

REVIEW ESSAY

Augustine Deformed: Love, Sin, and Freedom in the Western Moral Tradition.
By John M. Rist. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xii + 420 pages.
\$36.99.

How did we arrive at “the systematically anti-Christian, indeed anti-religious, world-view which most opinion formers of the Western Establishment now profess” (6)? Several major studies in recent years have challenged the default position that this is simply the inevitable result of the progress of science, and have instead argued for the importance of contingent historical factors that could have gone otherwise. Notably, Brad Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation*¹ argues that the Reformation and the doctrinal “hyperpluralism” and religio-political conflicts to which it gave rise ultimately led to modern Western secularism, moral subjectivism, and consumer capitalism. John Rist’s *Augustine Deformed* now joins the ranks of those studies. Rist, professor emeritus of classics and philosophy at the University of Toronto, expresses much agreement with Gregory but faults him for failing to reach back to the early medieval period—in fact, to Augustine—for the causes of our present “intellectual, moral and cultural nihilism” (4).

Though he spends much time on Augustine’s philosophical antecedents, Rist locates the source of the problem in a complex cluster of themes in Augustine’s thought on freedom, love, and responsibility. He concentrates on three problem areas in particular:

1. The nature of freedom and the will. For Augustine, drawing on the Platonic tradition, freedom is the absence of constraints upon love of the good. Call this freedom #1. God’s will is God’s love of the goodness that God is. For us, as image of God, love of the good is natural, as in the “restless heart” of the *Confessions*; thus, Augustine’s conversion comes when grace sets him free from the chains of habit. The highest freedom belongs to God and (through grace) to the saved in Heaven, a *non posse peccare*, an inability to sin. For Augustine *voluntas*, translated “will,” is fundamentally our character, the direction of our loves, not a distinct faculty. Augustine rarely talks of “free will,” but in talking of “free choice,” he draws on the Stoic tradition, to introduce a second sense of

¹ Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

freedom, freedom #2, the power to choose between alternatives. Rist's vocabulary about this sort of freedom is fluid—among his terms for it are “autonomy,” “libertarian freedom,” and “freedom of indeterminacy”—but (especially in the form of “freedom of indifference,” which I take to mean freedom #2 separated from any inherent orientation toward the good) it eclipses freedom #1 in Western thought.

2. The causes of sin. Adam, prior to the Fall, had a natural orientation to the good but also to freedom #2, including the ability not to sin (*posse non peccare*), given (as he was in fact given) the assistance of God's grace. Since he was in a paradisaical state of near-natural and graced moral perfection, it is hard to see why he would ever have sinned. The situation of Satan is still starker: in addition to all that Adam had, Satan had full knowledge of good and evil. How could either of them have sinned? Augustine's failure to provide a clear explanation leaves open the suspicion that it was simply because God denied them the grace of perseverance. But this seems an arbitrary choice on God's part and threatens to make God responsible for sin.
3. Original sin and salvation. How is “the penal condition in which we find ourselves ... compatible with God's goodness” (379)? According to Augustine, all the descendants of Adam and Eve are somehow present in them and share in the guilt of their sin. They become a “lump of perdition” (*massa perditionis*), from which God predestines only some individuals to receive the grace of salvation, which seems another act of arbitrariness on God's part.

Having laid this Augustinian groundwork, Rist embarks on a tour de force through the “cultural mainstream” of Western philosophy and theology through the Reformation, and then philosophy alone to the present. I can discuss only a few of the figures he considers. First is Anselm, who, to secure creaturely responsibility for sin, emphasizes Adam's and Satan's freedom #2, to the increasing neglect of freedom #1. He tends toward reifying the will as an instrument or faculty that is “in and of itself always ‘free’ to sin or not to sin” (92), disregarding any inherent orientation to the good.

Thomas Aquinas does not fully succeed in his attempt to “blend [an Aristotelian] theory of man innocent of original sin or of need of the grace of God with [Augustinian theology,] which had for centuries placed those ideas at the centre of theological endeavour” (107). He differs from Augustine (especially the Augustine of *De Trinitate*) in tending not to treat will as love, and in tending to separate will from intellect. Aquinas left some of his successors with the impression that the will was not free, in that it must assent to that which the intellect proposes as good. The intellect thus appears as a separate determining power, whereas for Augustine it is simply the case that, when

healed through grace, we love the good that we know. Moreover, Aquinas' distinction between our "natural" end (Aristotelian human fulfillment) and "supernatural" end points the way toward his successors' separation between morality and what is required for salvation.

The trend after Aquinas is to emphasize "a more and more arbitrary power of the will—first of God, then of man" (120). Duns Scotus combines an Anselmian account of the will with a reaction against the "intellectualism" of Thomas. For Scotus the will lacks a necessary inclination toward the good and always has the freedom #2 to act against it. "Freedom just is what the will is" (145); hence, even the saved could fall if God did not prevent it. Our natural inclination is only toward the benefit of our species, and genuine ("pagan") virtues can derive from it. Salvation, however, does not depend on these virtues but on an infused charity that gives a loving obedience to God, who has the absolute power to—and sometimes does—make exceptions to the Commandments that do not relate directly to his own nature. Ockham intensifies the division between a knowable, but not salvific, Aristotelian morality willed by God, and a salvation determined entirely by God's commands, so that "God's salvific acts ... come to seem less and less relevant to 'ordinary life'" (158–59). God's own freedom is a freedom #2, whereby he can choose from all noncontradictory alternatives, rather than a freedom #1, defined by his loving nature. In late medieval thought, both human and divine freedom #1 were disappearing from view.

Rist accuses the Reformers of a "lopsided Augustinianism" (173). Luther seeks to preserve God's omnipotent freedom by rejecting the idea that our works could impose any obligation on God. He goes beyond Scotus and Ockham in his insistence that what God wills is right because God wills it (180–81). Aristotelian ethics is to be rejected because it is based on merely human reasoning and because it encourages a "Pelagian" effort to make oneself virtuous without grace. For Luther, justification comes through the grace of faith alone, which inspires us to obey God's commands and thus become virtuous. God's justice and therefore God's commands are inscrutable. Luther differs from Augustine regarding the relation of faith to love. For Augustine, the grace of faith is the gift of the love of God in the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5); hence it begins an inward transformation, strengthened by the sacraments, that restores the love of God that remains within us even in our fallen state. For Luther, faith comes before love, and although it gives rise to love, this is not understood as a transformation. "Man's being 'accounted' righteous means not that he *is* righteous but that he is *held* to be righteous by God" (186). Thus, the justified person is at the same time a sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*). "It is here, in his doctrine of imputed righteousness, that we recognize the culmination of the separation of ethics from salvation towards which Scotus and others had pointed the road" (182).

In his efforts to preserve God's omnipotence and human impotence over against God, Luther can sound determinist, though Rist acknowledges that he may not have intended to be as determinist as he sounds (183n14). In light of the Fall, "free will" is meaningless; "we are either slaves of God or slaves of the devil" (182). Luther comes closer to double predestination than does Augustine, who, with a few exceptions, confines "predestination" to God's choice of those whom he wills to save. Calvin unambiguously asserts predestination to damnation as well as to salvation. Yet he is more interested than Luther in the ordering of earthly society. He desires a theocratic commonwealth following godly rules, but makes clear that following such rules does not lead to salvation, for which we, totally depraved, depend upon the inscrutable will of God. God is just, but his justice is incomprehensible to us—in this, Calvin, and, Luther before him, part company with Augustine, who held that human justice participates in God's justice and therefore affords us some possibility of understanding it.

The Reformers' unexpected legacies in the seventeenth century turned out to be an increasingly secularized morality and, coupled with it, a moral critique of the Christian God, especially the God of double predestination. Among seventeenth-century philosophers in the Protestant tradition, morality came to be seen as "the core of rational religion" (202), and those who wished to save morality tended to move from rational justifications of Christianity to rational reconstructions of something like Christianity. Gradually "the search for the more or less 'secular' good life" was replacing the search for salvation (355). Hugo Grotius, for instance, seeking to transcend the divisions of Christianity, develops an ethics of natural rights that would hold *etsi Deus non daretur* (even if the existence of God were not granted), though for him those rights were bestowed on us by a providential God. The Fall, sin, and redemption are absent from his ethics. Locke, at least in his earlier writings, holds that moral obligation ultimately depends on God's commands; in this he remains close to Luther and Calvin, but he holds that "the traditional account of original sin is morally impossible and thus unworthy of God" (223; emphasis omitted). Hobbes, who is not concerned with divine justice or moral responsibility, replaces divine predestination with a materialist form of determinism. The rise of physical determinism, which becomes central to later philosophical treatments of freedom, is tied to the growing abandonment of final causes in physical and ethical theory, a development to which Rist alludes repeatedly, but which he does not trace.

Eighteenth-century "moral sense" theories required God in order to secure that our moral feelings are objective, but soon Hume reduced moral sentiments to mere social conventions. Kant's effort to found morality upon reason smuggled in Christian assumptions that he could not defend

philosophically, such as the equal dignity of all human persons. If neither reason nor feelings can ground morality, perhaps what is left is freedom itself—understood as an arbitrary freedom #2, like that attributed to God in late medieval and Reformation theology. Rist’s account of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought is something of a thicket, in which figure after figure is reviewed, sometimes dismissively (for instance, T. S. Eliot is indicted for self-deception, cowardice, and cultural snobbery for stopping at Anglicanism instead of going the full distance to Catholicism). But the two principal pathways follow the exaltation of the individual human will and of the collective human will.

The first pathway derives from David Hume and is developed by the Utilitarians. As Rist illustrates in a lengthy examination of Mill’s thought, utilitarianism was unable to reach agreement on what goods are to be maximized. Eventually utilitarianism deteriorates into “preference-satisfaction consequentialism,” in which choice becomes the highest good, limited only by the freedom of others. The final result is an “apathetic nihilism,” exemplified by Derek Parfit, whose thousand-page *On What Matters* concludes, in Rist’s summary, “nothing” (340). Parfit thinks the demise of traditional ethics, together with the rise of an impersonal, scientific account of human life, should make us more altruistic—never mind that he has extended Hume’s dissolution of personal identity to the point where it is not clear who or what “we” and “others” might be.

The second pathway originates in Rousseau. For him, authentic freedom consists in the alignment of one’s individual will with the General Will. This is the state of “natural” human beings, who are in an unfallen state before their corruption by society, but to restore them from their corrupt state now requires education. The Jacobins found that such education of the body politic necessitated tyranny. Social Darwinism and Marxism can be seen as mutations of “the desirable surrender to the General Will” (297), materialized as the progress of evolution toward the survival of the fittest or the progress of history toward unalienated humanity. For Nietzsche, the ideal “is to identify our morality-tempted individual will with an impersonal Will to Power” (308), which differs from the General Will in that it does not seek the common good; rather, by identifying with it, a heroic individual attains the free self-assertion of the Superman. The nadir of Western thought is reached with Heidegger, who, at least after 1930, is for Rist (here uncritically following Emmanuel Faye)² nothing but a Nazi. Heidegger disguises his nihilism in his later

² Emmanuel Faye, *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars of 1933–1935*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

work with talk of “openness to Being,” but Being is historical, and in the concrete, always embodied in a *Volk*, among which *Völker* the German nation is supreme. Authentic freedom is subservience to the nation, personified in its *Führer*.

Rist is aware that he is proposing a major correction of the course Western thought has followed since Augustine. His concluding chapter on reconstructed Augustinianism, however, focuses on the narrow question of the cause and transmission of original sin. He imagines one or more Adams emerging through an evolutionary process in a state somewhat as Irenaeus envisioned Adam’s—as a “moral primitive” intended by God to learn through experience what is good, what is evil, and “what it takes to be sinless” (384). Through a divinely guided process, this “Adam” attains rational thought and the freedom to choose between greater and lesser goods. God has granted him freedom and permits (but does not will) its misuse. Evolution, together with an Aristotelian theory of body and soul, helps make sense of the inheritance of sin. Body and soul develop together for the species as for the individual. Adam’s wrong choices and those of his descendants affect the genetic (including psychological) endowment and social circumstances by which *their* descendants are partially formed as moral agents. Thus, sin affects what we *are* as well as what we do. On the last page, Rist returns to the sin of Satan, seeing it as a failure of love, not directly analogous to Adam’s fall—a curious ending to a critique of most of Western philosophy. From the rest of the book, however, some of the other elements of Rist’s reformed and recovered Augustinianism are clear. For one thing, we need to revive the Augustinian restless heart, naturally seeking the good and thereby seeking God. For another, we need, in response to modern scientific-metaphysical determinism that privileges the observer’s standpoint, to restore the first-person experience of freedom to the central position that it has for Augustine.

Rist’s study has its limitations. It is explicitly a work of intellectual history, leaving to others the task of filling in the historical, political, and economic circumstances within which ideas developed. It leaves theologians after the Reformation period out of view and even within philosophy concentrates after Rousseau almost entirely on British and German thinkers (Maurice Blondel, who might assist Rist’s reconstructed Augustinianism, is not mentioned). And Rist’s treatment of the philosophers he does consider becomes increasingly cranky and less charitable as he moves toward the present. *Augustine Deformed* is the fruit of decades of reflection on Augustine and Western ethical thought, and Rist seems to want to include a lifetime’s worth of insights, which can make it taxing for a reader to trace the main lines of argument. New points turn up in purported summaries of

preceding arguments. Many sentences are written in a sort of hypertext, with em dashes and parentheses serving the role of links, connecting readers to secondary points or arguments (page 356, for instance, contains seven pairs of em dashes, ten sets of parentheses, and the first of a pair of square brackets). Footnotes introduce tangential lines of thought but all too often give author-and-date references to sources that do not appear in the bibliography.

I took issue with, or wanted further justification of, quite a few of Rist's judgments, especially regarding more recent thinkers. Yet in all, *Augustine Deformed* is one of the most stimulating and challenging books I have read in years, and I recommend it to any patient reader concerned with Augustine and the development of Western moral thought.

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