

## St. Augustine on the Goodness of Creaturely Existence

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This article originally appeared in the *Duke Divinity School Review*, Fall 1978.

On the one hand, Augustine (354-430) can write: "At their hands [those of godless men] we suffer robbery, captivity, chains, imprisonment, exile, torture, mutilation, loss of sight, the violation of chastity to satisfy the lust of the oppressor, and many other dreadful evils .... What numberless casualties threaten our bodies from without--extremes of heat and cold, storms, floods, inundations, lightning, thunder, hail, earthquakes, houses falling; or from the stumbling or shying or vice of horses; from countless poisons in fruits, water, air, animals; from painful or even deadly bites of wild animals; from the madness which a mad dog communicates.... What disasters are suffered by those who travel by land or sea! What man can go out of his own house without being exposed on all hands to unforeseen accidents? Returning home sound in limb, he slips on his own door-step, breaks his leg, and never recovers.... How many accidents do farmers, or rather all men, fear that the crops may suffer from the weather, or the soil, or the ravages of destructive animals? ...sudden floods have driven the labourers away, and swept the barns clean of the finest harvests.... As to bodily diseases, they are so numerous that they cannot all be contained in the medical books. And in very many, or almost all of them, the cares and remedies are themselves tortures.... Have not the fierce pangs of famine driven mothers to eat their own children, incredibly savage as it seems? In fine, sleep itself, which is justly called repose, how little of repose there sometimes is in it when disturbed with dreams and visions; and with what terror is the wretched mind overwhelmed by the appearances of things which are so presented, and which, as it were, so stand out before the senses, that we cannot distinguish them from realities! How wretchedly do false appearances distract men in certain diseases! ... From this hen upon earth there is no escape, save through the grace of the Saviour Christ, our God and Lord." (*The City of God*, XXII, 22).

On the other hand, the same Augustine writes: "What wonderful--one might say stupefying--advances have human industry made in the arts of weaving and building, of agriculture and navigation! With what endless variety are designs in pottery, painting, and sculpture produced, and with what skill executed? What wonderful spectacles are exhibited in the theatres.... what wealth of song is there to captivate the ear! how many musical instruments and strains of harmony have been devised! What skill has been attained in measures and numbers! with what sagacity have the moments and connections of the stars been discovered!... In fine, even the defence of errors and misapprehensions, which has illustrated the genius of heretics and philosophers, cannot be sufficiently declared.... there is such a symmetry in its [the human body's] various parts, and so beautiful a proportion maintained, that one is at a loss to decide whether, in creating the body, greater regard was paid to utility or to beauty.... Shall I speak of the manifold and various loveliness of sky, and earth, and sea; of the plentiful supply and wonderful qualities of the light; of sun, moon, and stars; of the shade of trees; of the colours and perfume of flowers; of the multitude of birds, all differing in plumage and in song; of the variety of animals, of which the smallest in size are often the most wonderful--the works of ants and bees astonishing us more than the huge bodies of whales? Shall I speak of the sea, which itself is so

grand a spectacle, when it arrays itself as it were in vestures of various colors, now running through every shade of green, and again becoming purple or blue? ... What shall I say of the numberless kinds of food to alleviate hunger, and the variety of seasonings to stimulate appetite which are scattered everywhere by nature, and for which we are not indebted to the art of cookery? How many natural appliances are there for preserving and restoring health? How grateful is the alternation of day and night! how pleasant the breezes that cool the air! how abundant the supply of clothing furnished us by trees and animals! Who can enumerate all the blessings we enjoy?" (*The City of God*, XXII, 24).

Within the same chapter of his *City of God*, just a couple of pages apart, we have Augustine's version of "It was the best of times" and "It was the worst of times." Perhaps nowhere else do we have a more striking counterposition of the sorrows, frustrations, fears, insecurities, and pains, and the riches, joys, pleasures, accomplishments, and beauty of human existence. Perhaps nowhere else in recorded history do we encounter a person in whom such an acute sense of present and potential evils, of the depth of human suffering and misery, and of the dark underbelly of creaturely life that is ever present, is combined with such a deep appreciation of the achievements of human science and art, of the beauties of nature, and of the riches of human friendship and love.

One of the many ways in which the life of Augustine can be viewed is as a struggle between denying and affirming bodily existence in a worldly environment in time. Related to that struggle is the issue of how created spatial, temporal goods are to be appreciated and valued in relation to enjoying and loving God.

Augustine lived in an age in which there was a widespread desire to escape from the vicissitudes, risks, failures, and evils of spatiotemporal existence into a timeless, changeless realm. There was with this outlook a positing of the mind or soul as dearly distinguishable from and superior to the body, and as that which could now partially and might sometime completely and finally leave behind the body and all the pains and frustrated or evil desires to which it was subjected. Partly cause and partly effect of this pervasive attitude was the denigration of sex.

This "philosophy" was not without its effect on Augustine's mother, Monica. Or, as is more the case, the experiences of people like Monica over generations found expression in various philosophies (which in Augustine's times can be labelled as Neo-Platonic or Gnostic). And Monica was not without her effect upon her son. Augustine mentions a conversation with her in which "this world with all its delights became contemptible to us" and in which Monica said that she had "no further delight in anything in this life," since her final desire, that Augustine become a Catholic Christian and that she should see him "despising earthly happiness," had been realized (*The Confessions*, IX). But she also recognized the pull of earthly, temporal things. She did not have Augustine baptized when he was an infant, for she expected him to indulge in bodily pleasures before despising the world, and wanted the believed-in remission of all prior sins in baptism to be strategically used. A "lifescrypt" analyst could have a field day with all of that, but such an endeavor is not our concern here.

Augustine grew up enjoying the delights of sight, touch, and taste and the joys of the human voice, laughter, and friendship. Like all of us he began life affirming bodily existence in an environment in time (not in thought, of course, but in experience). Yet there were perceptions and attitudes of others and some experiences of his own that were pulling Augustine in the direction of seeing such existence as futile and evil. At the age of nineteen, he joined the Manichaeans, who identified evil with corporeal, material things and the good and divine with (supposedly) non-material, spiritual light.

The attraction of Manichaeism for Augustine and others lay in its allowing one to identify oneself with the divine sparks of light entrapped within the body and to externalize one's bodily desires and actions, thus allowing one (to attempt) to escape responsibility and guilt for feelings and deeds regarded as evil. Thus one could affirm bodily, temporal existence in one's actual living, while "officially" taking a position suitable to one's "superego" or "shadow," or whatever may be the appropriate term for that "part" of one that "looks askance" on earthly things.

Augustine's rejection of Manichaeism nine years later represented an acceptance of bodily, temporal things as an evil part of himself, of his will. (This should not be taken to imply that only relatively "bodily" evils or imagined evils were included in that which Augustine acknowledged to be in himself and his will, but this is the aspect of the change with which we are here concerned.) While this led in the short run to an increased asceticism and a greater or more integrated rejection of things earthly, in the long term, it was an integral part of a process of greater affirmation of spatiotemporal goods as gifts from God. For while he had been with the Manichaeans, his acceptance (and rejection) of earthly things had been a dishonest one in which he was split with himself.

In *The Confessions* there is a good deal of talk about the goodness of creation. Yet the overall atmosphere is fairly much one of desiring to transcend bodily existence to some complete, unchangeable, timeless realm. He writes, the "the mind is one thing, the body another." In a discourse that seems comical to us, Augustine wishes that he would be able to take food solely for sustenance, but that inevitably pleasure accompanies the movement from emptiness to fullness. And he wishes that he would not have to put up with the temporal nature of knowledge but could know all instantaneously and unchangeably as the angels do.

While there are countertendencies in *The Confessions*, the basic attitude expressed is that temporal things are not to be perceived as being gifts from God that have an *intrinsic* value that should be accepted and enjoyed, but rather are to be valued only *instrumentally*, as pointing to or manifesting God and things eternal.

Perhaps most indicative of Augustine's struggle between affirming and denying the human, temporal, earthly things (things which he always to some extent on some level affirmed by desiring and enjoying them) is his attitude toward friendship. Augustine writes of his friendship with people he had grown up with who had subscribed to Manichaeism with him: "All kinds of things rejoiced my soul in their company--to talk and laugh, and to do each other kindnesses; to read pleasant books together; to pass from lightest jesting to talk of the deepest things and back again; to differ without rancour, as a man might differ with himself, and when, most rarely, dissension arose, to find our normal agreement all the sweeter for it, ... to be impatient for the return of the absent, and to welcome them with joy on their homecoming; these, and such-like things, proceeding from our hearts as we gave affection and received it back, and shown by face, by voice, by the eyes, and by a thousand other pleasing ways, kindled a flame which fused our very souls together, and, of many, made us one" (*The Confessions*, VI). And as Peter Brown writes, Augustine's delight in human companionship continued: "in middle age he remains delightfully and tragically exposed to 'that most unfathomable of all involvements of the soul--friendship.'" But he worries about his great need for others, about the vulnerability and risk involved in relationships, particularly the possibility of the loss of a person to whom one has become attached, and about the distraction from divine, eternal things by human attachments. He was ashamed at his great sorrow at his mother's death. He would sometimes write that he wished he could be without passionate involvement in human relationships and cleave solely to God.

In his latter years, particularly in *The City of God*, Augustine exhibits a greater affirmation than heretofore of human existence in an environment in time. While there are certainly passages that admonish the pilgrim to the heavenly city to use "advantages of time and earth" only instrumentally in the contemplation of eternal things, the stronger message is that created temporal things are to be enjoyed as gifts from God having intrinsic value. He writes: "the things this [earthly] city desires cannot justly be said to be evil.... For it desires earthly peace for the sake of enjoying earthly goods.... These things then are good things, and without doubt the gifts of God." And the second quotation at the beginning of this paper cannot but be seen as affirming that human and natural things are to be relished. And while there lingers the desire not to be greatly sorrowed by the death of friends, there is more of an acceptance of this as a necessary part of friendship, that over-all is most definitely good. Augustine cautions, though, that in the process of enjoying earthly goods, the heavenly city and its "eternal victory and never-ending peace" are not to be neglected. Perhaps it can be said that, to some extent at least, Augustine has come to believe that human, temporal things are not to be wholly escaped from in the afterlife, but are tokens of a new creation that will leave behind only the evils that attend and are entwined with all earthly things.

When one considers the atmosphere which enveloped Augustine, he appears all the more an exponent of bodily existence. While he still makes a clear distinction between the soul and the body and characterizes the latter as "by nature inferior to" the former, he challenges the more radically dualistic opinions of the Manichaeans and "Platonists." He takes the Manichaeans to task for neglecting divine truth in regarding the soul as completely good and the body as completely evil, when, in fact, both body and soul have some good (in so far as they are created by God) and some evil (in so far as man goes astray and is punished). While the "Platonists" attribute the creation to God, they nevertheless hold that all vice in the soul arises from bodily perturbations and desires. Augustine asserts that a number of vices arise in the soul, particularly pride, the greatest sin. And he traces bodily vices to Adam's prideful soul, seeing "the weighing down of the corruptible body"--its evilness to the extent that it causes the person to have strong and partly uncontrollable desire for pleasure--as punishment for his original sin. But though bodily existence was originally intended to be good by the Creator and will be good after the resurrection, some ambivalence remains as to our actual bodily existence in an environment in time.

The area where Augustine least came to affirm the goodness of creation was that of sex. While he disputed those who thought the ideal would be to have a sexless world and affirmed sex as he imagined it would have been engaged in by Adam and Eve if they hadn't fallen, he perceived sex as it actually is as basically dirty and evil. Ideally for Augustine, sex would be just for the purpose of procreation and without the "wild heat of passion" arousing the sexual organs, accomplished with the calmness, control, and utility with which man's "other members serve him for their respective ends." Augustine disapprovingly notes that in the sexual act "all mental activity" is suspended. He pens that the "field of generation should have been sown by the organ created for this purpose, as the earth is sown by the hand." What bothers Augustine is the lack of control by the will: sexual desire comes when we don't want it and controls us, and, conversely, sometimes when we want it it doesn't come. While part of Augustine's negative feelings about sex stem from the perception of sex as consisting of overweening desire that manipulates and runs roughshod over the needs of others, there is also here the desire to be a mind which is in complete possession of itself and above all the vulnerability and risks, above the inability to re-evaluate and turn back in midstream, above all being affected by others, by his own past, and by

conflicting desires--and in the bargain above all the rich potentialities--of incarnate existence in one of its premier aspects. Augustine, rather than recommending that one allow sexual desire and passion to become a part of one's will to be realized for the pleasure of oneself and another, would have one always fight it and be a will divided.

How can we appropriate Augustine with respect to the issues raised in this paper? For the most part I will let you decide that for yourselves; which hopefully you have been doing in reading this. My categories and interpretations should give you some feel as to how I have appropriated Augustine in this area and hopefully will help in your appropriation, whether or not you totally accept them.

I will, however, make a few comments of a general and concluding nature. I believe we should appreciate Augustine's struggle over whether to affirm the Christian belief in the goodness of incarnate existence and his basic acceptance of that goodness, despite a general atmosphere and particular events ("little things," like the breaking up of civilization as it was known, and the death of friends and relatives) that pushed in the opposite direction. While things are not as bad now as in Augustine's time, there are still plenty of evils that tend to make us life-denying, and reading Augustine--who, while more than aware of the dark underbelly of life, still affirmed the great delights of this world--can help us retain or regain the awareness that creaturely existence is a very good gift from God despite all possible and actual distortions.

The other basic lesson we should appropriate from Augustine is that creaturely goods are not all that is to be valued. We should worship the Creator rather than the creature. God is to be contemplated, communed with, and thanked "for all the blessings we enjoy."

Finally, a firm belief of Augustine's, which is indirectly related to the themes of this article and should not go unmentioned, is that despite the myriad and profound evils which are always present in creaturely existence in an environment in time, God is ultimately in control. Though we may not share Augustine's belief in God's determining everything down to the last iota and his eventual denial of any genuine contingency in human volition, we should sense in Augustine that God assured to him and assures to all who have faith in Him the ultimate purposefulness and meaningfulness of our lives.