PHILOSOPHY 151: Moral Philosophy

AUGUSTINE: Augustine’s Ethics

Summary

1. The Art of Living
   1. Supreme Good
      1. “Moral Philosophy” or “ethics” as an enquiry into the supreme good
      2. That which we seek for its own sake, and not as a means to and end
      3. That which makes us happy – aim of philosophy in general
   2. Philosophy as a fundamentally practical discipline
      1. Because happiness is at its center
      2. Overshadows logic, metaphysics, etc., as philosopher’s chief concern
      3. Transformed philosophy into the “art of living” with ethics as the star
   3. Philosophy as a religion
      1. Practicality of philosophy lead to regarding it as religion
      2. Offered a view of God/s and its implication on everyday conduct
      3. Christianity as the “one true philosophy”
2. Happiness as The Ultimate End
   1. True and False depending on perspective
      1. False to think that all individuals have the same conception of happiness
      2. Root cause of why people would usually do what they do
   2. Happiness as best translation for beatitude or eudomonia
      1. Happiness vs Blessedness / Well-Being
      2. Blessedness implies existence of a divine blesser – which is absent from eudomonia or beatitude
      3. Well-being has no convenient adjectival form
   3. Agreements with standard philosophical teachings
      1. All beings desire happiness
      2. Only “people who like to argue” equate happiness with excessive indulgence
   4. Retractationes
      1. Augsustine’s reservations about his initial works
         1. Too much praise on Platonists
         2. Too much emphasis on liberal arts
         3. Overrated the importance of knowing immutable truths
         4. Suggesting that perfect virtue can be achieved in this life
3. Happiness, Morality and Immorality
   1. Immortality as prerequisite for true happiness
      1. Materialists are misguided because they chose to redescribe ideal happiness in such a way that it’s attainable in this life
         1. According to them, there is no afterlife
         2. Lowering the goal to place happiness within one’s control
         3. Happiness as a result of one’s own effort
      2. Platonists are believed to be wrong in their belief in the “liberation” of the soul from the body
         1. Humans are, by nature, EMBODIED, thus our bodies are not prisons nor punishments
         2. Failed to acknowledge Jesus Christ, incarnation of God in flesh, teacher and redeemer without whom attaining happiness would be impossible
4. Love of God and Neighbor
   1. Intrinsic Value according to natural God-given hierarchy vs Assigned value according to utility
      1. First refers to the natural order of God’s creations
         1. Humans will always be more important than animals, living objects greater than inanimate
      2. Second refers to an assigned value that we give things that are useful for us
      3. However, tendency is to rely on the second even if it largely conflicts with the first
      4. Discrepancy between giving value as free rational agents or as someone driven by our own needs and desires
         1. “What is this worth to me?”
         2. Flawed because this reveals more about the subject answering the question rather than the intrinsic value of the object
      5. Virtuous person would never regard others as merely the means to her own ends
   2. Christ’s Commandment of Loving Thy Neighbor
      1. Commands us to love beings for their intrinsic worth
      2. Love people because they belong to God, not us
         1. More inhuman to love somebody because he is your son than because he is a human made in the image of and belonging to God - Partiality for family is an animalistic and biological urge, not valuing someone for his intrinsic worth
      3. We should love and enjoy people as related to God for none of us have value independent of God
   3. Augustine on Virtue
      1. Never a means to and end, but not as something to be desired purely for its own sake.
      2. Virtue is rightly ordered love
         1. Virtues are forms of love rooted in charity
         2. Good conduct motivated by fear of punishment is NOT virtuous
      3. Virtue can NEVER supplant God as the supreme good – the sole good to be loved purely for its own sake without any higher good
         1. Otherwise, your are aiming for glory not virtue or you are a sophisticated narcissist for valuing your own virtue among everything else
      4. Once God has been recognized as the supreme good, at best human virtue is second
         1. We can only be happy by that through which we are made good – God.
      5. No trouble in defining that your supreme good is happiness or if it is God, for love makes up the distinction
   4. On Loving Oneself
      1. No need for such a commandment
         1. As if we were commanded to breathe
      2. Improper not to love oneself
         1. Love your neighbor AS you love yourself
         2. Never serve the interest of other for you your own ultimate good
      3. Never sacrifice greater intrinsic worth less than the good achieved
         1. Partnerships as hindrance to proper morality
      4. What makes you worthy to be loved?
         1. Inner value and virtues exemplified by Christ
         2. Best elements in us we owe to God’s generosity than to our own accomplishments
5. Pride and Fear
   1. Self-Love vs Pride
      1. Nothing wrong with self-love
      2. Pride is what really leads people awry
         1. Perverse self love that leads to arrogance
      3. We sin by loving the inferior aspects about ourselves or loving in excess
         1. Recognize that common good has more value than private , individual love
   2. Difference from Pagan Beliefs
      1. The only true community is a just community – but that will never happen until we join God
      2. Human nature is in its present condition, crippled by original sin
   3. Tension between loving God and fearing Him
      1. Fear as the first step to conduct ourselves better
      2. However, fear is never more than a first step, else everything has been lost
6. The Divided Will
   1. Internal Conflicts
      1. In his experience, it was about converting to Christianity, but couldn’t and continued to resist and delay
      2. Represented as bondage, where we are chained from doing God’s will
      3. Augustine emphasizes that the bondage was self created, that the division was an expression of a single self, divided.
         1. In contrast to other philosophers which dictate external factors as main cause
         2. “It was I who willed, U who refused and I who tore myself apart”
   2. Centrality of Will
      1. Augustine attributes three powers to the soul: reason/intellect, memory and will
      2. No division between will and emotion
         1. Joy as agreement between what we want and our will
         2. Fear and grief as disagreement with the will and what we reject
      3. If Human beings sin, then we must be morally responsible for sinning
         1. Explanation cannot lie in external factors such as ignorance, faulty reasoning or emotional disorder
         2. Sin arose from an evil will which had no prior or external cause
         3. Either the will is the FIRST cause of the sin, or there is no sin
      4. Based on two assumptions:
         1. We are justified in holding people, but not animal, responsible for their actions
         2. We would not be justified in holding people morally responsible if they did not have a will which somehow transcends the natural apetite
      5. To be morally responsible, people must deserve their punishments and rewards
7. Shared, Flawed Humanity
   1. Original sin and concupiscence
      1. There is a profound damage to the human nature by original sin
      2. Thus there is a profound dependency on God’s grace
   2. Pelgian View
      1. How could anyone have an obligation to be perfect if he lacks the ability to be? If we ought to be perfect, then it follows that we can be perfect
   3. Augustine vs Pelgians
      1. Ignoring the sheer universality of human failings
         1. No human to be perfect through our own efforts
      2. Against the notion that we are born innocent and good and grow worse only as a result of social conditioning
      3. Augustine’s view on Pelgian’s concept of perfection
         1. Challenges the Pelgian’s narrow understanding of how imperatives are used and what might be justly commanded
            1. Challenges and tasks may be gven in order to teach, not to produce obedient performances
         2. Challenges their interpretation of “prerfect”
            1. Why restrict the word so drastically?
            2. We should apply it to making progress, making a move in the right direction and well advanced in the journey towards God, regardless of flaws
         3. Challenges interpretation of “I am able” and its individualistic perspective it reflects
            1. From “I am able to be perfect”, what we ought to mean is “I am able to be perfect with God’s help”
            2. Makes us all moral agents of God
   4. While we suffer from the consequence of a sin we never committed, we also benefit from a sacrifice that none of us made
8. True Imperfect Virtue
   1. Common notion of virtue is that it’s inseperability: Either you have one, or you have none
      1. Identity: Makes every virtue identical with the knowledge of good and bad
      2. Unity: Plurality of virtues, but claims that it all belongs to the mind
      3. Reciprocity: Plurality of virtues and distinguishes virtues of the intellect and character. But there is reciprocal dependence between moral and intellectual virtues/practical wisdom, either you have practical wisom AND moral virtues, or none at all.
   2. Suggests two major things:
      1. That no being on the face of the earth has ever been so excellent as to meet this high standard of virtue
      2. Any individual who did manage to become virtuous must have progressed in an instant from possessing no genuine virtue to possessing them all
         1. Whoever has one moral virtue must have it all, whoever lacks cannot have any
   3. Augustine’s Attack
      1. Ancient philosophers are mistaken in thinking that any human being can be morally flawless
      2. Mistaken as well in believing that knowledge or wisdom is the foundation of all moral virtues
      3. Virtues are unified in CHARITY
         1. The more charity, the more virtue
         2. All sins are contrary to charity, and because whole law of God depends on charity, any sin represents failure to keep the law
      4. We never meet virtues except in the company of vices
         1. Virtue in life is perpetually in battle with vices
      5. Virtue is what makes us good, albeit short of perfect
      6. Habit as the enemy of virtue as compared it being its genus
         1. Character depends on the will, by which one might break the bonds of habit and turn away from one’s past
   4. We are never completely past the hope of salvation, never completely beyond the danger of degeneration, never thoroughly predictable to mortal observers
   5. Because God is loving and gives full credit for progress and having “one’s heart in the right place,” every one of us has reason to try her best and to hope for God’s grace.