

The Thought of St. Augustine

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St. Augustine, also known as Aurelius Augustinus, was born in AD 354 and died in 430 at Hippo, North Africa, in a region now better known as modern Algeria. He was raised in a town called Thagaste. There he suffered the twin misfortunes of the early death of his father, Patrick, and an impoverished education which did little to foster his knowledge and understanding. His mother, Monica, influenced him deeply and remained his best friend until her death in 388. Three years later (and against his wishes) Augustine was ordained presbyter for a small congregation at the busy seaport of Hippo Regius, forty five miles from his birthplace. His reluctance could not mask his outstanding abilities and it was not long before he was consecrated bishop of the province.

For thirty four years his episcopal duties engaged him in a constant round of preaching, administration, travel and the care of his people. Despite the demands on his time, and the various controversies which embroiled him as a champion of orthodoxy, he never ceased to be a thinker and scholar. He wrote extensively and his surviving writings exceed those of any other ancient author. His vast output includes one hundred and thirteen books and treatises, over two hundred letters, and more than five hundred sermons.

Although a citizen of the ancient world whose outlook was shaped by the cultures of Greece and Rome, Augustine is in important respects our contemporary. His influence has proved pervasive, affecting the way we think about the human condition and the meaning of the word 'God'. His concern for words and meanings and their relation to reality finds a modern resonance in the thought of the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein,¹ who included Augustine's writings among his favourite books.

Once freed from the arrogance and certainties of youth, Augustine saw that with all his formidable intellectual powers, something more than intellect was required in the pursuit of truth. He would have inclined to the remark made by Pascal that 'the heart has its reasons that reason knows not of'. Similarly, we can see from his great autobiography 'The Confessions' that his search for truth made plain to him the depths and disposition of the human heart.

Outstanding figure that he was, Augustine knew from personal experience that sin darkens the mind and makes crooked the motives of the heart. In his 'Confessions' he recalls how as a youth he had

stolen pears from an orchard—not out of hunger but merely as a lawless escapade. This was forever to remind him of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve with its insistence that humankind seeks the ‘forbidden fruit’ simply because it is forbidden. He drew support from St. Paul and in particular the Epistle to the Romans (Ch. 7 v. 21–24). In our own time the radical nature of sin is either ignored or denied and it may be that we need the insight of a modern writer like Muriel Spark to see what Augustine was driving at:

Everyone sins but any other
Sinner can blame an indifferent mother
or being suppressed, or going without dinner,
But I myself am a self-made sinner.
I never was hungry as a kid;
Anything I wanted to do I did,
And nobody whispered in my presence
Or complicated my adolescence.
If only I had been pampered, cursed
Or warned of ghosts; if only I nursed
A dark obsession and was trying to free it,
I could blame all that; but as I see it
I am a sinner in the purest sense,
Original par excell-ence
And I can't tell a lie or drink too much gin
But I think of my immaculate approach to sin.

Augustine saw himself as a sinner in ‘the purest sense’. Indeed the picture he paints of himself in the pages of the *Confessions* is at times so unflattering that it would be easy to overlook the more engaging aspects of his personality which more than compensate for the acknowledged vices. The need for sexual gratification was overwhelmingly strong during his adolescence. At the age of seventeen he took a mistress to whom he remained faithful for many years. She bore him a son, Adeodatus, whose untimely death caused Augustine genuine grief.

Having rejected Christianity as somewhat vulgar and simplistic he then attached himself to the religion of the Manichees. Their founder Mani, who was by all accounts a self-deluded fanatic, had been crucified in Persia in AD 277. He designated himself the Apostle of God, the *Paraclete* foretold by Jesus. His followers were required to renounce the world as the place of darkness, and the lower half of the body as the work of the devil. The Old Testament with its emphasis on the goodness of creation was denied any binding authority, and a similar fate befell any passages in the New Testament which suggested that the world was not irredeemably evil.

Many fantastic notions were peddled in Mani's name and it seems curious, if not astonishing to us, that a man of Augustine's stature should have been taken in for so long by such spurious doctrines. He

remained an adherent for ten years (at a relatively uncommitted level) before he was attracted, then captivated by St. Ambrose of Milan. Himself a 'vendor of words', Augustine could hardly fail to be impressed by the preacher's reputation as an eloquent speaker. This combined with a growing awareness of the deeper truths contained in the Scriptures brought him to a moment of decision. He accepted the Christian faith and, at the age of thirty two was baptized.

A year later he returned to Africa and with the help of friends established a monastery at Tagaste where he remained for two and a half years. The 'society of brothers' as they were called, spent long hours in prayer and contemplation. Time was also given to philosophical questions with Augustine normally providing the answers. His intellectual curiosity was incessant and almost child-like. Others took the existence of the world for granted whereas he wanted to know why it was there at all. Wittgenstein would have agreed.

To enter into Augustine's world requires us to recognize the breaking-point where the old civilization of Greece and Rome was painfully giving way to the beginnings of Western European culture. Augustine straddled two worlds and saw Christianity transformed from what had been a persecuted sect into a State religion sanctioned and protected by the Roman emperor. As we struggle through our present times of change and upheaval, it is encouraging to discover in the turbulence of a bygone age, the figure of Augustine holding fast to God and his purpose in creating the world. Here in his own words he describes the tragic fate of the city of Rome following the invasion of Alaric and his soldiers: an event of such significance that it was to call forth from Augustine a work of the highest genius.

At this time Rome was overwhelmed in disaster after its capture by the Goths under their king Alaric. Those who worship the multitude of false gods, whom we usually call pagans, tried to lay the blame for the disaster on the Christian religion, and began to blaspheme the true God more fiercely and bitterly than before. This fired me with zeal for the house of God and I began to write the *City of God* to confute their blasphemies and falsehood. This took a number of years for other tasks intervened . . . but the great work . . . was at last finished in twenty two books.

He began the *City of God* at the age of fifty nine and concluded it when he was seventy two. In the opening sentences of the Preface the purpose of his sustained endeavours is made clear:

Here my dear Marcellinus is the fulfilment of my promise, a book in which I have taken upon myself the task of defending the glorious City of God against those who prefer their own gods to the Founder of that City.

Augustine with considerable panache and fantastic detail sets before

us a divine society consisting of those predestined to reign with God from the beginning of time. Separate and apart from this company of the elect are those unfortunate ones who have lived by merely human standards and as such are doomed to eternal punishment.

It is hard not to feel a certain unease (a distaste even) when confronted with a vision of the future in which some are blessed and others damned for reasons which on the surface seem less than compelling. We shall look at these later. For now we can say that man's highest good, according to Augustine, is eternal life with God. This does not necessarily entail a rejection of the world's values—to do so would be to fall prey to the negative and world-denying doctrines of the Manichees which he had left behind prior to his conversion. But power, wealth, fame, ambition—all the things that so easily lay a fatal claim upon human lives—are to be seen as transient when placed in the context of eternity. In one of the most celebrated passages of the *Confessions* he declares: 'Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee'. The human heart is in pilgrimage and its destination—the true God—is the pearl of great price of which the Scriptures spoke.

It seems natural to ask from where Augustine derived these transcendent notions. He knew his Bible of course but he was no philosopher in the trained technical sense and was only partially acquainted with the works of Plato and Aristotle. He had received a rhetorical education and the core of his training was in the art of speaking. It is all the more remarkable therefore (and, not least, a measure of his intellectual genius) that he was able to weave Greek thought into his theology and furnish it with his own insights derived from Scripture. If he was indebted to anyone it was the second-century religious philosopher, Plotinus.

According to a contemporary biographer, Plotinus seems to have been a somewhat eccentric genius whose life exemplified the ascetic ideal. He was a vegetarian who never acknowledged his birthday. Food and sleep were kept to an absolute minimum and baths did not seem to figure at all on his list of personal priorities. What consumed him was the philosophical system he had developed from his reading of Plato and Aristotle. Added to this were his own theological reflections on God and the nature of the external world. Augustine had but one reservation concerning his mentor's system: admirable though it was as an attempt to reach the truth about the universe, it lacked the divine illumination of the intellect, which, for Augustine, made natural knowledge possible.

The same cannot be said for Augustine's own highly-distinctive style which is revealed in the last three books of the *Confessions*. They provide a marvellously discursive interpretation of the book of Genesis and the story of creation. Philosophical reflections on the problem of time and the hidden meaning of scripture combine

together with an adoration of God which pervades virtually everything he writes. Augustine is not bound by the traditional time-scale of the Bible and readily concedes the possibility that the world has been in existence long before the arrival of man. He would have had some difficulty with later views of creation describing it as an event which began at six o'clock on the evening of 22nd October 4004 BC and took one hundred and forty four hours to complete.

In this respect he is remarkably modern without having access to the vastly different cosmology which informs our thinking today. We can only speculate at his reaction to a universe at once grander and more mysterious than he could have possibly imagined. Probably he would have had little time for theories which assert that creation is an accidental product of chance and randomness (see for example, Prof. J. Monod *Chance and Necessity*). Like Einstein in the earlier part of our own century he would have refuted any notion that 'God plays dice with the world'. Augustine had a keen sense of its astonishing order and design both of which are dependent on the goodness and graciousness of God. Both *The Confessions* and the *City of God* contain many allusions to the world's intoxicating beauty:

The manifold diversity of beauty in sky and earth and sea; the abundance of light and its miraculous loveliness; the dark shades of woods, the colour and fragment of flowers; the multitudinous varieties of birds with their song and bright plumage . . . Then there is the mighty spectacle of the sea.²

We are reminded almost irresistibly of St. Francis and nature poets like Wordsworth and Traherne for whom the world is the divine work of an almighty hand.

Alongside the order and loveliness of things exist calamity and woe. For Augustine this was not a matter of speculation but observable fact. He was acutely aware of the despondency induced in ordinary people by these brute realities yet saw it as his duty to remind them of their own responsibilities if things went awry:

Each generation thinks its own time uniquely awful; that morality and religion have never been at so low an ebb . . . and civilized values have never been more threatened. But whether times are good or bad depends on the moral quality of individual and social life and it is up to us.³

There is profit in this message for us today. We seem to lack the historical perspective and assorted varieties of fatalism seem to hold many lives in their sway. Atrocities on a global scale no longer surprise us and we have too easily accepted what the German philosopher, Hannah Arendt has described as 'the banality of evil'. Far from despairing, Augustine urges readers of any generation to

feel their individual and collective strength. They have more influence on events than they realize.

The good ordering of society however cannot be divorced from the quality and integrity of its rulers. In welcoming the earlier conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity, Augustine was not blind to the later intrigues and power-struggles—the domination of the weak by the strong. He had read Sallust's sobering account of Roman republican history and endorsed his celebrated dictum that Roman society was characterized by 'private affluence and public squalor'.

A fair society in Augustine's view was one of mutual interdependence secured by justice. On this point he was quite uncompromising: 'Take away justice and what are governments but gangsters on a large scale?'⁴ He was then on the side of the poor yet the earthly city all about him seemed impervious to their needs. The defenders of the *status quo* were invariably rich and powerful—a world removed from the poverty of those below them. The Church did what it could with its daily soup kitchen and register of paupers, but the real and pressing need was for a re-distribution of taxation. Once again Augustine strikes a contemporary note with his insistence that political structures must necessarily be concerned with the 'common good' and not just a minority within society.

In speaking so unequivocally we might suppose that Augustine could be regarded as a champion of revolution (violent or otherwise). Not so. Whatever failings a government displays towards its subjects, it rules as a divinely-ordained instrument within society and as such has indubitable rights. Rulers are approved by God as St. Paul made clear (Romans, Chapter 13) and are necessary because of the greed and wickedness of the human heart. Left to their own devices men would wreak havoc upon the world. Unless there is law and order (to which all ostensibly consent) there can be no peace.

Augustine's thinking at this point bears some resemblance to the much later thought of Thomas Hobbes⁵. His great work of political philosophy *Leviathan* presents human life as 'nasty, brutish and short'. In such a world a powerful state is needed to control the impulses of its members which threaten the good of all. Despite the similarities, the world of Augustine ultimately belongs to God and cannot therefore be regarded as nothing more than a ferocious battleground of conflicting interests. That we give due deference to the requirements of the State is to acknowledge that its authority derives from, and, to some extent, reflects the immutable law of God. Government has a moral basis therefore and does not rely solely on brute force for its authority. Even if we acquit Hobbes of the agnosticism of which he was sometimes accused in his own day, it is doubtful whether he could side with Augustine here. For Hobbes, sound government is made possible by the consent of the people and the judicious use of power. Metaphysical considerations, are, strictly

speaking, irrelevant to the world's principal business of competition and survival.

Enough has been said already to show that in conceding the divine right of the State to exert control over its people, Augustine does not lead us to suppose that the City of God can be identified with any temporal institution. Certainly not the ruling elite, and, more surprisingly, not even the Church here on earth. It is, from our contemporary viewpoint, remarkable that he very rarely identifies the City of God with the Church.

Others may have cited St. Paul's saying that the Church is 'without spot or blemish'. For Augustine it was rather more the case that the true believer should love the Church 'warts and all'. As priest and bishop he loved the Church passionately—indeed spent himself in her defence and service. Yet he knew the members of his congregations to be average sensual people. Their obvious failings, the moral and spiritual lapses of his clergy, and the occasional easy compromise of the Church with the spirit of the age were all matters which momentarily depressed him. The monastery at Hippo received many dubious characters who, despite their avowed interest to change, seemed unable to shake off their old destructive ways. It seemed that a crook could still remain a crook even after taking religious vows.

Interestingly, Augustine never conceived of the Church as a purely clerical affair. The ordained ministry, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, had an important rôle to perform liturgically and pastorally. For him the veracity of the gospel was not authenticated by any appeal to a spiritual hierarchy but rather to the faith of the universal Church. He comments at one point: 'I would not have believed the gospel if the authority of the universal Church had not constrained me to do so'.

It could be argued that Cardinal John Henry Newman⁶ was drawn to a similar conclusion in the nineteenth century when he stressed the necessity of consulting all the faithful in matters of doctrine. His deep study of doctrinal controversies in the Early Church of the fourth century led him to the view that when the supposed guardians of the faith were in danger of apostasizing, it was the faithful witness of ordinary believers that maintained the Church in truth.

This idea of the Church as the whole people of God was to figure prominently in the discussions and documents of the Second Vatican Council⁷ where the invisible hand of Newman was acknowledged to have played a significant part. The prescient Cardinal had prepared the way for the Council's Constitutions on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) and on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*). That the laity were now seen to have an indispensable rôle in the life and mission of the Church owed much to the shared view of Newman and Augustine. Indeed one could go further and say quite simply that a Church without a laity would be lost.

Before moving away from the Church as an object of concern, it is noteworthy that at various points in the *City of God*, Augustine displays a dual-conception of its [the Church] nature and purpose. On the one hand it is a visible body ruled by bishops who are successors of the apostles, and among whom the Bishop of Rome has primacy. Then again, it is also portrayed as the 'supernatural reality of the congregation of the predestined'. Somewhat enigmatically, he goes on to say that the Church 'has in her midst those who are united with her in the participation of the sacraments, but who will not join with her in the eternal destiny of the saints'. Even more surprisingly, among those presently regarded as the enemies of the Church are 'citizens to be'.

On this reckoning it would be highly presumptuous to state categorically who will be finally included in the company of the elect. In Augustine's own words 'there are others outside the visible city of the Church who yet one day will belong to the City of God as a supernatural reality'. God alone then knows who are his own and the elect can never be sure of their destiny.

Before we look at some of the criticisms elicited by these strange notions (and, not least, in fairness to Augustine himself) we need to understand his teaching on predestination. Notwithstanding the initial concern we might feel at its apparent arbitrariness and severity, closer scrutiny does reveal a certain coherence at the heart of this daunting doctrine.

Predestination is about our human destiny—both in this life and in the world to come. To be finally included among the blessed is to receive salvation which is the gift of God. Augustine sees the human race as a 'mass of perdition' caused by the sin of Adam and compounded by all who constitute his posterity. Man is incapable therefore of pulling himself up by his bootstraps and can only be set on the right path by the grace of God. Grace alone is the means whereby our freedom is restored because from the first moments of infancy we are held captive in the dark dungeon of pride and selfishness.

The greatness of God's grace is revealed in the sending of his Son to die and rise again. But that is not all. Preachers have been commissioned to preach the good news of the gospel and call sinners to repentance. Their response is two-fold: some believe and accept it while others reject it. Both responses may be ascribed to the election of God. The elect, of whom there are a fixed number will in time believe and be saved. The non-elect are lost because God rejected them on account of their sin. As sinners they are justly condemned to punishment.

This appears manifestly unfair in that all men as Adam's off-spring deserve the same treatment. But, as a matter of fact, God does not treat all alike. Some are justly condemned, while others, despite their

sin, are mercifully blessed. Augustine answers the objection by quoting Romans, Chapter 9 v. 19 and Chapter 11 v. 33. The will of God in this respect is hidden and it is blasphemy on the part of man to attempt to discover it. 'A gulf of bottomless depth is God's unsearchable purpose'. Man is mere clay in the hands of the potter and is not entitled to question the One who fashioned him. Furthermore God's justice is not called into question by his seeming severity because sinners are left to the just recompense of their sins: 'Kind in his kindness to some, righteous in his punishment of others and good in respect of all, because it is good when that which is due is rendered; and righteous in respect of all, since that which is not due is given without wrong to anyone'.

If this seems somewhat convoluted, put more simply, Augustine seems to be saying that those who receive mercy can only be grateful for grace they had done nothing to deserve. On the other hand, those who do not receive mercy can have no ground to remonstrate against a verdict which all in Adam deserve.

With obvious justification Augustine's critics were rightly quick to signal their complaints. They pointed to his highly selective use of Scriptural texts and, even more damagingly, to the forced use of Biblical passages which manifestly failed to fit his overall thesis. They argued for example that the New Testament text 'God wills all to be saved' had to be interpreted by Augustine in the minimalist sense of including some representatives of every race of mankind instead of the more obvious all-inclusive sense. But it was not just his dubious exegesis that gave rise to concern. There was the sense that his speculations had gone too far—that he had, so to speak, fallen foul of the criteria he had himself set down and strayed in to mysteries beyond mortal comprehension. Not least, there was the concern that predestination with its ready-made categories of lost and saved could induce moral laxity. After all, if one's eternal destiny lies utterly beyond one's personal control, what incentive is there in trying to be good?

No discussion of predestination would be adequate without reference to the counter-blast it called forth in the form of Pelagianism. Pelagius was a monk of British origin who was not unsympathetic to Augustine's analysis of the human condition as a state which gives rise to misery and ends in death. In certain important respects however, Pelagius declared himself unable to swallow the doctrine of predestination undiluted. Quite simply he was more optimistic about human nature than his episcopal adversary. He could not believe that humanity inherited a flawed nature. That we were born into sin he did not contest. What he rejected was the view that we were born with sin as a sort of crippling contagion transmitted by the act of sexual intercourse. To Pelagians, Augustine never seemed at ease with the human body—an unfortunate legacy perhaps from the

oppressive Manichean spell which had held him captive for so long during the earlier (and formative) part of his life. It is a matter of regret that for many centuries the teaching of the Church on human sexuality has suffered from its adherence to Augustine's distorted emphasis.

Pelagius saw man as being endowed with a divine capacity for doing good. Whether he chooses to do good depends upon himself. He may go wrong and choose evil but nevertheless a genuine and free choice has been exerted. In theory, therefore, it is possible for man to keep the commandments and be without sin. Admittedly, without the help of grace this undertaking is bound to end in failure or despair. But even this prospect was, for Pelagius, less debilitating than the view he opposed with its insistence that everything—even man's will—is the initiative of God. Surely, he argued, this destroyed man's answerability before God and hence his responsibility for his actions.

Augustine's reply (conducted over a number of years) castigated Pelagius as a perverter of Christianity. Instead of appropriating the good news of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of mankind, humanity now had the invidious task of saving itself by good works. Moreover these incipient humanistic ideals inclined, in Augustine's view, to elevate man at the expense of Christ and the sacraments of the Church. Christ was, after all, the most eminent example of predestination. He was predestined to be the Son of God and the Head of the Church, not by any merit in himself, but purely by the grace of God. His entire life was given as a means of our salvation, and not simply as an example for us to emulate in the questionable hope of meriting eternal life through our own endeavours.

Similarly, any perceived devaluation of the efficacy of the sacraments had to be resisted. If man was as hopelessly wayward as Augustine's teaching implied, then a corresponding emphasis had to be given to baptism and the eucharist as objective means of grace. To view man as the master of his fate (which was Augustine's mistaken belief about Pelagius) called into question the absolute necessity of the sacraments and, by extension, the very authority of the Church.

Matters of the highest principle seemed to be at stake. Augustine's rhetoric became more extreme and eventually Pelagius was condemned. His ideas, like those of Augustine, have influenced later generations providing ammunition for those wishing to preserve respectively the freedom of the will and human responsibility, or the absolute sovereignty of God. Augustine's final word on this tortuous matter is to be found in a book he wrote for Simplicianus of Milan. 'In trying to solve this question I made strenuous efforts on behalf of the preservation of the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God defeated me'.

Little else was to defeat Augustine during his lifetime. The Pelagian controversy occupied him for more than twenty years and

earned him the title of Doctor of Grace. As a bishop, he also struggled long and, initially unsuccessfully, to bring the Donatists⁸ into union with the Catholic Church. The process of reconciliation was arduous with persuasion and debate of little or no purpose. Augustine finally consented to the intervention of the government and, reluctantly, to the use of force. Centuries later, long and bloody wars were to ensue as a result of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Although Augustine hated violence, his doctrines of the Church and of grace, and the different interpretations placed on them by opposing sides during the sixteenth century, were to result in the very thing he deplored. His anti-Donatist writings were plundered by zealots eager to find select quotations which, taken out of context, could support the torture and burning of heretics. Motivated by their own perverted notion of orthodoxy and a deep fear of unorthodox ideas, they wilfully ignored the many passages in Augustine's works where he clearly opposed torture and capital punishment.

Sadly, the last months of his life were spent in a crowded city filled with refugees fleeing from the Vandal hordes swarming over Africa. In the winter of 429–430, their army and navy surrounded the seaport of Hippo. Augustine died on the 28th August and was spared the sight of a devastated city. Almost miraculously, and to the inestimable benefit of the Christian centuries to come, his library and writings survived intact. Innumerable minds have never ceased to be grateful for the nourishment and stimulation they have provided.

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NOTES

- 1 Ludwig Wittgenstein: 1889–1951. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922).
- 2 *City of God*, Book 21.
- 3 *Sermons* 25, 80.
- 4 *City of God*, Book 4 Ch. 4.
- 5 Thomas Hobbes: English philosopher (1588–1679).
- 6 English theologian (1801–1890).
- 7 Held over four sessions in Rome between Oct. 1962 and Dec. 1965.
- 8 Fourth century North African schismatic church.