

# Augustine's teachings on human nature



**Key words:**

**The Fall:** the Biblical event in which Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command and ate the fruit from the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden; it is also used to refer to the imperfect state of humanity.

**Imago Dei:** image of God. Not physically but we have rationality, freedom and moral obligation. Capacity to have loving relationships.

**Moral choice:** committing to act for what one believes is right and good.

**Original Sin:** a state of wrongdoing in which people are born (according to some Christians) because of the sin of Adam and Eve.

**Cupiditas:** "selfish love", a love of world things and of selfish desires.

**Caritas:** "generous love", a love of others and of the virtues; the Latin equivalent of the Greek word agape.

**Dominion:** the idea that humans have control over or responsibility for the world.

**Stewardship:** the God-given right or responsibility to care for and manage the world.

**Salvation:** Jesus came to earth to save people from their sins and achieved salvation through his sacrifice in death on the cross.

**Agape:** unconditional love.

**Grace:** God's free and undeserved love for humanity, epitomised through Jesus's sacrifice.

**Influences: Who was Augustine, who influenced him and how did his beliefs change?**

## The Roman Empire

Before Augustine was born the Roman Empire was under the reign of Nero. At this time to be a Christian was considered treason, punishable by death. However, when Constantine took power he adopted the Christian faith for himself. The status of Christianity was raised and it was decriminalised. Yet, no one was forced to be a Christian. Constantine promoted religious tolerance.

Augustine was born in North Africa, an important part of the Roman Empire. Constantine's rule had established an air of religious and philosophical pluralism. Augustine's mother was a devout Christian. He was given a good education.



## The Manichees

- A group who believed the world is in a cosmic battle of good and evil.
- People have two souls, one good and one bad. This creates an internal struggle between temptation and doing good. We can use wisdom and reason to understand the causes of evil and wrong doing.
- By following role models we can escape wrong doing.
- Role model= Jesus.



## Influences continued...

### Plotinus

- A Neoplatonist.
- Augustine was particularly taken with Plotinus's view that we should be ashamed to live in our human body and that the impermanent body and the perfect realm of forms were opposites.
- Plotinus disagreed with the concept of two realms.
- There is only good.
- Evil is not a substance in itself, but a turning away from Good.
- However, Augustine did reject Plotinus's view that we are capable of understanding goodness through reason alone. As this would leave no room for Jesus



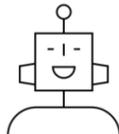
### Conversion

- Augustine had always been around Christians.
- He was inspired by St. Ambrose.
- From reading letters of Paul to the Romans he realised you cannot be truly good or understand the truth without the Grace of God.
- And we need to turn away from the bodily pleasures.
- He converted to Christianity aged 32. He later became a priest and bishop.
- Much changed when he converted. He gave up his mistress for example.
- He did not have the same religious tolerance as Constantine and actually persecuted non-Christians and destroyed non-Christian places on worship.
- He has 93 formal works.

## Human nature and the Fall

- Turning point for mankind: The Fall. Adam and Eve deliberately disobeying God.
- Understood through our relationship with God. We are created by God, we have fallen and we can be redeemed/ saved.
- Role of humans= dominion over all creatures. "Rule over" Genesis 1:26. Stewardship/ caretakers.
- Imago Dei= image of God. Not physically but we have rationality, freedom and moral obligation. Capacity to have loving relationships.
- Made from the dust, so we are just another part of nature.
- Breathing into nostrils: detachable soul or animating and life giving force.

We have rules, not programmed like robots, we have free will. We need to be told the expected standards of behaviour, but we have moral choice. We may need to follow God's commands even if they conflict with human reasoning.



## The Fall

It is a central belief in Christianity that humans are inclined to sin.

**Punishment:** One way in which mankind, specifically women, were punished after the sin of eating the forbidden fruit was child birth being made painful.



"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; With painful labour you will give birth to your children". Genesis 3

## How did the Fall change human nature?

Adam and Eve were made exactly as God wanted. Augustine believed Adam and Eve would have lived in a spirit of loving friendship with each other and in a partnership with God. As well as this, they would have been living in harmony with all other creatures. **They were living in a state of perfection, without sin.**

After The Fall this harmony was lost. Focus on the distance created between man and God.

"God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."

Genesis 1:28



- Adam and Eve had a sexual relationship in order to fulfil this command.
- Not a relationship driven by lust. Lust was a punishment given to Eve by God, after she disobeyed his command not to eat the forbidden fruit. (Highlight previous Genesis extract)
- We also know they lost their comfort in being naked.



## Concordia

- The easy, comfortable and understanding relationship with friends. The best type of human relationship.
- Augustine maintained we need a healthy life and friendship.
- We are naturally social creatures and friendship is the highest form of that sociable nature.
- It is this spirit of relationship Adam and Eve would have enjoyed before the fall.



# Augustine's teachings on human nature

## Free Will and Original Sin

- Free will, given to us by God, is one of the chief characteristics that makes us like God. Imago Dei.
- However, it was this moral choice that allowed Adam and Eve to sin.
- Consequently we are born into the grip of sin. As we are all "seminally present in the loins of Adam" we are born with original sin, we inherit it as one of Adam's descendants.
- We can now only be saved by the Grace of God.



## The Problem of Evil and the driving force of love.

- If we recall the Manichees maintained there were two powers in the world. Good and evil.
- However, Augustine maintained there is only Good. God is perfectly good (influenced by Plato's concept of the perfect form of Good).
- Evil is therefore an absence or privation of good.
- Privation of good comes when we use our Free Will to disobey God.
- We are tainted with sin and get drawn into the world of material goods.
- Evil is NOT the fault of God.



## Driven by love

- Augustine maintained as humans we are driven by love.
- It can drive us to do the right thing or the wrong thing.
- CUPIDITAS: The love of impermanent, changeable, earthly things. To follow this love is an error of will and entirely an individual's own fault.
- CARITAS: Equivalent of the Latin word for Agape. A generous love of others and expression of the will of God. Displayed through the virtues such as prudence, fortitude, justice etc. Following these principles will lead to happiness.



## Original sin and the human will

Adam and Eve took a path of cupiditas. As a result they passed on the tendency to sin through sexual intercourse to future generations.

Original sin is the term used to denote the belief that all of mankind are sinful by nature and are born that way.

We are unable to live morally pure lives, no matter how hard we try.

Pelagius stated that despite Adam setting a bad example, if we try hard we can live a moral life.

Augustine disagreed fervently. Adam corrupted everything, including human freedom to be moral. We cannot rescue ourselves and can only be saved through the Grace of God.

**After all, if we could save ourselves, what was the point of Jesus's sacrifice?**



As a result human will is divided. We are made in God's image and therefore have reason and the capacity to tell right from wrong. Yet thanks to Original Sin we are inclined to do wrong, be selfish and lustful. This divide of the will is discussed by Paul in Romans 7.

## Original sin and human society



Before The Fall mankind was told to be "rule over" other species as stewards, but not one another.

Leaders of man prior to The Fall would have taken on roles of shepherds, rather than kings. Guiding, rather than enforcing.

If The Fall had not occurred man still would have needed this kind of fatherly authority, however there would be no need for any kind of repressive political power. However, due to our original sin, we need forceful political authority. Otherwise we would simply behave according to our greed, lust and selfish natures.

Augustine argued that even if good people are subject to the authority of bad people, they should use this as a learning opportunity for humility.

We should aim for "heavenly peace" rather than "earthly peace". Earthly peace is just a compromise of the will and is motivated by mortal interests. People's sinful nature makes them greedy and selfish and therefore would want more for themselves anyway.

If any sort of earthly peace is to be achieved then, it requires political structures.

Ironically many of the virtues required for us to achieve earthly peace are only necessary due to Original Sin. E.g. Self-control.

## God's Grace and the Summum Bonum



### Augustine's teaching about Grace

**Grace:** God's free and undeserved love for humanity, epitomised through Jesus's sacrifice.

Augustine was convinced we cannot be reconciled with God through our own efforts. It is only achievable through the grace of God.

Augustine got the nickname "Doctor of Grace" as God's Grace is the cure for the human condition. Our only hope of being saved from eternal punishment.

The sacrifice of Jesus provided the only way forward for humanity.

Looking at Romans 7 we can see Paul believed humans would continue to sin, even if we accepted the Grace of God. Augustine agreed.

Despite this unavoidable tendency to sin some of us will be elected to go to heaven. For Augustine this was indicative of God's goodness- we are all tainted by Original Sin but some of us still get to go to heaven! You cannot earn a place in heaven through kindness or charity.

**SO WHAT'S THE POINT?** Well we have to turn our hearts to God to stand a chance.

### The Summum Bonum



Remember Augustine was influenced by Plato. Augustine saw Plato's Form of the Good as being similar to the goodness of God.

Happiness in this life is temporary. The Summum Bonum is eternal happiness and comes from being in the presence of God. The ultimate goal / end for all humans is the Summum Bonum. It is only possible for those who fully turn their hearts to God and whom God chooses through his Grace. The Summum Bonum can be seen as an aspect of God.

## Evaluating Augustine: Strengths

- ✓ Augustine is being sincere and relatable as he is honest about his struggles with his will and desires, e.g. Mistress
- ✓ The truth is hard to accept. It might be true we are all corrupt and need God's help, we shouldn't reject this just because the idea itself is unpalatable. This could be linked to Original Sin- a very unpopular concept...but doesn't mean it's untrue.
- ✓ Augustine allows humans to recognise that they need God's help and grace. This would give not only genuine hope for a positive after life, it could well promote a positive and proactive approach to morality.
- ✓ All societies restrict sexual behaviour in some way. E.g. Age of consent. So Augustine could be praised for bringing attention to the dangers of uncontrolled sexual desires. (Abuse, jealous reactions)
- ✓ Thomas Hobbes also agreed we are selfish, what can be perceived as selfless team work is only being done for our personal gain.
- ✓ Augustine could be viewed as optimistic as he offers a cure for the downfall of humans - the Grace of God.
- ✓ Augustine's view that there is such thing as a human nature is supported by other thinkers.
- ✓ His views of human nature pre Fall are positive.



## Evaluating Augustine: Weaknesses

- If the story of Genesis is not literal then Augustine's teachings on concepts based on before and after the Fall make less sense.
- Humans have evolved and we were not created exactly as we are today, as per Genesis (link to theory of evolution). So this leads to the question: are/ or when did we become "in the image of God". (Imago Dei)
- Were Adam and Eve real historical people? If so did the Fall even happen? If it didn't happen surely all ideas surrounding the Fall become obsolete.
- Original Sin does not seem to be just or fair. It doesn't fit with the notion of an omnibenevolent God that we are all deemed to be sinners due to the actions of others. E.g. We wouldn't state as child is a sinner/ criminal due to the actions of their parent.
- Augustine's theory could lead people to the conclusion that being good (or having high standards of personal morality) is useless as this does not guarantee us a spot in heaven, only the Grace of God can give us this.
- We can call into question the characteristics and nature of God which is widely supported with classical theism. (Merciful, omnibenevolent etc.)
- It is really wrong to have sexual desires? It is a natural/ healthy part of being human. Encouraged in other faiths. E.g. Judaism and Hinduism.
- J-J Rousseau believes we are inherently good and want to serve justice by helping the weak.
- Many philosophers such as Rousseau and Locke believe humans are born with a blank slate/ "tabula rasa". Babies are neither good nor evil, humans have free will to become their own person.
- Pessimistic view of humanity: Augustine believes humans are corrupt from the start. There are other, more optimistic views of human nature.
- Augustine became even more pessimistic. We cannot escape our fallen nature and the Doctrine of Election could be seen as very pessimistic as our fate is already sealed and seems to remove responsibility for our moral actions.
- Very negative view on human nature post fall.
- Sartre...doubt on human nature.