

[1973. In Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics. Carl F.H. Henry, ed. Washington D.C.: Canon Press.]

AUGUSTINE. Unlike most philosophers, Augustine (354-430) lays great stress on ethics. In this, though in nothing else, he is similar to John Dewey, Friedrich Nietzsche, and the ancient Epicureans, and in this he differs from Aristotle, Descartes, the British Empiricists, and Bertrand Russell.

Strictly, ethical principles are not the logical basis of Augustine's philosophy. Truth is. But Augustine refutes skepticism (q.v.) and emphasizes the possibility of truth on the moral ground that truth and knowledge are necessary to our happiness. Skeptics try to act on probabilities; but the calculation of probabilities presupposes knowledge of various factors. This makes skepticism self-contradictory.

Everyone desires happiness, and Augustine simply could not credit a view of the universe that made happiness (q.v.) unattainable. Not only does skepticism conflict with ethics; the physical theories of the ancient Stoics and of the modern Nietzsche also make happiness impossible. Their theory of eternal recurrence asserts that world history, in every detail, must forever repeat itself. Such a view prevents anyone from being happy. If one is ignorant of the fact that he must repeat his life, without change, forever, he cannot be happy because he is deluded, and no deluded or ignorant person is happy. On the other hand, if he knows this, he knows that no state is permanent: whatever apparent good fortune he now enjoys was preceded by various youthful inconveniences and will be lost at death. But an essential characteristic of happiness is its permanence.

Since happiness must be permanent, it requires knowledge. One must know what to desire. Happiness is not the satisfaction of any random desire. The satisfaction of some desires brings tragedy. Therefore knowledge is essential. One must come to know what is permanent. To love what can be lost is to live in fear. Happiness is the immutable possession of an unchanging object. Now, the only unchanging object is Truth or God. Happiness therefore consists in having God.

Augustine does not crudely assume that knowledge is possible. He does not even restrict himself to proving that skepticism is self-contradictory. He positively defends knowledge on the ground that the laws of logic are indubitable. Mathematics also: we

judge not merely that three times three is nine, but rather that it must be nine. It is a necessary truth.

Skepticism is usually based on an empirical or sensory theory of knowledge; and it is indeed a question whether sensation can furnish any knowledge at all. In his *Contra Academicos* Augustine agrees that sensation fails to prove the existence of any object similar to the sensation. But logic and mathematics do not depend on sensation. Further, even if I make innumerable mistakes, these are instances of thinking; therefore I know, without mistake, that I think and that I exist.

Intellectual intuitions, such as these logical and mathematical principles, make physical science unimportant for epistemology as it is also insufficient to guarantee happiness.

Every theory of ethics presupposes some view of human nature. For Augustine man is his will. Not only does morality require volition; intellectual learning and even sensation depends on voluntary attention. Memory requires an act of will.

Now, the innate tendency of the will is to seek happiness. Aristotle had said, "Every man by nature desires to know." Augustine insists everyone naturally desires happiness. This is called love. In Christian theology, contrary to some superficial contemporary opinions, love is a volition, not an emotion. It is a natural tendency that no one can destroy. The moral problem therefore is not whether one should love or not, but what one should love. Virtue is to love what one ought to love.

This returns the discussion to its starting point. One should love truth because it is immutable, but not all truth. The knowledge of physical nature, i.e., science, is unimportant. "O Lord, God of truth, does it suffice to know those things to please Thee? Unhappy is the man who, though he knew them all, does not know Thee; and happy is he who knows Thee, even if ignorant of them. As to him who knows them also, it is not those things which make him happy; he owes all his happiness to Thee" (Confessions V. iv. 7).

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