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# Augustine's Adolescence

The Source of Sin

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# Stealing a Pear

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- ❖ ‘There was a pear tree near our vineyard, laden with fruit that was not enticing in either appearance or taste. One wretched night—it was our unhealthy custom to keep up our games in the streets well into the night, and we had done so then—a band of altogether worthless young men set out to shake that tree and run off with its fruit. We took away an enormous haul, not for our own food but to throw to the pigs. Perhaps we ate something, but even if we did, it was for the fun of doing what was not allowed that we took the pears. Behold my heart, O God; behold my heart, on which you had mercy in the depths of that abyss. Behold, let my heart tell you now what it was seeking there: seeking in such a way that I would be wicked for no reason, so that there would be no cause for my wickedness but wickedness itself. It was foul, this wickedness, and yet I loved it. I loved perishing. I loved my own falling away: I did not love the thing into which I fell, but the fall itself. In my very soul I was vile, and I leapt down from your stronghold into destruction, not striving for something disgraceful, but seeking disgrace’ (*Confessions* II 4. 9).

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# How Motivated?

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- ❖ Here is an odd contention: 'Behold, let my heart tell you now what it was seeking there: seeking in such a way that I would be wicked for no reason, so that there would be no cause for my wickedness but wickedness itself. It was foul, this wickedness, and yet I loved it.'
- ❖ Two problems:
  - ❖ On the surface it is apt to appear self-contradictory: 'for no reason' and 'for the love of wickedness'
  - ❖ However that may be, how is it possible to love wickedness?
    - ❖ This seems, at the very least, a perplexing sort of motive.
      - ❖ One might love fun or pleasure or companionship, and therefore do something wicked, even knowing it is wicked (it seems), without thereby loving wickedness itself.

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# The Guise of the Good

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- ❖ According to one prevalent theory, endorsed by philosophers as different as Socrates and Aquinas, one always acts under the guise of the good.
- ❖ Somewhat more formally:
  - ❖ Whenever *S* does any action *a* intentionally, *S* does *a* for a reason; if *S* has a reason for doing *a* sufficient for actually doing *a* rather than forbearing from doing *a*, then *S* must be supposing that *a*—under some description or other—is a good thing to do.
    - ❖ After all, otherwise *S* would not do *a* at all.
      - ❖ So, whenever *S* acts intentionally she acts under the guise of the good (GG).

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# Augustine's Characterization

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- ❖ From that perspective, Augustine's action seems either:
  - ❖ unmotivated and so utterly inexplicable, or
  - ❖ if motivated at all, then motivated in such a way as to contravene the GG theory of motivation, which, while not a contradiction, seems psychologically inexplicable.
- ❖ In either case, Augustine's self-characterization is, at the very least, challenging.
  - ❖ Perhaps—as happens to us all now and again—he was not in touch with his actual motives, or, worse, was in touch with them and decided to hide them from himself.
    - ❖ Should this be our take away?

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# Compare Eve

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- ❖ The author of *Genesis* tells us that Eve because eats the forbidden fruit, because she believes the serpent, who tells her that if she eats, setting aside God's injunction: 'Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil' (*Genesis* 3. 4-5)
- ❖ Her motives seem clear enough: 'And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat' (*Genesis* 3. 6)
- ❖ Eve's motives seem clear enough: she desires knowledge, which she reasonably thinks of as something worth having, something good.
- ❖ Note, then, that she does not contravene the GG theory of motivation.
- ❖ Augustine: 'And now, Lord, my God, I ask, what delighted me in that theft, and behold: there is nothing of beauty there' (*Confessions* II 6.12)

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## Still More Perplexing

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- ❖ Augustine himself seems to articulate (and subscribe to?) the GG theory of motivation:
  - ❖ ‘When a question arises about why some criminal act was done, people do not typically accept any explanation until it appears that there was a desire to attain, or a fear of losing, one of those goods that we have called the lowest goods’ (*Confessions* II 5. 11)

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## Aquinas's Take

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- ❖ 'When Augustine says that he loved his very delinquency, not the fruit that he was stealing, we should not so understand this statement as if the very delinquency or the deformity of moral fault could be primarily and intrinsically willed. Rather, he primarily and intrinsically willed either to exhibit typical behavior to his peers or to experience something or to do something against the rules or some such thing' (*de Malo* q. 3, resp. 1-2).
- ❖ The theft, on this approach, was not the end, but rather a means to peer acceptance, to a thrilling experience, or to the joy in the autonomy of flouting authority or . . .