

**Celibacy, Good and Evil and Sin and Free Will, Belief in God, and Human Existence in
Augustine's *Confessions***
(Chicago style. American English)

A. N. Essayist¹

Course

Teacher's name

Date

1. essayist.info. Contact: essayist@essayist.info

This essay takes a thematic approach to Augustine's *Confessions* centering on four of the issues he struggles with: celibacy; good and evil and sin and free will; belief in God; and human existence. I attempt to highlight those aspects of Augustine's thinking which are relevant to us in the 21st century. The resounding theme throughout *Confessions* is Augustine's struggle to find God.

Celibacy

Early Jews and Christians believed in the dualism of body and soul, the body being only a temporary host to an immortal soul. Sexual pleasure debased man by making him equivalent to an animal (i.e., without a soul). They "did not approve of the 'love of pleasure' associated with 'the power of procreation,' for it 'leadeth the young as a blind man to a pit and as a beast to a precipice'."²

As, for the Christians, life was just a temporary passage towards eternal life after death, celibacy would bring an end to the life-death cycle and put an end to suffering, thereby hastening the journey to heaven. Augustine quotes from the Bible (Wisdom 9:15): "For *ever the soul is weighed down by a mortal body, earth-bound cell that clogs the manifold activity of its thought.*"³ Brown tells us that "by around the year 150, sexual renunciation had come to mean many things to many Christian groups."⁴

The Manichean view was that "intercourse, and especially intercourse undertaken to produce children, collaborated with the headlong expansion of the Kingdom of Darkness at the expense of the spiritual purity associated with the Kingdom of Light."⁵ So celibacy was,

2. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 34.

3. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin, ebook (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Classics, 1961), bk. VII, sec. 17.

4. Brown, *The Body and Society*, xiii.

5. Brown, 391.

by no means, a new concept and we know that, in later centuries, the Medieval Catholic Church had many problems with keeping the clergy celibate.

The problem with sexual desire for Augustine is that it kept his mind on Earthly pleasures rather than in contemplating God. He suffers an inner conflict as he struggles with this desire but gets glimpses of an alternate lifestyle: “I could see the chaste beauty of Contenance in all her serene, unsullied joy, as she modestly beckoned me to cross over and to hesitate no more.”⁶ In Book VIII, he describes how he heard a child telling him to read the Scriptures, which he believes is a divine command. When he opens the Bible his eyes immediately focus on verses 13–14 of Romans 13: “*Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites.*”⁷

Good and Evil and Sin and Free Will

Throughout *Confessions*, he struggles with the concepts of good and evil. He finds it difficult to understand what causes evil and how a good God could allow evil to happen: “Since [God] is good, the things that he has made are also good. This is how he contains them all in himself and fills them all with his presence. Where then is evil?”⁸ The Manicheans believed that there were two gods (one good; one evil), so the individual who does evil is controlled by the evil god. But he explains that he was told that “we do evil because we choose to do so of our own free will, and suffer it because [God’s] justice rightly demands that we should.”⁹ We are not then manipulated, but we, knowingly, commit sin – we choose to do evil because we have free will. God’s punishments would then be just. Here we are

6. Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. VIII, sec. 11.

7. Ibid, bk. VIII, sec. 12.

8. Ibid, bk. VII, sec. 5.

9. Ibid, bk. VII, sec. 3.

reminded of the pre-scientific explanations of disasters – plagues, floods, and the like – which throughout the history of the pre-modern age were put down as punishments by God for Man’s wickedness. Although he does not, at this point, understand how a “sweet” God could have put evil into him, he recognizes that he is responsible for his actions.

This question of free will is pertinent to our own times. Although nowadays few people would argue that their evil actions were not voluntary but caused by the presence of a demon or an evil god, psychiatrists argue that certain individuals are not responsible for their actions for psychological reasons. In the US, the insanity defense comes up regularly when mass murderers are tried.

But if individuals have free will, Augustine argues, why do they willfully commit sin? The pear stealing incident is important because he makes it clear that they group of boys that stole only did so because it gave them pleasure to sin, not because they needed the pears. He recounts how he wanted “to enjoy the theft itself and the sin” and describes how he stole pears: “our real pleasure consisted in doing something that was forbidden.”¹⁰ This passage is reminiscent of present-day hooligans who enjoy breaking social rules just because they can.

But the concept of free will contradicts his attempt to justify the concept of original sin. In Book I, original sin is taken to a ludicrous extreme: “in your sight no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth.”¹¹ No reasonable person would nowadays argue that a newborn baby has the free will to sin since the concept of sin is only learnt with age. The argument that “if babies are innocent, it is not for lack of will to do harm, but for lack of strength”¹² is totally specious since it relies on a knowledge, which babies do not possess, of the effects of our actions. Additionally, Augustine presumes to know that

10. Ibid, bk. II, sec. 4.

11. Ibid, bk. I, sec. 7.

12. Ibid.

which he cannot know since he admits he has no memory of being a new born baby. In fact, Augustine's argument directly contradicts Jesus' who says: "whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea."¹³ So Jesus assumes that children must be incited to sin by adults who have knowledge of the world – not that it comes from an inherent evilness.

Belief in God

Augustine has a torturous time of believing in God and Jesus Christ. The fundamental problem centers on the fact that God is invisible, but supposedly everywhere and that our minds find it difficult to believe in something we cannot see. In particular, in Book X, Augustine points to the function of memory as the experience of something makes us sure that even though we might not see it at present we can recall its existence.

His arguments are founded on a good deal of self-deception or wishful thinking. For example, he states: "Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you."¹⁴ No, this is not true. It has never been true for humanity, and neither has monotheism. Similarly, he makes a number of other fanciful statements such as: "You are ever active, yet always at rest,"¹⁵ etc. (Book I: 4). How could he possibly know that? And: How can any living being be active and at rest? The Bible actually says that God rested on the seventh day, so presumably on the previous six days he was not resting while creating the universe. Book XII is notable for parroting of the Bible and accounts of his struggle with his faith. Here,

13. Matthew, "Matthew 18:6-7," Bible Gateway (New International Version), chap. 18:6-7, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2018%3A6-7&version=NIV>.

14. Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. I, sec. 1.

15. *Ibid*, bk. I, sec. 4.

Augustine tells us that he heard a voice saying “*I am the God who IS.*”¹⁶ This would, nowadays, be considered borderline schizophrenia, but it should be remembered that saints having visions (Joan of Arc, etc.) are quite common throughout history.

His problem is that he does not know how to pray to a God that he does not know. This problem is later “resolved” by some more self-deception in Book X, where he discovers God in his memories. Here, we finally get to understand why he is going on about memory. Memory is “my mind: it is my self.”¹⁷ We are not just physical beings but we are made up of our memories. This again is relevant to human beings at any point in the history of Mankind—a person who loses their memory loses their identity. Dementia and Alzheimer’s disease are familiar to most of us as populations age, and diseases associated with aging become more prominent. For Augustine, though, to find God he must “go beyond” memory because he has no memory of God.

Human existence

Confessions is not just a book about God and sin. Augustine includes philosophical reflections on what it is to be human. For example, in Book III he criticizes his former interest in being a good speaker “for the unhallowed and inane purpose of gratifying human vanity.”¹⁸ And, in Book VIII, he describes his internal conflicting emotions in graphic terms: “My inner self was a house divided against itself [...] I was beside myself with madness.”¹⁹ Anybody who has experienced inner conflict can relate to this. He sees the mind and body as being two separate things but he has trouble controlling his own thoughts: “The mind gives an order to the body and is at once obeyed, but when it gives an order to itself, it is resisted

16. Ibid, bk. VII, sec.10.

17. Ibid, bk. X, sec. 17.

18. Ibid, bk. III, sec. 4.

19. Ibid, bk. VIII, sec. 8.

[...] It is a disease of the mind.”²⁰ He is clearly worried about his own state of mind. He finds his thoughts rambling. In Book X, he writes of the need to collect his thoughts. There is a long digression into memory that initially appears as pure random thoughts but, later, connect to his idea that he must have a memory of God in order to love Him. In Book XI, he speculates on creation and the idea that God made time: “we cannot rightly say that time *is*, except by reason of its impending state of *not being*”²¹ and associates time with three mental processes: expectation, attention, and memory.

We can identify with many of his rambling thoughts. For example, we all have difficulty with the idea that time had a beginning. Current scientific theory ignores God and states that the universe started with a “big bang”. Whether it was spontaneous or whether God started it is still impossible to explain what there was *before* the beginning of time as the concept of *before* is itself conditioned upon time already existing. It should be clear, however, that I believe Augustine indulges in a great deal of self-deception that we, in the 21st century, should see as being torturous, deluded attempts to justify his beliefs, which are at times contradictory (as in the case of free will and original sin). Many of his justifications for his thoughts are merely parroted out statements from the Bible.

20. Ibid, bk. VIII, sec. 9.

21. Ibid, bk. XI, sec. 14.

Bibliography

Augustine, Saint. *Confessions*. Translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin. Ebook. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Classics, 1961.

Brown, Peter. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

Matthew. "Matthew 18:6-7." Bible Gateway (New International Version). Accessed July 13, 2022. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2018%3A6-7&version=NIV>.

Essayist.info