

## **Augustine and Nietzsche on the Achievement of Moral Health**

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Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, written over fifteen hundred years after Augustine's *Confessions*, seems at first to refute everything that the earlier writer claimed. The nineteenth-century psychologist sees little value in religion, whereas Augustine views religion as the sole basis for existence. It is interesting, however, to note that both authors use metaphors of moral "sickness" and "health" to support their views of the way in which life should be lived. These metaphors provide a convenient framework for comparison and contrast of the two authors. Both agree that most people are morally "sick," and that this "sickness" is a major problem for society. Illness is a useful metaphor for Augustine and Nietzsche, because it emphasizes the gravity of the situation; the mental "sickness" from which people suffer is highly contagious, and it threatens to destroy society. For Nietzsche, this mental "sickness" is strongly related to physical vigor; the weak have a tendency to become "sick," while the strong and proud are usually "healthy." Augustine, in contrast, values meekness, and "health" is contingent upon a surrender of one's life to God; for him, pride is a sign not of health, but of sickness. Nietzsche and Augustine agree, however, that people turn to religion, specifically to Christianity, to "cure" their sickness; Augustine believes that this "cure" is successful, while Nietzsche maintains that, although religion is an integral part of society, it actually makes people sicker than they were when they began.

The fundamental "sickness" is, in Nietzsche's view, an overpowering feeling of guilt. He labels this guilt the "bad conscience." "Bad conscience" is a "serious illness" that man was "bound to contract" as a result of being "enclosed within the walls of society and peace" (p. 84). Before forming a society, man was essentially a wild animal. In order to be civil, he had to turn

his wild instincts inward, what Nietzsche terms “the *internalization* of man” (p. 84). Instead of being used to survive in the wild, these instincts were then used “*against man himself*” and were manifested in “hostility” and “cruelty” (p. 85). This explains the will to “self-denial” and “self-sacrifice” (p. 86) that ultimately lead to the asceticism that characterizes the sick. Only the strong, those who “can command,” those who are “by nature ‘master[s]’” (p. 86) are not infected by the “bad conscience,” because they never stop following their natural instincts in the first place. They are “born organizers” (p. 87); they set up and rule society, but do so by following their natural instincts and thus are never faced with the internalization of those instincts. Although the “bad conscience” “would not have developed without them” (p. 87), it did not develop in them. Thus it is the strong that remain “healthy” and the weak that are enveloped in society and become infected with the “bad conscience.”

Where Nietzsche claims that guilt and sickness stem from the denial of man’s wild instincts of freedom, Augustine sees the resistance of one’s natural instincts simply as a necessary sacrifice in journeying closer to God, and thus to health. For him, society is a useful convention, because it houses religion, and health *is* the surrender of one’s life to Christianity and faith. Before Augustine himself is converted, he is “forever asking [his] soul why it [is] sad” (p. 55). Finally, he discovers God’s “mercy” as a “healing medicine” for “weakness,” such as his attachment to women. Nietzsche believes that “man has all too long had an ‘evil eye’ for his natural inclinations” (Nietzsche, p. 95) and his admiration for the strong comes from the fact that they are naturally dominant and do not have to struggle to become so. Augustine, however, believes that natural inclinations are, in essence, evil and sickly, because they are focused on one’s own desires and not the surrender of one’s whole being to the Lord. He tells a story of his mother resisting “an inclination to wine.” After this resistance, she is brought “to health” (p.

161). He also describes God's "ointments" as "sweet-smelling," yet he goes on to explain that he "did not run to them" (p. 159). If he did not run to them, his natural inclination must have been toward his sinful ways.

This contrast between the two authors' definitions of sickness and health, as well as that between their views on the value of religion as a cure for illness, is also evident in the examples of sickness and health in their works. For Nietzsche, as religion leads to moral illness, it brings physical illness as well, because it is the weak that are sick in the first place, and religion makes them even weaker and sicker. The quote "mankind itself is still ill with the effects of this priestly naïveté in medicine" (p. 32) is coupled with a list of physical ailments, such as those that result from fasting, that have come as a result of Christianity. Nietzsche "knows of hardly anything else that has had so destructive an effect on the *health*...of Europeans" (p. 143). Augustine, in contrast, often couples physical illness with moral "health"; when both his friend (pp. 54-55) and his mother (pp. 165-166) are sick and dying, they are celebrated for their moral superiority and faith, despite the fact that they are, physically, deathly ill. His mother even chooses to die when it appears that she still has enough will to continue living; she only passes away when she realizes that her goal of making Augustine a Christian has been accomplished.

Although they may have contrasting definitions of "illness," both Augustine and Nietzsche see a great amount of "sickness" in the world, and both authors agree that the sick turn to Christianity to attempt to "cure" their disease. Because their definitions of the precise illness that is the problem are so different, though, they do not agree on the efficacy of this "cure." As mentioned before, although Augustine "did not think of [God's] mercy as a medicine for [his] weakness" until he had tried it (p. 101), when he does use God as a "medicine," it is remarkably effective; he is converted and completely changes his ways, leaving his common-law wife and

becoming a celibate priest. He finally writes *Confessions* to show others that God is his “inmost Physician” (p. 174) who has “cure[d] all that is evil in [him]” (p. 173). Nietzsche does acknowledge that religion is an important part of society that attempts to deal with the weak and sick, and that the sick turn to it looking for help; he explains “the necessity of doctors and nurses *who are themselves sick*” (Nietzsche, p. 125) to heal those who suffer from a “bad conscience.” These doctors are priests, who must “defend” the sick “against the healthy” (p. 126). After all, not only can the healthy be harmed by the contagions carried by the sick; the sick can be harmed by their jealousy for the healthy and strong, and religion provides an excuse for them to see themselves as morally superior, even if they are not. Nietzsche points out that “every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering” (p. 129), and religion also convinces the weak that “[they] alone are to blame for [themselves]” (p. 128) and their internal conflict, and that this blame should not be placed on the strong and healthy. The structure of religion thus has beneficial elements for both the sick, religious people, and the healthy, powerful people, although it certainly does not solve the problems that Nietzsche sees with society.

Although Nietzsche argues that religion plays an important role in society and can, to a certain extent, be helpful, he believes that Christianity does not heal as it sets out to do, but rather further infects the weak. “Even if it does ‘improve’ them,” he says, “it invariably makes the sick even *sicker*” (p. 142). The reason that the sick were, in Nietzsche’s opinion, sick in the first place, is that they were weak and not able to take control of their lives. Religion makes them even weaker, because it instills in them the values of humility and grace, and subjects them to a “repentance and redemption *training*” (p. 142). In effect, Augustine is using his life as just such training for the readers of his book; he wishes that “men may hear” him (Augustine, p. 174). To Nietzsche, however, this “training” not only makes Christians weaker, it leads to more problems

in society that are a result of the religious wanting to make everyone humble, as they are. These problems include witch hysteria and “death seeking mass deliria” (p. 142).

The metaphors of sickness and health that Nietzsche and Augustine employ deal with a type of sickness that extends beyond the physical. The authors see the world as extremely flawed, and although they each see different flaws, one useful aspect of the employment of the sickness and health metaphor for both is that it implies that moral “sickness” is contagious. The reason there is so much wrong with society is that the “sickness” is spreading. Nietzsche points out that “the healthy” cannot “nurse the sick,” for they must “guard [themselves]” against the “worst contagions” (Nietzsche, p. 125). For him, one of these “contagions” is guilt, or a “bad conscience,” and by nursing the weak and self-loathing, the strong and healthy would inevitably feel guilty and be reduced to the status of those for whom they cared. For him, “the *sick* are man’s greatest danger” (p. 122). Augustine perceives the unfaithful as “sick,” and he points out many times before he became a Christian when he passed this “disease” of unfaithfulness on to others. When he was young, for example, he had a classmate and close friend whom he “turned...from the true faith” (Augustine, p. 54). The contagiousness of the moral “sickness” for each author lends urgency to the problem that it presents.

Augustine and Nietzsche both define a “sickness” that plagues the world and contrast this with the condition that they view as “healthy.” In both metaphors, the sick turn to Christianity to be “healed,” and for Augustine this remedy is successful; he truly feels that he has been saved by faith, and believes in this “cure” so much that he writes *Confessions* “that men may hear” (p. 174) and follow the same path to health. Nietzsche defines health as following one’s natural instincts and not allowing the suppression of those instincts that leads to cruelty and self-loathing, and, ironically, the religion to which people turn for a cure. It is less evident how he would propose

one achieve health; if there are certain people who are already “masters,” invested with superior power and strength, than how can they be prevented from dominating, following their *own* instincts, and forcing the weak to “internalize” *their* instincts? Nietzsche presents no clear solution to this problem, and perhaps this is why, in his words, “the ascetic ideal,” which is expressed in Christianity, “has decidedly not been conquered,” and has, in fact, become “stronger” (p. 155). Although Nietzsche makes a compelling argument defining the sick and the healthy and describes how their situations reached this point, to this point in history Augustine’s view has triumphed, because it presents an unfailing path to the achievement of health and happiness.

### Works Cited

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