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Augustine

ON 24 AUGUST 410, THE GOTHIC LEADER ALARIC AND HIS ARMY ENTERED Rome and sacked it. Palaces were looted and burned, prisoners taken, women raped, bodies left to rot in the streets.¹ Although the Goths withdrew after just three days, the fall of the Eternal City shocked educated Romans throughout the empire.

Why had such a disaster taken place? The discussion centred on the place of Christianity and the abandonment of the policy of toleration towards paganism, culminating in the Emperor Theodosius's ban on pagan cults in 391 and his order for the destruction of the great temple of Serapis in Alexandria. This focus may seem surprising, since the Goths who ransacked Rome were Christians, though adherents of what the Catholic Church regarded as the Arian heresy, which denied the divinity of Christ. But it was argued by the few remaining pagans that the Goths had been able to enter Rome because the public worship of the gods had been abandoned, and so the city no longer enjoyed their protection.

By this time most Romans were Christians, including the members of the senatorial aristocracy who had once been the guardians of paganism. Yet their Christianity was often superficial.² Worried that their weak faith would be challenged by the pagan argument, Augustine set out to reply to it, and in doing so produced his most ambitious work, a Christian rethinking, not just of the history of Rome, but of the relationship between God and the course of human history. Written in the safety of North Africa (where, however, the influx of refugees kept the events in Italy vividly present), the *City of God* (CG), begun probably in 412 but not finished until about fourteen years later, is not merely an intellectual masterpiece; it is a foundational book for the Problem of Paganism.³

¹For the sack and the events leading up to it, see Demougeot 1951, 376–485; Courcelle 1964, 50–56; Matthews 1975, 284–91; Heather 1991, 208–18.

²Earlier scholars represented the senatorial aristocracy as a stronghold of paganism. Cameron (2011) has argued impressively against this view, and against the persistence of paganism up until this time, but he accepts (2011, 689) that there were still some pagans who blamed the ban on pagan sacrifice for the sack of Rome, and concludes (2011, 793) that the *City of God* was written for an audience of 'Christians, many of them recent converts . . . whose motives and sincerity alike were suspect'.

³On the dating, see O'Daly 1999, 34–35.

Although the problem has somewhat different contours for him from those it would take on in the Middle Ages, from the time of Abelard onwards, when pagan antiquity was no longer even a moribund reality, in the *City of God* and other works Augustine looks closely at three of the main strands of the problem—wisdom, salvation and virtue—and takes positions which set the agenda for almost all subsequent discussion.

The vicissitudes of Augustine's own life had put him in the position to play this foundational role. Son of (probably) a pagan father and a Christian mother, his education as a rhetorician instilled in him the values of classical Roman civilization, but he shared a widespread discontent with them. In his *Confessions* (397–401), he tells of his long search for a set of firm beliefs. For a time, he became a follower of Manichaeism, a dualist religion which he may have regarded as a type of Christianity. Then he transferred his intellectual allegiance to Platonism, before finally, in his early thirties (386), in an experience of conversion which he presents as both miraculous and transformational, he committed himself fully to Christianity, the religion he had known from birth, and gave up his secular ambitions.⁴ None of the writings from before his conversion survives, but chronological study of his works shows that, in a sense, the process of Christianization continued. At first, Augustine wrote in a manner close to that of a philosopher in the Platonic mould, but he came to take on specifically Christian subjects and sources, especially the Bible. By the time he came to write the *City of God*, in the last two decades of his life, he seems to look out from the stronghold of Christian teaching to the pagan culture which had formed him as something alien, but his own intellectual and spiritual journey never ceases to complicate this perspective.

PAGAN WISDOM

Augustine's response to the pagans' arguments about the fall of Rome led him to rewrite Roman history.⁵ He shows with a wealth of historical evidence that the pagan gods were never the protectors of Rome their upholders claimed. The story of Rome is one of disasters and bloodshed, which the public worship of the gods did nothing to prevent (II.3; III). The only difference between the most recent calamity, the Gothic sack of Rome, and those of the past tells in favour of Christianity: the Goths respected the churches as places of sanctuary, in a way which no invader

⁴For the problems in assessing this conversion, see below, pp. 26–27.

⁵On Augustine's judgement of Roman history and culture, see Maier 1955, 84–116, 195–98. For the overall structure and themes of the *City of God*, see Guy 1961 and Madec 1994, 189–213.

had treated pagan temples (I.1–2). On a second level, Augustine argues that it is wrong to think that God acts simply by rewarding those he has chosen, let alone some particular nation or empire, with worldly prosperity. Nations and empires flourish and decline as God wills, but often God's design is inscrutable. God may, indeed, repay good behaviour with success, as he did in the case of the Rome of Cato, where a few men, at least, showed high moral qualities in their devotion to public life (V.12, 15). But he sends affliction equally to the good and wicked, partly to emphasize that it is in the hereafter that reward and punishment will be given, partly because even good people are too attached to worldly things, and partly because the same adversities will be used differently by the wicked, whom they punish, and the good, whom they chasten and improve (I.8–10). Augustine rejects, then, any historiography that sees the Roman Empire in either pagan or Christian triumphal terms. It had been tempting for Augustine's Christian predecessors, who witnessed the empire convert more and more fully to Christianity, to discern in its flourishing the workings of God's plan. For Augustine, too, divine providence controls the Roman Empire, but not in any easily discernible way. Yet he does not believe that God's providence is hidden. On a third level, Augustine answers the pagans by replacing a secular (though sometimes Christianized) historiography with a theology of history. The first ten books of the *City of God* discuss Rome, its gods and its history. The final twelve trace out the plan of sacred history, from the creation to the last judgement. The City of God—not a physical city but the community of those who are, or will be, in Heaven—has a clear history and future. They are set out, not in the books of Roman history, but in the Bible. The past which Christians should make their own is not that of Roman triumph and Roman virtue—which, in any case, are illusory—but that of the Old Testament and its fulfilment in Christ.

Given this outlook, it might be expected that Augustine would think that pagans, even the philosophers, were merely victims and purveyors of false beliefs, not sources of knowledge. He did indeed dismiss the claims of any sort of polytheism, even Varro's sophisticated presentation of it, to be taken seriously. But his approach to the dominant pagan philosophical school was very different: personally engaged, nuanced and, though with qualifications, highly appreciative.

During the first two centuries of Christianity, the leading school of philosophy in the Roman Empire had been Stoicism. Its adherents might, in some sense, be considered worshippers of one God, and there was room for some of the earliest Christian thinkers to see Greek philosophy as a preparation for their own doctrine. But the type of philosophy which became dominant from the third century onwards had a relationship with Christianity at once closer and yet far more conflicted.

Plotinus (c. 204–70) presented himself as an interpreter of Plato’s philosophy, but the ideas he advanced, often labelled ‘Neoplatonism’, owed much also to Aristotle, earlier followers of Plato and Plotinus’s own philosophical genius. Like Plato, Plotinus believed that the world we perceive with our senses must be explained by what we can grasp only with our intellects. He distinguished three levels of explanation: the One, because the ultimate source of things must be entirely unitary; then Intellect, in which he places Plato’s Ideas; and finally Soul, which accounts for movement and life in the universe. These three levels of explanation are not, however, constructs, but hierarchically ordered realities—indeed, they are alone what is truly real. There is (and was always for Christian readers) a temptation to see in these so-called hypostases Plotinus’s God, which thereby turns out to be, not merely immaterial and ineffable, but also triune. Yet many interpreters would say that there is nothing in Plotinus’s universe very similar to God in the Christian sense. Moreover, unlike Plotinus himself, his followers, Porphyry (c. 232–c. 305) and Iamblichus (c. 240–c. 325), considered pagan religious practices indispensable for the philosopher’s intellectual ascent, and they linked Platonism with defence of the classical gods and opposition to Christianity.

Despite its congenial elements, the Platonism of Plotinus and Porphyry would, therefore, have presented much which a Christian of Augustine’s time would have found rebarbative. Yet Augustine’s overall view of Platonism was surprisingly generous.⁶ Although their grasp of the truth was deficient and linked to the wrong attitude, Augustine believed that, so far as they went, the best of the Platonists were right in their beliefs about God. He could hold this view because he tended to exaggerate their belief in strictly one God, who fulfils much the same role as the Christian God.

One reason for this unexpectedly high estimate of the Platonists’ knowledge is provided by an aspect of his biography already mentioned. He had first read the ‘books of the Platonists’—thought to be translations of texts by Plotinus and Porphyry—in 386, when he was a professor of rhetoric in Milan, the imperial capital.⁷ According to the *Confessions*, these books taught him what, until then, he had not understood about God: that he is entirely incorporeal, eternal and good, and that evil is not

⁶On Augustine and Platonism, see especially Dörrie 1971; Madec 1962, 1981 and 1994, 51–69; O’Connell 1984; O’Meara 1959; along with the response by Hadot 1960. Both Dörrie and Madec consider Augustine’s attitude to Platonism somewhat less complex than it is here argued to be: for Madec Augustine’s Platonism is, even from the beginning, firmly rooted in a visceral attachment to Christianity; for Dörrie it is a stance, adopted to encourage educated pagans to convert.

⁷There has been much controversy about the identity of the ‘books of the Platonists’, well summarized by O’Donnell in Augustine 1992, II, 421–24; and see Courcelle 1968 157–59.

an existing thing at all (VII.x.16–xvii.23). In this way, Augustine explains, his reading of the pagan Platonists played an important part in bringing about his conversion. Historians have not fully agreed on the accuracy of Augustine's retrospective account, or how exactly to interpret it. Was Augustine far more than nominally a Christian at the time he read the Platonists' books, and was he also influenced by a Christian Platonism, through the preaching of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan? Or, by contrast, was his attachment to pagan Platonism longer and closer than he reveals as an autobiographer?⁸ Whatever the answer, it seems clear that Augustine read the Platonic texts he encountered as talking about one God, even though by his time Platonism was strongly associated with polytheistic worship, and in Porphyry, if not Plotinus, there was much which, at least ostensibly, favoured polytheism. Augustine was aware of the polytheistic elements in the books of the Platonists, the 'idols of the Egyptians', but he was not misled by them and he was able, like the Israelites stealing Pharaoh's gold, to take from them just the truths which they had put to wrong use.⁹ He might easily have decided that all pagan Platonism was itself inextricably tied to polytheism, but he seems, rather, to have concluded that there was strictly monotheistic, proto-Christian gold to be found in the pagan writings, hidden but not essentially corrupted.

This central idea shapes two of the three main themes which, from his earliest comments on Platonism, in the works written immediately after his conversion, to his latest, remain constant. First, Augustine holds that there is a body of important truths about God, valuable for Christians, which is taught by the Platonists. Second, he considers that the best Platonists did not seriously and consistently believe in the polytheism they apparently indulged. But there is also a third theme, in a different key: the Platonists' lack of humility.

The first theme is very obvious. For instance, in *Against the Academics* (387) Augustine is willing (at least as an interim measure, pending further enquiry) to accept so far as 'human wisdom' is concerned, what the Platonists hold, as 'not going against our [i.e., Christian] sacred doctrines'.¹⁰ A few years later, writing *On True Religion* (389–91), Augustine (III.3) portrays Plato's central teaching as a call to abandon a life of sensory pleasures and to learn how to contemplate God's eternity and thereby merit eternal life. He accepts this teaching. If, he goes on (III.7), Plato and his followers were to come to life again, 'they would make a few

⁸For a summary of the controversy (with bibliography), see Madec 1994, 51–69. More recently, Dobell (2009) has re-examined the question and produced serious arguments to show that the intellectual journey from Platonism to a full understanding of the Incarnation went on for years after Augustine's spiritual and moral conversion.

⁹*Confessions* II.ix.15.

¹⁰*Against the Academics* XX.43.

adjustments to their language and doctrines and become Christians, as many Platonists of recent times have done'. In the *Confessions*, Augustine brings out even more strikingly than before the extent to which the teachings of Plato and his followers coincide with Christianity by (VII. ix.13–14) quoting the opening of the Gospel of John, which tells how God made all things in the Word, and saying that he read this in the 'books of the Platonists'—'not indeed in these words, but entirely the same thing is put forward there with a multitude of arguments'.

In the *City of God*, after declaring that 'no other philosophers are nearer to us' than Plato and his followers, Augustine goes on (VIII.6–8) to show how their teaching about God was right in each main part of philosophy—physics, logic and ethics. There is no difference, he says later (X.1), between us and the Platonists about God as the source of all happiness, for angels as well as human beings. The closeness between Plato and Christian doctrine is so great that it makes it plausible to Augustine that Plato should have known something of the Old Testament, even though direct contact with a translation did not seem to him chronologically possible (VIII.11). He also argues (X.23) that Porphyry's understanding of the hypostases suggests that, unlike the other Platonists, he knew not just of the first and second persons of the Trinity, but also of the Holy Spirit, and that Porphyry had an idea of grace (X.29). And, near the end of the *City of God* (XXII.27), he suggests that, by putting together what Plato and Porphyry said, the truth about the final resurrection could be reached.

The second theme is stated clearly, though briefly, in *On True Religion*, where (III.2) Augustine admits that the philosophers went along with polytheism, but suggests that they did not really believe in it. Writing against Faustus, the Manichee (397–98), Augustine suggests that some of the pagan philosophers did not share the people's worship of idols and demons but did not dare to try to stop it (XIII.15). In the sermon *Against the Pagans*, the theme emerges through the figure of Pythagoras, who did *not* call on the pagan gods to help him in his intellectual quest (§36).

In the *City of God*, the theme is developed especially in discussing Porphyry. Porphyry might seem an unlikely subject for it, since he was well known for his polytheism and, indeed, for his virulent anti-Christianity. But Porphyry did certainly have reservations about theurgy and, unlike later Platonists, believed that it helped the soul only in the lower stages of its intellectual quest. Such hesitations about the links between pagan worship and philosophy are able to provide the basis for wider doubts about Porphyry's commitment to polytheism, because the conflict between Platonists and Christians in this area is a different and subtler one than the modern reader might expect. Augustine does not think that the pagan gods and lesser gods or daemons are simply figments of the

imagination. He accepts that they are real. Sometimes, he thinks, what the pagans are referring to—when it is clear that the beings in question are good—are angels (IX.23). For the most part, though, they are referring to beings which, although the pagans may not be aware of it, are evil demons, intent on corrupting humans; Augustine identifies them with the angels who fell with Lucifer.¹¹ The pagan Platonists do not err, then, by thinking that what they call gods and demons exist. Their mistake, as Augustine repeatedly explains through the length of books IX and X, is to think that these beings can act as mediators between man and God if they are worshipped; an error particularly obvious in the practice of theurgy. Such worship is wrongly directed if the beings in question are really angels, because the angels desire all worship to be given to God alone (X.7); and it is even worse directed, when the beings worshipped are evil demons. There is much in Porphyry's work, Augustine recognizes, which seems to mark him as a demon worshipper and theurgist. But did Porphyry really think that the demons were intermediaries? And did he in fact favour theurgy?

Augustine quickly raises the doubt: 'Porphyry promises a sort of quasi-purification of the soul through theurgy, but hesitantly and speaking as if he were ashamed of what he is saying. But he denies that this practice enables anyone to return to God. So you can see him shifting, from one remark to another, between wicked, over-inquisitive sacrilegiousness and the teachings of philosophy' (X.9). Augustine makes particular use of a letter to an Egyptian priest, Anebo, where Porphyry does take a rather hostile view of theurgy and considers whether the demons are not evil and deceitful. Here his fault was to have been too tentative—'it was hard', Augustine remarks sarcastically (X.11), 'for so great a philosopher to acknowledge the existence of the whole demonic fellowship and openly attack it. But any Christian old lady immediately recognizes and detests it'. Where in this letter Porphyry appears to enquire about various Egyptian religious practices, Augustine suggests that perhaps he has adopted the stance of a someone who wants to learn in order to undermine his correspondent's views and lead him away from them (X.11). Elsewhere (X.26) Augustine describes the theurgists as friends of whom Porphyry is ashamed, and as people he is unwilling to offend. Porphyry hands over to them the vast mass of people who are unable to follow the rigours of Platonic philosophy but, Augustine suggests, he has no use for them himself (X.27). Porphyry is presented, then, as prevaricating and uncaring about the multitude, but not a polytheist. As for Plato himself (who receives much less direct attention than Porphyry), his insistence that the gods are all good and that the representations of them in Greek

¹¹ *Letter* 102.18; cf. Mandouze 1958, 213.

poetry are lies makes him an ally of Augustine's in his attacks on demon worship (VIII.13–14, 18, 21). If the identification made by Augustine (though not in connection with Plato himself) between good gods and angels is applied, then Plato emerges as a strict and unhesitant believer in the one God.

How is this attitude to Plato and Porphyry to be reconciled with the fact that Augustine's favourite text when discussing pagan thinkers is Paul's comment on natural theology in his letter to the Romans (i, 20–25), discussed above—words he turns to remorselessly, quoting them, alluding to them, commenting on them?¹² According to Paul, the Gentiles who discovered God turned away from him because of pride and became polytheist idolaters. Paul's letter provides conveniently for the case of the sophisticated pagans, for whom the gods stood for parts of the world, since it mentions, not just straightforward polytheists, but also those who worship 'the creature rather than the creator'. Nothing in Paul's comment, however, fits those philosophers who, for Augustine, seem to have been believers in the one God. Usually, Augustine deals with this potential contradiction by using Paul's comment to describe the behaviour of pagan thinkers in general, without linking it specifically to those he would hesitate to call polytheists. Sometimes, in *The City of God*, a reminiscence of Paul's words is linked to a qualification, which makes it clear that some of the philosophers, although not open opponents of polytheism, did not themselves worship more than one God.¹³ In the sermon *Against the Pagans* (§36), Augustine tackles the problem more directly.¹⁴ Pythagoras and those like him, who do not seek help in purifying their souls from the pagan gods or from anything else, but rely on philosophy alone, must be considered, says Augustine, among those who, in Paul's words, 'turned God's truth into a lie'—a phrase usually applied to out and out idol worshippers. For such philosophers' confidence in their own powers is pride: 'whoever presumes on himself, presumes on human beings', and every human, Augustine says, is a liar. Even, then, those philosophers who rejected pagan gods and recognized the true God have erred, not by choosing the wrong sort of mediation, but by rejecting all mediation, even the true mediator, through pride.

This is the third of Augustine's themes.¹⁵ It occurs almost whenever he discusses pagan philosophy. Humans, Augustine believes, cannot reach God without a mediator, and that mediation was provided by the Incarnation. It is not enough, then, that the philosophers knew of the Son as

¹²See Madec 1962. Madec does not notice the way in which Augustine differs from Paul over the pagans' polytheism.

¹³X.3; cf. X.1.

¹⁴See also *On the Trinity* IV.15.20.

¹⁵Attention is drawn to it by Madec 1962; 1994, 51–69 and Rémy 1979, esp. I, 136–50.

God. They needed, but refused to accept his Incarnation. Augustine links their refusal directly to their pride—either their excessive confidence in their own powers, or, more commonly, a rejection of the humility needed in order to accept the apparent debasement of God implied by his death on the cross. ‘They did not wish to hold to Christ’s humility . . . for them, Christ’s cross was a dirty thing’.¹⁶ As a result, the philosophers were left stranded, unable to reach the destination they had glimpsed: ‘what does it profit someone proud and who, for this reason, blushes at the wood of Christ’s cross, to see from far off his country beyond the sea?’¹⁷ This theme structures Augustine’s autobiographical treatment of the relationship between Platonism and Christianity in the *Confessions*. From the moment Augustine receives the pagan Platonists’ books from ‘a man of enormous pride’ (VII.ix.13), the reader is not allowed to forget the association between pagan pride and Augustine’s own refusal, at this stage in his spiritual life, to recognize Christ as anything more than a very wise man. Each truth about God and his Son which those books taught him, and which Augustine pointedly summarizes by quoting from the opening of John’s Gospel, is complemented by a deficiency, a truth about the Incarnation and Christ’s life on earth which the Gospel contains, but not ‘those books’ (VII.ix.13–14). ‘Those pages do not contain . . . the tears of confession, your sacrifice, a contrite and humble heart, the salvation of the people’ (VII.ix.21). The final phrase brings up another element in Augustine’s picture of pagan philosophical pride. The philosophers had been shamelessly elitist. They had not even imagined that they could win the mass of people from polytheism and idolatry and offer them a way to salvation—and Porphyry even recommends for the multitude the polytheistic ceremonies he rejects for himself.¹⁸ Yet the mediation of Christ *does* offer a way for all to salvation: ‘this is the universal way for the salvation of the soul’, as Augustine repeats refrain-like through the concluding pages of his account of Platonism in the *City of God*.

In short, when he considers Platonism, Augustine changes the emphasis of Paul’s comment on natural theology, putting ideas of a reversion to polytheism into the background, and making a direct connection between pagan pride and the negative error of failing to see the incarnate Christ as the true mediator. On examination, then, Platonism does not escape Augustine’s condemnation of Roman civilization, and its downfall, pride, is a vice closely related to Rome’s prevailing characteristic, the desire for glory.

¹⁶*Sermons on John*, tr. II, 4.

¹⁷*On the Trinity* IV.15.20; more famous is the slightly different metaphor used in the *Confessions* VII.21; and cf. CG X.29 and Rémy 1979, 131–36.

¹⁸See *On True Religion* III.3; CG X.32.

THE SALVATION OF PAGANS

As will be clear from the discussion above, Augustine—following Paul’s insistence that justification is by faith—thought that people could be saved only by recognizing and accepting the incarnate Christ as their mediator. Pagans of his own day or a little earlier (like Porphyry and Plotinus) made, or could be plausibly taken to have made, a conscious decision to reject Christ. The preaching of his Gospel had certainly reached them, and many of those who lived where and when they did had become Christians. Augustine does not seem to have held out any hope for their salvation. They are dead, and lost, though their followers are still living and might be converted (CG X, 29). But what of the generations who preceded the coming of Christ, or who—before, and in, and after Augustine’s time—lived or would live where the Gospel had not yet been preached? Augustine’s attitude to them was simple, if slightly paradoxical. They too could only be saved by faith, explicit faith, in the incarnate Christ—but such faith was *not* an impossibility.

Augustine spells out his approach most fully and clearly in his *Letter* 102 in answer to a line of argument said (II.8) to be put forward by Porphyry.¹⁹ Why did Christ wait for so long before becoming incarnate and so offering people the possibility of salvation? He answers by asserting that ‘from the beginning of the human race, whoever believed in him and in some way understood him and lived piously and justly according to his commands, whenever and wherever they might be, were without doubt saved by him’ (II.12). Augustine goes on to make it clear that there were indeed ‘ancient people’ who believed and were saved. Their ceremonies may have been different, and the object of their faith lay in the future rather than the past, but their faith was the same as Christians’ faith in Augustine’s time. The main group of pre-Christian Christians Augustine has in mind are the Jews, whose prophecies of Christ illustrate his point. But he is explicit that the Jews were not alone: ‘For since a number of people are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, from the time of Abraham onwards, who were not of his stock, nor of the people of Israel, nor foreigners who became part of the people of Israel, and yet who participated in this sacrament [i.e., of prophesying Christ’s coming], why may we not believe that there were other men and women in other races in other parts of the world, although they are not mentioned in the Bible for us to read about?’ (II.15). He is equally explicit in the sermon *Against the Pagans* (§38) and no less definite in the *City of God*, although here (XVIII.47)

¹⁹See Rémy 1979, 697–705 for an analysis. Augustine thought—almost certainly wrongly—that this Porphyry was the same as the ‘famous’ Porphyry about whom he frequently wrote—cf. *Retractions* II.31.

he sets out his evidence more cautiously. He brings up the particular example of Job, whom the Bible considers more just than anyone of his time—the third generation of Israel—but who was neither a Jew nor a convert to Judaism. This one instance, Augustine suggests, was intended by God to show that there were non-Jews, before the coming of Christ, who were pleasing to God and would be saved by—as he stresses—belief in the incarnate Christ, whose future coming was foretold to these good people of ancient times.

In the sermon *Against the Pagans*, Augustine sets out the conditions under which someone living before Christ would be given the revelation needed in order to be saved. What they required was humility (§38): ‘for those—whoever sought him humbly—the humble mediator was not lacking . . . so that, persevering in their humility, they might merit purification through him, the humble mediator’. In letter 102, he even declared, ‘In this way, the salvation of this religion—the only true religion through which true salvation is truly promised—was never lacking for anyone who was worthy, and those for whom it was lacking were not worthy’ (II.15). On the face of it, Augustine seems to be suggesting that it was open to anyone at anytime to be saved, since whoever was worthy would be given the necessary revelation. That is to say, people were always able to earn their salvation by being good enough. (The sermon would seem to have the same implication, with the added explanation that humility was an essential part of the goodness). This is exactly how the passage was read by the supporters of Pelagius, Augustine’s opponents in his last years. They wanted to ensure that people’s unaided efforts to live well played a role in securing their salvation. Augustine insisted, against them, on the dependence of humans for salvation on God’s unfathomable and unmerited grace. But here, in *Letter* 102, they pointed out that Augustine himself seemed to speak like a Pelagian. Augustine disagreed, explaining that he had not said that the people in question were able to come to belief through their unaided wills. Salvation was, indeed, ‘never lacking for anyone who was worthy’. But ‘if it should be discussed and questioned from what anyone is worthy, there is no shortage of those who will say, “By human free will”. But I say: “By divine grace and predestination”’.²⁰ To some extent Augustine may be retrospectively reinterpreting what he had earlier written. But if he had really ever believed that salvation was genuinely open to all from the beginning of the world, he would be left having to explain *why* so many people in centuries past were so unworthy that they were not able to earn the revelation necessary for salvation. Given that Augustine

²⁰ *On the Predestination of the Saints* IX.17–X.19 (quoted passage from X.19); cf. *Retractions* II.31. The objection is put to Augustine in *Letter* 226.3. See Rémy 1979, 704.

never gave reason to think that more than a handful of ancient pagans were really Christians (due to a special revelation), he needed the notion of absolute dependence on unearned grace to square his theory about the universal availability of salvation with what he took to be the facts. A phrase from *Letter 164* (§4) brings out very clearly how Augustine thinks that the rights and wrongs of salvation cannot be judged in ordinary human terms. He is referring to the ancient poets, orators and philosophers, who scorned the pagan gods, practised frugality and sobriety, and risked their lives for their country, who are all, he believes, eternally in Hell. ‘There is something in-built in our minds by which these virtues so please us that we would wish the people who had them, alone or with the rest, to be freed from punishment’, he remarks, and then adds the rider, ‘were human sense not one thing, and the creator’s justice another’.

THE FALSE VIRTUES OF THE PAGANS

As this passage from *Letter 164* indicates, Augustine’s unsparing critique of Roman claims and ideals left him little room to appreciate the Roman virtues. In his view, the ruling trait of the celebrated Romans was a desire for praise and glory. This desire did, he recognizes, help to restrain the Romans from moral corruption and encourage behaviour which merited the earthly rewards God gave it, by allowing the Romans to rule over a vast empire. Yet Augustine does not accept that any behaviour motivated in this way is really virtuous (CG V.12–20). He analyses some of the best-known examples of virtuous Roman behaviour in such a way as to show that they too were motivated by concern for reputation. Lucretia’s suicide after her rape by Tarquin was not, as other Christian writers took it, an example of devotion to chastity, but the result of her ‘excessive desire for honour’: she was ashamed that people might think, though wrongly, that she was to some extent an accomplice in Tarquin’s act (CG I.19).²¹ Even Cato’s suicide, after Caesar’s victory, is put down, not to high-mindedness, but a sort of pride—an unwillingness to let Caesar win praise by sparing him (CG I.23).

These psychological analyses of individual, famous candidates for pagan virtue are underwritten by a theory which explains why, in principle, no pagan can be truly virtuous. The theory involves two strands of thought, neither of them set out in one place or step by step, which come together to support the same conclusion. One strand concerns what virtues are; the other is about who can have virtues and how.

²¹See Maier 1955, 87 and n. 12 for other Christian authors who use the story.

The first strand of thought pits Augustine's understanding of the nature of virtue against both the ancient philosophers' conduct and their own theoretical view. Augustine defines virtue (CG XV.22) as 'the order of love'. He sees this love as manifested in actions, but it is not enough to perform certain sorts of actions in order to be virtuous. The love must be rightly directed; that is to say, the actions must be referred to the right end. As Augustine puts it explicitly in *Against Julianus* (IV.2; written 420–1), 'Virtues should be distinguished from vices not by their functions (*officia*) but by their ends (*fines*). The function is what is to be done; the end that for which it is to be done. When therefore a person does something where he does not appear to sin, if he does not do it on account of that for which he should do it, he is shown to sin'. Augustine has no doubt at all about the end to which love should be directed and actions, if they are to be virtuous, referred: it is God. Although we can rightly love human beings, it is only when we regard them as the image of God and so we are directing our love to God through them.²²

Pagans, Augustine argues, do not direct their actions towards God, because they do not worship him, but rather worship a multiplicity of false gods. So, for example, he reaches his celebrated conclusion (CG XIX.21) that the Romans never had the true virtue of justice. Justice, he says, citing the Ciceronian definition, is the virtue 'which gives to each his own'. 'What sort of justice', he then asks, 'does a man have who takes the man away from God and subjects him to unclean demons?' Since Augustine was willing to allow that some of the Platonists did believe in the true God, it might seem that they could be genuinely virtuous, since they could refer their actions to the right end. But he would not accept this conclusion: for the philosophers to refer their actions to God, it is not enough for them just to know the true God, whilst continuing to worship false gods. Although he does not make the point explicitly, Augustine indicates it by going from his explanation of why Roman justice was not the true virtue to a discussion (CG XIX.22–3) of how Porphyry sacrificed to demons, even though the scriptures of the God of the Hebrews, whom he acknowledged, proclaim that anyone who sacrifices to other gods will be eradicated. Porphyry is an example of a (in some respects) wise pagan, but by no means of a virtuous one.

Augustine does not leave this line of thinking here, however. There is a deeper, theoretical disagreement between the pagan conception of virtue and his one. For Augustine, the virtues themselves are simply means to an end. Here he differs sharply from the ancient schools on which

²²The fullest discussion of this theory is in Book I of *On Christian Doctrine*, begun in 413; see esp. chaps. 5 and 22. The idea is repeated often in the later works; see, e.g., CG XV.22.

he concentrates his discussion, Stoics, Aristotelians and the Old Academy, as presented by Varro. The difference may be masked at first sight by the fact that Augustine and the philosophers share the view that the ultimate aim for each human is to be happy (*beatus* in Augustine's vocabulary). But they do so simply because to call a human happy means for them all just that he or she has reached the ultimate aim. 'Happiness' is a mere place holder; the substantive question is the identity of 'that which, when someone attains it, he or she is happy'—the Highest Good for humans. For the philosophers, having the virtues is all or part of the Highest Good, what makes a person happy. The virtues are intrinsically valuable; indeed, for the Stoics they alone are intrinsically valuable. For Augustine, by contrast, the virtues are means to a Highest Good which is distinct from them. They are needed to help us fight against vices: temperance to restrain our lusts, courage because we need patience in the face of the ills of earthly life, justice because we need constantly to work to subordinate the soul to God and the body to the soul, and prudence to distinguish good from the evils that surround us (CG XIX.4). The virtues are aids, though imperfect ones, by means of which we hope to gain salvation. Salvation (or heavenly peace)²³ is our Highest Good, since it brings happiness, which is not found on earth, in Heaven, where there is no longer need for virtues. The pagan philosophers are wrong, then, not only in thinking that happiness can be gained in this life—a view Augustine dismisses with vehement irony,²⁴ but also in holding that the virtues intrinsically provide some, or for the Stoics all, of this happiness. And this intellectual error about the nature of virtue is closely connected, he suggests, with a moral error, since the result of cultivating virtues for their own sake is a vice—pride: 'For although the virtues are thought by some to be true and worthy when they are referred to themselves and not sought for anything else, rather in this case they are proud and puffed up, and so should be judged not to be virtues but vices' (CG XIX.25).

The other strand in Augustine's thinking, about who can have the virtues and how, is simpler, although it involves one of his most characteristic and controversial ideas. A prerequisite for any good action, Augustine believes, is that the agent has charity: 'whatever someone thinks he does well, he in no way does well if he does it without charity'.²⁵ But charity requires faith.²⁶ This doctrine makes being Christian a necessary condition

²³Cf. CG XIX.11 and the discussion of peace below, pp. 39–41.

²⁴For Stoics, the sage is happy just because he is virtuous. The other schools held that some material goods were also necessary for a happy life. For the critique, see CG XIX.4.

²⁵*On Grace and Free Will* 18.37.

²⁶Augustine holds, in an inchoate form, what would become the doctrine of the theological virtues: faith, hope (which presupposes faith) and charity (which presupposes both faith and hope). His clearest presentation is in *Enchiridion* 3 (CCSL 46, 49–114).

for performing good actions, and so for having any of the virtues. It is closely tied to Augustine's views about ordering and directing love to the right object. Charity is simply rightly directed love (e.g., *CG* XIV.7). It is not, then, merely that, as just explained, pagan philosophers in fact did not direct themselves to the right end; lacking faith, they *could* not do so. When, therefore, Augustine is presented with the case of non-Christians who perform what seem to be good actions and so seem to be virtuous, he is adamant that their actions are not really good. Take the case even of a 'gentile who does not live on the basis of faith' who 'clothes the naked, saves those in peril, tends the wounds of the sick, uses his wealth to help the worthy people he cherishes and will not bear false witness, even under torture'. These are good works, but, Augustine asks, does he do them well or badly? If he does them badly, then he sins in doing them. But to claim otherwise and say he does them well would imply that good fruit comes from a bad tree, and that is impossible.²⁷

The reason why the tree is bad, Augustine goes on to explain, lies in the man's will. Here Augustine links his views about pagans with his wider thinking on the Fall and grace. By the time Augustine was writing the later books of the *City of God*, he believed that, by sinning, Adam had destroyed the power of the human will to act well, unless restored and then aided by God's grace. Moreover, his conflict with Pelagius and partial followers of Pelagius, such as Julian of Eclanum, had strengthened his views about the gratuity of grace. All humans, by inheriting Adam's sin, belong to the *massa damnationis*. God takes no notice of the differences between one person and another (*acceptio personarum*) in making his inscrutable choice to give one grace, and deny it to another.²⁸ It is for this reason that Augustine spoke of two cities: the City of God has as its citizens all those chosen by God who will go to Heaven, whilst the rest of humanity belong to the earthly city (*CG* XI.1). Although in the world the two cities are intermingled, only the citizens of the City of God—who consist of Christians, though by no means all of them, some pre-Christian Jews and a few people from all races who, before Christ, were granted a special Christian revelation—can act virtuously.

Augustine's thought about pagan virtue fits precisely, therefore, with his ideas about the salvation of pagans. But it faces a special problem. Augustine's views on salvation make God seem very severe and some would say even unjust. Augustine can insist, however, that this stern vision is what the Bible implies and humans cannot understand divine justice. If, however, he is insisting that all pagans are equally without virtue, then

²⁷*Against Julianus* IV.3.30 (PL 44, 754).

²⁸See, for instance, *CG* XXI.12. The theme is developed in many late works; the clearest exposition is still that given in Merlin 1934.

how can he distinguish morally—as he must if he is to present any sort of moral theory—between those pagans who clothe the naked or keep to the truth under torture and those who lie, steal and murder?²⁹

Augustine is aware of this problem. There are a number of passages in his later works where, in a way seemingly at odds with his dismissal of pagan virtue, he apparently acknowledges that pagans sometimes act well. For example, one of Augustine's ways of reading Paul's words about the Gentiles who have the 'law written in their hearts' accepts that there are some who do not 'worship the true God truly and justly' who performed deeds about which we have read, know or heard, 'which not only according to the rule of justice can we not censure, but which we rather deservedly and rightly praise, even though, were it examined for what end they were done, there would scarcely be found those which would merit the due praise and defence of justice'.³⁰ And even when Augustine is insisting that the pagans will be damned and that they are not acting according to the right end, he allows that 'according to a certain custom of this life' they are called good, and that they 'quasi-observe what is ordained in the law', honouring their parents and abstaining from murder, theft, adultery and bearing false witness.³¹ He allows, in the *City of God* (V.13), that when people restrain their vicious passions simply through desire for human praise and glory, they are less shameful, even though certainly not saints. The incorruptible Fabricius lacked true virtues, but, says Augustine, he deviated from them less than someone such as the traitor Catiline (and so will be punished less in the afterlife).³² For Regulus, the Roman general who returned to face death from his Carthaginian captors in order to keep his word, Augustine has almost nothing but praise, and he can only recommend Christians to follow and surpass him.³³ Altogether there were Romans, he believes (CG V.15)

²⁹Terence Irwin (2007, 423–33) gives a careful and philosophically sophisticated discussion of Augustine's attitude to pagan virtue. He contends that Augustine's criterion for virtue is merely moderately strict, requiring a correct, but not wholly correct, conception of the final end, and that, according to Augustine, some pagan philosophers did have a partly correct conception of the ultimate end and so could be virtuous. It is questionable, though, whether for Augustine loving virtues for their own sake shows even a partly correct conception of the end.

³⁰*On the Spirit and the Letter* XXVII.48; CSEL 60, 202:4–11. For the passage, see above and cf. Irwin 2007, 415.

³¹Cf. *Sermons on the Gospel of St John* 45.2; CCSL 36, 389:8–16; cited by Wang 1938, 116 (but as evidence of Augustine's harshening line because of the Pelagian controversy). See also the passage from *Letter* 164 discussed above in connection with the salvation of pagans.

³²*Against Julianus* IV.25; PL 44, 751.

³³CG I.15, 24; II.23; V.18; cf. Maier 1955, 87–89; but for a rare critical comment CG III.18.

who acted selflessly for the common good, adhering to the law and not yielding to sensual desires. They followed something ‘like the true path’ (*tamquam vera via*), were it not directed towards honour, empire and glory (and, because they achieved honour, empire and glory, they cannot complain that they have not been justly rewarded, even though they are damned).

Augustine, then, seems to be saying that pagans can indeed have virtues—but they are *false* virtues. They are false because they are not directed towards God, and they do not lead towards salvation, but in purely earthly terms they are just like virtues. From what has been said so far, however, it might seem as if, by qualifying them as ‘purely earthly’, they are being dismissed entirely; that they are being called ‘false’ in the way that counterfeit bank notes are false. But in the *City of God* (XIX) Augustine develops an idea which, in a certain way, bridges the gap between the two cities and even between true and false virtues—the idea of peace. Peace (*pax*) functions as an alternative to happiness (*beatitudo*) as the end to which humans strive. ‘Peace’, Augustine says, can be used to describe eternal life in Heaven, which he considers to be our ultimate good. In this sense, it has the same reference as ‘happiness’. But ‘peace’ is a broader term than happiness, and it functions differently from it. In Augustine’s view, it is simply wrong to claim that people can be happy during their earthly lives.³⁴ Whatever is not the true happiness of Heaven is not happiness at all. ‘Peace’ follows a different rationale in its usage. As well as heavenly peace, there is earthly peace. ‘Peace’ in this earthly sense has a very wide range of reference. Augustine uses it to name the state all humans and even wild animals seek, even when they seek it by war or violence (CG XIX.12). He defines various different sorts of peace (CG XIX.13):

The peace of the body . . . is the ordered tempering of its parts, the peace of the irrational soul the ordered putting to rest (*requies*) of its appetites, the peace of the rational soul the ordered matching of cognition and action, the peace of the body and soul the ordered life and the health of the living thing, the peace between mortal man and God ordered obedience in faith under the eternal law, the peace of men ordered harmony, the peace of the household the ordered harmony of those who live together in commanding and obeying, the peace of the city the ordered harmony of the citizens in commanding and obeying, the peace of the celestial city the most ordered and most harmonious

³⁴See, e.g., CG XIX.4: ‘Let us therefore not believe that we have already gained happiness to which we wish to come in victory, so long as we are in internal war’ (the ‘internal war’ is the conflict with our bad desires which, it is made clear, continues throughout our lives).

fellowship of enjoying God and one another in God, the peace of all things the tranquillity of order. Order is the disposition of similar and dissimilar things which gives to each its place.

In this list, Augustine deliberately mixes types of peace which all humans—and, indeed, all things—can attain with those (between God and man, and that of the celestial city) available only to those chosen by God for salvation. ‘Peace’ can be applied in so many ways because, as he explains at the end of the paragraph, things have peace when they are ordered. The definition of order given at the end of the paragraph is verbally similar to the Ciceronian definition of justice Augustine uses (‘justice is the virtue which gives to each his own’), but in fact it describes a very different structure. Justice relates objects to those to whom the objects are due; order (and so peace) simply relates objects to each other. If an agent is mistaken about the ultimate end of all actions, which is God, he or she will in any act be failing to give to each his own, since it is God’s own to be recognized as the supreme end. In consequence, the agent will not be just.³⁵ By contrast, not only can there be peace without recognition of the supreme end (indeed, for inanimate things without any recognition of ends at all); peace can also be brought about—as in the peace of the family or the city—without a correct grasp of the supreme end: it just requires that the elements (the family members, the citizens) are correctly placed in relation to one another.³⁶

The false virtues which Augustine recognizes in some pagans are the qualities which lead to earthly peace (witness the long-lasting and mostly peaceful Roman Empire, founded on these false virtues). Although he does not develop a full theory, he connects them directly with this peace: ‘When, if we live rightly, we mortals have the sort of peace that can be had here in mortal things, virtue uses its goods rightly; and when we do not have it, virtue also uses well the evils which man suffers. But it is true virtue when it refers all the goods which it uses well, and all the good and bad things it makes good use of, and itself, to that end where there will be such and so much peace that there could be none better nor greater’ (CG XIX.10). The ‘virtue’ to which Augustine refers in the first sentence must be false virtue, since it is contrasted, in the next sentence, with true virtue which refers everything to God. But even this false virtue is able to use good things well, to achieve earthly peace, and to use bad things well when peace is absent. The false virtues of pagans can, therefore, be valued as contributing towards something which is valuable in itself: the earthly peace, which is used by the citizens of the heavenly city (CG

³⁵See above on Augustine’s discussion of why Romans lacked the true virtue of justice.

³⁶This passage is discussed in Ruokanen 1993, 30–31 and in Geerlings 1997, 228–31, but is understood very differently.

XIX.26). They are not like fake money, which is useless once the forgery is exposed, but like a fake diamond necklace, which will help its wearer to be the belle of the ball, but not to make her rich.

Historians of political thought have argued powerfully that, especially in the *City of God*, Augustine gives a large measure of autonomy to human political life. Just because its values and aims are not those of the heavenly city, they need to be considered in their own terms.³⁷ The same tendency can be seen in his treatment of pagan virtues, or rather, in his terms, pagan false virtues. Whereas his answer to the problem about pagan salvation is to deny its possibility, except to those who were really hidden Christians, and to the problem of pagan wisdom to trace how far some ancient philosophers came towards reaching the truth, he treats pagan virtue by a sort of relativization. Pagan virtues can be discussed in their own terms, as false virtues: the classification of virtues remains the same (indeed, Augustine shamelessly takes over his classification of true virtues from the pagan philosophical tradition), and so are the sorts of acts that characterize them. But their end is different, and for that reason they are false and, ultimately, valueless. Although Augustine's severe judgements on both pagan salvation and virtue would inspire many in the coming centuries (often to an attitude even more extreme than his own), this element of grudging relativism would also have its followers.

³⁷See especially Markus 1970, 72–104 and Ruokanen 1993; but cf. Lee 2011 and the references there.