Frenyó Zoltán

senior research fellow
Institute of Philosophy of the Research Center for the Humanities
of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1014 Budapest, Úri utca 53.
frenyo.zoltan@btk.mta.hu

Saint Augustine on the foundation of morals

and the reason of a normative ethics.

0. Abstract

The problem of universal morality is irrelevant for the descriptive ethics; it is to be rejected for the metaethics; but it is a real subject for the normative ethics. Ethics is a practical philosophical discipline, which needs a metaphysical theoretical foundation. Ethics can be bound to and originate from the world (in a narrower sense the nature), from the man (his rational or irrational character), and finally from the absolutum.

The Christian philosophy of ethics takes into account all these features, naturally with the dominancy and priority of the absolutum. The principles of Saint Augustine have a great significance in this pattern. Similarly to the whole patristic and generally to the Christian ethics, this theory is a normative ethics, that is not an immanent but a transcendent system, which has its foundation in the natural law, and in a wider sense in the whole Christian view of world. On the ground of the natural law a rightly understood universal ethics can be deduced, while a false concept of universalization or totalization, mainly on the gruoud of the notion of the person, is to be rejected.

The paper aims to analyse some of the works of Saint Augustine within such conceptual framework. Here it is demonstrated that Saint Augustine's chief theses and principles in his works concerned are: The doctrine of the order of being as a starting point; the connection of the order of being, the eternal law and the natural law; the foundation of the principles of morals in the eternal law; the demand of a rational foundation of morals; the request of a positive, normative ethics; the unity of virtue and love.

1. Preliminary remarks

Considering the moral situation of our age, an inquiry after the possibility of a universally valid morality is a matter of primary importance. Nihilistic and relativistic tendencies have

strenghtened in the XXth century against the conception of a universal morality. Opposing the traditional normative ethics, there has a view occured and spread through the century, which distinguishes the kinds of a so called descriptive or comparative, a normative or prescriptive and an analitical or metaethics from each other[1]. At the same time this view went together with a modern way of thinking for some centuries, which aimed to decrease the significance of the Christian thinking in the history of philosophy to a final limit. However in the so-called moral crisis of our age the importance of a normative ethics is being reappreciated again.

The question arises with good reason, whether the morality can be founded, how is it possible, from where does it originate and what guarantees its validity. If we consider the being, the whole as a unit of three factors forming the subject of philosophy, there are the absolutum, the world and the man which can be pointed out, and nothing else exists and can be imagined. The schools of philosophy differentiates from each other according to their concepts on the rank and order of these factors.

It is not by chance that ethics is a practical discipline of philosophy (although there are some who just deny it); and in this way ethics is dependent on and is rightly founded on metaphysics and ontological axiology. Ethics without metaphysics remains an immanent circle of questions, which is compelled to substantiate itself by itself, and as a consequence of this, it generally leads either into naturalism, hedonism, utilitarianism, emotivism and a bad eudaimonism, or it eliminates itself by a mere logical analyses. It can be raised whether moral sense on the one hand which is undoubtedly and indisputably present at man's soul, and morality on the other hand which emerges as the demand of human reason, are able or not to subsist in themselves, or are to be reduced to a metaphysical ground to assure their truth and validity.

The question concerning a universal ethics is obviously a question concerning a normative ethics. The distrust of modern times against normative ethics is based on a false metaphysics, but from another point of view it can be partly respected as it opposes a sweeping generalization, an exaggerated totalization and collectivization. However this mistrust is definitely causeless as facing the natural order and social reality it questions the verification of the content of morals.

2. Counterpoints

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[1] Cf. Quante, Michael: Einführung in die allgemeine Ethik. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 2008[3]. = Bevezetés az általános etikába. Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó, 2012. 19.

Normative ethics can be attacked from several directions. Beside relativism and naturalism, which mean probably a simpler case, such intention can be found in metaethics. It is a right and useful aspiration of metaethics in analytical philosophy in itself to revise vigorously our conceptions. However what will be the uniform result of these investigations according to this discipline?

George Edward *Moore* in his Principia Ethica (1903) claimed: „The main object of Ethics, as a systematic science, is to give correct reasons for thinking that this or that is good; and unless this question be answered, such reasons cannot be given. (...) If I am asked 'What is good?' my answer is that good is good, and that is the end of the matter. Or if I am asked 'How is good to be defined?' my answer is that it cannot be defined, and that is all I have to say about it.[2]"

According to Ludwig *Wittgenstein*'s Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921): "There is no value in the world;" "If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so;" (6.41) "Hence also there can be no ethical propositions." (6.42)[3]

It is a strange relationship in which we find the philosophy, the creed and the practical activity of Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret *Anscombe*, the British analythical philosopher, who was a student and later one of the main experts of Wittgenstein. Her high appreciation is reflected even in the somehow exeggerated expression of Roger Scruton, the conservative philosopher, who noticed that "the late Elizabeth Anscombe <was> perhaps the last great philosopher writing in English."[4] Anscombe was a Catholic personality with a characteristic public activity, who entered the lists several times for the realization of Christian moral principles.

Referring to her way of thinking, it is to be noticed that Anscombe was a major representative of the so-called analytical thomism. On the one hand we appreciate the partial values of this tendency; it has the merit at least to refresh the analytical philosophy dominating the anglo-american spiritual life. On the other hand we have to point out that the two principles included in the tendency are completely incompatible and irreconcilable with each other. Namely, thomism represents a metaphisical position, while analytical philosophy represents an anti-metaphysical one. Consequently the concept of analytical thomism has an inner contradiction, and emerges as a result of the typically inconsistent way of thinking of our age.

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[2]Moore, George Edward: Principia Ethica. Cambridge, At the University Press, 1922. p. 5-6.
[3] Wittgenstein, Ludwig: Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, LTD. London – Harcourt, Brace & Company, INC. New York, 1922. p. 88.
[4] Scruton, Roger: Wine and Philosophy. Decanter.com. 24. febr. 2010.

In spite of her personal Christian spirituality, the infertility of this tendency can be recognized in the following statements of Anscombe's famous study „Modern moral philosophy" (1958), diametrically opposing the traditional principles of Christian world view, ontology and moral philosophy, but easily corresponding to the well-known theses of analytical philosophy:

„It is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy." „The concepts of obligation and duty – moral obligation and moral duty, that is to say – and of what is morally right and wrong, and of the moral sense of 'ought', ought to be jettisoned (...); because they are survivals or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it."

„This word 'ought' having become a word of mere mesmeric force, could not, in the character of having the force, be inferred from anything whatever." „I should judge that Hume and our present-day ethicists had done a considerable service by showing that no content could be found in the notion 'morally ought'. (...) It would be most reasonable to drop it. It has no reasonable sense outside a law conception of ethics." „I should recommend banishing ethics totally from our minds."[5]

3. The Significance of the Patristic Moral Philosophy

When Eric *Osborn*, the excellent expert of patristic thought has published his famous volume in 1976 entitled „Ethical Patterns in Early Christian Thought"[6], it was not by chance, that in the introduction of the book he began his investigations with treating some modern conceptions. He dealt long and in detail with several important authors of the analytical moral philosophy. Osborn cited both of the main works of Richard Mervyn *Hare*, „The Language of Morals" (1952) and „Freedom and Reason" (1963), cited Georg Henrik *von Wright* and some other authors too. Osborn tried to make order among such various ideas; he recognized some promising signs and tendencies, but as a whole he pointed out, that these theories of contemporary moral philosophy could not offer a secure basis for a system of moral values.

Osborn states: „A final feature of contemporary thought is a thoughtful rejection of Christian claims." At the same time he observes: „The urbanity of much twentieth-century ethics has worn thin." He claims that under such circumstances it is absolutely necessary

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[5]Anscombe, G. E. M.: Modern Moral Philosophy. In: Philosophy, Vol. XXXIII. 1958. 1-19.
[6]Osborne, Eric: Ethical Patterns in Early Christian Thought. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge – London – New York – Melbourne, 1976.

torediscover Christian faith as a fundamental domain of morality: „The need for exploration in this area is therefore urgent. It is not merely a matter of better understanding but a question of integrity." In this way the significance of the Church Fathers of the patristic age can be realized. Characterizing their spirit Osborn describes: „Dread of evil and enthusiasm for good were always with them." Taking into account the features of patristic thinking first of all he emphasizes the coherency of their system.[7]

It can be also instructive if we insert here some sections of Alisdair *MacIntyre*'s self-criticism formulated in the introduction to the second edition (1998) of his „A Short History of Ethics" on the first version of the book published three decades earlier (1967). Here MacIntyre regrets neglecting Christian philosophy, and adds: "This error of mine reflected a widespread, even if far from universal, practice in the then English-speaking world - which still unfortunately persists in numerous colleges and universities - of ignoring the place both of the earlier Christian eras and of the high middle ages in the history of philosophy."

Some lines below he appreciates the rank and value of Christian thinking as follows: "Those doctrines successfully define a life for Christians informed *both* by the hope of the Second Coming *and* by a commitment to this-worldly activity in and through which human beings rediscover the true nature of their natural ends and of those natural virtues required to achieve those ends."[8]

4. Saint Augustine

As follows, in accordance with this appreciation, I aim to reconstruct the main ethical doctrines developped by Saint Augustine. His whole work has an ethical dimension, though his chief activity were focussed on faith, truth and being. At the same time he created also special tractats and treatises on moral subjects. His most important works of such kind are the following: De ordine, De beata vita, De libero arbitrio, De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum, De continentia, De doctrina Christiana, De natura boni contra Manichaeos, De patientia, Enchiridion. Reading any of these works one can realize that Augustine treats the moral problems not immanently and separately in themselves but always in connection with his principles of faith and being.

4/a. The critics of a sophistical and sceptical view

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[7]Osborne, op. cit. p. 3-4.
[8]MacIntyre, Alisdair: A Short History of Ethics. Routledge, London, 1998[2]. p. viii-ix.

In Saint Augustine's view the purpose of thinking is to catch and realize the *order of being*; and he is convinced about the vanity of thinking if it focuses only on itself separated from the relations of being. His distinction between a metaphysical and a sophistical way of thinking has a definite validity at any time:

„Therefore it is one thing to know the laws of inference, and another to know the truth of opinions. (...) The man who knows that there is a resurrection of the dead is assuredly better than the man who only knows that it follows that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen."[9]

Advocating similarly the idea of a philosophy focusing on truth and criticising adversary philosophies Saint Augustine describes the situation and the task with the following words of topical interest: "In this age of ours, when we see none who are philosophers — for I do not consider those who merely wear the cloak of a philosopher to be worthy of that venerable name — it seems to me that men (those, at least, whom the teaching of the Academicians has, through the subtlety of the terms in which it was expressed, deterred from attempting to understand its actual meaning) should be brought back to the hope of discovering the truth."[10]

4/b. The source and the foundation of morality

If morality is not included simply in thinking, and if the world is a created being, than morality indicates to the absolute (absolutum). Saint Augustine originates the rules of behaviour and the knowledge of good and bad from the *divine absolute being*. It is the same as the scholastic conception of eternal law will be, which is the source of the natural moral law. Saint Augustine explains his notion giving an objective ground for morality as follows:

"Where indeed are these rules written, wherein even the unrighteous recognizes what is righteous, wherein he discerns that he ought to have what he himself has not? Where, then, are they written, unless in the book of that Light which is calledTruth? Whence every righteouslawis copied and transferred (not by migrating to it, but by being as it were

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[9] Augustinus: De doctrina Christiana, II. 34. 52.; Cf. his similar arguments in De Trinitate, IV. 16.21. – 17.23.
[10] Augustinus: Epistula 1. 1.

impressed upon it) to the heart of the man that works righteousness; as the impression from a ring passes into the wax, yet does not leave the ring."[11]

4/c. The order of being and the natural law

Saint Augustine's fundamental principle is to recognize and acknowledge the order of being.[12] He begins his dialogue on order with the statement that it is the nature of anybody to follow the order of being, but to understand this order ruling and holding the universe is a difficult task and can be successful very rarely.[13]

He developpes already in this early work a strong connection between the *order* of being and the principle of the *right life*. He finishes his book with an invitation to the right life with the following words: „Most of our efforts are to be directed to the better morals. Our God doesn't listen to us if we don't live righteously, but if we do so, he listenes to us qiute soon."[14]

Order of being and *law* are conceptions similarly in strong connection in Augustine's works. He consideres as an eternal law to preserve natural order established by the Creator. According to his formulation eternal law is the will of the divine reason which compels us to follow the natural law and forbids to avoid it anyhow.[15]

Similarly again to the scholastic principle „agere sequitur esse", that is „action follows being", investigating human activity and morals Saint Augustine starts from the concept and reality of being. (As Aquinas states: „The mode of activity of anybody follows the mode of his being itself."[16])

As Augustine claims, man strives after *happiness*, and happiness is the fulfilness of human nature. One can realize it if his actions correspond to reason and truth.[17] Likewise

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[11] Augustinus: De Trinitate, XIV. 15. 21.; „Ubinam sunt istae regulae scriptae, ubi quid sit iustum et iniustus agnoscit, ubi cernit habendum esse quod ipse non habet? Ubi ergo scriptae sunt, nisi in libro lucis illius quae veritas dicitur, unde omnis lex iusta describitur et in cor hominis qui operatur iustitiam non migrando sed tamquam imprimendo transfertur, sicut imago ex anulo et in ceram transit et anulum non relinquit?" Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 50. A. 451.; This text was cited also by the International Theological Commission, in the 31. note of its document entitled „In Search of a Universal Ethics. A New Look at the Natural Law (2009).
[12] Cf.: Rief, Josef: Der Ordo-Begriff des jungen Augustinus. Paderborn, 1962.
[13] Cf. Augustinus: De ordine, I. 1.
[14] Augustinus: De ordine, XX. 52.
[15] Cf. Augustinus: Contra Faustum, 22. 27.
[16] Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologica, p. I. q. 89. a. 1. „Modus operandi uniusquiusque rei sequitur modum essendi ipsius."
[17] Augustinus: De Genesi contra Manichaeorum, I. 20. 31.

virtue is a mental disposition – as he points out similarly to Cicero - which harmonizes with nature and reason.[18]

He explains the principle as follows: „Passions of our soul are not alien to us. They feed co-existing with us on the knowledge of sciences, best morals and eternal life, as they were seeding herbs, fructifying trees and verdurous plants. And it is just this case which constitutes the happy and tranquil life of man, when all of our passions harmonizes with reason and truth."[19]

It means that Saint Augustine's theory of passion admits and confirms the rule of passion in human life as a phenomenon which has its right place in the order of being. In his work on The City of God he turns against the stoic concept of impassiveness (ἀπάθεια, impassibilitas); he declares that in reality it doesn't belong to our present life, and formulates his teaching: „In the light of these considerations, since we must lead a right sort of life to arrive at a happy life, a right sort of life has all these emotions in a right way, and a wrong sort of life in a wrong way."[20]

4/d. Virtue and love

Beside the foundation of morals the basic content of Saint Augustine's moral philosophy is the forming of *virtue* and *love* into an organic unity. In the course of this he also unite the classical Greek philosophical doctrine on the four cardinal virtues and the biblical tradition. Namely in his work De moribus ecclesiae catholicae[21] he cites the Book of Wisdom composed in a hellenistic-platonic spirit, where it is written:

„And if a man love righteousness, her labours are virtues; for she teacheth temperance and prudence, justice and fortitude; which are such things, as men can have nothing more profitable in their life."[22]

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[18] Augustinus: De diversis quaestionibus LXXXIII, 31. 1.

[19] Augustinus: De Genesi contra Manichaeorum, I. 20. 31. „Non enim a nobis alieni sunt motus animi nostri. Pascuntur etiam nobiscum cognitione rationum et morum optimorum et vitae aeternae, tanquam herbis seminalibus et lignis fructiferis et herbis viridibus. Et haec est hominis vita beata atque tranquilla, cum omnes motus eius rationi veritatique consentiunt." Migne, J-P. (ed.): Patrologia Latina, vol. 34. col. 188.

[20] Augustinus: De civitate Dei, XIV. 9. „Quae cum ita sint, quoniam recta vita ducenda est qua perveniendum sit ad beatam, omnes affectus istos vita recta rectos habet, perversa perversos."

[21] Augustinus: De moribus ecclesiae catholicae, 16. 27.

[22] Wisdom 8,7.; Καὶ εἰ δικαιοσύνην ἀγαπᾷ τις οἱ πόνοι ταύτης εἰσὶν ἀρεταί σωφροσύνην γὰρ καὶ φρόνησιν ἐκδιδάσκει δικαιοσύνην καὶ ἀνδρείαν ὧν χρησιμώτερον οὐδέν ἐστιν ἐν βίῳ ἀνθρώποις. Σοφία Σολομῶντος, 8,7.; Et si iustitiam quis diligit, labores huius magnas habent virtutes: sobrietatem enim et prudentiam docet, et iustitiam, et virtutem, quibus utilius nihil est in vita hominibus. Liber Sapientiae 8,7.

The question occures, how and in what manner are virtues and love compatible with each other. According to Saint Augustine's final formulation virtue is the order of love (virtus est ordo amoris.) The precise sentence is: „Hence in my opinion, a short and true definition of virtue is 'a due ordering of love'."[23]

This principle runs through Saint Augustine's whole life-work and figures in each of his books concerned. In his early work „On the Morals of the Catholic Church" love is defined and treated as the summary of virtues,[24] his basic hermeneutical work written in his middle age „On Christian Doctrine" explains his important notion on the right order of love,[25] and his late and great work „On the City of God" contains the formula mentioned above.

4/e. The rational foundation of morals

In his work „On the Morals of the Catholic Church" written in 388 Saint Augustine explained and summarized his view of moral philosophy against the manichaean conception. This work is respectable in all manners and first of all in its intention to establish and assure moral philosophy by a *rational* method. As he declares at the beginning of the work: "How then, according to reason, ought man to live ?"[26] In the following section we try to demonstrate the main principles of this work.

In the work we can recognize the Christian transformation of the eudaimonism of Antiquity through the series of the concepts of happiness-virtue-love-God. Desire of happiness leads us to practice virtue; the summary of virtues is love; practice of virtue tends toward the final good (summum bonum), which is identical with God.

He states: "No one will question that virtue gives perfection to the soul."[27] Then he adds: "Undoubtedly in the pursuit of virtue the soul follows after something."[28]"If, then, we ask what it is *to live well*, - that is, to strive after *happiness* by living well, - it must assuredly be *to love virtue*, to love wisdom, to love truth, and to love with all the heart, with all the soul, and with all the mind."[29]

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[23] Augustinus: De civitate Dei, XV. 22. „Unde mihi videtur quod definitio brevis et vera virtutis ordo est amoris."
[24] Augustinus: De moribus, op. cit. 33. 73.; 15. 25.; 13. 22.; 25. 46.
[25] Augustinus: De doctrina Christiana. On the order of love cf.: Origenes: Commentarius in Canticum Canticorum, III. 4.
[26] Augustinus: De moribus, op. cit.3.4.
[27] Op. cit. 6. 9.
[28] Op. cit. 6. 9.
[29] Op. cit. 13. 22.

Saint Augustine consideres the four virtues as four different manifestations of love: "For the fourfold division of *virtue* I regard as taken *from four forms of love*. For these four virtues (would that all felt their influence in their minds as they have their names in their mouths!), I should have no hesitation in defining them: that *temperance* is love giving itself entirely to that which is loved; *fortitude* is love readily bearing all things for the sake of the loved object; *justice* is love serving only the loved object, and therefore ruling rightly; *prudence* is love distinguishing with sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it."[30]

After this Saint Augustine refers the four virtues also to God. Man wants to be happy, and for this reason he is looking for the final good. "Such, then, being the *chief good*, it must be something which cannot be lost against the will."[31] "As to *virtue* leading us to a *happy life*, I hold virtue to be nothing else than *perfect love of God*."[32]

As he observes, the right way of living can be deduced by and for anybody from these principles.[33]"I will briefly set forth the manner of life according to these virtues, one by one." He analyses the four virtues in detail and deduces principles of life from them.[34]

In this way the practice of virtues becomes accomplished in the love of God. "I need say no more about right conduct. For if *God is man's chief good*, which you cannot deny, it clearly follows, since to seek the chief good is to live well, that to live well is nothing else but to love God with all the heart, with all the soul, with all the mind; and, as arising from this, that this love must be preserved entire and incorrupt, which is the part of *temperance*; that it give way before no troubles, which is the part of *fortitude*; that it serve no other, which is the part of *justice*; that it be watchful in its inspection of things lest craft or fraud steal in, which is the part of *prudence*. This is the one perfection of man, by which alone he can succeed in attaining to the purity of truth."[35]

4/f. The essence and the reason of the augustinian moral philosophy

Saint Augustine finds it as a fact that there are two kinds of attractions operating in the human being: self-love and unselfish love, and that an endless fight of these two kinds of love runs through the history of our race. In other words it is obvious and unambiguous that man is equally able to be good and evil. Under such circumstances a theoretical investigation has to

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[30]Op. cit. 15. 25.
[31] Op. cit. 3. 5.
[32] Op. cit. 15. 25.
[33] Op. cit. 16. 26.
[34] Op. cit. 19. 35.
[35]Op. cit. 25. 46.

prefer looking for a normative and positive foundation of morality to a logical dilemma or a metaphysical and anthropological dualism. Although Saint Augustine takes into account and keeps track of both of the communities and „cities" of human nature and attitude, he denominates naturally only the concept of „city of God" (civitas Dei) as leading principle in the title of his grand work.[36] He endeavoured to show norm and virtue as *more real* phenomena than corruption and lack of order are. Independently from faith given or not to anybody, I think that as a request of human spirit that is the main reason of thinking and culture. (On Saint Monica's old feast, 4. May, 2014.)

5. Basic Secondary Literature on Augustine's Ethics

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[36] Augustinus: De civitate Dei, XVIII. 1.