Episode 5. Vice contains its own punishment. Saint Augustine

Welcome to Philosophy for the Real World. I'm Professor Thomas White.

In an earlier podcast, I explained Socrates' idea that there is a very practical reason for worrying about the ethical character of our actions. The way Socrates put it is 'vice harms the doer.' The specific harm he's referring to is, first, *we lose our ability to be satisfied*—so *our desires* take control—and, second, our *ability to perceive reality accurately* (especially our ability to assess risk) *is compromised*. Put more plainly, being unethical makes us greedy and stupid.

Saint Augustine

As a rule, I'm not going to talk about religious perspectives, but I can't help bringing up someone whose thinking is very similar to Socrates' on this topic—the fourth century Christian thinker, Saint Augustine of Hippo. In addition to being one of the great saints of the Christian church, Augustine was a very perceptive student of the human personality, and he thought a good deal about sin and evil. He made some important observations about the effects of acting unethically that are similar to Socrates' ideas. The way Augustine puts it is that "sin contains its own punishment."

Augustine was born in northern Africa in 354 to a non-Christian father and Christian mother. He was raised as a Christian, although in keeping with the customs of the time, he was not baptized. As a young man he studied rhetoric at Carthage, where he rejected Christianity in favor of Manicheanism (which taught that the world is ruled by two principles: one good [light], and the other evil [darkness]). After teaching rhetoric in Carthage, Rome, and Milan, he abandoned

Manicheanism, began studying neoplatonic philosophy, and was led back to Christianity. After a powerful conversion experience, he was baptized, returned to Africa, founded a religious community, and was subsequently ordained priest and then appointed Bishop of Hippo. He carried out his duties as bishop for more than thirty years and wrote voluminously, frequently against what he saw as his time's heresies. Although he died in 430, his influence in Christian thought has been enormous. Called by Saint Jerome the "second founder" of Christianity, Augustine's ideas have affected virtually every branch of the religion.

Augustine is also known in some quarters as the author of the first autobiography. His *Confessions* is an account of his shame about how he lived as a young man and his subsequent conversion to Christianity. Particularly distinctive about this work is its psychological focus. Augustine doesn't simply recount events, he studies his own experience with acute perception of the impact of the outside world on his deeply personal, internal spiritual journey. Because the harm that *Socrates* suggests is produced by vice is *psychological*, Augustine is an especially good writer to consult if we're looking for other evidence of the syndrome Socrates describes.

Augustine had a special interest in sin and evil. He believed that before his conversion he had led a terribly sinful life. And while we would surely judge him less harshly than he judged himself, Augustine pondered deeply on sin and its effects. As an orthodox Christian, Augustine believed that people would be rewarded or punished after death for how they lived their lives. At the same time, however, in his book *On Free Choice of the Will,* he argues that doing evil leads us to be punished *in the here and now*. That is, he comes to a conclusion remarkably similar to Socrates' idea that "vice harms the doer" in claiming that *vice contains its own punishment*.

<u>The power of desire</u>

Note that Augustine is *not* talking about sin or vice being punished by God after we die. When he says that vice contains its own punishment, he means that behaving unethically weakens us *in the here and now* in the same way that Socrates claims.

Augustine believes that "all evil deeds are evil for no other reason except that they are done through . . . *blameworthy desire*."[1] He describes how damaging such an overpowering drive to satisfy such desires is in dramatic, fascinating detail.

> Desire dominates the mind, despoils it of the wealth of its virtue, and drags it, poor and needy, now this way and now that; now approving and even defending what is false as though it were true, now disapproving what it previously defended, and rushing on to other falsities; now refusing assent and fearing clear reasoning; now despairing of fully discovering the truth and clinging to the deep obscurities of stupidity; now struggling into the light of understanding and falling back again from weariness. Meanwhile the reign of desire rages tyrannically and distracts the life and whole spirit of man with many conflicting storms of terror, desire, anxiety, empty and false happiness, torture because of the loss of something that he used to love, eagerness to possess what he does not have, grievances for injuries received, and fires of vengeance. Wherever he turns, greed amasses, extravagance wastes, ambition entices, pride bloats, envy twists, sloth buries, obstinacy goads, submissiveness harasses, and all the other innumerable things that throng and busy themselves in the kingdom of desire.[2]

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[1] Saint Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will,* translated by Anna S. Benjamin and L. H. Hackstaff (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985) p. 10.
[2] Saint Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will,* p. 10, translation altered.

Notice that Augustine paints a picture of an unhappy, tortured, and unsatisfied life driven by *insatiable desire*. More importantly, however, is that all the details he describes come down to the same two kinds of damage connected with Socrates' idea about how vice harms the doer.

First, our inability to be satisfied leads us to be constantly fixated on gratifying some desire or other. And no matter what pleasure we experience, we're never satisfied. Augustine is particularly eloquent at depicting the power of the desperate hunger for *more, more, more*. Not only does desire "rage tyrannically and distract the life and whole spirit of man," but it plagues its victim with a wide array of negative emotions: "terror, desire, anxiety, empty and false happiness, torture because of the loss of something that he used to love, eagerness to possess what he does not have, grievances for injuries received, and fires of vengeance." In such a state, our lives are not our own. We are the prisoner of our desires. And we're tormented, to boot.

Second, like Socrates, Augustine claims that our *minds* lose their independence and become prisoners of our wants. Again, Augustine's account of the damage is dramatic. "Desire dominates the mind . . . drags it . . . now this way and now that; now approving and even defending what is false as though it were true, now disapproving what it previously defended, and rushing on to other falsities; now refusing assent and fearing clear reasoning; now despairing of fully discovering the truth and clinging to the deep obscurities of stupidity."

In short, Augustine believes that the punishment of sin is that we yield control over our lives to our desires, which enslave our minds to do their bidding. And be sure to see that Augustine doesn't claim that God is doing this to us. He describes it as an earthly process that we do to ourselves.

Ignorance and difficulty

Elsewhere in the same work, Augustine adds another dimension to the impact of sin when he points to two more results—*ignorance* and *difficulty.* He writes, "It is an absolutely just punishment for sin that each man loses what he is unwilling to use rightly, when he could without any difficulty use it if he willed. Thus the man who does not act rightly although he knows what he ought to do, loses the power to know what is right; and whoever is unwilling to do right when he can loses the power to do it when he wills to. In fact, two penalties—ignorance and difficulty—beset every sinful soul."[3]

Again, Augustine is noteworthy for how perceptive he is about human psychology. He takes the everyday notion "use it or lose it," which is certainly true of physical abilities, and he applies to both *the mind* and *the will.*

Augustine and Socrates don't see eye to eye about religious beliefs, but they're unquestionably of the same mind about the effects of unethical behavior on the human personality. Vice harms us. We lose powers that would otherwise benefit us. We become weaker.

A final thought. Similar to addiction?

There's no missing how dramatically Augustine describes the negative impact of sin. And you might think that he's using exaggerated language simply for literary effect. However, it might be argued that what he describes is disturbingly similar to the negative effects of *addiction*—being obsessed with obtaining whatever it is we're addicted to, taking foolish risks, refusing to recognize until it's too late the damage being done to other parts of our life (relationships, job, etc.). Augustine's concept of "blameworthy desire" is, of course, very different from

[3] *On Free Choice of the Will*, p. 128.

chemical addiction. But a psychological obsession with power, money, success, fame, or sex can mimic many of the self-destructive features of addiction, and it can lead to the same kind of damage to the personality that Socrates and Augustine describe. It's easy to find examples of people who devastated the lives of the people around them and ultimately ruined their own lives as they single-mindedly pursued some goal. In my opinion, Augustine's intense and vivid account is precisely on target.

I think that if you take the time to look around, you'll have no trouble finding examples of people who demonstrate the kind of harm that Socrates and Augustine talk about. Both thinkers make the very practical observation that a pattern of unethical behavior seriously clouds our judgment and makes it more likely we'll act against our own interests. I have my own idea about why this syndrome might be part of the human personality, but that falls into the realm of speculation, so I'm going to skip that for now.

Now I appreciate that you might be skeptical, thinking that if we want a *truly practical* argument for why we should take ethics seriously, we want to hear from someone more hard-nosed than an ancient *philosopher* or an early medieval *saint*. Fortunately, the twentieth-century *psychologist* Abraham Maslow provides some interesting empirical data. He doesn't directly address the question, "Why should we be ethical?" or "Does vice harm the doer?," but his research on the healthy human personality does indirectly back up Socrates and Augustine. We'll discuss that in a subsequent podcast.

Today's take-away

So, what is today's practical take-away for how philosophy can help us navigate

the real world? There are plenty of times when we tell ourselves that doing something that we know is wrong is OK because it doesn't really hurt anyone. This is especially true if no one finds out. What Socrates and Augustine suggest, however, is that that's not true. There are ways in which we hurt ourselves. Think about it.

Just a reminder. If you want to leave comments about any of the episodes, please do so on the contact page on philosophyfortherealworld.com. You'll also find transcripts of all the episodes there.

Thanks for listening. I'm Professor Thomas White and this has been philosophy for the real world.