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"Medieval" and its cognates arose as terms of opprobrium, used by the
Italian humanists to characterize more a style than an age. Hence it is
difficult at best to distinguish late antiquity from the early middle ages. It is
equally difficult to determine the proper scope of 'ethics,' the philosophical
schools of late antiquity having become purveyors of ways of life in the
broadest sense, not clearly to be distinguished from the more intellectually
oriented versions of their religious rivals. This chapter will begin with the
emergence of philosophically informed reflection on the nature of life, its
ends and responsibilities in the writings of the Latin Fathers and close with
the twelfth century, prior to the systematic reintroduction and study of the
Aristotelian corpus.

Patristic Foundations

Early medieval thought is indissolubly bound to the seminal writings of
the patristic period, roughly those Christian writings produced from the
second through the sixth centuries. The ethical presuppositions inherited
by the early fathers reflect the broader intellectual milieu of late antiquity,
with its loose amalgam of Platonism, Stoicism and popular tradition, and
it is this background which the early medieval period inherits. In the Latin
context it is primarily the moral thought of Cicero (106–43 B.C.) and Seneca
(c. 4 B.C.–c. A.D. 65) which undergoes Christian interpretation. An influential
figure in this process of reinterpretation was Ambrose of Milan (c. 340–397),
whose work *On the Duties of the Clergy* undertook to answer Cicero's *De
officiis* and expound the relations of duty and virtue to the blessed life
promised by scripture.

The most influential of the Latin fathers, however, is Augustine of Hippo
(354–430), who, in his work *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, redefined
the cardinal virtues as forms of loving service oriented toward God. In his
Confessions Augustine merged this account of the virtues with a neo-
Platonic *telos* for which earthly life is a pilgrimage toward our true heavenly

home. As pilgrims we must undertake to serve God and our neighbor, taking scripture as our primary guide. Here again the primary ethical injunction is to cultivate the virtues, which discipline the individual to the proper use of earthly things. Book 10 of the *Confessions*, for example, indicates the ways in which the senses must be disciplined to the service of God, and distinguishes the search for the saving knowledge of God's will from the vice of curiosity (chapter 35).

Augustine elaborated his political ethics in *The City of God*. Just as the individual is a pilgrim, so is the Church, that body made up of the faithful. The church "militant," making its way in the world, must acknowledge that God has ordained the political order for the restraint of wickedness and the protection of the good. This social order extends to the faithful and the unfaithful alike, sustaining at least the peace necessary for regular communal activity. Christians must be willing, and make themselves able, to undertake this necessary political activity even to the extent of accepting the burdens of judge and soldier.

In many shorter works, such as his treatise *On the Good of Marriage*, Augustine demonstrated the power of his notion of love directed to the service of God and neighbor to come to grips with matters of practical morality. Rejecting perfectionism he acknowledged the genuine goods of marriage, not merely in begetting children and sacramentally legitimating sex, but in establishing a permanent fellowship between two people.

Augustine became the most influential of the Latin Fathers in generating a broad moral vision, but some mention must be made of the emergent institutions which established and sustained the moral world of the early Middle Ages: the penitential system and the monastic ideal. As the fundamental means for securing moral and spiritual well-being, the penitential system and its attendant theology pervade the early Middle Ages. To be in a state of sin is to be excluded from the community of God and the neighbor. To remain in a state of sin jeopardizes the very possibility of eternal happiness. Thus the sacrament of penance actively reflects the early medieval vision of genuine human good, its responsibilities and the consequences of breaching the proper order of society. The structure of penance came to be systematized toward the end of the early Middle Ages. Traditionally, penance has three components. Essential for penance is contrition of the heart: the person recognizes the sin and regrets it as an evil. Contrition must be followed by confession; by the early Middle Ages, this meant primarily the private admission of sin to a priest. Finally, restitution is necessary for complete reintegration of the individual into the community. Failure at any point renders penance defective and its efficaciousness

suspect, at very best. The nature and relative gravity of sins at a given period can be discerned from the penitential literature that begins to emerge in the sixth century.

Philosophically more interesting is the complex moral psychology presupposed by the penitential system. *Peccatum* seems to retain its broader sense of "mistake," suggesting that it is not the desire which is evil, properly speaking, but the complex of the desire, the understanding of that desire, and the action taken. Sin creates a disorder in the soul. The sinner who is not depraved suffers and recognizes the wickedness of the action as well as any of its untoward consequences. Confession acknowledges responsibility for the breach of order; restitution reflects the desire to restore that order. This account of penance points up two important aspects of early medieval ethics. There was no hard and fast distinction between the public and the private, the ethical and the political, or similar polarities. Further, the complex relations between agent, community and God make it fruitless to characterize medieval ethics as *essentially* teleological, deontological or divine command.

The complexity of the period emerges even more clearly in the second pervasive institution, the monastic order. From the sixth century to the twelfth, the centers of learning in western Europe were the monasteries dedicated to the *Rule* (*Regula monâchorum*, of St. Benedict, c. 480–c. 547). The *Rule* proclaims itself a "school for beginners in the service of the Lord." As such, it emphasizes attaining humility through the practice of obedience. Of particular note is Benedict's concept of the "ladder of humility" on which the monk ascends from fear of God through the various subordinate virtues such as deference and gravity to the twelfth degree "when the monk's inward humility appears outwardly in his comportment" (*Regula*, chapter 5). From perfected humility, the monk progresses to perfect charity and the spiritual power to confront the powers of evil in mortal combat. Humility and charity, from the monastic perspective, constitute primary virtues potentially in conflict with the virtues of classical culture.

Benedict's *Rule* served to organize the monastic life of the early Middle Ages, but it also served to establish a general ideal. This ideal found elaborate expression in the writings of Gregory the Great (Pope Gregory I, c. 540–604; r. 590–604). Through his *Pastoral Rule*, *Dialogues*, and particularly the *Moralia in Job*, Gregory exercised a determining influence on the early medieval conception of the end of human life and how that life should be led. He established the hierarchy of the modes of sin, ignorance being the least grave, infirmity the intermediate and intentional sinning the worst. His list of the seven capital sins became canonical. Gregory had a

great influence on moral theology throughout the medieval period. Of extra-biblical authorities only Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) and Augustine, for example, are more frequently cited by Thomas Aquinas (1225?–1274).

If Benedict and Gregory established the ideal of humility defined by service to God, Benedict's contemporary, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 480–524) represented a more straightforwardly philosophical tradition. Boethius never completed his vision of translating the Aristotelian corpus and that of Plato into Latin, but his *Consolation of Philosophy* rivalled Augustine's *Confessions* as a guide to the moral life.

God, Boethius argued, is true perfection and hence true goodness as well. Through providence God governs the world, grasping it all in an eternal present. Fate is the unfolding of this providential order in time. There is a temptation to think of God's eternal knowledge as necessitating a fatalism which denies freedom of action and human responsibility, but this, Boethius argues, is a *non sequitur*. Human freedom is inviolate and it is the responsibility of the wise person to come to grips with the mutability of fortune and train himself not to care about its vicissitudes. This involves realizing that the individual is essentially a soul, whose true home is in heaven. Earthly life is a form of captivity and evil is a privation of the good. Those deficient in virtue are deficient in being and happiness, appearances not withstanding (*Cons.* 4,4). Those who know their true home and reject attachment to fortune retain their peace of mind regardless of their sufferings.

Augustine, Boethius and, to a lesser degree, Gregory were all thinkers of power and originality; Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636) was not. Nonetheless, his *Etymologiae* brings together a remarkable amount of information in an atmosphere dominated by the thought of Augustine and Gregory. Isidore created the preeminent encyclopedia of the early Middle Ages, and in so doing made available for generations not merely a body of arcane and ofttimes amusing lore, but definitions of basic ethical concepts as well. From Isidore, later authors typically derive, for example, the distinction of law into *ius, lex* and *mores*. In his subdivision of *ius* into the natural, the civil and the *ius gentium*, Isidore paved the way for later theories of natural law and its relations to the laws of nations. The natural law covers the conduct of all persons, establishing, for example, the responsibility of parents for the upbringing of their offspring, and the propriety of meeting violent attack with force. Isidore seemed to imply that the natural law establishes constraints on the civil law, which to be sound must promote the common good in accord with nature, tradition and social context (*Etymologiae*, 5, 4; 5, 21).

The Carolingian Renaissance

The renaissance of learning, which had its center at the court of Charlemagne (742–814) did not give rise to innovation in moral thought. The works of Alcuin (735–804), the leading figure in Charles' reform, reflect a period of consolidation and are instructive in their concerns. Introducing his *De grammatica*, for example, Alcuin pens a short introduction to philosophy which stresses, in Boethian fashion, the need to free the soul from the vicissitudes of Fortune and transitory involvements and to discipline itself with study. A dialogue on rhetoric closes with a discussion of the cardinal virtues and their parts. His treatise *On the Virtues and the Vices*, drawn primarily from scripture and the sermons of St. Augustine, presents a concise statement of the relation of faith and works, emphasizing the primacy of charity, fear of God, and chastity as the *vita angelica*. Alcuin traces the fundamental moral directive to reject evil and do the good back to Psalm 33, and derives from it the four cardinal virtues. It is of interest that a list of eight principal vices and a new set of subordinate virtues emerge—a set which includes peacefulness, mercy, patience and humility.

Half a century later John Scotus Eriugena (c. 813–880), working at the court of Charles the Bald (Charles I, King of France, 823–877; r. 843–877), engaged in a heated dispute on predestination and foreknowledge which relates directly to the foundations of ethics. If God is omniscient, are not all human actions immutably fixed and inescapable? Taking his start from Augustine, Eriugena argued that language about God must of necessity be metaphorical and nonliteral. Hence talk of God's knowledge as preceding human acts is misleading. God exists in an eternal present without change. His understanding remains merely foreknowledge in the divine eternity and is in no way coercive. Eriugena remained primarily a cosmologist, however, though book four of his *De divisione naturae* does outline a moral psychology based on the allegorical interpretation of Genesis 3.

From Anselm to Alan of Lille

A growth in theology and philosophy paralleled the expansion of agriculture and population beginning in the eleventh century. Perhaps the most subtle intellect of the early part of this period was Anselm of Bec, later Archbishop of Canterbury (1033–1109). Anselm's interest in the logical analysis of concepts reflects the influence of his teacher, Lanfranc (c. 1005–1089), as well as the growing debate on the use of logic in theology. Although Anselm did not undertake an independent treatise on ethics, his *Cur Deus homo* incorporated a complex account of justice and the end of

human existence. God created humans for happiness, which he would not remove without just cause (*Cur Deus homo*, 1, 9). Sin is specifically the injustice of not rendering God his due (1, 11), and the incommensurability between God and his creation makes it necessary for restitution to be made by the man who is also God (cf. 2, 16). The happiness made possible through Christ's act of restitution consists in justice, which requires that the moral agent be free (2, 10) and capable of discerning and willing what justice requires (2, 1).

Anselm elaborated this moral psychology in his work *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin,* where he distinguishes between action, appetite and will, locating sin in consent to the promptings of the appetites, rather than the appetites themselves (*De conceptu,* 3–4). Sin properly so-called involves a willful and deliberate act contrary to justice, and it is this which merits punishment. The natural sin inherited as a consequence of Adams's personal sin is, properly speaking, an incapacity on the part of the agent to achieve justice unaided (*De conceptu,* 23). Natural and personal sin both exclude the nonbeliever from the community of the saints; but they do not bear equal gravity, and so, Anselm implied, they do not merit equal punishment in hell.

In the half century following Anselm's death, Peter Abelard (1079–1142) emerged as the most brilliant, and controversial, thinker of the early schools. In his unfinished *Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Jew and a Christian,* Abelard is called upon to judge, in a dream vision, the out-come of a dispute over the proper path to true happiness. The philosopher begins by noting his attachment to the natural law, which he equates with moral teaching, also called ethics. But reason is so denigrated by the common intellect that the search for the good is mired in tradition and bias. Hence he seeks guidance from the Jew and the Christian. The law of the Jew he argues, while it may be divine in its origins, remains too tied to this worldly particularism to appeal to the reasonable mind. The righteousness of Abraham and Noah demonstrate that the burden of Jewish law is not necessary for ethics. Turning to the Christian, the Philosopher receives an account of ethics as having two parts: First there is the doctrine of the *summum bonum* as the object of moral striving; then there is the doctrine of the virtues as the path toward the *summum bonum.* Drawing primarily on Augustine and Cicero, the Philosopher and the Christian agree on an account of the virtues which they couple with an Augustinian theory of the relation of good to evil in the world. The *Dialogue* breaks off after the discussion of the application of 'good,' thus we lack Abelard's analysis of the debate. The *Dialogue* remains valuable, nonetheless, for its discussion of

natural law, virtue, and the concept of 'good.'

In his *Ethics* or *Know Thyself*, Abelard analyzed the interrelations between 'sin,' 'vice' and 'evil,' and the ways in which responsibility for actions is assessed. Acts are good when they accord with what God wills for people, and wicked when they evince contempt for God or knowingly violate what God demands. Sin lies not in the act, or even in the will, but rather in consent to the deed contrary to God's will. With regard to guilt before God, the doing of a deed adds nothing, a view Abelard recognizes as provocative. But he notes that an admittedly prohibited act, such as sleeping with another's wife, may well be done without sin if it is done in ignorance, and this strongly suggests the neutrality of acts in themselves. Abelard checks the apparent slide toward subjectivism by insisting that an intention is good only when it is actually, as opposed to just apparently, in accord with God's will. Nonetheless, an individual cannot be held guilty if he acts in accord with the dictates of conscience.

This discussion leads Abelard into the question of repentance, and then into a discussion of the status of priests in the penitential order. This closes the first book. There remains but a fragment of a second book and thus, as with the *Dialogue*, it is unclear what the final shape of Abelard's work might have been. Nonetheless, both the *Ethics* and the *Dialogue* display subtle and well-argued analyses of key moral terms. It is not inappropriate to view Abelard's fragmentary works as essays toward an independent philosophical ethics.

Many of the disparate traditions of early medieval ethics come together in Alan of Lille (c. 1120–1203), master at Paris toward the end of the twelfth century. Alan's works run the gamut from philosophical poems such as his *Anticlaudianus*, on the creation of the perfect man, to a *Rules for Theology* and a *Treatise on the Virtues and the Vices*, which, together with his *Art of Preaching*, make up a sustained treatise on practical philosophy. The details of Alan's account are not novel, but two aspects of his thought invite reflection. First, the organization of his works, with the emphasis on definition and analysis, extends the interest in philosophical method found in Anselm and Abelard. Second, the account of nature's attempt at constructing a perfect man in the *Anticlaudianus* expresses a growing interest in ethics as an extension of natural philosophy. Although the soul comes from God, the rest of the attributes of Alan's New Man are shaped by Nature and her companions, the Virtues. In the battle against the Vices which closes the poem, Alan gives the impression that Virtue triumphs without supernatural aid. Without ceasing to be a Christian theologian, Alan looks forward to a period when it will be possible to undertake ethical analysis on a thoroughly natural basis.

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