

St. Augustine's Concept of Disordered Love  
and its Contemporary Application

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March 12, 1993

Introduction

Toward the conclusion of Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, a work which he himself described as a "*magnum opus et arduum*"<sup>1</sup> (Brown 1967: 303), the esteemed Doctor of the Church penned one of the most profound and poetic descriptions of the mystery and genius of man (*The City of God*, XII. 24). Though the humble saint would never suggest it, there is little doubt that the author himself belongs to this category of human greatness which he so eloquently described.

The virtues of Augustine (354-430) have been recognized by "an astonishing variety of people—mystical seekers after God and rationalist philosophers, Protestants and Catholics of many theological persuasions, political scientists and educators, statesmen in search of social justice" (Williams 1979: 3). Superlatives lauding Augustine can be garnered with ease from figures past and present. Antoninus (d. 1459), the saintly bishop of Renaissance Florence, in his day could unabashedly compose this rhetorical flourish about the Bishop of Hippo.

What the sun is to the sky, St. Augustine is to the Doctors and Fathers of the Church. The sun in its brilliance excels all other luminaries; it is the lord of the planets, the father of light. A delight to the eyes, its rays shine like a jewel. His words are like music. The light of his mind penetrated the deepest problems. No wonder St. Jerome said of him that he was like an eagle soaring above the mountain tops, too lofty for lowly trifles, but with a vision embracing heaven and earth (quoted by Schopp 1948: 6).

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<sup>1</sup> "a great and arduous work."

Far more modest in tone, but to the point nevertheless, are the comments of Jaroslav Pelikan who has observed that in each of the sixteen centuries since his conversion, St. Augustine has been a "major intellectual, spiritual and cultural force." Even those who question the value of St. Augustine's contribution and consider the faith for which he lived to be antiquated would have to agree with Pelikan's assertion. Indeed, "the profundity of Augustine's thought and the sublimity of his genius will forever assure him an undying prestige as philosopher, theologian, and promoter of culture of the highest order." (Schopp 1948: 23).

Though his life and career spanned the latter half of the fourth and the first third of the fifth centuries, Adolf von Harnack recognized him to be the "first modern man" (quoted by Bourke 1982: xi). Augustine's own historical context and life experiences are intriguingly contemporary and may profitably be compared to our day. Bourke has observed: "Augustine's times were much like our own: threats and realities of war faced the political establishments; a new spirit was developing in the religions of the post-classical period; daring men were exploring the earth; tradition confronted innovation on many fronts. Into this seething cauldron of human struggle and puzzlement, a young scholar from North Africa threw his remarkable intellectual and moral talents" (1982: xi).

Our present post-industrial, postmodern era, characterized by "a legitimation crisis, a crisis of representation, and one great big crisis of modernity" (Wooley 1992: 4) has produced, in Umberto Eco's words, "the well know quip [that]: 'God is dead, Marxism is undergoing crisis, and I don't feel so hot myself'" (1987: 126). Perhaps aspects of the thought of Augustine, who once spoke powerfully into the crisis of his own era, might be worth listening to again.

Furthermore, Augustine's personal life, so painfully and honestly depicted in his *Confessions*, shows him in a strange and disturbing way to be very similar

to our late twentieth century selves. Using current psychological jargon to describe his background, a *prima facie* reading of his *Confessions* reveals that he grew up in a dysfunctional family, suffered through a childhood of unhappiness, was prone to theft and dishonesty, abhorred study and formal education, was virtually addicted to sex and food, enjoyed the life of the theatre and cabaret, studied off-beat philosophies and religions, and for a time was a single parent. His life was unquestionably disordered, and like many of our contemporaries, he found himself on a relentless course in search of healing and happiness.

I have set forth these reminders about Augustine in order to propose that certain aspects of his thought might be worthy of contemporary consideration. This is not an ill fated move according to Teselle (1970: 19).

He [Augustine] may have even greater relevance today than in the past, for when theological edifices built during the middle ages and since are being threatened, if they have not already crumbled, a new creativity ... is demanded; and if we are not to start out light-headedly elaborating our latest fancies, we would do well to dismantle the later edifices and look again at the original components from which they have been built, the insights that gave impetus to the whole development.

If Teselle's opinion regarding Augustine has merit, and I believe it does, then maybe a present look in Augustine's direction is justified. I will now present several themes of Augustinian moral philosophy with the accent on the central concept of disordered love in an attempt to draw together his thinking on this subject. I will offer a brief explanations of these main points and suggest how they might relate to our contemporary situation.

### St. Augustine's Concept of Disordered Love

**Thesis 1.** One of St. Augustine's main contributions concerns the self-consciousness and self-knowledge of the human soul as the starting point in the search for truth.

St. Augustine was the *inspecteur extraordinaire* of the human heart, his own in particular and by means of his own, those of all human beings. No one has more intensely carried out the Socratic call to the examined life, or faithfully fulfilled the injunction of the Delphic Oracle to "Know Thyself." Indeed, classic depictions of the introspective Saint often times show him gazing intently upon the church held in one hand, and the human heart held in the other.

Guided by the platonic conception of the superiority of the suprasensible over the sensible, and by the neo-platonic mystical notion that to reach the good, one must return into oneself since the human spirit is the link to ultimate unity, Augustine took the turn inward long before Descartes as the beginning point in the search for truth. For Augustine, the soul was "a substance endowed with reason and fitted to rule a body" (*De Quanti. Anim.* 13, 22.) and his definition of a human person followed as "a rational soul using a mortal and material body" (*De Mor. Eccles.* I, 27, 52). His metaphysic of the interior, or the principle of interiorization as it has been called, involves several dimensions.

First of all, the plotinian encouragement to turn inward found support in the Bible which speaks of the image and likeness of God imprinted on the soul. For the neo-platonist, the inward gaze results in the discovery of the soul as a reduced divinity, but for the Christian believer, self-examination results in the discovery of a temporal and mutable reflection of the eternal and the changeless. Hence, on the foundation of Scriptural revelation, Augustine sought to know God through His image in the soul. This knowledge of God and the soul, described in a fictive dialogue between Augustine and his own reason, became the Saint's exclusive concern (*Soliloquies* 1. 2. 7):

Reason: Now what do you want to know?

Augustine: All those things which I prayed for.

Reason: Sum them up briefly.

Augustine: I desire to know God and the soul.

Reason: Nothing more?

Augustine: Absolutely nothing.

Augustine insisted that a true knowledge of the soul's nature can be based only on the immediate awareness of self-consciousness; and that the soul's awareness of itself is of a trinity in unity that reflects the being of its Maker. Knowledge of one's own being, thinking, and willing is not open to question; there is an ego that exists, knows and wills. As Gilson describes it (1983: 244), "one of the prime characteristics of metaphysical Augustinianism is that the certainty with which the soul apprehends itself is the first of all certitudes and the criterion of truth."<sup>2</sup>

Hence, the soul in knowing itself knows that it is neither self-sufficient or independent. It cannot sustain its own being, produce its own knowledge, or satisfy its own desires. Knowledge of the soul for Augustine was neither sufficient nor satisfying in the quest for truth that was objective and unchanging. Rather, amid the flux of the changing temporal order, and in consciousness of one's own self-certainty, Augustine admonishes the step upward to God.<sup>3</sup> Augustine had learned from the Platonists to find in God "the author of all existences, the illuminator of all truth, the bestower of all beatitude (*City of God* VIII. 4; taken from Burnaby 1985: 388). Knowledge of the soul within should lead to a knowledge of God without.

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<sup>2</sup> For he who says I know I am alive, says that he knows one single thing. If he says, then, I know that I know that I am alive, there are already two... and similarly he can add innumerable others" (*De Trinitate* 15. 12. 21). Even the skeptic cannot doubt this because "everyone who knows that he is in doubt about something knows a truth; and, in regard to this, that he knows, he is certain. Therefore, he is certain about a truth" (*De Vera Religione* 39. 73).

<sup>3</sup> Do not go outside of yourself, but return to within yourself, for truth resides in the inmost part of man. And if you find that your nature is mutable, rise above yourself. But when you transcend yourself, remember that you raise yourself above your rational soul; strive, therefore, to reach the place where the very light of reason is lit. For, whither does every good reasoner strive, if not to the truth?" (*De Vera Religione* 39. 72.).

That the soul in and of itself was not the "bestower of all beatitude" was readily apparent to Augustine. Knowledge of the soul leads not only to a knowledge of God but also to a keen awareness of its own misery and unhappiness. For Augustine, the human soul was a deep abyss that was characterized by depravity and darkness. "Is not man's heart an abyss? For what abyss is deeper.... It is night, because here the human race wanders blindly" (*Ennarations on the Psalms* XLI. 13. 9). Sounding very much like an existentialist bewailing the human condition, he argues that "it must needs be that all men, so long as they are mortal, are also miserable" and that "our whole life is nothing but a race towards death" (*City of God* 9. 15 and 13. 10). At one point in the *Confessions*, reflecting on the vanity of his amusements and emptiness of his soul, he uttered this disturbing query: "My life being such, was it life, O my God?" (*Conf.* III. 3. 5). No doubt his entire pre-Christian experience of intellectual and emotional torture was the source of these observations which propelled his soul, and he believed all souls as well, on a journey to discover wisdom and the truly happy life.

**Thesis 2.** Out of the sense of misery arises the natural and universal quest for happiness.

Pricked from within, and inspired from without by reading Cicero's *Hortensius* at the age of nineteen, Augustine set about to discover wisdom in order to be happy. So motivated, Augustine developed what is perhaps the most thorough-going *eudemonism* in the history of Western thought.

No other man has examined more steadily and discerningly the way to the happy life. Everyone surely seeks happiness, but does anyone possess it? Is it not true that, whether rich or poor, illustrious or obscure, no one can escape a persistent inner disquiet and restlessness? Time inevitably exposes the absence of interior peace. This universal human experience, which Augustine called wretchedness (*miseria*), informs all Augustine's thinking, and directs it, whatever his subject may be, toward a single goal, the happy life (DiLorenzo 1983: 33).

Augustine was convinced that happiness was the ultimate goal of the thought of philosophers—"the one great object towards which the labor, vigilance, and industry of all philosophers seems to have been directed" (*City of God* 8. 3). He referenced Marcus Varro, an encyclopedic thinker, who in his book *De Philosophia*, had cited some two-hundred and eighty-eight different sects of philosophy each setting forth various opinions regarding the supreme good and the source of happiness (cf. *City of God* 19. 1).<sup>4</sup> But the "pursuit of happiness" was not the territory of philosophers alone. All persons, Augustine noted, seek happiness: "It is the decided opinion of all who use their brains, that all men desire to be happy." (*City of God* 10. 1). The problem for Augustine, and for anyone, boils down to this: "to know what one should desire in order to be happy, and to know how to obtain it" (Gilson 1983: 4). Here is Augustine's exposition of the problem (*Against the Manichaens* 3.).

But the title happy cannot, in my opinion, belong either to him who has not what he loves, whatever it may be, or to him who has what he loves if it is hurtful, or to him who does not love what he has, although it is good in perfection. For one who seeks what he cannot obtain suffers torture, and one who has got what is not desirable is cheated, and one who does not seek for what is worth seeking for is diseased. Now in all these cases the mind cannot but be unhappy, and happiness and unhappiness cannot reside at the same time in one man; so in none of these cases can the man be happy. I find, then, a fourth case where the happy life exists—when that which is man's chief good is both loved and possessed. ... We must now inquire what is man's chief good.

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine explains his reasons for his reference to Varro as follows: "I must first explain...the reasonings by which men have attempted to make for themselves a happiness in this unhappy life, in order that it may be evident, not only from divine authority, but also from such reasons as can be adduced to unbelievers, how the empty dreams of the philosophers differ from the hope which God gives to us, and from the substantial fulfillment of it which He will give us as our blessedness" (*City of God* 19. 1).

In developing this theme of human longing and satisfaction in the quest for happiness and the greatest good, Augustine was developing a time-honored teleological notion in Greek metaphysics. Persons illustrate in their being forces that are actually at work in all aspects of nature. Human beings are part of a vast network of interrelated things within an ordered hierarchy of beings which together form the cosmos. Each entity is pursuing its own end and comes to rest only when these ends are attained. This striving for rest and fulfillment is the power and motive that drives all things toward their purposes, just as weight causes things to move to their proper places in the cosmos—heavy things downward and light things upward. Augustine conceived of the powerful forces that move people, like a weight, to be love. Love is the moral dynamic that propels people to act. In the *Confessions* Augustine wrote, "My weight is my love; by it am I carried wheresoever I am carried...." (13. 9. 10; (Markus 1967: 202). And most people are carried by the weight of their love to find the rest they are seeking in a variety of objects of love.

**Thesis 3:** The quest for happiness consists in attaching ourselves in love to objects of desire that we think will make us happy. But for this to occur, a knowledge of the metaphysical order and value of objects of love is necessary such that love might be properly ordered.

For Augustine, the word "love" (or the plural "loves") designated the sum total of forces and drives that determine a person's actions whether natural or voluntary. But behind human love is the human will or the capacity of choice. Consequently, human beings are not simply at the mercy of conflicting, overpowering forces of love within, but these loves may be regulated by the human will—a *la* the platonic charioteer (*Phaedrus*)—which is capable of selecting among them, deciding which to resist and which to embrace. The human moral task amounts to the responsibility to discern between



metaphysically ordered objects and to love them rightly. Hence, for Augustine, rightly ordered love was virtue (*City of God* 15. 22) and disordered love was vice.

The idea of order is central to Augustine's moral philosophy and was probably a product of his Manichean and Neoplatonic backgrounds as well as his Christian faith. Augustine's cosmos is an ordered structure in which the degrees of being are at the same time degrees of value. This universal order requires the subordination of what is lower in the scale of being to what is higher: body is to be subject to spirit and spirit is to be subject to God. Man must know not only his own place but the place of everything else in the universe and attribute to it what is its due. His Christianity led him to make the qualitative distinction and to maintain the proper order between the realms of the infinite Creator and the finite creation (Burnaby 1985: 388). From these notions came Augustine's emphasis on order which might be rightly called a metaphysical and/or ethical hierarchicalism. As O'Donnell says,

The Augustinian ethic reveals itself in practice as hierarchical. Proper use of all people and things requires an accurate assessment of their relative value in the plan of salvation. All right love is based on right knowledge. Order exists within nature, and only when order is perceived ... can the commandments of love be genuinely fulfilled (O'Donnell 1985: 19).

Here is how Augustine himself puts it.

Now he is a man of just and holy life who forms an unprejudiced estimate of things, and keeps his affections also under strict control, so that he neither loves what he ought not to love, nor fails to love what he ought to love, nor loves that equally which ought to be loved either less or more, nor loves less or more which ought to be loved equally. No sinner is to be loved as a sinner; and every man is to be loved as a man for God's sake; but God is to be loved for His own sake. And if God is to be loved more than any man, each man ought to love God more than himself. (*On Christian Doctrine* I. 27. 28).

For Augustine, then, the problem was not loving *per se* since human beings are made in the image of the divine Trinity who is love. The problem was

not in the things loved *per se* since all things are good having been created by God who is goodness itself, though his lingering Manichaeism mitigates against this to some extent. Rather, the problem arises in loving things the wrong way, that is, in the manner in which people love and in the expectations they have in regard to the outcome of their love in relation to the metaphysical order and value of the objects of love.

Each object of love is different and for this reason the consequences of loving them will be different. In a similar way, the needs that prompt us to love are also different. Augustine believed that there was a direct correlation between various human needs and the objects that can satisfy them. Each object of love can give only so much satisfaction and no more. Happiness requires that an object of love contain a sufficient amount of whatever it takes to fulfill or satisfy human need. Although each object is a legitimate object of love, we cannot and must not expect more from it than its unique nature can provide (Stumpf 1989: 145). Two examples may help to clarify this.

**Thesis 4:** Love is disordered when it seeks final happiness in temporal and finite objects, an action which engenders all kinds of pathologies in human behavior.

First of all, the human soul as it loves and seeks earnestly to rest securely in the things that it loves, discovers that the ephemeral, temporal nature of created things as they stand in the metaphysical hierarchy render them an inadequate basis for final happiness.

In all such things, let my soul praise You, O God, Creator of all things, but let it not cleave too close in love to them through the senses of the body. For they go their way and are no more; and they rend the soul with desires that can destroy it, for it longs to be one with the things it loves and to repose in them. But in them is no place of repose, because they do not abide (*Conf.* 4. 10. 15).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wherever the soul of man turns, unless towards God, it cleaves to sorrow, even though the things outside God and outside itself to which it cleaves may be things of beauty. For these lovely things would be nothing at all unless they were from Him. They rise and set: in their rising

And since this is their nature, since they are not permanent, the soul can find no final rest in loving these things. "The chief good," says Augustine, "must be something which cannot be lost against the will. For no one can feel confident regarding a good which he knows can be taken from him, although he wishes to keep and cherish it. But if a man feels no confidence regarding the good which he enjoys, how can he be happy while in such fear of losing it" (*Against the Manicheans* 3). Hence, Augustine invokes God to keep him from loving things that will perish so as not to disfigure or destroy his soul.

Furthermore, not only does the ephemeral nature of objects render them an inadequate basis for happiness, but the finite nature of things, in that they cannot satisfy the innate human need for the infinite, exhibits their impotence as well. This seems to be the implication of an imaginary interrogation he sustains with the earth and its contents.

And what is this I asked the earth, and it answered me, "I am not He"; and whatsoever are in it confessed the same. I asked the sea, and the deeps, and the living creeping things, and they answered, "We are not Thy God, seek above us." ... I had sought Him in the body from earth to heaven, so far as I could send messengers, the beams of my eyes. But the better is the inner, for to it as presiding and judging, all the bodily messengers reported the answer of heaven and earth, and all things therein, who said, "We are not God, but He made us." These things did my inner man know by the ministry of the outer: I, the inner, knew them; I, the mind, though the senses of my body. I asked the whole frame of the world about my God; and it answered me, "I am not He, but He made me." (*Conf.* 10. 6. 9).

Here Augustine questions things to allow them to reveal themselves as the finite creation dependent upon their Creator. What seems to interest Augustine here is the moral attitude of the questioner, not so much that the order and beauty of these things imply the existence of the Creator, but rather that

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they begin to be, and they grow towards perfection, and once come to perfection they grow old, and they die: not all grow old but all die. Therefore when they rise and tend toward being, the more haste they make toward fullness of being, the more haste they make towards ceasing to be. That is their law (*Conf.* 4. 10. 15).

since God had created them they must be seen for what they are as His handiwork, to value them accordingly, and to worship only Him and not His handiwork which would be disordered love. The moral aspect of his deliberations—rightly understanding the order of things and responding appropriately to them—seems to be the critical point (Marcus 1967: 204).

To elaborate, it seems, according to Augustine, that the range of human need includes not only temporal and finite things—other persons, created entities, and the self—but also God. Since we always bears the marks of our creation, our nature was made such that only God can provide ultimate satisfaction or happiness and fulfill human teleology. To love God is, then, the indispensable requirement for happiness, because only God, who is infinite, can satisfy that special need in humanity that is precisely the need for the infinite.<sup>6</sup>

But not all persons have this knowledge and some, if not most, like Augustine himself, seek their happiness in the temporal and finite with resultant pathologies.

What a person loves, and how he or she loves it, will determine the course and character of life, as well as the condition of society. For the youthful Augustine, this was certainly the case. Recall his famous introductory remark at the beginning of third book of the *Confessions* where he says: "To Carthage then I came, where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about my ears."<sup>7</sup> Immersion in

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<sup>6</sup> This train of thought ultimately led Augustine to his concept of the two cities, the City of God, and the City of Man, which is the mutual association of individuals united together by the things they love.

<sup>7</sup> This line from the *Confessions* was employed by T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, in the verse below by which he offered his own description of the disorder of twentieth century culture.

To Carthage then I came  
Burning burning burning burning  
O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
O Lord Thou pluckest  
burning.

the "cauldron of unholy loves" engenders all kinds of pathologies in human behavior. Augustine's own past experience again illustrates the point: "For it was my sin that not in Him, but in His creatures—myself and others—I sought for pleasures, sublimities, truths, and so fell headlong into sorrows, confusion, errors. (*Conf.* 1. 18. 31). The reason why this is so, Augustine opines, is strictly theological. "For Thou hast commanded, and so it is, that every inordinate affection should be its own punishment" (*Conf.* 1. 12. 19). For Augustine, the depravity created by disordered love was so deep that no one could extricate or heal him or herself from it. Rather, the human subject must be renewed by the gracious initiative of God.

**Thesis 5:** The human condition as envisaged by Augustine calls for nothing less than the radical reconstruction of the human personality through Christian conversion and reunion with the only proper object of happiness which is the Godhead. Augustine's own conversion experience as set forth in the *Confessions* is the paradigm.

Augustine's theft of a bevy of pears in the *Confessions* has occasionally been held up to ridicule as an example of a neurotic soul that was burdened by excessive and unnecessary guilt.<sup>8</sup> However, from Augustine's point of view, the heist implied a violation of the very moral and rational order established by God, an act that carried with it the implications of total autonomy and freedom. Starnes explains what he thinks the theft of the pears might have really signified to

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<sup>8</sup> This view was expressed by Oliver Wendell Holmes when he wrote to Harold Laski, "Rum thing to see a man making a mountain of robbing a pear tree in his teens" (quoted by Brown 1967: 172, n. 5). Judy Jones, and William Wilson, *An Incomplete Education*, in their treatment of Augustine, have this to say about the readability of his best known works, including the *Confessions*: "Not difficult, exactly, but after reading seven pages on the wickedness of stealing a pear, ... you may decide you'd rather spend time discussing, say, fluoridation of the water supply with someone closer to your own age" (1987: 307).

Augustine, here presented as if thinking to himself about the implications of the act (1990: 42):

"Everyone knows there is a divine law which forbids theft, so if I can steal [pears] and get away with it, this will show that I am not subject to God or to any divine law. And if I am not subject to any law which defines what is good, then the good will simply be what I say it is. Hence I will be free and omnipotent. I can do what I want and what I want is the good." It is no wonder that he ends these two chapters with words of total abhorrence. "O rottenness, O monstrosity of life and depth of death" (2. 6. 14).

This violation of the divine moral and rational order which signified his independence from God and personal freedom was also manifested in what Augustine called his "old friends," that is, "the finite goods [things] that had been with him throughout his life and to which he had attached himself by the chain of habit" (Starnes 1990: 42), and by which he had sought to be happy. It was his attachment to these things or friends, which reason told him were temporal, and limited, and therefore inadequate, that kept him "hanging suspended" (*Conf.* 8. 11. 27) and separate from Christ. In particular, it was his sexual desire—itsself representative of a plethora of other earthly attachments—and his aversion to a life of continence, that bound him fast to the world, and kept him an unbeliever. The intensity of his struggle is found in these honest words from his *Confessions* (8. 11. 26).

My old friends, nonsensical trifles and empty nothings  
Held me back and picked at the robe of my flesh  
And murmured from below:  
    "Do you send us away? and  
    "From this moment we will never be with you for all eternity," and  
    "From this moment on you will never be allowed to do this or that for all  
    eternity."  
And what things did they suggest in the phrase "this or that" which just  
used!  
What things did they suggest my God!  
May your mercy keep such things away from the soul of your servant!  
What sordid things they suggested, what shameful acts!  
But I heard them now much less than half as strongly.

It was not as if they were freely contradicting me to my face  
But they were like things muttering behind my back  
And like things stealthily plucking at me to make me look back  
While I was going my way from them.  
Nevertheless, they held me who delayed from ripping myself clear  
And forcing myself off from them  
And leaping over to the place to which I was called,  
Since habit, a tyrant, said to me,  
"Do you think you can live without these things?"

The decision Augustine faced was whether or not to remain true to his old habits and way of life which reason told him to repudiate, but which nature averred he could not live without. The resolution of the stalemate came in the celebrated garden scene in which he realized that it was impossible for him to heal the division in his soul by himself. At last he was open to a restoration and cure that could only be effected by divine grace.

Interpreting the child's phrase to "pick it up and read, pick it up and read" as a divine command to pick up the Scriptures and read, his eyes fell upon that famous passage of Scripture in Romans 13 that exhorted "take no thought for nature and nature's appetites, but put on Christ." Once he had read this far, he had no need to go further for as he put it, "the light of confidence flooded my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled." Starnes offers this understanding of this pinnacle event (1985: 235).

In obeying these commands Augustine had therefore freely committed to God the cure of his soul—the healing of the wound or division in his innermost nature, the opposition between his animal and rational natures, the sickness in his bones. Throughout the *Confessions* it has been his constant teaching that divine grace alone can cure us and he has now fully shown the logic which justifies this position. The command was Christ's and so was the way: from henceforth he would not look to himself for his salvation but to Christ.

From the moment of his garden conversion and subsequent baptism at the hands of St. Ambrose in the little church at Milan, Aurelius Augustine began one of the most extraordinary spiritual pilgrimages in the history of the human

race. Humanward he testified that what he had feared to be parted from was now a joy to be parted with (*Conf.* 9. 1. 1), and to God he uttered that "You kept stirring me with Your secret goad so that I should remain unquiet until you should become clear to the gaze of my soul" (*Conf.* 7. 8. 12), which, we will recall, was the starting point. And finally he experienced the repose and peace for which he had longed, knowing that "with Thee is rest entire, and life imperturbable" (*Conf.* 2. 10. 18). This is the background of perhaps the most famous line in the whole of the *Confessions* where Augustine says: "O Lord, Thou has made us for Thyself, and our spirits are restless [unhappy] until they rest in Thee" (*Conf.* 1. 1. 1). His only regret was that God was his "tardy joy" (*Conf.* 2. 2. 9).

Too late have I loved Thee, O Thou Beauty of ancient days, yet ever new!  
Too late I loved Thee! And behold, Thou wert within, and I abroad, and  
there I searched for Thee; deformed I, plunging amid those fair forms  
which Thou hadst made. Thou wert with me, but I was not with Thee.  
Things held me far from Thee, which, unless they were in Thee, were not  
at all. (*Conf.* 10. 27. 38).

#### Contemporary Applications of St. Augustine's Concept of Disordered Love

The thought of Augustine certainly has its flaws. It may be and has been faulted for its "crypto-Manicheism or lingering Neoplatonism" (O'Donnell 1985: 22) that denigrates the material creation, for its excessively pessimistic assessment of human nature (though events of the twentieth-century may affirm his outlook), and for his unqualified reliance upon the grace of God as the only hope of humanity—a notion that offends humanistic sensibilities. Despite these possible shortcomings, I find several features of his thought appealing for a day of questionable alternatives. Along these lines, I am reminded of a quip from Woody Allen that goes something like this.

"Mankind is at a crossroads. He faces two alternatives. On the one hand there is deep pessimism and mass destruction. On the other hand there is



dark despair and total annihilation. Let us pray for the wisdom to know the difference and to choose wisely."

At the crossroads and crisis of the late twentieth century, Augustine offers some lines of thought to consider. First, I believe his proposal to turn our gaze inward to the soul as the starting point in the quest for truth to be epistemologically and existentially suggestive. The self-knowledge that results from the look within propels one toward the source and solution of its inward operations and needs. Additionally, serious internal examination is a helpful antidote to our carnivalesque American culture that rivets attention upon the external and the trivial and diverts our focus from the contemplation of the perennial questions that continuously confront our minds. As Charles Taylor said, "... Augustine was the first to make the first-person standpoint fundamental to our search for truth" (1989: 113), a standpoint which if not the *terminus ad quem* of the process, at least may be posited as the *terminus a quo*.

Second, I find his focus on the search for happiness not only attractive, but also an accurate assessment of the human condition. In a country where the right to the pursuit of happiness is a foundational political proposition, St. Augustine's depth analysis shakes up our superficial understandings of this sublime notion, and offers a challenging alternative, namely, that ultimate happiness is not to be found in the elusive character of the American dream, but is rather transcendent in origin and nature. As C. S. Lewis once proffered, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world" (1968: 25).

Third, his penetrating insights into the miserable state of the human heart, and the vanity of life, are very relevant to our day with its angst and neurasthenia. Augustine keenly depicts the experience of many who do in fact lead lives of quiet desperation. Not only does he, in the context of his resolutely theocentric

system, suggest why this is the case, but he also presents himself and his experience as a glimmer of hope in the midst of the darkness as one who has looked into the abyss and felt the anguish.

Fourth, his concept of disordered love in which the soul seeks satisfaction in things that are metaphysically incapable of providing it is strikingly applicable to our day. The Bible would call this disordered love in the extreme "idolatry," and the disordered lives that result from idolatry would, in the biblical idiom, be labeled unrighteousness. Today's psychotherapist would call disordered love, the repeated, desperate attempt to achieve happiness by satisfying all desires in objects that cannot satisfy them, addiction, and the lifestyle that results would be termed dysfunctional. In other words, it is possible to make the case that the Augustinian notion of disordered love and the psychotherapeutic notion of addiction are virtually are one and the same. Through this teaching on disordered love, Augustine has put his finger on the very pulse of our times. The parallel is not just uncanny; it's revealing.

Fifth, and finally, a fresh look at Augustine and his thought renews the most central theme of all: that of the existence and nature of God, and in what way, if any, He is the key to happiness, the *summum bonum*, the fulfillment of the abyss in the human heart. An honest look at Augustine's perennial philosophy may serve us well at this moment of crisis and transition in our civilization's history where the choices are not particularly alluring.

In our own time, Augustine is no longer the venerable ancestor looming over every ecclesiastical controversy that he was for so long, and this is almost certainly to his advantage. We are freer than any other generation since his own to confront him as he was, to let him speak for himself, and to live out the implications of what he had to say (O'Donnell 1985: 129).

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St. Augustine's Concept of Disordered Love  
and its Contemporary Application  
by David Naugle, Th.D.

Southwest Commission on Religious Studies  
Theology and Philosophy of Religion Group  
March 12, 1993

*Introduction*

*St. Augustine's Concept of Disordered Love*

**Thesis 1.** One of St. Augustine's main contributions concerns the self-consciousness and self-knowledge of the human soul as the starting point in the search for truth.

**Thesis 2.** Out of the sense of misery arises the natural and universal quest for happiness.

**Thesis 3:** The quest for happiness consists in attaching ourselves in love to objects of desire that we think will make us happy. But for this to occur, a knowledge of the metaphysical order and value of objects of love is necessary such that love might be properly ordered.

**Thesis 4:** Love is disordered when it seeks final happiness in temporal and finite objects, an action which engenders all kinds of pathologies in human behavior.

**Thesis 5:** The human condition as envisaged by Augustine calls for nothing less than the radical reconstruction of the human personality through Christian conversion and reunion with the only proper object of happiness which is the Godhead. Augustine's own conversion experience as set forth in the *Confessions* is the paradigm.

*Contemporary Applications of  
St. Augustine's Concept of Disordered Love*

First, I believe his proposal to turn our gaze inward to the soul as the starting point in the quest for truth to be epistemologically and existentially suggestive. Second, I find his focus on the search for happiness not only attractive, but also an accurate assessment of the human condition.

Third, his penetrating insights into the miserable state of the human heart, and the vanity of life, are very relevant to our day with its angst and neurasthenia.

Fourth, his concept of disordered love in which the soul seeks satisfaction in things that are metaphysically incapable of providing it is strikingly applicable to our day.

Fifth, and finally, a fresh look at Augustine and his thought renews the most central theme of all: that of the existence and nature of God, and in what way, if any, He is the key to happiness, the *summum bonum*, the fulfillment of the abyss in the human heart.