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Saint Augustine of Hippo, step-father of liberalism☆

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ABSTRACT

Ostensible contradictions between Augustine's account of the two cities are resolved by his concealed claim to the privileged epistemic status of a Christian prophet. Faith and grace provide the mobility between this quasi-divine and the fallen human position. Such mobility is impossible in a pluralist and secular system of thought. This is why, having lost the creative Augustinian ambiguity, the liberal philosophy of history and norms of relationship between state and individual continue to veer between the logical end-points of anarchy and complete indifference, or utmost individualism.

Introduction

The influence of Saint Augustine (354–430) on Western civilisation is remarkable for its length and breadth. Nonetheless, many readers of *The City of God* (413–26) complain of its inconsistencies. Some infer that Augustine was a bit of a failure by our criteria of coherence and strength of argument.[1] Others delve into his historical and intellectual background, or try to resolve his inconsistencies philosophically. One problem that strikes most is Augustine's seemingly confused account of time. Another is that he writes of the two (or three) cities in at least three modes: as diametrically opposed ideal-types, overlapping actualities, and as potentialities. Rome and Babylon stand for the unbelievers, all worldly cities, or for themselves as actual states, which may or may not become models of Christianity on earth. Jerusalem represents Heaven, a special earthly city, and the Church on Earth. All three are potentialities – Rome can be saved, Jerusalem can fall – and unknowable in full, due to man's epistemic limitations, the hidden parts of the salvation plan, and the scope of man's free will. Similar contradictions exist in his descriptions of the Church as the community of all justified Christians (on Earth and of those already in Heaven), as the invisible Church consisting of those predestined for salvation but unknowable to man, as all who consider themselves to be Christians (some of whom will go to Heaven, and some of whom will not); and so on.[2]

One resolution of the apparent inconsistencies that ensue is the heady possibility that Augustine was writing from God's, angels' and prophets' vantage point, and tried to put an ineffable position into words. However, he often claimed that such knowledge is unattainable on earth, especially to mutable, corporeal creatures, even if their eyes are transfixed on the divine.

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[1] Examples include H.N. Baynes, *The Political Ideas of Saint Augustine's De Civitate Dei* (London, Bell, 1936), 3–5. R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge, University Press, 1970), 59: 'Augustine's identification with the earthly city is as clear in his writings as is his refusal to abide by this identification. [...] Without the least sense of inconsistency, Augustine will assert that Rome, or the res publica, is the earthly city, or assume this equation, and then go on to speak in ways which imply the contrary [...] This overlap of the two cities in actual institutions is incompatible with their mutually exclusive character'. For a systematic study of apparent contradictions see the excellent Johannes van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon: a Study into Augustine's City of God and the Sources of his Doctrine of the Two Cities* (Brill, 1991), esp. chapter 2. This is also a recurring theme in the long tradition of interpreting Augustine's view of time. Peter Janich, 'Augustins Zeitparadox und seine Frage nach einen Standard der Zeitmessung' *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 54 (1972), 168–86. G.J.P. O'Daly, 'Augustine on the Measurement of Time: Some Comparisons with Aristotelian and Stoic Texts', in: *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honour of A.H. Armstrong*, eds. H.J. Blumenthal, R.A. Markus (London, Variorum, 1981). Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford, University Press, 1986). A.M. Johnston, 'Time as a Psalm in St. Augustine', *Animus* 1 (1996), 68–72, on 69.

[2] S.v. "Church", in: *Augustine Through the Ages: an Encyclopedia*, ed. A.D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 169–76.

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Many of the famous inconsistencies and contradictions arise from his attempt to give the best possible description of *true* time and history, as seen by God alone. He was well aware of the limitations of this exercise and, in proto-Kantian fashion, incorporated them into his scheme successfully enough to transcend them.[3] Augustine's description of the powers of angels and prophets holds the key to his escape. The line of division between prophecy and a self-contained rational system blurred; through faith and grace Augustine came to see the divine mind in the way angels see it, and tried to describe the experience using irremediably inadequate human language. I do not argue that his assumption of the prophetic vantage point solves all his inconsistencies. Some arose from the process of development, since Augustine thought problems through while writing (*Epist*. 143), and happily admitted that he changed his mind while writing and revising, for instance, *The City of God*. As a combatant theologian, his criteria for cogency and validity could also differ from a logician's, although he was well-trained in dialectic and rhetoric.[4] However, many apparent self-contradictions disappear if one accepts one large and deliberate contradiction, namely the possibility of using language and reason in conjunction with a proudly irrational belief in God's saving grace, thanks to the gift of a privileged epistemic status.[5]

In retracing the shifts of perspective between himself as divinely gifted prophet and as fallen man, Augustine's philosophy of time will be our first port of call. The resolution of ostensible contradictions in his treatment of time opens the way to a better understanding of his account of two cities, and of Church-State relations. Augustine famously reconciled Christianity with classical notions of citizenship, providing an alternative to early Christians' anarchical disregard for worldly affairs and *Reichstheologie*.[6] Augustine affected this reconciliation by allowing for a multiplicity of compatible goods, assigning value to civic life as well as to Christian conduct. The relationship between these two overlapping but fundamentally different identities is another theme in *The City of God* that baffles many. I hope to explain it through Augustine's privileged observation post from where he saw time, history and society. The same multiplicity of goods and spheres of identity lie at the heart of liberalism, and our final concern will be to see why liberalism cannot maintain it without God. The opportunities for political philosophy that arise from Augustine's shifting perspective are contrasted with the more narrow ideological options available to secular, representative mass democracies.

Time for Man and God

In this secular age, Augustine is probably best known for his discussion of time. The passage most quoted in weekend op-eds, high-school essays and quiz shows is the scene-setting formulation of the problem in the *Confessions* (397–400):

> What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, provided nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled.

He then proceeds to construct what, for want of a better term, many call 'psychological time'.[7] Properly speaking, past, present and future do not exist[8]; time as a continuum does, but in its true form it cannot be partitioned by those who are caught up in it. Mental images of the past, present and future, i.e. memory, intuition (*contuitus*) and expectation are another matter[9]: they do exist, and when several memories or intuitions are in conflict, authority identifies the truth—in the Hobbesian state of time, God is the Sovereign.[10] Time is an attribute of Christians and pagans alike, rather than a dimension

[3] *Confessions* (397–8) (Oxford, University Press, 1991), X.viii.15 'I do not myself grasp all that I am, the mind is too narrow to contain itself.' On man's epistemic limits, *De correptione et gratia* (426/7), in: *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (NPNF), ed. P. Schaff, 7 vols. (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1888), XV.46. Comparative studies of Augustine and Heidegger (and Henri Bergson) are legion, and many revolve around an implied connection between Kant and Heidegger. Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3 vols. (Yale University Press, 1957), R.J. Severson, *Time, Death and Eternity: Reflecting on Augustine's Confessions in Light of Heidegger's* 'Being and Time' (ATLA, Scarecrow Press, 1995).

[4] *On Christian Teaching* (397 Books 1–3, Book 4 in 426) (Oxford, University Press, 1997), IV.i.2.

[5] *On the Trinity* (404–20) (Catholic University of America, 1963), I.i.1: 'guard against the sophistries of those who disdain to begin with faith, and are deceived by a crude and perverse love of reason.' Faith was superior to reason, but reason was also important. *Trinity* XII.vii.12, 'man was made in the image of God not according to the shape of his body, but according to his rational mind.' See also *City of God* (Penguin, 1984), XIX.15, XXII.24. *Trinity* ends: 'Directing my purpose by this rule of faith, so far as I have been able, so far as thou hast made me to be able, I have sought thee, and have desired to see with my understanding what I believed.' J.J. Pelikan argues that thanks to God's grace, confession 'could become a way of coming to terms with the continuity of the self by including divine forgiveness within the continuity, and thus putting the subjectivity of memory into the subjective-objective context of time.' *The Mystery of Continuity: Time and History, Memory and Eternity in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Virginia University Press, 1986), 26. This transcendental *sub specie aeternitatis* vision during confession is akin to the prophetic vantage point that I think Augustine claimed while describing time and the cities.

[6] C. Douzinas, *Human Rights and Empire: The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* (Routledge-Cavendish, 2007), 237–8.

[7] E.g. Herman Hausheer, 'St. Augustine's Conception of Time', *The Philosophical Review* 46:5 (September, 1937), 503–12. J.F. Callahan, 'Basil of Caesarea: A New Source for St. Augustine's Theory of Time', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 63 (1958), 437–54. Christopher Kirwan, *Augustine* (Routledge, 1991). The terms 'subjective' and 'objective' are also often used to describe Augustine's varieties of time.

[8] 'And so we can truly say that time is because it tends not to be.' *Confessions*, XI.xiv.17, XI.xv.20, XI.xxviii.37, etc.

[9] *Confessions*, XI.xx.26, XXVII–XXVIII.

[10] God's *voluntas* decides meaning: *Christian Teaching*, II.ii.3, *Confessions* XII.xxiii.32. J.J. Pelikan, *Divine Rhetoric: The Sermon on the Mount as Message and as Model in Augustine, Chrysostom and Luther* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 58–61. T. Toom, 'Augustine on Ambiguity', *Augustinian Studies* 38:2 (2007), 407–33, esp. 419–23. Surrendering true knowledge of time to the divine is the move that Jorge Luis Borges refused to make. *A History of Eternity* (1936) and *A New Refutation of Time* (1946). J.M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge, University Press, 1994), 84: 'Thus the past does not continue to exist, but a representation of it (more or less accurate) exists in our 'memory' and perfectly, as a whole, in God's memory, which experiences past and future as present.' See also the excellent M. Mignucci, 'Logic and Omniscience: Alexander of Aphrodisias and Proclus', in: *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, III*, ed. Julia Annas (Oxford, University Press, 1985), much of which is also useful for Augustine, especially Mignucci's discussion of the kind of knowledge that depends on the knower, and how the necessary/contingent, mutable/immutable, undetermined/determined categories can allow a philosopher to conceive of gods knowing immutably things that are mutable. Compare *City of God*, XI.xxi and *To Simplicianus* (396/7), *Ep*. 37, II.ii.2 (NPNF 1).