

LIVING IN HOLY LOVE: AUGUSTINE'S CHRISTOCENTRIC ETHICS

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ABSTRACT: This article seeks to clarify the relationship between systematic first principles and the moral theologies which follow. It argues that current tensions in anglophone moral theology reflect incompatible theological presuppositions, defined by the terms of the last century. In keeping with this edition's theme, this article considers P. T. Forsyth's conception of 'holy love' and its bearing on the moral life. However, rather than follow Forsyth's rejection of the liberal theologians of the past two centuries, I consider Augustine's parallel rejection of classical philosophers in Late Antiquity. Augustine's articulation of a distinctly Christian ethic grounded in the love of God challenges our current presuppositions and allows for a rearticulation of Christian ethics in a grammar undefined by debates of modern theology. Christian resourcing of classical ethics has typically sought to retrieve a tradition of virtue ethics within an Augustinian frame. However, Augustine's own retrieval of classical ethics rejects both Stoicism and the virtue ethics tradition in favor of a distinctly Christian way of life. His anthropology contrasts from liberalism in many ways, but chief among them is that Augustine understands humans are defined by loves, not rationality or self-possession. Augustine offers a Christian ethics not about improvement or moral choices but about confessional encounters with God. Like Forsyth, he is adamant that one must first admit God's holiness, then one's sin. To admit God's holiness is to admit that God has covered our sin. To love in holy love is to confess that one cannot, on their own, live in holy love.

KEY WORDS: Augustine of Hippo; Ethics; Forsyth; Virtue; Confession

Theological Ethics and Augustine's Conception of Holy Love

The debates of 20th Century protestant systematic theology are often remembered as debates over first principals. Anthropology, historical criticism, natural theology, the 'life of Jesus' and the Tradition of the Church all vied for primacy in theological reflection. Since the start of this current century, however, these debates have come to bear on theological ethics in new and often divisive ways, though the reasons for

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these divisions too frequently elude us. This article seeks to clarify the relationship between systematic first principals and the moral theologies which follow. It argues that current tensions in anglophone moral theology reflect incompatible theological presuppositions, defined by the terms of the last century. In keeping with the journal's theme, this article first considers P. T. Forsyth's conception of 'holy love' and his its bearing on the moral life. However, rather than follow Forsyth's rejection of the liberal theologians of the past two centuries, I consider Augustine's similar rejection of classical philosophers in Late Antiquity. Christians resourcing classical ethics have typically sought to retrieve a tradition of virtue ethics within an Augustinian frame. However, Augustine's own retrieval of classical ethics rejects both Stoicism and the virtue ethics tradition in favor of a distinctly Christian way of life, which he sees as more fully fulfilling the classical project. Consequently, his anthropology contrasts from liberalism in many ways, but chief among them is that Augustine understands humans are defined by loves, not rationality or self-possession. For instance, his reading of Psalm 32 argues that happiness depends on forgiveness (reconciliation), not proper action. Thus, the ethical agent is not the individual trying to do better, but Christ welcoming all into his body. Augustine offers a Christian ethic that is not about improvement or moral choices, but about confessional encounters with God. Augustine's articulation of a distinctly Christian ethic grounded in the love of God challenges our current presuppositions and allows for a rearticulation of Christian ethics in a grammar undefined by debates of modern theology. Like Forsyth, he is adamant that one must first admit God's holiness, then one's sin. To admit God's holiness is to admit that God has covered our sin. To love in holy love is to confess that one cannot, on their own, live in holy love, but to embrace, that one has, by God's holy love, already been made holy by incorporation in body of Christ.

The Modern Moral Landscape

Twentieth Century systematic theology was marked by debates over first principles which have shaped our current discourse. This is especially clear in Theological Ethics, as competing strands of Christian ethics continue to develop in opposite directions. Often Catholic ethicists and papal encyclicals rely evermore on the weight of Natural Law, while many protestants reject Natural Law entirely (e.g. Finns; Brock). The divergences over first principals in the last century have borne fruit in our current ethics and politics. In this landscape, Augustine is helpful once more as common ground in our theological reasoning. Ultimately, the purpose of this article is to put forth a renewed vision of this common ground that is both historically and theologically rich, while approachable and relevant to current discourse. This section argues that contemporary divides in Christian Ethics are in fact divides of theological an-

thropology and locates P.T. Forsyth's rejection of liberal theology within that debate. After clarifying this anthropological divide, the article explores Augustine's analogous rejection of classical anthropology and explores how this shapes his ethics. Last, the article argues that Christian ethics may overcome many of its current divides by re-grounding anthropology outside our 20th century debates; in this case, that of Augustine. Augustine's approach offers a way to move beyond modern theological debates, renewing a distinctly Christian ethic for today's challenges.

If ethics is the study asking after the good life for a human being, it first must reckon with the nature of that human. In the 20th century, these debates centered around original sin and the human's capacity for natural knowledge of God, the existential nature of the human life, and questions concerning evolution and image of God. While these latter two categories have certainly impacted Christian ethics (the work of John Caputo and James K.A. Smith are notable heirs to Heideggerian existentialism, while Daniel Pedersen, 2020, is a paradigmatic example of a work wrestling with evolutionary anthropology), the greatest rifts have come in response to theological divergences over original sin and natural revelation. In this first section, I sketch a loose history of this divergence in the previous century, paying special attention to P.T. Forsyth's place in that genealogy, and argue for its influence in our present ethical landscape.

While debates of theological anthropology are not unique to the 20th century (cf. Gregory of Nyssa, 2023), the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher ushered in the questions of liberal theology which dominated the 20th century. Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith* (2011) redefined original sin as a corporate and social human condition, stemming from humanity's forgetfulness of and failure to align with God's will. This shift to a relational and communal notion of sin is even more pronounced in the work of Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), which overtly rejects doctrines of original sin and human depravity. Rather, Ritschl's work argues for a more optimistic and romantic view of humanity, which conceives of humans as intrinsically good and spiritual beings, challenged by the natural impulses stemming from external influences (Ritschl, 1872). The thrust of Christianity, thus, is not a forgiving and renewing from a sinful nature to a new nature in Christ, but a realization of the kingdom of God on earth, a moral community in which the external influences of society no longer lead one to sin. Ultimately, Ritschl's work is humanistic, emphasizing the Church's role to bring about the kingdom of God. Attaining holiness on earth for those within the Schleiermacherian and Ritschlian tradition is a corporate, human activity (Forsyth, 1952, p. 381).

It is in response to this positive humanism that Forsyth articulates his anthropology, maintaining Ritschl's moral dimension of faith, while rejecting Ritschl's anthro-

political optimism and corporate account of sin and righteousness (Forsyth, 1997). Forsyth posits that humans are fundamentally moral beings, created to reflect God's holy love. Holiness, for Forsyth, is the defining attribute of God, and humanity's purpose is to participate in this holiness through moral obedience and communion with God (Forsyth, 1998). While more critical of human nature than Ritschl, he does not reject the persistence of the conscience as the core of human identity, serving as the seat of moral accountability. It is where humans encounter God's moral demand and become aware of their guilt due to sin. (Forsyth, 2017). Humanity's relational nature is expressed in its unity, not through biological or metaphysical continuity (e.g., shared guilt in Adam) but through a moral and spiritual unity restored in Christ. This unity is grounded in the redeemed conscience, which Forsyth sees as the locus of human solidarity (Forsyth, 1997). For Forsyth, the crisis of the guilty conscience is central to his anthropology. He argues that human efforts (e.g., moral striving or ritual) cannot resolve this crisis. Only divine action, through judgment and grace, can address the depth of human sin (Forsyth, 1997). In Christ, the conscience is not merely cleansed but transformed. Salvation involves a 'new creation' where the moral self is reborn through the Spirit, enabling a restored relationship with God and others. Forsyth's anthropology is inseparable from his Christology and soteriology. The process of sanctification is dynamic and ongoing, involving crises and renewals. The old self is not annihilated but redeemed, as Christ's work aligns human moral existence with God's purpose (Forsyth, 1998). He emphasizes that this is a gift of grace, not a human achievement (Forsyth, 2017). This process of atonement, accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection, is God's definitive act of holy love and justice, addressing human guilt and sanctifying the conscience.

Forsyth was also influenced by Reformation thinkers. Luther's emphasis on justification by faith and the centrality of the cross resonates in Forsyth's focus on grace and atonement. Calvin's doctrine of God's sovereignty and holiness informs Forsyth's view of divine love as holy love, demanding moral obedience (Forsyth, 1999). His stress on the conscience echoes Luther's concept of *coram Deo*, wherein human identity is defined by accountability to God. Forsyth combines this protestant emphasis on obedience with modern Kantian moral philosophy, particularly the categorical imperative and the autonomy of the moral self. While rejecting Kant's secular ethics, Forsyth adapted Kant's focus on moral duty to emphasize the conscience as the site of divine-human encounter (Forsyth, 1952). The historical processes of Fichte and Hegel shape his dynamic view of sanctification. What results is a moral theology of an autonomous moral individual, guided by conscience to obey God's commands and actualize the kingdom of heaven on earth. As noted above, however, because the

conscience is sanctified through God's own act of Christ's death and resurrection, the ultimate moral agent in Forsythe's ethic is God, not the autonomous individual.

Unbeknownst to him, these two concepts of conscience and societal progress would define theological debates for the rest of the century. The events of World War II, the Holocaust, and the rise of the Soviet Union would set theologians on quests to answer questions of moral realism and optimism, as typified by the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez and Reinhold Niebuhr. Similarly, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Erich Przywara would seek to redefine or defend traditional accounts of conscience and revelation (see Hart, 2001). As a result, by the end of the Twentieth Century, theologians were largely divided by dogmatic debates of revelation and human depravity. However, while these theologians and their corresponding schools of thought have differed over doctrine, they have largely agreed on the basic liberal assumption of an autonomous individual before God, especially in protestant theology. Whether following Kant or Kierkegaard, the moral theologies on offer coming out of the Twentieth Century are alternative conceptions of how the individual obeys God, through reason, conscience, faith, habit, command, or natural reasoning. Even Forsyth, who explicitly rejects liberal theology with his rich account of depravity and emphasis on God's action, still finds his moral theology structured around the individual's conformity to God's holy love. Crucially, on each of these accounts, the individual is a moral agent, charged by God with the task of improving themselves and, sometimes, the world around them. I argue that to recover meaningful discourse in theological ethics, theologians must reconceive of the moral agent as something other than an autonomous individual choosing between various moral offerings. We must rediscover a more robust theological anthropology grounded in the work and person of Christ. It is to this I now turn.

Augustine's Reimagination of Classical Ethics

Similar to Twentieth Century theologians, who found themselves attempting to resource and rebut modern post-Kantian moral theory, in the Fourth Century, the North African rhetorician-turned-bishop found himself wrestling with the moral theory of the Graeco-Roman world. However, unlike modern theologians surveyed above, Augustine's approach retains the operative ethical framework of his classical predecessors. Instead, he redefines the anthropology underpinning this framework to reimagine what the concepts of classical moral theory mean for the Christian. Following classical philosophy, Augustine's moral theory focuses on *eudaimonia*, virtue, and the movement of the intellect toward the Divine. However, he rejects the anthropology of his stoic and Neoplatonic influences, defining humans by their loves: the love of self or the love of God and neighbor (Augustine 2003: 13.28). In this section, I

sketch Augustine's turn away from classical philosophy toward a distinctly Christian anthropology and examine its implications for Christian moral theory.

Augustine's ethics are eudemonistic and teleological virtue ethics, but his anthropology, and thus his approach, are markedly different than his predecessors (Augustine 2003: 8.8). He is concerned with living his life in such a way to attain happiness (*eudaimonia*, Latin: *felicitas*) by pursuing and attaining his proper end (*telos*, Latin: *finis*). Echoes of classical philosophers come through his writings, noting that all people want to be happy: 'the desire for happiness is not in myself alone, or in a few friends, but is in everybody' (Augustine 1991: 10.21.31). However, unlike the classical philosophers, Augustine does not seek *felicitas* in a life of virtue, but in rest with God himself (Augustine 1991: 10.20.29). Having come from God, he claims all beings desire to return to God, and in the meantime, retain some memory of happiness with God (Augustine 1991: 10.20.29). Cicero, had claimed with the Stoics that man, being 'derived from the divine reason,' becomes, by habit, a perfect understanding, which is virtue, so that the mind is complete and possessed of virtue, and therefore, happy (Cicero 1927: 5.3) Augustine, however writes, 'the authentic happy life, to set one's joy on you, grounded in you and caused by you. That is the real thing and there is no other...nevertheless their will remains drawn toward some image of true joy' (Augustine 1991: 10.32.22). His eudemonism is neither concerned with action, nor virtue, but with rest and union with God (Augustine 1991: 1.1.1). In this sense, his eudemonism appears far from its classical counterparts, concerned less with 'ethics' than religion; it is passive and suspended, not yet attainable because of mankind's limitations as a temporal, created being, still being formed.

This is most evident in his *Confessiones* (*conf.*) Primarily, the ethics of *conf.* stem from what Augustine sees as mankind's self-evident desire for rest (*quies*). This desire both opens and closes the work; throughout the text, rest, happiness, good, and eternity appear as different expressions for Augustine's desire for God (Augustine 1991: 1.1.1; 13.38.53). The first ten books recount Augustine's failures to find rest and happiness in either his external desires or his interior reflections. Books 11-13 sketch his pursuit of rest in God and expose the ontological problems of a created being finding rest. However, both reflections emerge from the conviction that rest is only found in unwavering unity with the divine, who is above both external objects and internal contemplation.

Since happiness depends on attaining an object one cannot lose, Augustine reasons that it can only occur in an unchanging state of rest with God. To attain rest, all things must be converted from 'a fluid state in darkness' (*fluitans in obscuritate sua*) to their proper form, 'more and more to live by the fount of life... in complete happiness' (Augustine 1991: 13.4.5). Created things must be turned, because they are, by

the nature of being created, not at rest. Created things change. They exist in darkness and flux of formlessness and must be turned to stability and light (Augustine 1991: 13.5.6). Conversion is an ongoing act of God creating the human to be who they are. Like all created things, humans must be converted from their temporal restlessness and be brought to their form in eternity.

While physical beings naturally move to their proper place according to their natural weight, Augustine identifies that humans are uniquely restless. They are moved by their love and do not always love properly. Thus, humans can move upward toward a place of rest in eternity, but they can also move downward toward physical things toward a place of unrest and disorder. Augustine contrasts the ‘impurity of our spirit which flows downwards because of our love of anxieties, and the holiness which draws us upwards in a love of freedom from anxiety’ (Augustine 1991: 13.7.8). While he defines humans as intellectual creatures, for Augustine the term ‘intellectual’ (*intellectus*) should not be taken to refer to a modern notion of a rational intellect, but to the distinction between types of being. The intellect is the highest part of the soul; it is that which, by love, moves toward or away from their proper end.

The narrative of books 1-10 is full of Augustine’s failures to find rest in the love of temporal things, or in the love of himself, which always results in restlessness. He does not find rest in external desires, nor internal contemplations, because none of these things are infinite and unchanging. Earlier in *conf.*, Augustine describes the restlessness of his youth. Recounting the grief of losing a friend in book four, he provides an honest analysis of the restless state of his soul in his early years, uniting the notions of rest and temporality with those of selfhood and desire. He writes:

wherever the human soul turns itself other than to you, it is fixed in sorrows, even if it is fixed upon beautiful things external to you and external to itself...for these things pass along the path of things that move towards non-existence. They rend the soul with pestilential desires; for the soul loves to be in them and take its repose among the objects of its love. But in these things, there is no point of rest: they lack permanence (Augustine 1991: 4.10.15).

Regardless of the object of love, because all things other than God undergo change, nothing but God is a stable object of love in which the human can find rest. Thus, Augustine’s eudaimonism begins and ends with the notion of rest. His account of the happy life is the life which adheres to the unchanging nature of God.

The central question for Augustine is how does one join with God and partake of his being and rest, especially considering one’s tendencies to turn from God (cf., Augustine 2003: 5.1)? In *conf.* 7-8, he recounts his attempted intellectual ascent from the beauty of bodies, to the beauty of the soul, to its inward force, to the mind, and

even for a moment, to the contemplation of God. Yet despite the perfection of what he ascends to, his soul cannot remain attuned to God (Augustine 1991: 7.17.23). Just as the mind forgets itself, so too does it forget God. He concludes that man does not have the strength to remain with God through the intellect, because the will (*uoluntas*) desires lesser things (Augustine 1991: 7.17.23).

Augustine concludes that the mind needs a mediator between itself and the One. When recounting his time with the Neoplatonists, he notes that ‘to possess my God...I was not yet humble enough’ (Augustine 1991: 7.18.24). In hindsight, his admonition is to throw off the confidence one has in themselves, and to become weak (Augustine 1991: 7.18.24). The Neoplatonists aimed to apprehend the One itself through the contemplation of the divine, something Augustine confesses he is unable to do. Recounting his time with the Neoplatonists, he notes: ‘You took me up from behind my own back where I had placed myself because I did not wish to observe myself’ (Augustine 1991: 8.7.16). Augustine had begun to see the truth, but this truth did not free him; rather, it convinced him of his inadequacy. Introspection and intellectual ascent did not lead him to eudaimonism but revealed his unhappiness. His intellectual Neoplatonic quest had led him to self-knowledge and glimpses of knowledge of Truth, yet its result was not happiness, but despair. His move past Neoplatonism resulted from an acceptance that he could not comprehend the *logos* by the intellect, but that the *logos* encountered him in space and time. No amount of rationality could resolve his internal tension. Augustine could not resolve his divided self, it was only the interruption of the *logos* that reconciled his will, which as explored below, becomes crucial for his ethic of confession (Augustine 1991: 8.12.29).

Thus, in book 13 he expresses that he cannot convert himself to his true form and find happiness but must be converted to God who is the unchanging location of his rest (Augustine 2003: 4.11.21-24). Humans do not ‘ascend’ to God through intellect as the Platonists suggest but are drawn upwards by the spirit above the waters (Augustine 1991: 7.18.24; 13.6.7). Augustine writes: ‘both the fact of its life and the fact of its living in a blessed state are owed only to your grace. By a change for the better it has become converted to that which cannot change either for the better or for the worse. This is what you alone are in absolute simplicity’ (Augustine 1991: 13.3.4). Thus, Augustine’s eudaimonism is the process of restless beings being formed to rest with God who cannot change, and this formation is conversion. And yet, because Augustine depicts the individual as dependent, volitional, and prone to lesser goods, the pursuit of this *eudaimonia* is not a work of intellectual assent or personal habits of virtue, but a confession of these limitations, and a giving away of any notions of one’s possession of one’s own self.

Thus far I have examined the framework in which Augustine articulates the hap-

py life: it is a move to rest with God brought about by God, not through intellectual ascent or moral improvement, but through the interjection of Christ to convert one's loves to God. I now turn to analyse the nature of this conversion. Specifically, I focus on the reformation of the will. I argue that Augustine reorients ethics to focus on the internal desires of the will to emphasise the contradictions and frustrations of his inner-person and turn outward to God.

One can only engage *conf.* as an ethical text within the context of Augustine's broader emphasis on interiority and volition. While reflections on the soul and its interior composition are nothing new, Augustine's reflections on turning inward to the inner-man (*interiorem-hominem*) and his emphasis on the will (*uoluntas*) shifts ethics away from the external actions of the individual and to reflection on one's internal desires as moral qualities themselves. Classical accounts of ethics focused on the external expression of inward virtue, while early Christian writers prior to Augustine were overshadowed by death in the pursuit of martyrdom, emphasising victory over external enemies. As Peter Brown notes, 'by the time of Augustine, the Church had settled down in Roman society. The Christians worst enemies could no longer be placed outside him: they were inside, his sins and his doubts; and the climax of a man's life would not be martyrdom, but conversion' (2002: 159). This marks a distinct shift in both ethics and anthropology. Where the earliest fathers spoke of embracing one's humanity as literal death, Augustine crafts an account of spiritual death in a world without martyrdom. One must read Augustine's ethical and political writings in this light, not concerned with the external institutions of Rome, but with the realities of the *interiorem hominem* as he seeks to 'die with Christ' in a world without martyrdom. Thus, Augustine shifts ethics from virtues of habit (*consuetudo*) to virtues of will (*uoluntas*). In *conf.*, Augustine only uses *consuetudo* in a negative sense, referring to the habit of sin within him. Rather, he frequently posits *consuetudo* against *uoluntas*, (Augustine 1991: 3.8.16; 6.12.22; 8.5.1; 8.8.19) and in *City of God* famously critiques classical habits of virtue as splendid vices (Augustine 2003. 19.25). As a result of Augustine's emphasis on *uoluntas* and his method of introspection, Western ethics developed a critical focus on the will, not just as motivation for good actions, but as ethical actions in themselves.

This focus on *uoluntas* is central for Augustine's synthesis and ethics in *conf.* In this early work, he first attempts to articulate the functions of the human soul: being, knowing, and willing (*esse, nosse, velle*) (Augustine 1991: 13.11.12). Of these three, *uoluntas* is the subject of Augustine's life and conversion in *conf.* and the problem of a divided will is the beginning of his problems both of identity and ethics. Wherever his will oscillates, so too does he feel himself disintegrate. To consider *conf.* as an eth-

ical text is to identify Augustine's account of a human will, fluctuating between the love of self (*amor sui*) and the love of God (*amor Dei*).

He identifies a divided will that does not answer to either his own desires or his intellect: 'Mind (*animus*) commands, I say, that it should will (*uelit*), and would not give the command if it did not will, yet does not perform what it commands' (Augustine 1991: 8.9.21). The primacy of the will in and over the mind, inhibits the soul from naturally following the Truth. The will is weighed down by habit. No amount of intellectual deliberation can force the will (*uult*) to desire (*uelit*) what it does not. Augustine is clear there is no dualism in the soul, as if a good will and an evil will are conflicting substances within man. He notes: 'The self which willed to serve was identical with the self which was unwilling. It was I. I was neither wholly willing nor wholly unwilling. So, I was in conflict with myself and was dissociated from myself' (Augustine 1991: 8.10.22). Augustine offers no intellectual solution to this division. There is an inherent division in the inner-person if one is bound to the will, which lacks the integrity of a single-hearted love of the ultimate good. Thus, for all his introspection, Augustine finds no solution within himself.

Augustine's conversion results from an acceptance of his weakness. He cannot comprehend eternity by the intellect, nor can he keep his will from oscillating between God and his passions. Rather, eternity encounters him in space and time. No amount of rationality can resolve his internal tension of the will. It is the Word of Scripture that imposed the moral imperative to 'make no provision for the flesh in its lusts' (Augustine 1991: 8.10.29). This command suspends Augustine's moral reasoning and commits him to a singular will. He notes: 'At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled' (Augustine 1991: 8.10.29). Augustine cannot resolve his divided self; it is only the interruption of God's will in scripture that reconciles his will and brings clarity to the temporal disjunction of his identity.

In *Confessions*, then, interiority plays a paradoxical role. While Augustine turns inward, he only does so in desperation, when he finds that the pleasures of the external world cannot satisfy him. Moreover, his inward turn appears more unsatisfying than the distractions of the external world. He recalls that God was inside him, but turning inward, he does not find God, but a heap of misery (Augustine 1991: 1.2.2; 10.27.38). Despite this frustration, he still urges his readers to turn inward (Augustine 1991: 13.11.12). Turning inward leads to despair and an awareness of one's impotence to reform the will. Augustine's rhetoric once more leads his readers inward to aporias which can only be resolved from without. Exposing the limits of something as central as the will raises a paradox which Augustine hopes will stir his readers to confession, and, ultimately, to a greater love of God.

I have analysed Augustine's conversion as a reformation of the will from without. I argued that in a Christian empire, Augustine prioritises the moral state of the inner-man over external actions and customs. Crucially, this emphasis on the inner-man leads Augustine and his readers to despair and to confession. It is only in this position of confession that one is receptive to the interjection of conversion of the will from without.

Thus far, I have explored three central themes underlying Augustine's moral theory: his definition of *eudaimonia* as rest with God, his approach to rest through moral humility, and his paradoxical focus on the internal state of his intellect and will. I now turn to an ethic of confession, considering the nature of self-giving, the rejection of self-betterment, and the public intention of confession. The demands of an ethic of confession are an embrace of one's ontological dependence, the acceptance of the impotence of rationality upon the will, the willing exposure of one's moral failings, and the epistemic limitations of ethical discourse.

In confession, one's ethics shift from the improvement of one's actions to rest in the love of God. Again, this is most plain through Augustine's own conversion. He writes in book ten:

[You] are so an object of love that I am ashamed of myself and reject myself. You are my choice, and only by your gift can I please either you or myself...When I am evil, making confession to you is simply to be displeased with myself. When I am good, making confession to you is simply to make no claim on my own behalf (Augustine 1991: 10.2.2).

In *Confession*, the entirety of his person is present and exposed, but his will is directed away from himself. Therefore, confession is the antidote to pride. It requires and enables displeasure in one's evils and selfless disavowal of one's virtue. Confession is thus, not merely an ethical act, but a metaethical act. In confession, one's ethics shift from the improvement of one's actions, to rest in the love of God. This is not to say that one becomes ethically passive, but that the desire for ethical action shifts from the one's own moral progress toward a good outside oneself.

The ethic of *conf.* is that of deliberate self-giving. It is a rejection of any claim to know or define oneself. It goes beyond the moment of conversion as recounted in book eight, as Augustine expounds the act of conversion to be an act of God, being formed into his true person, an Augustine that is in union with and at rest in God. Consequently, the resultant ethic is centered on suspending false notions of the self and being converted to a love of God. Augustine's notion of a suspended identity re-orientes ethical theory away from the individual and toward self-giving in the pursuit of the greatest good (*Summum Bonum*) in God. The foundation for such an ethic

lies not only in the text of *conf.* itself, but in Augustine's own act of writing the work. Exposing his own moral failures in such a contentious time of his life establishes the model of self-giving in the pursuit of God.

Moreover, in *conf.*, Augustine emphasizes God's pursuit of him, rather than his pursuit of God. *Conf.* is not an introspective analysis of his ethical life to bring about moral change, but a rejection of his own life, designed to bring about the praise of God. Because persons cannot make themselves will what they do not desire, Augustine focuses not on the moral agent, or the desire itself, but on revealing God to be desirable. In his *retractions* (*retr.*), he claims that the books 'praise the just and good God for my evil and good acts and lift up the understanding and affection of men to him' (Augustine 1968: 23.2). That is, the work itself is an act of praise. While he confesses (read: admits) his past and present sins, the act of writing confesses (read: praises) God for a reconciliation of his disjointed, sinful person. He relinquishes his own pursuit of happiness in virtue or success, and instead looks to God to raise his love up. In so doing, he replaces an ethic of work for an ethic of rest, foreshadowing and participating in the rest he hopes to fully attain after his death.

It is not virtue that leads to happiness, but confession which leads to forgiveness; forgiveness allows for rest, and rest restores the individual to virtue. True virtues are, of course, not splendid vices. Like all things, the distinction depends on the *telos*. No one can deny that temperance is good if it keeps one sober enough to care for one's family. What I suggest, however, is that temperance comes by loving one's family and confessing one's innate intemperance, rather than practicing temperance for its own sake (see Augustine 2003: 5.20). Though not in *conf.* Augustine expresses this most clearly in his exposition of Psalm 32 (Augustine 2004: 31.2.9). Augustine reflects that he is happy (*beatus*) when he is forgiven (See Brock: 2007). As Possidius indicates, Psalm 32 is at the center of Augustine's thought. He had it engraved on his wall beside his bed, and it also structures his work (Possidius, 2008: 31, 57) One can see Augustine's ethics and soteriology in the first line: 'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one to whom the Lord will impute no sin, and in whose mouth is no guile' (Augustine 2004: 31.2.9). His vision of the good life rests not on his virtuous actions, but on the action of God's forgiveness. It is not that one does not have iniquity, but that God forgives the iniquity one has (Augustine 2004: 31.2.12). Happiness is a passive gift, in which the only actions of the recipient are themselves actions of God's grace. (Augustine 2004: 31.2.9). In this exposition, Augustine once again returns to the theme of confession, noting that it is confession that precedes happiness: 'If he had shouted his sins aloud and kept quiet about his merits, you see, his bones would have been rejuvenated – his virtues, that is.' (Augus-

tine 2004: 31.2.12). Thus, Augustine does suggest an ethic of virtue, but claims virtues are a consequence, not a cause of happiness.

If aretaic ethics thus far has predominately asked 'how do we live virtuously?', Augustine asks, 'for what, other than ourselves, are we living virtuously?'. Contemporary trends in aretaic philosophy and theology have emphasized the centrality of practical reason in the development of personal virtue. Yet, Augustine's emphasis on ignorance and weakness rejects both speculative and practical reason. The weakness of the will and the ignorance of one's inner-man demand recognizing limitations of moral self-concern and a resulting emphasis on humility and otherness in moral formation (Augustine 2003: 5.19-20). Augustine's work presents a viable foundation for this in his contradictory insistences to look inward and admonitions against self-love. He exposes a contradiction in mankind's attempts to develop virtue and character: as far as we focus on virtue for our own virtue and character, we do not pursue virtue, but ourselves. Thus, one cannot attain virtue by seeking virtue, but by self-giving in the action of confession. This approach shifts the notion of virtue away from any consideration of a moral agent, and toward that rest in God. Concluding his fullest critique of virtue, he writes,

For their virtue, if they have any, is made subject to human praise another way, for the man who is satisfied with himself is no other than a man. But the truly religious man who puts his faith and hope in God, and loves him, gives more attention to the matters in which he is dissatisfied with himself than to those, if such there be, with which he, or rather, the truth is satisfied. Nor does ascribe that which already gives satisfaction to anything by the mercy of Him whom he fears to please. He gives thanks to the curing of some of his faults and pours out praise for the curing of the rest. (Augustine 2003: 5.20).

In this, Augustine's unsatisfying introspection becomes foundational for an outward self-giving, considering what one lacks for greater dependence on God. Augustine's insights demand a persistent self-reflection, in which one examines the false goods of one's desires, above all the false good of personal virtuous character. Augustine's work confronts us with the reality that virtue is not an end (*telos*), and that ethics is the task of attuning one's desires away from oneself and toward the true, the good, and the beautiful.

I have articulated the demands of an ethic of confession: an embrace of one's creatureliness, the acceptance of the impotence of rationality upon the will, the willing exposure of one's moral failings, and the epistemic limitations of ethical discourse. I began by arguing that one must embrace the moral humility found in introspection and look for help from Christ. In conversion Christ reforms the human will to God,

rectifying the fragmented inner-man and moving one to rest. As humans are incapable of rectifying their own will, this formation is always an act of grace from without. In turning away from oneself as a source of moral improvement, the inner-man gives up himself and instead focuses on God who is stable. In this, one's actions shift from self-improvement to a pursuit of that which is stable, a pursuit of what one properly desires. Thus, I have argued that the ethic of confession is that of deliberative self-giving. It is a pointing away from oneself and to Christ. In this self-giving, one finds congruence in one's confessed and rectified ignorance and weakness. More importantly, in this self-giving, ethics ceases to focus on the individual agent, and on the object which one is pursuing. Virtue may come, but only as a result of a rectified will, not as a means to it.

In reconsidering the anthropological assumptions of classical ethics in a Christian light, Augustine retains notions of eudaimonism, teleology, and virtue, but shifts the moral imperative from self-improvement to confession and grace. In this, Augustine shifts moral theory inward, away from one's disciplines and actions, to one's loves, and more importantly, to God's love for the person. His insistence that the human person cannot know themselves, rationalize the good, or direct their own will force him to a way of life grounded in humility with Christ on the cross. While happiness, intellectual ascent, and virtue remain central ethical categories, they are consequences of, not ways to the good life. In his pilgrimage, Christ is both the end and the way. Christ is the moral agent, not only for justification of the sinner, but for the ongoing conversion of the sinner to himself. Ethics on this account is a spiritual practice of confession, rather than a habit of ongoing moral betterment.

Conclusion: Reconceiving the person in 21st century moral theology

In his re-conception of the human person in light of Christ, Augustine preserved the strengths of classical moral theory, while challenging them from within. He was able to successfully redefine the moral landscape, not by contributing another school of philosophy, but by positing that the classical schools had mischaracterized the subject of their science, and that any further moral theorizing would need to first reckon with the gravity of the human condition. If the beginning of this article is at all correct in its assessment of contemporary Christian ethics, the assumptions of modern liberalism have presented challenges that demand similar renewed attention to the nature of the human person.

Ancient philosophy fractured into various schools and differing moral theories to address how to live a good life. Likewise Christian ethicists have fallen into formulating different answers to how to live a good liberal modernity. I suggest instead that ethicists would be better served to reckon with the anthropological assumptions of this liberalism: that the human being is an autonomous, rational being, free to choose

whatever one pleases. Augustine instead offers a vision of the human being that is dependent on God and community for one's moral formation; moved by one's desires and loves rather than intellectual ascent, and oriented toward a telos of rest and happiness, rather than free to choose any good one pleases. Moreover, his insistence on confession, the praise of God and admittance of mortality and sin shifts the focus of moral reflection from self-improvement to worship. The moral agent is improved not by right action, or even attitudes, but by relation to Christ. In this, his vision of the human person and one's place in the moral landscape challenge the individualistic and intellection preconceptions of liberalism in favor of a more cosmic and relational picture of God's ongoing creation of the human person.

It is perhaps curious how much Augustine shares with some twentieth-century theologians surveyed above. Similar to Schleiermacher, Augustine does have room in his anthropology for a social dimension to sin. Though he famously develops a strong doctrine of Original Sin (*Conf.* 2), this allows for the brokenness of human relationships after the Fall, and the false politics of the City of Man. Likewise, one finds common ground with Ritschl. Contrary to his Platonist and Manichean influences, Augustine's emphasis on creation *ex-nihilo* insists that humans, both soul and body, are created good, and that there is a real obligation to seek the City of God on earth for the good of the human city. Like Brunner and Przywara, Augustine affirms natural theology and the role of the conscience (for him, always Christ, the inner-teacher); however, more like Barth, he admits that the human understanding of these revelations is always susceptible to misunderstanding, even manipulation. He shares a Kantian obligation to follow God's command and a Heideggerian existentialism in the face of death. Most notably for this issue, he shares with Forsyth an unrelenting insistence on the centrality of God's holy love, the centrality of grace, and the ongoing nature of moral transformation. There seems to be something in Augustine's moral vision for every modern thinker. However, I suggest the reason for this is not that Augustine poignantly prefigured modern ethics, but that his theological and anthropological vision differs so starkly with modernity, that he lacks the framework within which to disagree with these modern moral theories.

All modern ethics are modern in that they are concerned with the moral agent seeking to do rightly, or virtuously, or seek the good. But Augustine is seeking to be loved by God. He is not asking 'how do I act correctly, but 'what, or who do I love?', 'who am I in God's love?', or just 'who am I?' Because the human person is such a mystery to himself, so prone to wandering desires and disordered loves, and so dependent on God and others, the project of moral progress cannot get off the ground without risking self-love and self-deception. The only real moral project for Augustine is confession. He commands that one loves one's neighbor, and follow the

commandments, but not because it is sanctifying or an act of moral progress, but because it is good for the one who is loved. For Augustine, the moral agent is Christ, welcoming all into His body. In this, Augustine's framework challenges current anglophone moral theology in movement away from the moral agent themselves, and toward a focus on divine love and reconciliation. It does not help us overcome the divisions of divine command ethics compared to virtue theory, or to define the limits of human depravity and natural revelation, but to go behind these divisions and question whether the nature of our modern projects is even Christian. That is, are they concerned with the love of the crucified and risen Lord, or are they concerned with our own moral self-justification?

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