Hadot and Blumenberg) see Harding (2008: 1–34). Some
of the difficulties in assessing Augustine's legacy adequately are set out by Otten (Otten 2012: 201–
18). Nevertheless and more particularly, Harding's comments on the influence of Sallust (and indir-
ectly of Thucydides) on Augustine are a good summary of some of the historical-ideological aspects
of much of Augustine's work, especially the *City of God* (Harding 2008: 47–73). I would agree
with him (for example, against Milbank) that for Augustine pagan thought (and pagan 'virtue')
is defeated in its own terms, self-referentially – and that therefore there is a case to be made for
beginning with his Christian alternative.

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Christian successors[2] – though generally very supportive of his views – tried to defuse. Some of these difficulties are explicable with reference to the unsystematic character of much of Augustine's writing or to an incomplete knowledge of his work: thus his piecemeal presentation of a complex understanding of the relationship between knowing, willing and loving induced in his followers increasingly unrelated explanations of these activities of the person, so that each tended to be set against the others. Hence, while trying to resolve problems both real and imaginary, they often failed to correct genuine weaknesses and introduced further confusion. By the time the incremental effect of this process has reached our own day, we find ourselves – so I argue – in a cul-de-sac from which there appears no way out but to retrace our steps under pain of becoming ever more trivial, banal or downright toxic.

Augustine's role in the developing story of philosophical ideas in the Western tradition is not merely that of passing on a synthesis of traditional themes, of both Christian and pagan origin, to many ensuing generations. He also added new dimensions to philosophical thought, many of which passed virtually unnoticed until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and of which one is of peculiarly contemporary interest. For the first time Augustine (especially, though not only, in the *Confessions*) makes us aware of the problem of how to relate a thinker's unique personal experience (the first-person view) with the objective, scientific, 'view from nowhere' which philosophers have normally attempted to project. But our own experience *is* part of the world and therefore cannot be reduced (despite modern attempts, as we shall see) to a third-person stance. While many of Augustine's philosophical predecessors and successors (not least those who influenced him most, the Platonists) were inclined to think that personal individuality is something to outgrow, or at least is outside the scope of philosophical enquiry, and that philosophers can only talk about human beings as members of a class, Augustine takes seriously the implications of the Christian claim that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, and so wants to find space for the unique experiences of the individual, each of whom, he believes, is in this present life a 'mystery to himself'.[3]

[2] When I speak of the 'domination' of Augustine I should not be taken to imply that others (Boethius, Ps-Dionysius, Ambrose, Benedict, Gregory the Great etc.) are to be discounted, but that the intellectual framework, the theology, within which they (and others) were understood was supposedly Augustinian. But one can go too far, as when O'Donnell comes close to suggesting that what we know of Christianity is very largely an Augustinian construction (O'Donnell 2005: 200).

[3] This theme will reappear only in the 'modernity' parts of the present book; for further discussion of Augustine's view – in comparison with that of Hume – see Rist 2000: 95–114.

Once upon a time the moral philosopher, or the moral theologian, offered guidance for the good life, and beyond that for salvation. Later he forgot about salvation or was unwilling to pay the price he apparently had to pay to retain it. Finally he lost sight of 'truth' and had to content himself with ideologies. To have any hope of reversing the process, he must begin not at the end but at the beginning of the chain to see if more authentic progress is possible, and at what price. This book offers no full-scale guide to where we are now and why, only an examination of a set of themes related to 'freedom', love and responsibility, all central for such a wider enquiry.

In seeking to retrace part of the journey Western thinkers have made, I am far from attempting something new: many more learned than I have led the way. Older studies, like Jacques Maritain's *Three Reformers*, for good or ill, recount, even if inadequately, what (unhappily) happened rather than why it happened and why, in light of earlier difficulties, it was almost bound to happen. J. B. Schneewind, in *The Invention of Autonomy*, has tried to trace the 'invention' of autonomy from Aquinas to Kant, while Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self*, has gone back to Plato and Augustine. Most recently, Brad Gregory, in *The Unintended Reformation*, has argued that Luther's break with the Catholic Church (aided, as Maritain contended, by fourteenth-century theories of univocity and the reckless use of Ockham's razor) has led in traceable ways to modern secularism and post-Christian societies in which a liberal society maintains research universities with the expectation of justifying a liberal and anti-theological ideology.

There is much to be learned from such works. Yet Schneewind, jumping *in medias res*, has failed to explain how and why Aquinas and his immediate successors found themselves where they did, while Taylor omits the medieval period entirely; presumably finding it irrelevant to his search for 'the modern identity', he is content sitting on the fence between older ways and 'modernity' – and even more so in his later *A Secular Age* – and so fails to tell parts of the tale dispassionately. Lynn Hunt, in *Inventing Human Rights*, though sometimes inaccurate in detail, well summarizes a number of important characteristics of Western thinking since 1789; indeed, in the steps of Schneewind, by the use of the word 'Invention' in her title she draws attention to the ambiguity of much post-Augustinian thought about morality and its foundations; for 'invention' has two very different senses: etymologically it means 'discovering' – thus 'The Invention of the Cross' means the claim of Helena to have discovered the True Cross and not that she made it up! Or it can mean 'newly creating', as in philosophers' talk about inventing right and wrong.

Brad Gregory's book focuses on the Protestant Reformation and the ensuing fragmentation of Christendom as the most basic, albeit unintended, cause of the looming secularism to follow. With much of that I would wholeheartedly agree; there can be no doubt that the Reformation immensely accelerated the process of Christian (and hence cultural) disintegration that was already, if slowly, under way. Gregory, however, shows himself more inclined than I to credit a radical failure of medieval churchmen to practise what they preached as a major cause of the success (such as it was) of the Reformers in uprooting the whole 'Papist' structure centred on 'the Anti-Christ of Rome'. Of course, that there was failure is true enough. Gregory can sound quite 'traditional' (indeed rather like Maritain, not to speak of Milbank) in emphasizing the ill effects for Christendom of aspects of the work of Scotus and Ockham; but he over-estimates the success of earlier medieval thinkers in their attempts to construct a Christian philosophical synthesis – in this being like MacIntyre as well as Maritain – and like them pays scant attention to the weaknesses of the more or less Augustinian framework within which that synthesis was originally constructed.

With reference to our contemporary philosophical situation, it has been argued[4] that in the Western world much intellectual debate, especially in ethics and philosophical psychology, is radically flawed in that the language and concepts of the disputants derive from a largely abandoned set of theological and metaphysical axioms; that we find ourselves trying to defend conclusions devoid of the premises once regarded as their necessary foundation. My present account invites us to assess an important and interlocking selection of such assumptions and how certain confusing and confused philosophical and theological axioms from the remoter past have helped generate problems about the human condition for which, in the present post-Christian intellectual culture, no compelling solutions are or could be in sight – and hence intellectual, moral and cultural nihilism must inevitably prevail.[5] I shall, however, also point to the possible recovery

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[4] Famously by Anscombe (1958: 1–19).

[5] For a helpful introduction to the radically confused premises of what the author calls the principle of modern liberal autonomy (MLA) – with particular reference to its 'classical' and influential application in the work of H. L. A. Hart – see Laing (2004: 184–216). Laing defines the most important principle as follows: 'If consenting adults want to do something, unless it does specific harm to others *here and now* (my italics), the law has no business intervening.' The words 'here and now' are especially important because they preclude consideration of the good of the wider society (especially of the vulnerable) and of future generations. It is encouraging to see Laing joining the gradually increasing number of those who recognize the extraordinary foresight of Plato in making us aware

of revised and hopefully more defensible, if long discarded, axioms which, taken seriously, would at least alleviate our presently ineluctable fear of being brought up against banality, despair and ultimately despotism.

The more properly historical arguments of the present book are designed to explain significant features of the decline of traditional Western culture (intellectual and hence other) and to contribute to their possible repair. That culture, a derivative of ancient Greece, Rome and Israel, received much of its enduring intellectual framework from the writings of Augustine who stood at the intersection of these; hence the decline, fall and desirable resurrection of what can broadly be dubbed Augustinian Christianity will be the focus of the present explorations. Augustine's imposing structure was assembled from a great array of Christian and non-Christian sources and traditions, but for better or worse it held a unique position at the centre of European cultural life for hundreds of years; no proposed alternative has as yet earned so enduring an influence. A basic part of this structure, with its vast ramifications, was built on a set of axioms and conclusions about the nature of the 'will', human and divine: of its 'freedom' (however understood), its 'responsibilities' and, perhaps fundamentally, its relationship to love.

If current transformations of Western culture cannot be understood without reference to the abandonment – for good or bad reasons – of the Augustinian world-picture, we are left with the question of whether all the babies were thrown out with the bathwater; or, to choose a less drastic metaphor – whether in giving up on the difficulties and paradoxes which Augustinianism seemed to generate, our ancestors, wilfully or unwittingly, undermined the very city from which they had their nurture: the civilized structure of which they were the heirs and which was still basically liveable in. If that is right, we should be asking how repair work might yet be carried out; only restoration requires knowledge of what the original 'city' was like, of its particular strengths and weaknesses. To cash out the metaphor, you cannot think within a tradition unless you have good knowledge as to what the tradition was.

When during the early modern period accepted interpretations of certain key words ('will', 'freedom', 'responsibility', 'duty') began to change – or rather when even earlier movements for change, themselves prompted by serious philosophical difficulties, began to accelerate – the cultural and

of these problems. She also identifies Hart's ideas – themselves a derivative of those of Mill – as self-destructive and potentially totalitarian. I consider the totalitarian aspects of contemporary liberalism in Chapters 11 and 12.

intellectual consequences were huge, albeit unforeseeable. Changing language both reflected and promoted what was to become the systematically anti-Christian, indeed anti-religious, world view which most opinion formers of the Western Establishment now profess: whether because they truly understand its implications, or more probably because they think they understand them though they do not; whether their by now time-bound and ignorant individualism insists that in our exponentially wider and more complex world immediate fancy and convenience – mine – are all that can matter; whether they conclude, or will be found to conclude, that we are not persons but automata fit only to function at best as parts of some larger bureaucratic machine that may be nominally democratic or blatantly totalitarian.

Beneath the surface of the present enquiry lies a subsidiary but still substantive question: Are we to conclude that universities and other intellectual organs in our society which offer philosophical, historical or literary studies – by increasingly promoting, at least by default, an ignorance of all but the very recent past – are setting themselves to damage, at least disparage, perhaps even destroy, an intellectual, moral and spiritual tradition which goes back, via the Christian centuries, to the origins of Western civilization?[6]

The perceptive reader will demand more information about pre-Augustinian discussions of the 'will', its 'freedom' and related topics – not least about the relationship between loving and knowing – and my first chapter, though necessarily limited in scope, considers something of these earlier enquiries. But for better or worse, when in late antiquity much of that substructure disappeared from view – to be rediscovered piecemeal as the centuries passed – it was largely the Augustinian world-picture that remained in the West, and it was on the strengths and weaknesses of that world-picture (often handed down in more or less deformed versions) that subsequent discussion rested. Indeed, even when wider knowledge of the more ancient debates gradually became possible, the principal concern of those thinkers who engaged with it was either how to fit it into the dominant Augustinian framework or to demonstrate how it must undermine that framework. The history of classical philology reveals that even when more of the philosophical texts of antiquity had long been available, it remained difficult to interpret them correctly and so to cut away layers of misinterpretation that had deformed and continued to deform the subtleties of ancient controversies. Only in the past couple of centuries has our

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[6] For an introduction to part of this subsidiary problem see MacIntyre (2009).

understanding of antiquity developed to the point where we can recognize what the Augustinian and post-Augustinian world-picture preserved of a by then fragmented earlier tradition and what it ignored or left obscure. In this way has chance – unless it is providence – governed the way Western thought has developed since ancient times.

A major concern of the present book will be with the 'will' and its freedom – though problems about free will arose before anything like our notions of what we call the 'will' and free choice had developed. When philosophers talk of taking action, they may seem to refer to a set of mental phenomena which we can unpack as follows: I act to do or secure X when (a) I believe it is good to do or to secure X; (b) I realize that to do or secure X I must do A; (c) I therefore decide that A is a reasonable thing to want and to do; and finally (d) I choose to do A in order to acquire or to do X. That is, roughly, Aristotle's position. Other philosophers suppose that for X to be secured (or attempted) we need to invoke a further phenomenon, an act of will over and above its 'components': that is, our beliefs, reflections and desires. So they explain 'I did X' (eventually) as 'I did X because I willed to do X'. That is, roughly, the position of Aquinas and of many others before and since, and it usually implies that we have some sort of faculty called the 'will'. It is not, however, the position of Augustine, who thinks, very roughly, that we go for X rather than Y because we *love* X more than Y.[7]

Similar alternatives pertain in theology, where if 'will' is falsely posited, this will generate an analogous and arguably similarly delusory problem of whether God is primarily or exclusively to be viewed as being or possessing absolute will and/or absolute intelligence. Now if a free action is at least to some degree a rational action, then when a man acts randomly or wilfully, it is hard to see how he can be either free or rational. However, whereas it is reasonable to suppose that a man can be both unfree and irrational, there is no rational possibility of God's not being free; yet if God's 'freedom' allows him to act arbitrarily, then he must seem to fail to

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[7] Something like Aquinas' position is defended in Anscombe (1957). Lawrence, for example, proposes a defence of something more like Aristotle's version (Lawrence 2004: 265–300). Needless to say, Lawrence's reading of Aristotle is disputed, but – while I cannot enter the debate here – I am in large agreement with it. Byers notes the error of taking Augustine to advocate a 'faculty' of the will (though she wrongly supposes him to suggest such a faculty on one occasion (Byers 2006: 171–89; p. 187 on *DLA* 2.19.50). Before Byers, Chappell had spotted this 'faculty' error (Chappell 1995: 127) (though his immediate comment is misleading inasmuch as it neglects the Platonic aspects of Augustine's position). He writes: 'Augustine's talk about the *voluntas* [should] be understood simply as his way of talking about the voluntary – whether that means voluntary action, or choice, or both – and not, as it has often been, as talk about a reified faculty of will constituting a substantial presence in the theatre of the psyche.'

act rationally, let alone morally. That raises problems if – perhaps to pro-
tect God's omnipotence – we suppose him to follow (or even simply to
be) the absolute decrees of his 'will'.

Classical Greek philosophers did not have a word that can simply and
unproblematically be translated as 'will', though Hellenistic and Imperial
Roman Greek came to offer something near it in a secondary sense of
the word *prohairesis*.[8] Latin (and its Romance derivatives) offered us the
word *voluntas* – from which arises the problem as to whether in the rele-
vant ancient texts – in the present study that means primarily the text of
Augustine – we can translate *voluntas* as 'will' without misleadingly gen-
erating a series of unnecessary philosophical problems. And if we can,
should our interpretation of Augustine be that he was a voluntarist: that
is, someone who believes that free actions are to be explained in terms
of *willing* rather than of *loving*? Of course, if it turns out that Augustine
is not at least consciously a voluntarist, we shall not be justified in sad-
dling him with the belief that all actions – human or divine – are to be
explained as functions of more or less successful exercises in pure reason-
ing or rationalizing.

In any case, what sort of thing might we want to rationalize, and fur-
ther, what can rationalizing tell us about the nature of freedom? If a free
act is also an act of the mind, are we, in the case of God, to think of him
as performing precisely and infallibly what he knows he wants to do? Is
his 'will' free in the sense of unrestricted, or must it function in accord-
ance with a (more than instrumental) rationality? Put bluntly, are God's
decisions arbitrary? As we shall see, it was in part Augustine's apparent
failure to answer this question in a clear and convincing way that induced
some of his defenders, gradually divorcing God's apparent 'will' from his
intelligence – at least as they understood an intelligence – to propose what
seemed to many an arbitrary divinity. But does that sort of proposal help
us formulate what real freedom might be? And if real freedom is arbi-
trary freedom – as opposed, that is, to the freedom of an unfettered 'good-
ness' – are we left with the hope (or fear) that when God is banished from
the scene, arbitrary freedom becomes the mark of the genuinely free *man*,
until human 'freedom' requires no – or minimum – possible restraint on
thought and action?

And we need to clarify that 'minimum possible', for that there could
be absolutely free human activity has to be a mirage, since every human
action, moral or non-moral, is performed within fixed parameters. My

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[8] See recently Pich (2010: 95–127); Dobbin (1991: 111–35).

actions are limited at least in part by my genetic inheritance, my personal history, the world and society and family into which I am born, the fact that I am not immune to illness and death and so on. When I act, I recognize these inhibiting factors, consciously or unconsciously. I may try to act more 'freely' – that is, without some of these constraints – but I can never act without any form of constraint.[9] Yet if for whatever reason (and Augustine can plausibly suggest what that reason would be) the absolutely free act is a mirage, or the dream of certain philosophers or madmen – as perhaps an unconscious desire of all of us – then in our 'willed' actions, if we have our best interests at heart, we might, as the Stoics supposed, need to follow and accept whatever is going in any case to happen to us. In the Stoic world that inevitability is governed by a benevolent providence, but what, we might wonder, would follow from our obedience to necessity if that benevolent providence be absent? At best we might manage to be simply resigned, to attain a certain *apatheia* in the face of whatever may come to pass, for ourselves or for others: as Epictetus puts it: Every time you kiss your child goodnight, [you should] remember to tell yourself that he may die tomorrow. The best we could construct, that is, would be some kind of hard shell, some self-protective defence mechanism – and the best we could do for others would be to advise and teach them to do likewise. We would not advise them to try to be free of their destiny, or a destiny of madness or criminality would catch up with them.

The theological universe, as construed by Augustine, is a universe overseen not by the impersonal God of the Stoics but by the personal God of the Christians. In the hereafter the saints will appreciate the divine control in that they will neither wish to sin nor be capable of sinning. They will willingly accept that state as the best possible, understanding 'freedom' – that is, freedom from impediments to such a life – as a conscious conformity with it. Hence we are at all times free only to the degree to which we approximate to that blessed end-state. But remove Augustine's end-state and, if our desires for personal autonomy overbear Stoic resignation, our only option will be to aim for the highest attainable degree of freedom from any 'inhibitions'. These will include moral factors – among them an obligation to procreate and educate a future generation – and also physical factors: we might, for example wish to be free of the limitation of being male or female, even though escape is in practice impossible (for I must be basically either male or female, even if, like Teiresias, I try – whether contemporaneously or sequentially – to be both). Here I merely

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[9] A well-known treatment of some of the social implications of this is to be found in Sandel (1982).

indicate where the rejection of an Augustinian understanding of a good 'will' – albeit for what may seem excellent and humane reasons, and prescinding from whatever a 'will' may be – has led many of the high priests of modern society. The history of evil is often the history of simplistically facile beginnings (as Machiavelli well observed).

The history of 'willing' – not yet viewed as the act of a faculty independent of reason and desire but rather as a shorthand term which we may employ to describe the relationship between them – obviously began before Christian monotheism entered the field and took up from the more or less monotheistic Platonists a baton on which was inscribed the claim that not man but God is the measure of all things. Yet conflict between a monotheistic God and a race of men inclined to will their absolute autonomy could only occur after this God had been firmly established in the zenith of the cultural world view. Nor could the philosophical ramifications of that conflict be perceived before the God of monotheism could be subjected to serious philosophical scrutiny. Once such scrutiny had begun, its conclusions, whether valid or faulty, would begin to prevail among philosophers and preachers, and sooner or later be reflected in the culture itself. Thus in the Christian West, once the supremacy of God had been firmly – if not always intelligibly – established by Augustinian theology, the role of man's 'will' (however understood) in constructing the acceptably good life was diminished; indeed pressure could grow correspondingly (as frequently with the self-abasing devout) to diminish it to the point that man could be presented less as an intelligent creature of God who must rationally, and *therefore* humbly, recognize himself as such, than as *fundamentally* worthless and despicable, possessed of a more or less corrupt 'will' to be 'free' as God is 'free'.

Yet Christians had always held man to be created in God's image, so that the idea that he is simply despicable seemed a contradiction from which he must be rescued; he must be either confirmed as despicable or somehow rehabilitated. The attempt to confirm his portrait as both potentially redeemed and at the same time truly despicable was made by Luther, Calvin and those of the 'Reformers' who were theologically rather than politically or merely personally motivated; it was able to build on weaknesses in the traditional Augustinian theology gradually revealed during the Middle Ages and startlingly, albeit unintentionally, gaining greater prominence from the fourteenth century on. But within the Reformed camp itself there was soon revulsion against so squalid a portrait, as also against its perceived implications for the nature and designs of God. Many resolved the difficulty as follows: mankind, though clearly wicked,