Redeeming Augustine, Redeeming the Body: Critiquing Popular Readings of Augustine’s Theology of the Body and their Historical Consequences

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05/02/18
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Honors Thesis

Spring 2018
Abstract

Fourth-century bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine, formed a theology of the body that has a profound influence on Church history and modern Catholic thought. Much of his influence, however, is muddied by the receptive history of his work. Later theologians, such as John Calvin, used Augustine’s theology to form their own thought without regard for Augustine’s inner turmoil as a particular and conflicted man experiencing his place in time: living with intersectional identities during the waning of the Western Roman Empire. Without a careful, methodical approach to treating Augustine as both singular and universal, we become potential subscribers to damaging derivatives of his theology. The consequences of Augustine’s receptive theology, namely in Reformist thought, manifests in the colonization both of South Africa and North America. Contemporarily, the veins of ascetically influenced conceptions of morality impact how we regard women as ethical and dignified beings.

However, Augustine did not only form bodily theology, and that his influence is most obvious in regard to the body is reflective of cultural preoccupations with sex and lust. Augustine’s work on the Eucharist and the Trinity may serve as correctives to his bodily theology and its derivatives—both emphasize wholeness and relationship, rather than shame and sin. In order for Augustine to be meaningfully evaluated as both a Church Doctor and a contributor to formative Western thought, he must be taken holistically.
Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my advisor, Dr. Katherine Greiner, for her guidance, patience, and solidarity. I am also grateful for Dr. Fregulia and Dr. Glowienka for their commitment to my project and their helpful contributions. Finally, I am grateful for the professors whose class discussions and assigned work contributed to the research and analysis for this thesis, even if they did not know it. These include: Dr. Meyer, Dr. Hall, Dr. Pavlakis, and Dr. Ries.
Introduction

I first encountered Augustine of Hippo in a summer reading group, tackling *City of God* with a few other theology undergraduate students and a few professors. Struck by his complexity and the lengths he was willing to go to find the consequences of his thought, I was particularly drawn to his ideas on the body. There seemed to be a dissonance between the body and the mind, even in a work not particularly dedicated to bodily ethics. There were a series of implicit questions in *City of God*—how does embodiment interact with our relationship to God? How do moral-theological conceptions of God and the body affect how we oppress certain bodies? How do each of these questions interact with actual Christian practice? Most importantly, how were these ideas linked to Augustine’s own experiences?

According to popular imagination, Augustine’s struggle with his own body and the implications of his own feelings was a lifelong project. *The New Yorker*’s Stephen Greenblatt writes in June 2017:

One day in 370 C.E., a sixteen-year-old boy and his father went to the public baths together in the provincial city of Thagaste, in what is now Algeria. At some point during their visit, the father may have glimpsed that the boy had an involuntary erection, or simply remarked on his recently sprouted pubic hair. Hardly a world-historical event, but the boy was named Augustine, and he went on to shape Christian theology for both Roman Catholics and Protestants, to explore the hidden recesses of the inner life, and to bequeath to all of us the conviction that there is something fundamentally damaged about the entire human species.¹

Augustine’s recollection of this scene is in hindsight. On his father’s apparent delight at seeing his son had reached puberty he writes, “he [my father] saw in me only hollow

There are two problems, one with The New Yorker, and one with St. Augustine himself. First, Greenblatt suggests that Augustine’s self-consciousness was inherent. His piece’s analysis is on how Augustine’s shame influenced his thought, not on how Augustine learned shame. Second, Augustine himself superimposes shame on his youth while writing Confessions at age forty-three without ever dissecting where it came from, and without ever removing his own shame from his broader theology. Telling, however, in this piece, is the esteem with which contemporary culture regards Augustine. His ideas may not be effectively conveyed in a New Yorker long-read, but they touch many of our human interactions: with oppressed peoples, with the opposite gender, and with our own consciences.

This thesis attempts to draw the lines between the dissonance accompanying each of these interactions and historical ideas of the body—as a vessel and as an agent.

Augustine moves between and beyond the walls of academia; as a Doctor of the Church, his thought is foundational to Christian thought and, therefore, Western thought. The struggles Augustine wrestled through are at once singular and universal, for better or for worse, and examination of the man is crucial to examination of his thought and its succeeding consequences. The parts of Augustine’s theology that flowed through Christian thought and into societal narrative were those that were negative—those most touched by shame.

As broad as Augustine’s thought is his influence and those it touches. As such, this paper focuses on different groups broadly—Augustine’s contemporaries, women throughout

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the centuries, and native North American peoples from the time of conquest through the present day.

**Methodology**

In Chapter One, I offer a survey of Augustine’s life, largely relying on Peter Brown. In Chapter Two, I trace Augustine’s thought; in particular, I focus on his thought related to the body. In order to narrow the scope of this thesis, I pull mostly from *Confessions, City of God, and De Trinitate*. To supplement these works, I include thoughts explored in Augustine’s Sermon 272, his letter to a nunnery in the region he presided over as Bishop of Hippo, and his responses to Pelagius. As I move to Reformist Christian thought in the third chapter, I evaluate original sin as seen by Protestants in general in the immediate formations of the Reformation, but more specifically John Calvin and the tenants of the Westminster Confession of Faith, utilized by Nonconformists, including English Baptists and Presbyterians. I chose this document because I believe it to be an archetypal model of faith for the first settlers in the American Colonies—those who first encountered American Indians.
Chapter I: The Life, Times, and Influences of Augustine of Hippo

I have known my soul and the body that lies upon it,  
That they have been enemies since the creation of the world.\(^3\)

Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis was born in Thagaste, a town in North Africa, to a Roman father and a Christian mother. He possessed sharp intellect from a young age and was sent to college by his father. While away from home, he took a mistress to whom he was loyal for twelve years and with whom he fathered a son. He also converted to a heretical sect of Christianity—Manichaeism\(^4\)—that held the universe as a battle between realms between Good and Evil, the former helmed by God and the latter by Satan. In his thirties, he moved to Rome and became a professor of rhetoric, eventually moving to Milan, close in proximity to St. Ambrose, the then-bishop. Persuaded by Ambrose’s teaching, Augustine converted to Roman Catholicism. Shortly after, he and his son moved back to North Africa, where they lived in relative wealth. After his son’s death, Augustine was ordained a priest in 391. One of the most important figures in Western Christian thought, he is marked by works portraying a deep shame about the nature of the body. Augustine expresses this internal struggle in his autobiography, *Confessions*, which is famous for its searching self-reflection and piety. This chapter traces the path to *Confessions* as an examination of how Augustine learned shame. It ultimately argues that Augustine knew shame because he grew up in his place in time: North Africa, son of a

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\(^3\) C.R.C. Allberry, ed., *A Manichaean Psalm-Book* (Stuttgart, Germany: W. Kohlhammer, 1938), 56.

\(^4\) I owe my understanding of Manicheism to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, listed in the bibliography. Manicheism was a highly dualistic religion that touted itself as practicing pure reason. In Manicheism, there are two sides of the universe—light and dark—at war with each other. In order to avoid falling captive to the darkness, humans must deny their bodily desires and practice self-denial (including extreme dietary restrictions) in order to “to set the light-substance free from the pollution of matter” (Arendzen).
Latin father and an African mother, Christian in the creedal age, and Roman during the
decline of the Western Empire. No identity Augustine could have claimed was robust
enough or had enough of a claim on him to satisfy his yearning for wholeness.

**Youth and Upbringing**

Following his formal education in Thagaste, Augustine taught rhetoric in
Carthage. He writes about this time in *Confessions* with poetic yearning:

> I came to Carthage, where a caldron of unholy loves was seething and bubbling all
> around me. I was not in love as yet, but I was in love with love; and, from a hidden
> hunger, I hated myself for not feeling more intensely a sense of hunger. I was looking for
> something to love, for I was in love with loving, and I hated security and a smooth way,
> free from snares.\(^5\)

This self-recollection frames Augustine as a smart boy, freed from his passive life in
Thagaste, utterly wrought with emotion and feeling as he enters the world.

Africa in the fourth century was past the initial culture shock of Roman conquest.
After two centuries of Roman rule, the crucible of resentment and admiration for an
invading Caesar faded into the mundane. African scholarship was, according to writers
like Peter Brown,\(^6\) lazy and derivative, never original because thinkers were keeping an
eye toward Rome. The deification of Rome in the province was mixed with veins of
authentic African identity—the statues on Thagaste wore togas, but the men wore
traditional tunics. Towns throughout the province called themselves “Little Rome,” but
their populations never swelled above a few thousand. Augustine’s own father, Patricius,
a Roman citizen, used his connection to Rome as a status symbol even as he resented the

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\(^5\) Augustine, *Confessions*, XXX.I.

\(^6\) Peter Brown published his seminal biography of Augustine in 1967; I am using an edition
published in 1969.
flailing empire’s increasingly harsh taxes.⁷ This time of contradiction, wherein Rome was worshipped but not fully understood, was the era into which Augustine was born.

St. Monica, mother of Augustine, was complicated herself. Believed to be of Berber descent because of the origin of her first name, she was fiercely Christian, and so she was condescended to by educated men (who were Roman and Pagan), including her husband.⁸ M Labbé Bougaud’s *The History of St. Monica*, published in 1885, describes the young Monica as deeply devoted to the Catholic Church, having experienced the Donatist⁹ controversy in her formative years.¹⁰ Bougaud’s depiction of Monica is of a pious, gentle, beautiful woman given in an arranged marriage to a violent brute, Patricius, who she eventually wears down with her kindness and love. God rewards her dedication with her true happiness: her three children, Augustine in particular.¹¹ It is true that Patricius was violent and that, nevertheless, he eventually converted after Augustine’s childhood.¹² Bougaud’s take on Monica presents the idea that Monica saw her son as a literal gift from God, who, as a woman with saintly qualities, she saw as her duty. Perhaps because of this, she knew that a successful man would need to navigate a culture

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that valued Roman thought, and so she insisted that Augustine received a classical, Pagan education, “believing that it would make him a better Christian.”

Christianity in North Africa was “drastic.” Monica’s sect was not, as Bougaud would have his Catholic audience believe, perfectly dogmatic. It was influenced by “tribal” practices; the broader context was framed against Carthaginian bastardizations of Roman Gods whose Saturn figure was known as “The Old Man.” This God was not the Great God—that title belonged to the Goddess of Heaven, a maternal entity “to whom even Christian parents widely dedicated their children.” Christianity, meanwhile, was marked by both superstition and exclusivity. Dreams, trances, dancing, and alcohol-induced ecstatic trips were sought after and trusted. Monica’s literal dreams for Augustine were that he was destined for greatness, and she saw this as divinely promised. Mixed in with this was what Peter Brown describes as the “African temperament”—a harshness drawn from the “exacting patterns of behavior current in a provincial society.”

As a consequence of this,

For two generations, the majority of African Christians had rallied to a caste of ‘pure’ bishops, rejecting the outside world as ‘unclean’: a group of their adherents were notorious for a combination of aggression against outsiders, and traditions of ritual suicide among themselves.

Augustine loved his mother deeply—it is evident in Confessions, with several chapters dedicated to her—but he was plainly aware of her unsophistication. He sought the complexity of Rome.

Augustine was both Roman and African. Both Latin and Berber. Both Pagan and Christian. It was unlikely for him to emerge unscathed from his childhood without feeling

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14 Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 33.
15 Brown, Augustine of Hippo, 33.
16 Ibid
some stains of guilt at the parts of his identity that were at odds with each other. Robert P. Russell, annotator on the first English translation of St. Augustine’s *De Ordine*, wrote

> In the history of human thought and achievement St. Augustine holds a unique place. His intellectual development is intimately connected with the personal circumstances of his eventful life. It would, in fact, be difficult to find throughout the vast history of human thought a personality in whom the bond between mind and life has been more dominant and decisive.\(^1^7\)

As a creature of confused times, Augustine was a confused man, detouring his search for truth in the material trappings of the Roman Empire and the intellectual snares of Manicheism.

**Ambition and Conflicted Identity**

The Roman Empire was structured so that it could manage the expanses of land and people that lived within it. Provinces were oriented around Roman systems of law, which emphasized bureaucracy. Augustine’s parents “had groomed him for the day that he might gain the attention of an imperial official” and ascend in status and class. Indeed, “they sacrificed for him in the hopes that such a moment would come.” This sacrifice included saving up money specifically for Augustine’s schooling—there is no record of Augustine’s siblings receiving the same investment—and sending him away to receive an education superior to the one he might receive in Thagaste. In *Confessions*, Augustine recalls the Roman style of his education, wherein discussion of human nature was valued less than proper pronunciation of the word “human.” He writes:

> These were the customs in the midst of which I, unhappy boy, was cast, and on that arena it was that I was more fearful of perpetrating a barbarism than, having done so, of envying those who had not.\(^1^8\)

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\(^{18}\) Augustine, *Confessions*, I-XVIII-XXX.
Unhappy though he was in retrospect, Augustine was prized for his intelligence and he learned to value himself for it, too. Around the age of eighteen, two formative events occurred in Augustine’s life. His father, who converted to Christianity late in his life, died, leaving Augustine to his mother’s influence. Then, Augustine read Cicero’s *Hortensius* during his studies and found himself struck by a desire for wisdom. In this desire, he turned to what his mother had always told him was Truth: the Bible. The translation, however, was rudimentary and unsophisticated compared to the masters Augustine was reading (he cites Tully in *Confessions*).\(^{19}\) This incident occurred in Carthage, just before he met his long-term mistress. Fresh from an education on Latin customs and pagan practices, Augustine’s relationship with his mother pulled him toward Christianity, but his Latin upbringing compelled him to regard the Bible with disdain. After this pivotal moment, Augustine spent thirteen years teaching and performing rhetoric and practicing religion with the Manicheans.

While still with the Manicheans, Augustine made his rhetorical debut in Rome and dazzled his audiences. He did it in the pursuit of success: “Augustine was a young man who in his own words was ‘impelled by the goads of ambition.’”\(^{20}\) The casual contemporary take on Augustine is that he is at best ambivalent about the desires of the body. Forgotten in the sexual politics of his work is his own admission that the desires of the body include ambition, power and status. As a young man, Augustine valued these pursuits. He “found secular success to have ‘no small sweetness.’” He aspired to a life of ‘honors, money, [and] marriage’ and hoped to ‘obtain preferment to public office’—at

\(^{19}\) Augustine, *Confessions*, III-V-IX.

\(^{20}\) Paul R. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 66.
least a ‘minor provincial governorship’ or the like.” These ends may have been even more important to him than his carnal needs, as he left his long-time mistress, the mother of his son, in order to make himself a more suitable match for an advantageous marriage. Though he soon took up another mistress in order, according to his own account, to meet his physical needs, his sheer ambition dictated the course of his life from the time he was a child. First, his mother and father propelled him, and then he pushed himself in striving toward Roman ideals of success. He was, in many ways, the perfect Roman, according to Paul Kolbet:

The path to imperial capital became available to him because he had been socialized into the aspirations of a civilization; he had imbibed its corporate longings and come to embody its ideal. He expected as a reward for it the glory, honor, and money associated with social status.

Bestowed with clear and tangible ambition, Augustine would later criticize the very structures in which he had been raised. His ambitions would turn to regrets as he transcended the Roman ideal life. Augustine’s challenges mirror, in many ways, Rome’s. Rome eventually collapsed under the its own expansiveness and diversity. Eventually, Romanization was not enough to uphold the provinces. Augustine, too, was burdened by too many influences:

In his own spiritual odyssey Augustine had passed from the popular, non-intellectual Christianity of his childhood, through the influences of Cicero and Latin rhetoricians with their rich, Stoic, Epicurean, and Platonic borrowings, through Manicheism with its Gnostic dualism, and through Neo-Platonism to the Scriptures as interpreted by Ambrose, to his own conversion to Christ.

While Augustine’s contribution to Christian creedal development is utterly original, it is influenced by each of these figures in his education and experience. Indeed, Augustine’s

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21 Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 66.
life works indicate an ongoing struggle to reconcile classical tradition with the Christian
faith.\textsuperscript{24}

There could be no moment in time more challenging to attempt this
reconciliation. Early Church fathers were in fierce debate about the nature of God and the
Trinity; meanwhile, Rome—the city of Man—was fading. Augustine’s contemporaries
asked him to write on the fall of the Empire in defense of Christians, who pagans blamed
for the sack of Rome. Augustine’s flock—fellow Christians—explicitly asked him to
frame his theology around the events of his life as witness to Alaric’s sacking in 410. The
result was \textit{City of God}. Of course, these events—the fall of the city of Rome and \textit{City of
God}—took place thirteen years after Augustine wrote \textit{Confessions}. Even so, if Augustine
no longer affirmed secular pursuits as virtuous, it may have been because he saw the
cracks in the moral machine constructed by the Roman Empire. No amount of
rhetoricians or privately wealthy men could stop the currency from inflating or prevent
outlying regions from invasion. Empire could neither protect nor fulfill Augustine.
Meanwhile, he was still deeply influenced by the thinkers he studied in his education.\textsuperscript{25}

After committing himself fully to the Church of Rome, Augustine reflected on his
past indiscretions with regret. \textit{Confessions} is famous for its lamentations of human
behavior—for playing as a child, for dreading school. These indiscretions were normal in
his culture—so normal that Augustine’s baptism was delayed until he was no longer a
mischievous youth, because “the guilt contracted by sin would, after baptism, be greater

\textsuperscript{24} Andrew R. Murphy, “Augustine and the Rhetoric of Roman Decline,” in \textit{Augustine and History}, ed.
Christopher T. Daly, John Doody, and Kim Paffenroth (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2008), 55,
previously published in \textit{History of Political Thought} 16, no. 4: 586-606.

\textsuperscript{25} Here, too is a confliction—Augustine came to hate rhetoric for rhetoric’s sake, but he leaned heavily on
Cicero both in his writings and in his sermons.
and more perilous. Simultaneously raised to be conscientious of sin but also to excuse it, to seek wisdom in God but also the Classics, to act as a Roman but also as a Christian wrought Augustine with inner turmoil. The guilt he felt at failing in any one of the aforementioned pursuits was not instilled by the Manicheans. It was in the Manicheans that Augustine sought escape and salvation from blame.

**Intellectual Influences**

**The Manicheans**

Augustine’s commitment to the Manicheans was a rejection of all he had known before. His devout and beloved mother’s strain of Christianity was simple and regionally-influenced but not heretical. The nature of Manicheism, though, challenged Augustine’s conception of himself as an orator. In a stark move away from the philosophies Augustine studied as a boy,

> The Manichean materialist sensibility was one that abhorred allegory and figuration. Their teachings and practices did not signify some further spiritual reality to be inferred indirectly. Their cosmic myths and rituals were meant to be taken literally and directly. Neither required further elaboration and interpretation. The promise of such literal truth apprehended by the senses appealed to Augustine’s thirst for wisdom.  

In Manicheism, Augustine found a philosophy that rejected ambiguity. This was, perhaps, a response to the ambiguity in his own life: he did not like his father, and yet he aspired to his father’s ambitions. He loved his mother, but he feared being identified with her and her people. Beyond his ambition, which he ultimately found to be a hollow pursuit, all parts of his identity challenged each other.

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26 Augustine, *Confessions*, I-XI-XVII.
27 Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls*, 72.
Augustine links his turn to the Manicheans, implicitly, to his education. Simplicity was barbarous; complexity was sophisticated. Finding the Scriptures too simple and “swollen with pride” at his own intellect, he subscribed, for a time, to Manichean conceptions of God.28 This God was confined to a body. Interestingly, Augustine recoiled from this specific notion enough to explore it with some depth in his *Confessions*, suggesting that his dissatisfaction with the body ran parallel to his view of an incorporeal God and pre-dated his stint with the Manicheans. This may mean that while a polarized, critical view of his past was strengthened and validated by the Manicheans (and certainly shows up in his later writings), Augustine learned shame before he turned nineteen, before he engaged in heresy.

Augustine’s sexual experiences support this theory as well. As raised in a Christian household with unhappy but faithfully married parents, marriage was sacred, and, as tied to status, pragmatic. And yet, Augustine felt and acted upon carnal desire throughout his entire young-adult life after reaching puberty. But there was shame there. His mother’s indoctrinations on what constituted a good Christian man included the teachings of Paul of Tarsus, who Augustine admired and who was a major catalyst in Augustine’s eventual conversion. In Galatians 5:17, Paul writes, “For the flesh has desires that are opposed to the Spirit, and the Spirit has desires that are opposed to the flesh, for these are in opposition to each other.”29 To grapple with the shame of his fleshly desires, which were shamed in his Christian upbringing, prior to his adult life, Augustine found a strain of thought that “rejected the Old Testament and [had a] dualistic interpretation of the problem of evil (they [the Manicheans] attributed evil to a supreme

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28 Augustine, *Confessions*, III-V-IX.
29 NET translation.
principle) [that] soothed his own sense of guilt about his sexual aberrations.”

To subscribe to Manichean thought was to assign power to some evil entity outside of the human will, and to split the human will in half in mirror of nature of the universe.

Augustine’s hunger for wisdom eventually triumphed over his Manichean justifications for his promiscuous behavior, which did not satisfactorily soothe him. Also unsatisfactory to Augustine was Manichean thought in general; his meeting with the Manichean Bishop Faustus of Mileve to draw logic from a substantiated source of Manichean truth disappointed him. After conversion to Catholicism in 386 at the age of 31 in Milan, Augustine finally had to reconcile the different identities burgeoning inside him; he could no longer find escape in the bodies of others, the words of the Classics, or the philosophy of the Manicheans.

This was a painful process for Augustine, who admits his own dissociation from his faults and confusion:

It was I, even I myself. I neither willed entirely, nor was entirely unwilling. Therefore was I at war with myself, and destroyed by myself. And this destruction overtook me against my will, and yet showed not the presence of another mind, but the punishment of my own. Now, then, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me, (Romans 7:17) — the punishment of a more unconfined sin, in that I was a son of Adam.

The battle within Augustine was not inherent to his human condition. Not every saint nor every Church Father faced such internal conflict. Augustine’s journey of self discovery and faith was especially difficult because he was, to use a metaphor (Augustine’s favorite method of elucidation), caught in a massive tug-of-war.

On Plotinus

31 Augustine, *Confessions*, V-III-III.
32 Augustine, *Confessions*, VII-X-XXII.
A thinker from a century earlier, Plotinus, largely influenced Augustine’s experience with Platonism. By 250 CE, Platonist philosophers had settled on a logical deity, a consequence of sorting through the multiple gods of what the Romans called paganism to find the underlying mechanism of deity: that of Truth, which has an essential unity. However, Plotinus’s version of this divine unity pressed beyond a single truth into hierarchized manifestations of Truth:

Great emphasis was placed on the hierarchy of divine powers, stretching out to the remote divine unity beyond the surface of divine manifestations in this world. The gods thus appeared as individuated aspects of the One, each with its own spiritual value, each an expression of divinity itself and a path to the One. This embrace of the power of multiple gods is captured by the famous expression of Symmachus: “not by one path alone to so great a mystery”.

Further, Plotinus introduced a crucial concept to philosophical notions of God: the infinite nature of the One, outside of space and time, and beyond all duality. Both these thoughts—of a hierarchy of Truth and access to it, and of the infinite nature of God—appear in Augustine’s theological writings. Augustine explicitly criticizes, however, the Plotinian notion of how one achieves access to Truth, or transcendence.

Plotinus, Augustine himself writes in 386, the year of his conversion to Christianity, was the first truth he found gripping after his disillusionment with the Manichees:

And notice, when certain rich books exhaled over us, . . . costly substances from Arabia, and poured a few tiny drops of the most precious perfume onto that little flame, incredibly, Romanianus, incredibly, and even more powerfully than you might believe about me—what more can I say?—unbelievable even to me, those books excited within me a conflagration . . . Truly I was returning completely to myself. As if on a journey, I confess, I looked back upon that religion which had been grafted into us as boys and entwined in our marrow. Indeed it was taking hold of me but I didn’t realize it. And so,

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^{33} John Peter Kenney, ""None Come Closer to Us than These:' Augustine and the Platonists," *Religions* 7, no. 9 (September 1, 2016): 2. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/rel7090114.

^{34} Kenney, ""None Come Closer,"" 7.
hesitantly, I grabbed the works of the apostle Paul . . . I read all of it intently and carefully.\textsuperscript{35}

Importantly, Augustine viewed Platonism as a vector to Christianity—not a stand-alone belief in itself, but a tool to interpret other ideas. Whereas Plotinus believed that the soul could achieve transcendence to Truth on its own, if only ephemerally and without conscious cause (though philosophy could prepare us for encounter), Augustine viewed transcendence as “beyond the moral capacity of the soul.”\textsuperscript{36}

In book seven of \textit{Confessions}, Augustine details his encounter with Platonism by first framing his experience with the Manichees as one of frustration. Manichean thought asked Augustine to conceive of God as One with a body, entrenched in the material. Augustine was repelled by this thought, while simultaneously unable to conceive of God beyond the material. Augustine writes in book seven that this failure of imagination was a moral failure.\textsuperscript{37} To experience God beyond the material, Platonists would have said to turn inward in order to return to Truth. Augustine found this insufficient—human access to Truth (and, therefore, Salvation) was contingent on divine guidance. It necessitated a mediator, an actor outside of human moral capacity:

Thus admonished to return to myself, I entered into my innermost depths with you as my guide, and I was able to do so because you had become my helper. I entered and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, saw above that eye of the soul an immutable light higher than my mind—not the everyday light visible to all bodies, nor a greater light of the same type that might shine more clearly and fill everything with its magnitude. It was not that light but another, entirely different from all others. Nor was it above my mind in the way that oil is on top of water or the sky is above the earth. Rather it was superior because it made me, and I was inferior because I was made by it.\textsuperscript{38}

Though thrilled by his experience—one of true love for God, achieved through contemplation and with divine assistance—Augustine immediately retreats back into his

\textsuperscript{35} Augustine, \textit{Against the Skeptics}, II.II.V; Kenney, ""None Come Closer," 6.
\textsuperscript{36} Kenney, ""None Come Closer," 117.
\textsuperscript{37} Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, VII.
\textsuperscript{38} Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, VII-X-XVI.
shame, lamenting that he was “torn away from [God] by [his] weight,” back into “inferior things” and “sexual habits.”

Though intrigued by Plotinus’s notion of transcendence, Augustine cannot abandon his deeply-seeded idea that humans—and he himself—are too debased for audience with God on human’s own terms.

Conversion and Christian Life

*Every day I sighed after you.*

Before his baptism in 387, Augustine renounced his sexual life. He was not required to practice celibacy in order to be baptized, but he “sought something higher: the life of a Christian philosopher.” While his turn to Catholicism suggested a “positive evaluation of the body,” he was already oriented toward an ascetic lifestyle, interpreting it as the most moral possibility for human activity.

Critical in understanding Augustine’s draw to Christianity—the means through which he both exercises and interprets his former influences—is the narrative of his conversion, as he himself details in *Confessions*. It is a narrative explicitly interested in deliverance from sexual desire. While living in Milan in 386, Augustine was still “bound by secular interests” and “tied by women.” He trusted Ambrose, then-Bishop, and Ambrose’s mentor, Simplicianus, the latter of whom advised Augustine to read

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39 Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.VII. XI.
40 Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII.VI.XIII.
43 Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII.I.I-II.
Victorinus, who had converted to Christianity under Simplicianus’s guidance. The establishment of the possibility of conversion, even for someone around whose heart “the devil had an impregnable fortress,” allowed Augustine to yearn for God and yearn for a conversion experience.\footnote{Augustine, \textit{Confessions} VIII.V.X.}

A man Augustine describes as a “compatriot, in that he was an African” visited Milan and shared a story of his own experience with God: he opened the Bible to a random page, found that it was open to one of the letters of Paul of Tarsus, and found truth, meaning, and connection in that passage.\footnote{ibid.} Augustine wanted to emulate this man, but again found himself bogged down in the baseness of himself. Then, he heard children on the street chanting a song—“pick up and read, pick up and read.”\footnote{Augustine, \textit{Confessions} VIII.XII.XXX.} Augustine obeyed what he believed to be a divine command:

\begin{quote}
I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting. There I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: ‘Not in riots or drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts’ (Rom. 13:13-14).\footnote{Augustine, \textit{Confessions} VIII.XII.XXX.}
\end{quote}

And he immediately felt “at peace.” In his conversion, Augustine finds himself disinterested not just in bodily desire, but all bodily pursuits—status, ambition, and competition, all the qualities that had made him a good Roman rhetorician. Bishop Ambrose baptized Augustine into the Catholic Church the following Easter.

Augustine’s experience with the divine was directly related to the bane of his search for wisdom: the body. Direct word from God soothed Augustine and made him ready—whereas before he was hesitant to encounter God, thinking in his reflections,
“Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.”48 Augustine had his answer: the answer was not in worldly desire, in the body, but in Christ.

He came to these words by way of Paul of Tarsus, a man who split from the first leaders of the Church—James and Peter—claiming “whatever they were makes no difference to me.”49 Paul’s claim to Truth is that in his own conversion to Christianity, he encounters the divine Jesus, while apostles knew only “Jesus-in-the-flesh.”50 Paul dichotomizes Christ, placing superiority in the Spirit over the body.

St. Ambrose baptized Augustine and his son in 387. While traveling home to Thagaste the next year, Monica died. Shortly after his homecoming, Augustine’s son died, too, leaving him with only his estate, which he shortly sold off, save for his childhood house, which he turned into a monastery. He was ordained a priest in 391, and then Bishop of Hippo in 395, two years before finishing Confessions.

Noted for both his writings and his sermons, Augustine spend his thirty-five years as Bishop engaging in broad arguments about Church doctrine and heresy as well as tending to his pastoral duties, speaking and writing specifically about the fears his congregation faced. In 430, as Augustine fell fatally ill, the Vandals sieged his province, pillaging his town as he lay dying. After his death, they burned the city, but left intact his cathedral and his library.

Conclusion

The circumstances of Augustine’s birth and life are not universal. His internal conflict, documented in Confessions, is relatable because everyone feels doubt and guilt,

48 Augustine, Confessions VIII.XII. XVIII.
49 Gal 2:9, NET Translation
but the conclusions Augustine comes to about the nature of the body and the nature of sin
ought not be considered without full understanding of the nature of the conflict facing
Augustine, which was at its root a question of who he was in the world.

As a point of pride for both of his parents, Augustine was divided. His father
wanted his son to surpass him in status in the Empire. His mother prophesied spiritual
import for him. When he became his own man, he eventually pursued both ends,
ultimately rejecting the desire his father instilled in him to achieve high civic office—the
dream of any good late-Empire Roman boy. In his spiritual pursuits, Augustine was
plagued by the Christian teachings in his youth and his formal Roman education which
were, for most of his pre-Christian life, irreconcilable for him.

Augustine lived in an era that made many claims upon him. Neither the Roman
Empire nor the Christian faith were particularly amenable to an intersectional identity;
the first was in its final decline and the second in its early formations. Augustine simply
did not know who to be. Even after his conversion at thirty-one, Augustine’s writings are
wrecked with doubt, fear, and confusion. He spent a lifetime forming complex and cogent
logical proofs and dense analysis on the nature of God. These analyses, and the
conclusions he comes to, are fundamentally rooted in the intersectional experience of
Augustine’s life and how his body interacts with each experience. In the physical spaces
in which he moved and operated, the links between his relationships and social status,
and even the Manichean emphasis on diet, Augustine’s identity is very much contingent
on his physical circumstances. Each of his influences—from his parents to his mentors to
his philosophical heroes to the towns in which he lived—have apparent influence on his
work. His work on the body, then, flows through not just these influences, but Augustine’s own propensity toward shame.
**Chapter II: Augustine’s Views on the Body by Way of His Theology of Original Sin: A Survey of Augustinian Thought**

*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*

51 Romans 7:15-20 (NIV)

In *Confessions*, Augustine is wrought with guilt and self-deprecation, which he weaves in with a humility he understands as becoming of one of God’s creation. Perceiving himself as utterly incapable of knowing God in his moral state—which he regards as poor—Augustine describes his physical life as a contextualization for his own theology. Reflective of Augustine’s complicated and varied intellectual journey is his theology of the body. This chapter focuses on Augustine’s thought in regard to Original Sin, bodily morality, and the path to divine encounter.

**Original Sin**

The Book of Genesis does not include the words “original sin.” Augustine took the Garden narrative seriously, with more consideration than previous exegetes. In his reading, he interprets original sin, and uses it as the foundation of his bodily theology. For Augustine, original sin is the reality of the path of free will away from God. When the body serves as a distraction from God, it is in opposition to God. Augustine never declared the body as the root of evil—this would have been too close to Manichean dualism, a body-based version of which would become a powerful antagonist to God’s will. Rather, the body, as a consequence of original sin, detracts from rationality and so
disorders our desires. Augustine has a vision of sexuality in the Garden as a logical, contained activity. One could will oneself into arousal “just as we can move our hands and feet whenever we wish.” The irrationality of sex in the Fallen state and its ensuing promulgation of sin are emblematic, for Augustine, of the nature of sin itself:

> Sin warps judgment, weakens the will’s determination. For sin impels the mind toward external things, away from the contemplation of transcendent realities…. The *Confessions* have at their heart a sense that a sinful man, hamstrung by selfishness from the earliest moments of infancy, is the prisoner of habits which are second nature. Only grace can restore authentic freedom.

The body, though not evil, cannot respond adequately to reason unless tempered by asceticism, which foils the illusion of achieving the highest good by one’s own means. However, the will of the soul can sometimes save one from sin even as the body is technically sinning. Augustine writes in *City of God*:

> Let not your life, then, be a burden to you, you faithful servants of Christ, though your chastity was made the sport of your enemies. You have a grand and true consolation, if you maintain a good conscience, and know that you did not consent to the sins of those who were permitted to commit sinful outrage upon you.

If the mind consents to the actions of the body, then it actively engages in sin. Victims of sexual assault were not pulled away from God by the desires of their body, but were instead imposed upon.

Augustine explicitly ties salvation to freedom from original sin, in a sexual sense. Sexual urges, then, are a consequence of original sin, which is not an event in time but, “rather, a condition.” The punishment for sin is distance from God—a proclivity to further earthly desires, as Adam and Eve chose to do in Eden. This includes

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52 Chadwick, *Augustine*, 121.
54 Augustine, *City of God*, I.XXXVIII
“dispossession from a naturally perfect environment, the loss of natural immortality and the acquisition of susceptibility to physical pain, fatigue, disease, aging, and rebellious bodily disorders, especially sexual lust.” Notably, these disorders are all physical, as “Augustine appears not to think that the penalties of original sin include any intrinsic diminution of the soul’s active abilities, such as the ability to reason and to will,” beyond the distractions physical conditions provide. Even so, every human born of another human is colored by the sin in the Garden, and this notion became Church creed, via interpretation of Romans 5:12:

‘Through one man sin entered the world and through sin death so that it passed on to all human beings, in whom all have sinned.’ For Augustine, the relative pronoun "in whom" (Latin, in quo) referred to Adam. Because of Augustine's powerful influence in the church, his understanding of original sin was incorporated into the Council of Carthage in 418.

This interpretation connected being human—son of Adam—with being sinful.

**Manichean influence**

To Augustine’s contemporaries, this stance was pessimistic. Bishop Julian of Eclanum, a Pelagian sympathizer, accused Augustine of still being an “impenitent Manichee, more influenced than he himself realized by his decade under Mani’s spell, hating the Creator’s handiwork, and denying that in giving man free will God ‘emancipated’ humanity to stand on its own feet.” The logical chain of Augustine’s thought—that the very thing we are endowed with as humans, free will, is what allows us

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56 Mann, “Augustine on evil,” 46.
57 Ibid.
59 Chadwick, *Augustine*, 120.
to descend from the most possible good—lends itself to later thinkers’ moves into concepts like total depravity, which I will discuss in the next chapter. Julian’s accusation, however, is challenged obliquely in *City of God*. Augustine specifically names free will as a grace, even if it resulted in the move of humans away from God:

> It is He who when He foreknew that man would in his turn sin by abandoning God and breaking His law, did not deprive him of the power of free-will, because He at the same time foresaw what good He Himself would bring out of the evil, and how from this mortal race, deservedly and justly condemned, He would by His grace collect, as now He does, a people so numerous, that He thus fills up and repairs the blank made by the fallen angels, and that thus that beloved and heavenly city is not defrauded of the full number of its citizens, but perhaps may even rejoice in a still more overflowing population.  

The perfection of God’s creation will be restored in the resurrection (notably and vehemently a resurrection of the flesh).

**Salvation and Gender**

The nature of perfection differed from his contemporaries, especially when it came to gender:

> From the words, *Till we all come to a perfect man, to the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ*, Ephesians 4:13 and from the words, *Conformed to the image of the Son of God*, Romans 8:29 some conclude that women shall not rise, but that all shall be men, because God made man only of earth, and woman of the man. For my part, they seem to be wiser who make no doubt that both sexes shall rise. For there shall be no lust, which is now the cause of confusion. For before they sinned, the man and the woman were naked, and were not ashamed. From those bodies, then, vice shall be withdrawn, while nature shall be preserved. And the sex of woman is not a vice, but nature. It shall then indeed be superior to carnal intercourse and child-bearing; nevertheless the female members shall remain adapted not to the old uses, but to a new beauty, which, so far from provoking lust, now extinct, shall excite praise to the wisdom and clemency of God, who both made what was not and delivered from corruption what He made.

‘Hating the Creator’s handiwork’ would insinuate a presumption of mistakes on God’s part, and if femininity were not a “regrettable error” on God’s part, then Augustine was

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60 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.I.
61 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.XVII.
closer to a sheer and subversive awe at God’s wisdom than other thinkers of his time.⁶²

Even so, Augustine’s vision of a restored female aligns with his general view of women as vectors for lust. Writing to a group of nuns in one of the monasteries he oversaw as Bishop of Hippo, Augustine warns against looking at a man for too long:

> For it is not only by touch that a woman awakens in any man or cherishes towards him such desire, this may be done by inward feelings and by looks. And say not that you have chaste minds though you may have wanton eyes, for a wanton eye is the index of a wanton heart. And when wanton hearts exchange signals with each other in looks, though the tongue is silent, and are, by the force of sensual passion, pleased by the reciprocation of inflamed desire, their purity of character is gone, though their bodies are not defiled by any act of uncleanness.⁶³

Augustine’s advice to avoid temptation is a re-ordering of desires (a distinctly Augustinian correction to a Manichean notion, as Plotinian thought would consider the desire to enjoy physical beauty as the first pull of love toward the Good), wherein one “guard[s] herself from desiring sinfully to please man by cherishing a fear of displeasing God.”⁶⁴ Female bodies seem to have a culpability in their ability to elicit irrational responses in men’s bodies. This is a product of Augustine’s place in time, of course, but also likely of his specific draw toward physical satisfaction in his youth.

> Augustine also tempered his own theology with defenses of marriage. He sees it as the best response to original sin:

> Those who use lust well are not disfigured by the plague of lust, although they indeed generate those who are disfigured by the plague of lust and must therefore be regenerated. Nor is virginal modesty found in the ungodly, although virginity of the flesh may be found in them. True modesty cannot exist in a soul committing fornication. Therefore, the virginal good of the ungodly is not to be preferred to the conjugal good of the faithful. Spouses using this evil well are preferred to virgins who use that good in an evil way.”⁶⁵

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⁶² Chadwick, *Augustine*, 94.
⁶⁴ ibid.
Further, Augustine wrote an entire treatise *On the Good of Marriage*, in which he praises the fruits of marriage: children, mutual fidelity, and sacrament. Through analysis of adultery, infertility, and lustfulness, Augustine distances the good of marriage from the sinful actions of man: marriage pardons the sin of sex. Whereas St. Paul indicated that the most virtue lied in celibacy, Augustine directly linked copulation to original sin—the fallen state of man. Even so, the bond between two people could serve to reflect the bond between Christ and the Church, which was, to Augustine, the pinnacle of relationship with an earthly factor.

Crucially, Augustine regarded his celibacy as a sign of his conversion. After baptism, Augustine found no trouble in abstaining from earthly distractions—he quit his job as a rhetorician and abstained from sex. This was, in his understanding, a grace: not God winning out over the devil, as would have been the Manichean explanation, but grace working to help re-order Augustine’s own free will. Augustine felt validated in his choice as a willing agent but the success of his choice.

While Augustine never concedes to the Manicheans that the body is evil, he does see the impulses toward which the body is inclined as a lesser good than a will oriented toward God—Plotinian thought helps him along in this distinction. Even so, hints at Manichee dualism pervade Augustine’s work, particularly on the body and original sin. This is especially obvious because Augustine frames himself in opposition to Manichee thought, and works through much of his own theology on sexual morality and marriage.


as a way to differentiate himself from the Manichees, both for his own conscience and in response to criticism from his contemporaries.

**Plotinian influence**

**Ordered Desires and Rationality**

Augustine’s general thoughts on the body warrant some unpacking. Augustine interpreted goodness as an ordered reality; that is, some things are better than others, so some good things are less good than others. A hierarchy of goodness, a nod to the Platonic ladder, culminates in a Divine reality of truth and law, and the best activities dispose us to the Divine. The path away from earthly desires, which are not close to God and so are less good, for Augustine was through contemplation and grace, provided by Jesus Christ, who communicated his will to us through Scripture. Crucially, we choose to pursue godly activities. We are endowed with the choice by free will, which makes us fundamentally human, and may not in itself be evil, because it was created by God, who is the highest good. Our active decision to focus on God is our reflection of the highest good, because it utilizes our unique humanity for its proper purpose: relationship with God.

Contemplation is not a physical activity. It is tied to rationality and will, which, for Augustine, are separate from the body. Indeed, the sexual desires of the body are incompatible with reason—the two operate independently of each other and are more often than not opposed to each other, as the body will be “stirred when the will and

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67 Mann, “Augustine on evil,” 43.
reason do not want it, or vice versa.” Moreover, “sexual ecstasy swamps the mind,” obliterating rational thought. The body impinges on the avenues that deliver us into union with God. Fittingly, then, the body is suitable for earthly duties—obedience to Caesar and procreation. The soul participates in neither. The soul ought to preserve itself for interest in the eternal, not in the temporal, for “the human soul abuses itself whenever it seeks fulfilment except by returning to God.”

**Sexual Sin**

More prevalent in Augustine’s perspective on sex than Manichee influence is his own deliverance from his sexual history through conversion. As healed by grace, he then forms a theology around the interaction of the body and grace.

Celibacy denies the body impulsive distractions. Marriage, according to St. Paul, is a “concession, not a command;” it is a mitigating institution for those who do not have self-control, so that they do not “burn with passion.” Even sex within marriage has a tint of shame to it, as “the act normally takes place in privacy and in darkness.” Sex outside of marriage is obviously shameful, considering basic observations: “town brothels are in special areas, not the main street. There is an intuitive sense that sexuality can come into tension with higher aspirations.” The implicit discomfort with sexual morality informs the heart of Augustine’s theology:

His estimate of sexuality was marked by tension between his personal renunciation and a positive Catholic evaluation of the beauty of bodily form given by the Creator (e.g. R ii.15). But the most positive estimate could not eliminate the truth of the experience that

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70 Chadwick, *Augustine*, 120.
71 Augustine, *Against Julian*, 4.7
72 Chadwick, *Augustine*, 111.
73 Augustine, *Confessions* II.VI.XVIII-XLV; Stock, *Augustine the Reader*, 228.
74 1 Cor 7:9, NASB Translation
75 Chadwick, *Augustine*, 120.
even for married couples sex can have its problems. The body can be disobedient to both will and reason, and Augustine saw that fact as a penalty for the soul’s resistance to divine goodness. So the physical act was, he urged, the vehicle for the flawed human nature subsequent to the Fall. Were that not the case, the New Testament would not have regarded married life as surpassed by the greater good of celibacy. Hence ‘the very root of sin lies in carnal generation’ (PM ii.15). Augustine boldly suggested that this hypothesis explained why Jesus was born of a Virgin: from Mary Jesus took the ‘likeness of sinful flesh’ (St. Paul’s phrase), not a flesh flawed by original sin…. The Virgin Birth presupposes that even within marriage the sexual acts cannot be done without some taint of cupidity.\textsuperscript{76}

Augustine couches all of his bodily theology, with its various intellectual influences, in its transmissibility. The origin of this concupiscence was Adam’s decision in the Garden, and none Augustine’s opinion on the body cannot move away from the Fall—until he moves to the Incarnation.

\textit{On Resurrection of the Flesh and the Eucharist}

Despite Augustine’s inner turmoil on the nature of the body, he was certainly dissatisfied with the Platonic and Plotinian notion of the transcendence of the mind. In his estimation, it did not go far enough. How Augustine settled on the necessity of resurrection of the body is likely linked to his refusal to explicitly pit the body and the soul against each other as a protest against Manichee thought. To avoid dualism, the body and the soul must be, in the end and the eternal, united. Augustine justifies the reality of bodily resurrection utterly true because of how followers of Jesus were convinced. That so many people, before and after Jesus’ death, could believe something so wholly unbelievable, was proof of its miraculous and divine honesty:

\begin{quote}
It is incredible that Jesus Christ should have risen in the flesh and ascended with flesh into heaven; it is incredible that the world should have believed so incredible a thing; it is incredible that a very few men, of mean birth and the lowest rank, and no education, should have been able so effectually to persuade the world, and even its learned men, of so incredible a thing. Of these three incredibles, the parties with whom we are debating
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{76} Chadwick, \textit{Augustine}, 121-122.
refuse to believe the first; they cannot refuse to see the second, which they are unable to account for if they do not believe the third. It is indubitable that the resurrection of Christ, and His ascension into heaven with the flesh in which He rose, is already preached and believed in the whole world. If it is not credible, how is it that it has already received credence in the whole world?  

For Augustine, the presence of the body in the City of Heaven meant a body perfectly under control of the will, and a will perfectly oriented toward God. Undergirding this, however, is faith. Augustine does not believe that man can achieve perfection in his lifetime. We may try, but human beings are imperfect and lapse in their efforts, as Augustine did several times, as he admits in *Confessions*. Just as the heights of human pursuit are not in humans themselves, the origin of human potential is not in itself. Grace alone has the power to draw one in and perfect her. To accept human goodness as the ceiling of goodness is death:

> But in order that we fall not away from Continence, we ought to watch specially against those snares of the suggestions of the devil, that we presume not of our own strength. For, Cursed is every one that sets his hope in man. And who is he, but man? We cannot therefore truly say that he sets not his hope in man, who sets it in himself. For this also, to live after man, what is it but to live after the flesh? Whoever therefore is tempted by such a suggestion, let him hear, and, if he have any Christian feeling, let him tremble. Let him hear, I say, If you shall live after the flesh, you shall die.

Augustine’s ultimately achieves personal reconciliation with the body and transcendence through the figure of Jesus Christ. In the Eucharist, wherein we “say amen to what we are,” we participate in perfection. This only functions because there is a body which is perfect—Christ—and in the Eucharist, then the body can be welcomed into grace by presence in the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ.

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77 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.V.
**On the Trinity**

In his treatise *On the Trinity*, Augustine provides analogy to aid in our thinking about God: lover, beloved, and love itself, as one relationship.\(^{80}\) God is relationship. If the way God interacts with us is reflective of who God is, then God interacts with us through relationship. This relationship is marked by gratuitous love. In it, there are no needs humans could fulfill for God, and no reason other than love for existence. A perfect love on earth is impossible, because we are necessarily separate from the divine, but trying at a more perfect love would resemble moves away from exploitation. Humans are not tools for God and ought not be tools for each other—Augustine would affirm this; he detested slavery and used Church funds to free slaves in his town whenever possible.\(^{81}\) Christian culture, as it stood in colonial-era politics, co-opted Augustine’s ideas on the body and used them as an argument in the broader religious idea of conquest. Simultaneously, Christians failed to latch onto the relational aspect of God. Lost in Augustine’s idea of the body was his overarching idea of redemption: humans may choose to desire God.

The highest good for humans is the orientation of desire toward God, and so toward a *wholeness*. Augustine’s idea of who God is was never centered around the baseness he felt as a man, but rather, it was centered around God’s absolute Goodness. This goodness was inherent to God, not a choice, but a truth. Augustine sought that grace above all else. He did not toil in his shame.


\(^{81}\) Chadwick, *Augustine*, 84.
Chapter III: Historical Consequences

But whoever is anywhere born a man, that is, a rational, mortal animal, no matter what unusual appearance he presents in color, movement, sound, nor how peculiar he is in some power, part, or quality of his nature, no Christian can doubt that he springs from that one protoplast. \(^{82}\)

Augustine’s life-long struggle with the nature of sexuality and sin reflect who he was as a person: a man given to obvious bodily proclivities. His ability and desire to fulfill his sexual needs was met with an equally powerful shame directed towards that ability and desire. He needed to name it and to heal himself of it, and original sin was where he landed himself in the complexity of Christian theology. That he became a starting point for ensuing centuries of theological thought is a testament to his compelling prose and comprehensive contemplation, most of which was preserved in writing. It is regrettable, however, that his influence was taken without regard for his specific proclivities and identity. The receptive theology reformists and contemporaries latched onto was largely negative, despite the conflicting narrative of the body we get from Augustine. We are living in the consequences of taking Augustine’s regard of the body as gospel—the narrative of the rational man vs. the savage or the noble vs. the naked anchors every conquest undertaken by European powers since the Age of Discovery.

This chapter is interested in John Calvin’s theology as influenced by Augustine and as used to define standards of morality rooted in asceticism, then utilized by worldly men to annihilate others. Among other fathers of the Reformation, Calvin and his school are the originators of a “fire and brimstone” conception of God.

Born in 1509, Calvin split from the Roman Catholic Church around age twenty-one, during the early years of the Protestant Reformation. Though derivative of Martin

\(^{82}\) Augustine, City of God, XVI.8
Luther in his ideas of faith and Martin Bucer in his conception of predestination, Calvin is most broadly influential in his ideas of God’s wrath. With a fundamentally different take on the nature of God than Augustine, but using many of the same ideas on the nature of man, Calvin’s framing is an interesting exercise in context and its importance to a theology. The schools most influenced by Calvin—Presbyterians, Baptists, and Puritans—are those with the most direct influence on American Christianity, especially in its nascent formations.

Calvin, like Augustine and St. Paul, viewed marriage as a way for humans to curb their lustful appetites, though even within the confines of marriage, sexual desire ought to be indulged with care, control, and modesty. Calvin, however, framed sin as the charge which brings man before God’s judgment and will be punished. Sin, for Calvin, “makes us liable to God’s wrath,” whereas Augustine viewed sin as the punishment itself—distance from God. Further, while Augustine’s God is inherently loving, Calvin’s God is loving by choice: though He *ought* to hate us, He chooses to love us. These different conceptions of punishment have consequences. When evil and sin are not thought of as privations and distances, they become more central to the identity of the human being. When God is not, at His core, love, humans fear wrath more than they anticipate love, making evil the inherent reality of the human condition, rather than grace. Evil as such powerful reality must be overseen by God so as to avoid dualism. Martin Luther, Calvin’s contemporary and the father of the Reformation, suggests that God is present in evil:

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Since then God moves and actuates all in all, he necessarily moves and acts also in Satan and ungodly man... Here you see that when God works in and through evil men, and yet God cannot act evilly although he does evil through evil men, because one who is himself good cannot act evilly, yet he uses evil instruments that cannot escape the sway and motion of his omnipotence.\(^{85}\)

When Augustine writes about original sin, he is faced with his own “confusion between the problem of finitude and the problem of sin.”\(^{86}\) While the Catholic Church chose to affirm the goodness of the natural order and therefore the goodness of man (with great help from Thomas Aquinas), reformers like Calvin chose to adhere to the negative Augustinian reading, which is to “identify finitude with evil, through the identification of concupiscence with original sin.”\(^{87}\) Paired with uniquely reformist ideas, like the notion that baptism does not cure humans of sexual lust, and the idea of an inclination toward evil rather than a privation of justice formed the foundation of Calvin’s idea of total depravity. The fallen state of human beings means that one cannot choose to fully love God:

> Man, by his fall into a state of sin, has wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.\(^{88}\)

Calvin adopted Augustine’s idea of sexual sin as a central tenant of humankind’s sin, but apparently forgot Augustine’s absolute affirmation of free will and its purpose: to orient the oneself toward God.

Similarly, whereas Augustine always situates sin as redeemable by grace—from a God and Christ who love wholly, gratuitously, and personally—Calvin declared that humans are “perverted and corrupted in all parts of our nature” and “therefore cannot but

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\(^{86}\) Neil Ormerod, *Creation, Grace*, 72.

\(^{87}\) Neil Ormerod, *Creation, Grace*, 73.

\(^{88}\) Westminster Confession of Faith, 9.3.
be odious and abominable to God." As humans are both utterly corrupted and hopelessly unable to orient themselves effectively toward God, God himself calls some into salvation. First, God knows all, eternally, and all is set in God’s knowledge:

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions; yet has He not decreed anything because He foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death. These angels and men, thus predestinated, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

Then, Christ’s grace finds some people, who are passive in the process of salvation:

All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace. This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.

The Elect are the righteous. When a group of people convince themselves that they have been enlightened in the way to follow God, and then that group encounters a foreign and utterly different group of people, it is not a far leap to see how the “elect” might believe in their own code to the extent that conversion or expansion followed.

This internalized superiority had realized effects in the process of colonization.

Projections of what it meant to be a moral creature resulted in exclusion, stratification,
and efforts at forced assimilation. The rest of this chapter expands on weaponized asceticism and focused examples on Reformist-influenced colonization in South Africa and North America.

**Asceticism and Colonization**

When European colonists interacted with peoples native to the land they encountered and saw (after much capitulation) that they did indeed have culture and religion, it was an inferior one—because of the native people’s nakedness. A church influenced by Augustinian thought on the morality of the body meant that

> The dichotomy between true and false religion was associated with opposition between spirit and flesh: the truth was considered spiritual and those who were living in dishonesty were thought to live by the flesh or to be intrinsically carnal subjects.  

David Stannard, author of the 1992 book *American Holocaust* on the centuries-long genocide perpetrated on American Indians, links the Christian idea of “tainting of godliness with sexuality” to the writings of Saint Paul, who established a hierarchy for desire: abstinence as best, marriage as the option for the man who cannot contain his desires, and sin for a man who indulged in his desires outside of marriage. Sexual engagement was a “concession, not a command.” Indeed, the ability to be a non-sexual creature was immediately grasped as a moral indicator and a way to legitimize ordained men as authoritative—the “great renunciation” was the “basis of male leadership in the church.”

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93 1 Cor 7:6, NET Translation
Augustine) evolved into another way to stratify, and in conquest became another reason for Europeans to validate their perceived superiority. That Stannard specifically names Augustine is interesting. He goes on to qualify the claim, tracing an emphasis on sexual restraint back to the Greeks and then to one of Augustine’s influences, Cicero, before admitting a literal interpretation of the prophet Matthew’s “charge that ‘there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom’” back to Origen, a third-century Church Father.\textsuperscript{95} Insinuating, then, that the Church took after Augustine’s thought on sexuality indicates the massive influence Augustine had on the matter, despite the contributions of his predecessors. On the status imparted with celibacy within the Church, Stannard comments: “Of course, such fanatically aggressive opposition to sex can only occur among people who are fanatically obsessed with sex, and nowhere was this more ostentatiously evident than in the lives of the early Christian hermits.”\textsuperscript{96}

The notion of holiness and its relationship to bodiliness is a major factor in how white settlers treated the people they encountered. The rest of this chapter will focus on examples of how religious ideas of bodily immorality and status were employed to defend apartheid, forced migration, and genocide.

**South Africa**

The main church in South Africa was the *Nederduitse Gereform Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church), whose theology was primarily shaped by the works of John Calvin.\textsuperscript{97} It arrived with the Dutch East India Trading Company in 1652; “the first permanent

\textsuperscript{96} Stannard, *American Holocaust*, 156.
\textsuperscript{97} The Dutch Reformed Church is often referred to as the DRC or NGK in the literature.
minister arrived in 1665. Most notably, the Dutch Reformed Church rejected modernity and the Enlightenment by attacking and expelling clergy who accepted modern views. Clergy in the Dutch Cape Colony used the States Bible, which translated scripture from Hebrew into Dutch. This translation classified “gentiles,” or non-Israelites, as “heathens.” This distinction had unintended consequences in terms of the relationship between Christian settlers and non-Christian slaves:

“The Rev. M.C. Vos, a South African-born proponent of the Continuing Reformation … had to correct a farmer who quoted Psalm 2:8 (‘Ask of me and I will give you the heathen as an inheritance’) to justify treating his slaves any way he chose.”

Baptism and European descent were strongly linked in the 17th Century Dutch Cape colony. If one had an ancestor who was part of the Christian Covenant (something the Dutch brand of Calvinism emphasized), then one was also part of the Covenant. This extended to children born to slaves with white fathers. No formal recognition on the part of the father was necessary. He could be identified as ‘unknown Christian,’ and the legitimacy of the baptism stood unquestioned. If one appeared European, even partly, then one had access to Christianity as a “birthright of Europeans.” Slave owners, or even the Trading Company itself, could choose to baptize any slave children, with context rooted in Abrahamic tradition. Those without access to the Covenant (however specious) had to convert of their own volition. Of the large group native to the Cape

99 Ritner, “The Dutch Reformed Church and Apartheid,” 35.
101 Ibid.
region, the Khoikhoi, only four converted in the 1600s.\textsuperscript{103} Who was and was not part of the Covenant became a crucial divider between the settlers and the original populations; indeed, “‘Christian’ became synonymous with settler.”\textsuperscript{104} Christianity was not just a faith, but an ethnic identity. It was one of the markers of superiority—baptized slave children were superior and sacred compared to black children not because of the color of their skin (which was, very often, the same), but because of their membership in the Covenant. People were members of ingroups and outgroups by degrees, introducing a hierarchy of power and control. At the top were white Christians, and then black Christian slaves, and then non-Christian blacks and natives.

A proto-mission was established in the Cape Colony in 1737, not by the Dutch, but by German Pietists. Georg Schmidt, a Moravian, attempted to learn the Khoikhoi language and to apply Christianity in ways more accessible to their non-European experiences. He was driven out of the colony by the Dutch Trading Company after baptizing five Khoikhoi. The next Pietist missionaries came in 1792, and they found a Khoikhoi woman named Lena preaching under a peach tree Schmidt had planted.\textsuperscript{105} There would not be another fifty-year gap between missionary activity in the Cape. The Reformation had continued, much to the chagrin of the Dutch Calvinists, and with it came the rise of evangelism. Permanent, however, was the stratification of certain bodies based on connection to a racialized conception of Covenant.

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The colonizers of what would become the United States were largely Protestants, influenced by reformist theology that staked its claims on the sinfulness of concupiscence. Of course, Catholic conquistadors swept through the Caribbean and South and Central America with similar disregard for the peoples already living there, too. Queen Isabella of Spain famously wanted Colón to collect souls for her. In North America, however, there is a documented link between the supposed “sensuousness” of native peoples, particularly native women, that was untenable with Christian values. If sin is an act that necessitates further wrath, rather than punishment in itself, then the “righteous” positioned themselves to enact God’s wrath. It was an act of judgment that justified the plunder of people who did not meet standards of morality centered around western civilization. It is a simple chain: one does not deserve resources if one will not use them for ends that are not correct and moral; we may know who is correct and moral based on who is elect; the sin of the unrepentantly un-elect necessitates their removal. Interestingly, reformist sects, when confronted with their crimes against the American Indian during the Red Power movement of the 60’s and 70’s,

All gleefully responded to the accusation that they had been responsible for nearly all of the problems of the American Indian, [and] they also decided they could purchase indulgences for these sins by funding the Indian activists to do whatever they felt necessary to correct the situation… In a real sense, Christian churches bought and paid for the Indian movement.106

Of course, the separation and stratification modeled by theological ideas of personhood still have immense consequences today. The United States continues to employ a practice of enforced anarchy on Indian reservations, wherein the local tribe may only claim jurisdiction over crimes with sentences of two years or less. More serious offense must be

106 Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red*, (New York: Putnam Publishing Group, 2003), 47.
overseen by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which is critically understaffed and underfunded, leaving tribal governments unable to effectively manage crime in their communities. The result of this, to link back to bodily sin, is that there is no existing statistic for missing persons for the demographic of Native American women. Native American women make up a massive fraction of those entrapped in sex-trafficking within the country. Just as landing Europeans saw little but savagery and sensuality in the faces of native peoples, the crimes committed against the bodies of Native women are not worth saving, in the opinion of a state composed of descendants of colonizers.

**Conclusion**

None of these atrocities may be traced directly and solely back to Augustine of Hippo. The purpose of this chapter is not to conflate Calvinism with Augustinian thought and then to lay the blame for centuries of racialized violence at the feet of men who did not sanction such acts. However, when taken out of the context Augustine created for himself of his own bodily experience, and out of the nuance in which Augustine framed his work on concupiscence—that of grace and the nature of sin—it is easy to find a pessimistic, damning, and consequential theology. Ironically, Augustine also provides us with the language to relate to one another in such a way as to render any purported moral failings related to purity meaningless. That we ignore his Trinitarian language on love

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109 Ibid.
and relationship is not a reflection on Augustine, nor is it an indictment of Calvin and his contemporaries—it is a telling reality of what we choose to receive.
Chapter IV: Contemporary Veins of Augustinian Thought

If Augustine were an ancient, absent figure discussed only by literary figures, exploring his life and writings would be an exercise in exposition. The reach of his writings, however, into the sinews of Christian thought as it evolved through the Medieval Age and into the Renaissance, Enlightenment, Modernity, and now into post-Modernity makes him an urgent figure. While many conceptions of morality and normativity have evolved both within the Church and secular society into a more complementary model of gendered interaction, the underlying thought and logic behind gender roles, purity, and ascetic tendencies particularly within Catholicism still find a champion in Augustine. Expanding upon the previous discussion of present harm to colonized peoples, this chapter explores the places in society where misapplied Augustinian thought remains persuasive. Whereas previous chapters implied fault in Augustine’s writings or blame in reformist application of his thought, this chapter suggests that we, as members of Western culture, prefer Augustine’s negative take on the body because it resonates with our own experiences and fears. The ideas Augustine presents on guilt and shame, especially in *Confessions*, are easy for many to accept because they convey experiences we share, such as concerns over body image, how our bodies interact with our identities, and how our bodies influence our treatment from others. As a corrective, other facets of Augustinian thought—namely his Trinitarian theology—offer an opportunity to look beyond our own impulses toward shame.

Women and Imago Dei

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The embodiment of women, in the Augustinian anthropological model, is a lesser good than the embodiment of man, because it detracts from the possibility of men to transcend their concupiscence. Women’s bodies, then, are the conflation of sin and desire. How may a woman see herself in the image of God in this understanding of her body? There is an inherent difficulty for her to see herself in the image of God and thus her subservience in the church can be justified both by the Church, but, most damagingly, she justifies it for them, too. Internalized misogyny allows men to gain the ethos of sympathetic women in discourse about gender equity; women who have been complicit in their own dehumanization have simply been convinced of it—and how easy it is to be convinced! A two-thousand-year-old Catholic Church venerates the promulgator of these thoughts as a Church Doctor, and the Church itself obliquely and sometimes blatantly continues some of these lines of thought.

Augustine invented original sin. Understanding of the link between the Garden narrative as interpreted by Augustine and our contemporary conception of bodily morality is crucial. Eve’s sin in the Garden was not a sexual sin for Augustine, but instead an outcome of her already weaker rationality. She was more likely to desire in a disordered way not because she was lascivious, but because she was weak by virtue of her feminine nature.  

This assumption of weakness in women (and so an orientation toward the less-good, which is to say, sexual desire, at least for Augustine), as a foundation of patriarchy has a long history indeed, as it not only predates Augustine, but vestiges of a patriarchal

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111 Neil Ormerod, *Creation, Grace*, 73.
ordering of society remains into the present day. The consequences of this purported weakness is a proclivity toward sexual desire, and an influence on men into undoing.

As the basis of all Christian thought, Sacred Scriptures, specifically the writings of St. Paul, offer a place to begin. Indeed, Paul himself, insists that “nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The Augustinian model seems to reject this central tenet of Paul’s teaching, in the suggestion that the differences between men and women are so profound that each experiences a different relationship with, and therefore journey toward, Christ. Recall Augustine’s letter to the nunnery, wherein he implores modesty so as to not draw the attention of men: Blamed for the temptation of man, whether by weakness of will or immorality of body or both, in the mind of Augustine, women are distanced from Christ. The consequence of this is not just absence from discussions about salvation, but indignity, and also the possibility of oppression. With actions as seemingly small as the employment of male pronouns when referring to God, to actions as large as punishing “fallen” women with poor treatment and forced adoption in Magdalena laundries, the female experience of Church and God is one damaged by sexual narratives.

**The Stratification and Division of Women**

Undergirding much of present Western social interaction is the tension in which Augustine operates: that between pressing sexual urges and their apparent sinfulness. This double-reality presents itself in our contemporary sexual narratives outside of the Church, too. Competing paradigms tell teens to abstain from sex while simultaneously sexualizing youth; even those who seek to subvert media structures still emphasize the

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113 Galatians 3:28, NIV Translation
importance of youth in relationship (if only because youthful relationships are more successful reproductively).

Prevalent, too, is the Madonna-whore dichotomy, which in fiction and its corollary, reality, posits women as either temptresses, wicked and detracting (we may insert the women with whom Augustine indulged himself), or angels, redeeming and pure (we may imagine Monica and the Madonna herself here). More complicated is when both women are expected to reside within the same person. When a woman is told that she must be desirable but must not behave in such ways to provoke desire, a seedling of the same conflict that existed in Augustine exists in her: to desire and to not want to desire. Patriarchy and the institutions it permeates give conflicting accounts of how women ought to be. If not beautiful, she may as well abdicate her claim to physical pleasure (even when sacramentally permitted) and take a vow of celibacy. If too beautiful, she ought to cover herself up so as to not “ask for” unwanted male attention, but she must also not appear too prudish so as to deny men the pleasure they gain (and in their own opinion, are entitled to) by looking at her body. In every instance, women are not agents, but subjects of male opinion. This normatively dictated passivity exacerbates these tensions by erasing the reality of women’s desire and making them a vessel for male passion, distancing women from the free will in which Augustine sought redemption. As vessels—objects—women are not full beings. They are projections. Projections have no aspirations beyond supplementing men, taking the back-seat while men decide what morality is and who is moral. The complicated inner lives of women, which are wrought with the same truth-seeking and self-confronting qualities as men’s’ lives, face erasure.
The objectification of women allows, too, for a stratification of women. In keeping with his idea of a hierarchy of goods, Augustine wrote, “Suppress prostitution, and capricious lusts will overthrow society.”¹¹⁴ Men, especially those who are not oriented toward God, in this estimation, will always need women to fulfill their sexual desires. Augustine designates a supposedly necessary class of women to be exploited—not virgins or married women, who are closer to Jesus in their chastity, but “fallen” women.¹¹⁵ These women, in Augustine’s paradigm and indeed the contemporary paradigm, are both reviled and preserved. As the popular narratives go, sex workers are seductresses, selling out their most intimate possession—their bodies—in the pursuit of hedonistic pleasure, carrying diseases and depravity wherever they go. At the same time, a market of men exists for the services sex workers provide, and precious little political capital is spent regulating the sex industry. When Pope John Paul II condemned the objectification of bodies as products to be bought and sold, he did so as a follow up to a call to women to take responsibility for female empowerment:

If anyone has this task of advancing the dignity of women in the Church and society, it is women themselves, who must recognize their responsibility as leading characters. There is still much effort to be done, in many parts of the world and in various surroundings, to destroy that unjust and deleterious mentality which considers the human being as a thing, as an object to buy and sell, as an instrument for selfish interests or for pleasure only. Women themselves, for the most part, are the prime victims of such a mentality. Only through openly acknowledging the personal dignity of women is the first step taken to promote the full participation of women in Church life as well as in social and public life.¹¹⁶

Women, from the writings of Augustine to the writings of a twenty-first century pope, are both accountable for and victims of male behavior.

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¹¹⁵ Aquinas and Jerome said it, too.
Prostitution is inherently exploitative, as it commodifies the female body and is more often than not taking place in an imbalance power relationship between client, boss, and worker. Underlying this exploitation is Augustine’s stratification: there are some women who are worth treating with dignity, and some who are not. How may we treat a fallen woman? We may silence her and use her. We may fling her even further from the institution that claims to be endowed with a merciful, loving Holy Spirit.

**Sexual Assault**

The Augustinian approach to bodiliness disadvantages women. Augustine’s attempt to redeem women in *City of God* has modern resonance: women, as the predominant victims of sexual violence, are often still given a narrative of separation of the mind and body as a means of soothing. Recalling Augustine’s assurance in *City of God*, that a woman need not fear she has committed an act of sexual transgression as victim of rape if she truly did not consent:

> Let not your life, then, be a burden to you, you faithful servants of Christ, though your chastity was made the sport of your enemies. You have a grand and true consolation, if you maintain a good conscience, and know that you did not consent to the sins of those who were permitted to commit sinful outrage upon you.

Two veins of this thought still surround the conversation about rape. First that, a woman need not experience pain or grief after assault because her soul and her morals are still intact. Ignoring the connection between bodily trauma and psychological trauma is dangerous; dichotomizing sexual experience—especially violent sexual experience—as *sin* or *not sin* perpetuates the idea that sexual assault is not a complex matter, but instead simply is or is not: black and white. A perspective on sexual assault that is binary

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117 Augustine, *City of God*, I.XXXVIII.
excludes the experiences of countless women, because it forces distinctions on details—
penetrative or non-penetrative, length of time, injuries sustained, visible recovery—
instead of taking the trauma experienced seriously regardless of expectations of how
women ought to behave and what constitutes assault. The second problem follows the
first: how many victims of sexual trauma have questioned themselves after the incident,
wondering if they did indeed indicate consent in some way? The dynamics of sexual
hierarchy have made it so that for centuries, a man decides what consent is. Though
Augustine appeals to a woman’s heart-of-hearts in whether or not consent was truly
given, this appeal questions a woman’s first inclination, asking her to perform deep soul-
searching about an issue deeply tinged with misogyny and excusatory rhetoric.
Internalized shame, as Augustine would know, prevents women from healing and
admitting transgressions against them.

**Sexual Culture**

The necessity to contain desire so as to orient oneself toward a higher truth is lost
in most contemporary discussions about abstinence and purity—Augustine did not say
that women should be pure for men, but for God. The emphasis Augustine placed on the
un-Godliness of inevitable, natural sexual desires is a tension in which the Church still
operates. The Catechism of the Catholic Church recognizes sexuality as natural, but calls
on all to temper it with the appropriate practice of chastity for their sacramental state.118
Growing up in the world are more children afraid and ashamed of their own bodies, as
Augustine was, fearing their own sinfulness and finding their church hostile to sexuality

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118 “Life in Christ,” Catechism of the Catholic Church,
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a6.htm, 3.3.2.6.
in any sense outside of marriage. Hostility leads to outright shaming or silence, both of which deprive adolescents of the language to come to terms with their own bodily ethics and struggles. When sexuality is simultaneously pursued in culture and shamed in religion, this chill on discourse has repercussions: lobbying against sexual education in schools leaves that exploration for pornography websites and MTV. Generations of parents without the vocabulary to explain consent or pleasure produce generations of sexually unhealthy people.

Shame may be a universal condition, but hiding in shame is what makes us hurt ourselves and others. Augustine exorcised his shame. He named it and reasoned with it and ultimately decided that grace triumphs over it. Resonating only with his initial condition tells us, certainly, something about the narratives we find appealing. If we’re looking to Augustine for truth, we ought to look at his journey—through shame and toward grace—and the way that he describes that grace: perfect, self-giving love. Augustine’s contribution to bodiliness may be redeemed—namely through his Trinitarian theology.
V: Conclusion

The last chapter included uncharitable readings of Augustine, but as a part of the receptive history surrounding him, these readings are a consequence of the Augustinian legacy. Aside from Augustine’s explicit work on the body are essential ideas about rationality and salvation, and these equally as deserving of the same cornerstone-status given to his anthropology. Nitpicking elements from Augustinian thought on the body denies any access to a prescriptive theology. Embedded in his obvious and personal shame were notions of love and grace too often severed from his less-optimistic notions of embodiment. Even taken holistically, Augustine’s experience is immensely subjective. To make a deeply personal and specific journey into a narrative of universal redemption is impressive; to instill in others the ability to make the same journey is essential. Where Augustine landed in complexity formed central tenants of the Church, but his approach to complexity ought to replace our current discourse on the body. Drawing from what he knew to be true about himself and what he was compelled to believe as a higher truth, Augustine followed every line of his theology down to its logical consequences. Those who draw on his thought too often fail to do the same.

Present, too, in Augustinian thought, is the language to correct our own urges toward shame and, most damaging, the actions we pursue to process that shame. To protect ourselves from our own perceived shortcomings and failings, we create structures that insulate us from our own vulnerability. Here, we may remember Augustine’s own plea—to receive guidance and truth, but not yet. A corrective measure to this inclination toward writhing in our own finitude is Augustine’s own Trinitarian language.
The Trinity is a good way to explain the communal nature of salvation. God, as Trinity, makes it possible to join in the sheer love that animates creation. The Trinity is not a hierarchy—not a Godhead—but instead a perfect relationship. Augustine refers to it as lover, beloved, and love itself—each distinct but unified. This is a move away from Augustine’s Plotinian ideas of a hierarchy of goods, in which actions and pursuits are evaluated in regards to how close they bring one to God. Augustine’s Trinitarian model suggests a different paradigm: one of wholeness and relationship—of redemption in that wholeness. Contemporary theologians like Catherine Mowry Lacugna have modeled Trinitarian spirituality as fundamentally rooted in relationship and contrary to traditional hierarchical models of spirituality that still carry veins of Godhead-style thinking, capitalizing on Augustine’s work to suggest that as God relates to Himself, so too does He relate to us, and so too should we relate to each other.

*The New Yorker* writes about Augustine’s preoccupation with the Garden and with his own bodily shame. This is a self-selection. The choice to bring into contemporary discussions Augustine’s negative, but supremely contextual, focus on the body is unfortunate. There is space, especially in progressive publications concerned with expression and liberation, for discussions on a model of relationship not founded in power and control but in grace. If Augustine’s sexual politics may enter and alter secular space, so too may his more forgiving and optimistic takes on what it means to be human.
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