

## **Identity, Meaning, and Morality**

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According to Augustine in his work, *Confessions*, evil exists only in man's free will to turn away from God. He believes that the origin of this evil is inherent in human nature, and that the dichotomy of evil and goodness ties man's identity to the meaning of his existence; the purpose of man's existence is to embrace the way of God, and thus, man's will to fulfill this purpose determines his identity, or position on the moral spectrum. Nietzsche, in contrast, believes that the popular concept of evil is best illustrated by the socially constructed concept of morality, and thus an objective definition of both morality and evil is questionable. While he believes that man's self-created, spiritually derived meaning of existence and identity are undermined by the nature of this socially constructed morality, his concept of man's purpose of existence is similar to that of Augustine because it encompasses a form of human moral transcendence.

Because *Confessions* is essentially Augustine's relation of his spiritual development – the development of his perspective on his spiritual reality – he doesn't possess a concrete perspective on the nature of evil until the mid-to-later years of his life. His conclusion is that evil is "...not a substance, but a swerving of the will...toward lower things and away from...God...the supreme substance" (121), meaning that evil does not exist in God's creation as an (isolated) force or entity; evil is an action, (specifically the action of turning away from God), and it exists only in man's free will, because free will is what gives man the potential to turn away from Him. In order to

understand the reasoning behind this conclusion, however, one must delve into Augustine's beliefs about the origins of evil.

The concept of free will as the only means for the action of, and thus, existence of evil, brings up the question: how could God create a being with the potential for evil and lack evil Himself? Augustine seems to be unable to derive an answer through reason, and thus must rely on his faith that God's word is the "eternal Truth" (122), and that God created humans, but not the sin in them (8). He criticizes the Manicheans for lacking such faith, and describes them as "full of evil" for holding such doubts (109).

Augustine's faith in the absolute Goodness of God does not satisfy the question of the origin of evil in man, however. The bulk of Augustine's inner turmoil is centered on this question – he describes himself as "...on fire with the question whence comes evil" (115). but he eventually realizes that, while in search of the answer, he is focused on worldly things, and that these worldly things disable him from "...turning back towards the truth" (115). His explanation of the role of the material world in rendering him unable to turn towards the truth - towards God, whose word is the "eternal Truth" (122) – suggests that the material world is a temptation toward evil, or rather, a distraction from God's eternal Truth. However, this fails to explain the origin of evil, the reason why men turn away from God. Man's mere possession of free will doesn't guarantee that he will use it to turn away from God. Thus, the only explanation of the origin of human sin is the concept of original sin, which he discusses without much emphasis, though he implies a belief in it in his discussion of the sinfulness of children: that the "...innocence of children is in the helplessness of their bodies rather than any quality of their minds"(8). When placed in context with Augustine's definition of evil as an action, the concept of original sin

suggests that man, by virtue of being part of a race that committed horrendous sins in the past, has already participated in the act of turning away from God, and thus, is born sinful.

Relying on his faith in God's absolute Goodness and Truth, Augustine states that "evil is utterly not" (119), concluding that evil, as an entity, cannot exist in God's creation. He reasons that something that is purely evil is incorruptible because it can be corrupted no further. The word "corruption" suggests that something retains damages, and "damage" connotes a loss of goodness. Pure evil cannot be corrupted because there is no goodness there to lose; no damage to be done. However, because God, in Whom no evil exists, made all things good, it is impossible for a substance to lose all its goodness, because it would cease to have being. (119). The idea that a substance could lose some of its goodness indicates that there are varying degrees of goodness and that not all things are equal in goodness (119), which suggests a sort of hierarchy of goodness. This "goodness spectrum", so to speak, brings about the concept of a moral/spiritual identity: man may define who he is by his goodness using God's perfect, incorruptible Goodness as a basis for comparison. Augustine does just this throughout the book, illustrating that one key aspect of man's construction of his identity is the concept of goodness relative to that of God. Augustine most likely sees man's degree of goodness as an indication of his willingness to resist evil and follow God, which, according to him, is the meaning of man's existence.

Augustine establishes that evil does not exist as a substance, but as an action; evil exists not as a position in time and space, but as a direction. If heading in a direction that is away from God leads to non-existence, then we may assume that heading towards God leads to the opposite, existence, a word often used synonymously with life. Therefore,

the meaning of man's existence could be nothing other than to head in God's direction, which is, by virtue of God's perfect Goodness and Truth, the direction towards goodness and truth. According to Augustine, in order to exist in goodness and truth, man must see the world through the eyes of God, and live for Him. When Augustine discusses friendship, he accuses himself of "lov[ing] men upon the judgment of men, but not upon [God's] judgment, in whom no man is deceived" (61-62), signifying that, rather than loving men as God would and judging them with His standards of goodness, he saw men through man's own imperfect, corruptible eyes, therefore lowering his standards of judgment, consequentially loving men for earthly reasons. In order to find the way of God, man must see God clearly. Augustine states, "When first I knew Thee, Thou didst lift me up so that I might see that there was something to see, but that I was not yet the man to see it" (118), indicating that man must go through a process of spiritual development before he can see God clearly. Life is just such a continual process, suggesting that man's purpose in life is to strive to see God clearly so that he might attain that incorruptible goodness.

Nietzsche, like Augustine, believes that evil does not exist as an independent force or entity in the world. However, rather than approaching the concept of evil from a spiritual/philosophical perspective as Augustine does, Nietzsche approaches it from a sociological/historical perspective. In order to understand Nietzsche's concept of evil, it is necessary to understand his definition of morality, because evil is at the root of immorality, which cannot exist separately from morality.

Nietzsche believes that the popular modern concept of morality has been socially constructed, morphing throughout history's morphing societies into what it is today, and

he illustrates his perspective through a discussion of the historical origins of morality. He states that morality originated in feudal societies with the “pathos of nobility and distance”, in which nobles felt or desired to feel superior to those in lower social strata, and thus made a positive value judgment on their own nature (‘good’) and a negative value judgment on the nature of those in the lower classes (‘bad’) (26). Nietzsche consequentially suggests that this elementary concept of morality originated in egotistic actions (26) that strive for self-affirmation through the degradation of others, rather than in realities of “right” and “wrong.” Contrary to Augustine’s faith in God’s absolute Goodness and Truth, Nietzsche doubts the existence of any universal truth, and therefore doubts the reality of a universal “right” and “wrong.” He states that the common, underlying perception of truth is that “truth is *divine*” (152), and he proposes that the concept of divinity may be the world’s greatest falsehood: that “God himself turns out to be our longest lie” (152), which negates the common human perception of truth. As Nietzsche explains it, “from the moment faith in the God of the ascetic ideal is denied, a *new problem arises*: that of the *value* of truth” (153).

Nietzsche addresses the “ascetic ideal” through a description of the development of the “priestly form of human existence”(33), in which the feudal ‘good’ and ‘bad’ become associated with ‘purity’ and ‘impurity’, respectively. ‘Purity’ describes something that is untainted or uncorrupted, and, accordingly, in order to attain purity, one must prevent corruption. Because the priests are historically a part of the upper strata, the concept of impurity (corruption of purity) originates in the priests’ condescension toward the physical characteristics (most likely hygiene) of those in the lower strata, which eventually leads them to the practice of the denial of primal, earthly desires (31-32).

According to Augustine, the material world is a distraction from the way of God, and therefore the denial of earthly pleasures is a manner of directing oneself to God and thus preventing the occurrence of evil. In contrast, Nietzsche believes the priestly form of existence is the place in which the soul can "...acquire depth and become evil" (33), and the ascetic ideal is the means by which these tasks are accomplished.

Nietzsche delineates his version of the spread of Christianity, emphasizing the instillation of guilt in Christians via Jesus' crucifixion (35). Here unfolds the concept of "slave-morality" (36), which is created when guilt makes a man its moral slave, because he will do what society tells him is moral in order to feel he is a moral person, or to go to heaven, or one of various other self-interested reasons. Unfortunately, according to Nietzsche, the suppression of natural instincts is a cause of resentment; "... [resentment] itself...gives birth to values..."(36) and the 'slave' who denies himself of his animal nature, rather than resenting 'free' men for their freedom, resents the 'animal' qualities that they possess and that he lacks, and thus labels them as immoral in order to project his resentment outside of himself (36). Essentially, Nietzsche is asserting that modern morality, the creator of the 'slave' or the 'man of resentment', corrupts the true, honest nature of humans. He states that "the man of [resentment] is neither upright nor naïve nor honest and straightforward with himself" (38), signifying that the guilt/resentment complex that is tied to modern morality twists people into thinking that they are behaving 'morally' as a result of their own purity of heart and longing to do what is 'right' as an end and not a means to an end. These ideas are direct contradictions of Augustine's belief that evil, or the turning away from God (whom Nietzsche would label a tool for

guilt), is the manner in which the soul is corrupted, and that, in turning away from God, man commits sin, or immoral acts.

Man's identity and the meaning of existence are two almost inseparable values, especially in Nietzsche's conclusions about them. His conclusions, again, seem to be a direct contradiction to those of Augustine, who concludes that man's identity is based in part on his morality in relation to the Goodness of God, and his purpose is to pursue the way of God, because he sees man as having no definite purpose or identity. He ultimately attributes the development of the current system of morality to the emptiness man feels when there is no answer to the question of the meaning of his existence. Nietzsche states that "...man was surrounded by a fearful void – he did not know how to account for, to affirm himself; he *suffered* from the problem of his meaning"(162), signifying that man felt he needed some purpose for living, a meaning for existence, in order to establish any sort of identity. However, the irony is that in the struggle to create a legitimate meaning, and, thus, a legitimate identity for himself through the fabrication of morality and the ascetic ideal, he essentially created a meaning that is, by nature, "*a will to nothingness*"(163), because in denying all earthly things, he is denying life and all that it encompasses(162-163). Although this outlook seems rather bleak, there is a light through the fog. While Nietzsche is convinced that modern morality is a gross perversion of what true morality should be, and that humans have negated the legitimacy of the purpose they created for themselves, he also describes human consciousness, man's self-awareness and ability for self-restraint, as "...profound...*and pregnant with a future*...as if with him something were announcing and preparing itself, as if man were not a goal but only a way..." (85). This quotation signifies that perhaps humanity's current,

distorted concept and practice of morality is a part of a more positive purpose and identity as a necessary stage in the long process of human development and motion toward the goal of moral transcendence, which, though removed from a religious context, is not so different from Augustine's definition of man's identity and purpose, after all.

### **Works Cited**

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