

Augustine on the Moral Life



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Augustine on the Moral Life

What is involved in the question?

- What makes us who we are?
- What elements are involved in the moral life?
- What struggles do we face?

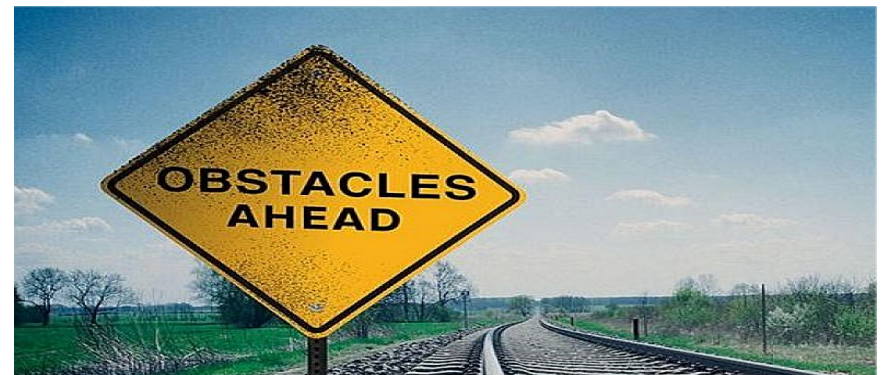
What is involved in the answer?

Three sets of ideas:

1. Happiness, desire, justice, power
2. Mediation and dependence
3. Humility and pride

First set of ideas: happiness, desire, power

- What is the foundational idea that can get us started?
Everyone wants to be happy!
- What is the fundamental issue that we face? Our desire reaches further than our power.



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How do you find happiness if your power cannot fulfill
your desires?

Three answers

(1) Power -- expand power until it can satisfy desire (Locke and Nietzsche).

(2) Justice -- reshape desire in accordance with justice (Plato and Aristotle).

(3) Power and justice – need the power to satisfy just desires (Augustine)

*'Two things are required to make you happy: to wish well and to be able to
do what you wish.'*

Augustine, *De Trinitate* 13.17

Augustine's third way *Justice and Power*

The big question: Do we have enough power to satisfy *just* desires?

Augustine's answer: No – we want eternal life! Absolute gap between the reach of human desire and the extent of human power.

The big freakout:

- (1) The death of classical ethics
- (2) The death of Christian ethics
- (3) The end of happiness

Second set of ideas: dependence and mediation

Big idea: there is an absolute gap between what we desire and what we have the power to secure. We are always dependent on mediators.



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Dependence and mediation

Three big ideas

- (1) The kind of life that you lead is a result of the kind of mediator on which you depend.

E.g. Roman, Christian, capitalistic, technological.

- (2) The key task we face is finding the mediator who allows us to find happiness.

Classical and modern thought wrong to downplay questions of mediation.

- (3) We are dependent because we cannot live without mediation.

Key theological question: how do we think about dependence?

Summary so far . . .

To understand Augustine's view of the moral life you have to think about:

- (1) The search for happiness
- (2) The excess of our desire in relation to our power
- (3) The place of justice and power in pursuing happiness
- (4) Our dependence on mediators to bring objects of desire within reach.
- (5) The way our lives are shaped by the mediators on which we depend.

Third set of ideas: humility and pride

Key premise: To be human is to reflect on the realities that shape our lives.

Key question: how do we relate to our dependence?

Key contrast: humility and pride



"What? All I said was I'm proud of my humility."

Humility and pride

Three big ideas:

- (1) At root, only two kinds of human life across all of history: humble and proud.
- (2) All of history is the story of a contrast between these two kinds of life: fall of the angels, fall of Adam and Eve, and Cain's murder of Abel are all examples of the conflict between humility and pride.
- (3) Human beings are caught in cycles of pride, and learn humility only from the true mediator who comes in humility.

Summary: Augustine on the Moral Life

How do we understand who we are?

- (1) How do we think about happiness? Where do we locate happiness, and how do we try to get there? Power? Justice? Both?
- (2) What mediators do we rely on? How do they shape our lives? Do they bring happiness closer or leave it further out of reach?
- (3) How do we relate to our dependence? Humility? Pride?