

Refuting the Claim that Augustine is Opposed to Corporeality

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Saint Augustine, it has been claimed, decries fleshly embodiment in favor of a non-physical, spiritual existence. This has led to the purported hatred of the human body by modern Catholicism and even traditional Protestant Christianity, both of which find the basis for their teachings in Augustine. In this paper, I will show how Augustine's views regarding embodiment developed over time. I will demonstrate that Augustine did not hate the body, and that his view was the most amenable of all the early Christian fathers to embodiment.

Augustine the Manichaeon

One of Augustine's earliest ideological alignments was with Manichaeism. He was enticed by the prospect of salvation that it offered. It also seemed to offer resolution to the inner conflict of his misplaced passions.

In *A Guide to the Thought of Saint Augustine*, Eugène Portalié enumerates several potential motives for what he terms to be Augustine's being "led astray" by Manichaean doctrines. One such motive was to find the origin of evil, which he felt this philosophy could do. Another was the scientific explanation of nature to which the Manichaeans laid claim. Yet another was Manichaeism's teaching on materialism—that substance is evil by nature, something to be despised, and that spirit is immaterial. It is this

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last teaching that bears particular significance to the topic of Augustine's supposed hatred for corporeality and sexuality (8). Of all of the philosophies he ever embraced, Manichaeism was the most clearly anti-corporeal. It taught that sexuality was evil, a teaching that bore a certain approval for Augustine in his youth, as it counterbalanced his licentiousness. Augustine felt regret for his debauchery and likely, as penance, felt it appropriate to hate sexuality, as his only experience therewith had been of a supremely lustful nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that later in his life he condemns lust as an egregious misappropriation of love.

Augustine finally became disenchanted with Manichaeism when he met its principal proponent, Faustus. Augustine began to have deep-seated doubts about the cogency of Manichaeism. He sought answers from his fellow adherents, which they could not provide. They urged him to seek resolution to these problems from Faustus, who would surely be able to provide adequate explanations to Augustine, rather than abandon the faith. When Faustus finally arrived, Augustine was unimpressed with his answers to (or, in some cases, avoidance of) his questions (*Confessions* bk. 5 chap. 3). This disappointment was the cause for more soul-searching, though he was not able to immediately abandon all of Manichaeism's positions until some time later.

Interest in Neo-Platonism

Following his disenfranchisement with Manichaeism, Augustine turned for a period to studying Platonism and Neo-Platonism. The teachings of Plotinus, though certainly secular and divorced from Christian doctrine (Plotinus himself wrote treatises against Christianity), seemed to prepare Augustine for his conversion to Christianity. He appreciated Neo-Platonism's emphasis on pure intellectual being and its model of the One, the Primary Cause, immutable, without body or parts, fundamentally simple. Were there a God, he would surely resemble this, Augustine thought. Platonism and Neo-Platonism also provided a model for being and non-being, and this model answered his soul's yearning to love properly as well as his intense curiosity about the origin of evil, which curiosity Manichaeism had failed to adequately quench. As Platonic and Neo-Platonic ideas played a significant role in shaping Augustine's views generally and more particularly on embodiment and corporeality, a deeper explanation of them is in order.

Many of Plato's ideas built on the conflicting theories of Heraclitus and Parmenides. Heraclitus observed that the world around him was in a constant state of becoming or change—nothing was constant. Parmenides,

the founder of the Eleatics, argued that there are two worlds—one of appearances, and one of reality—and that in the world of reality there is no such thing as change or time (though in the world of appearances there seem to be). Plato, observing these two schools of thought, established a model for reality that had the physical world being one of shadows of real things, namely the unchanging Forms. The light that cast these shadows was the One, which was eternally simple and immutable.

Neo-Platonism began with Plotinus and then diverged into radically different formulations under Porphyry, Iamblichus, and others. Plotinus' formulation built on Plato's hierarchy, including a *noûs* (intellect) subordinate to the One, as well as the Universal Soul. From this third tier of being emanates human souls, which fall because of *concupiscentia*—a distraction from higher-ordered, spiritual things to lower-ordered, material things. They become trapped in human bodies and live out a mortal existence. Traditionally, in these conceptions of reality the hope for all humanity is to rid the soul of its corporeal chain that is weighing it down and then to rise back to the Universal Soul and take its place in being once again. This is not accomplished merely by death, because the divine portion of human beings reincarnates until it can reorder its desires back to the realm of being. The body, in this model, is something to be disposed of and transcended. It is also important to note that, though the body was clearly inferior to the intellect and constraining to the soul, it was not necessarily evil.

Porphyry's developments of Neo-Platonism further denigrated the body, actually asserting that the material world was evil, but Iamblichus, one of his students, actually celebrated the goodness of the material world considerably (much to Porphyry's chagrin). Iamblichus believed in theurgy, that certain physical acts had a salvific effect. He also believed that, because the One is the ultimate cause for the material world, the material world could not be evil, but was rather divine.

In light of these formulations, the questions we must address include not only whether Augustine ascribed to Neo-Platonism and, if so, to what degree (which could help us better answer whether he held an antagonistic view of the body), but also to which formulation of Neo-Platonism he ascribed to. Scholars seem to suggest that he primarily studied Plotinus, secondarily Porphyry, and made little mention of Iamblichus or other Neo-Platonist philosophers, though there was already a significant body of thought by a variety of Neo-Platonists by the time of Augustine's interest in Neo-Platonism, and had been for at least half a century.¹ Portalié seems to

¹See Hunter 180–184 and Portalié 96–98.

further indicate that Augustine felt that “the thought of Porphyry remains obscure,” thus further validating the idea that Plotinus was Augustine’s chief source for Neo-Platonic thought (98).

Conversion to Christianity

After Augustine moved to Milan, he met Ambrose and soon converted to Catholic Christianity. There is some debate as to whether he sincerely converted to Christianity at the time of his garden vision or if he remained a Neo-Platonist at heart.² Portalié, citing Wörter, countered such objections, reasoning thus:

(1) Augustine was baptized, as all admit, at Easter, 387. Who will believe that this was a meaningless and empty ceremony? (2) The material facts of the *Confessions* (and not only the state of his soul) would have to have been falsified with unashamed brazenness: the scene in the garden, the example of the solitaries, the reading of St. Paul, the conversion of Victorinus, the ecstasy of Augustine when reading the Psalms with Monica—all that fabricated after the deed was done! (3) Finally, Augustine composed such apologetic works as *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* in 388, when he would not even have been a Christian! The reader is free, moreover, to consult the dialogues themselves. (15–16)

It is thus reasonable to presume that his conversion to Christianity was genuine. This is significant because if he remained committed to Neo-Platonism over Christianity it would have shaped his teachings on corporeality more definitively. As he was fully converted to Christianity, he was also free to adopt more amenable positions regarding corporeality, based in scripture and possibly departing from strictly Neo-Platonic views.

Criticisms of Augustine’s Views on Corporeality

Many who do not belong to the traditional Christian sects that rely on Augustine’s doctrinal heritage have decried traditional Christians and Augustine himself for what they take to be a hatred of the body. Among these are atheists, agnostics, and even other Christians, such as Mormons.

²See Harnack and Gourdon.

One such example is found in D.J. Heasman, a Canadian writer often cited by atheists, who decries Christian anti-materiality. Heasman wrote,

A persistent tendency in Christianity has been towards the Manichaeian view that the body itself is evil; St. Augustine, for example, who held that the emotional excitement accompanying the conjugal act was evil not only in excess but in any the least degree. (316)

Here it is claimed (1) that Christianity agreed with Manichaeian views regarding the body and (2) that Augustine was also party to this view, because of a view he held on sexual intercourse. However, neither of these claims can be substantiated. The first claim is refuted by the fact that Augustine himself wrote at least six treatises against the Manichaeians (such as *On Two Souls*, *Against the Manichaeians*, or *Concerning the Nature of the Good*, *Against the Manichaeians*) and also decried their philosophies in the *Confessions* (see bk. 3 chap. 6). The second assertion is invalid because it does not follow that, whatever his view on the physical ecstasy of sexual intercourse, he therefore believed that sexual intercourse was evil (he did not, as detailed in *On the Good of Marriage*) or, more particularly, that the body itself was evil.

Mormon thought has criticized traditional Christianity almost since the faith's inception. One 20th century Mormon thinker, Hugh Nibley, has broadly criticized the early Church Fathers on this subject, wondering why it is that a purely intellectual being would create a physical universe if "all physical things are a vile corruption" (270). Such a critique is odd, since there is ample literature on the subject suggesting that the prevailing attitude is that matter is not itself *evil* but rather *inferior* to God. Augustine himself reasoned in his work *Miscellany of Eighty-Three Questions* that "everything good is from God," and that, since "every body is from God," the body is therefore good (34–35). Elsewhere in that same opus he acknowledges the physical and spiritual resurrection of the human body to be the crowning glory of human existence (103–110) and that man is both bodily and spiritually made in the image of God and is thus more like him than animals (63–64). As Augustine can reasonably be called the principal authority on doctrine for the Catholic Church among the Church Fathers and his opinion is as stated, Nibley's assertion is unfounded.

Augustine's True Opinions

Augustine did, in fact, write on corporeality. His later views supported the idea that the body is not evil, but that a corrupt body leads to

corrupt behavior. He taught that our bodies and even our spirits are corrupt because of the Fall of Adam. Without God we are irredeemably lost—incapable of reordering our desires to think of heaven and obtain peace for ourselves. Only the grace of God can overcome this problem.

Augustine addresses the role of nature and the material realm in *On Christian Doctrine*. He asserts that “no man hates his own flesh” and goes on to explain that even acts that seem to punish the body (we may assume such things as self-flagellation) are merely putting it in subjection and control, for “it is not no body, but an uncorrupted and very light body that they want.” He goes on to write that “after the resurrection, the body, having become wholly subject to the spirit, will live in perfect peace to all eternity.” Additionally, he argues that although one may prize something more highly than the body, this does not mean that one hates the body in so doing (15–17). These most clearly indicate that Augustine has a very definite place for the body in his doctrine, and it is not consigned to permanent, unalterable corruption.

His crusade against the Manichaeans, likely enflamed by his former seduction to that faith, yields further proof that Augustine did not hate the body. As previously mentioned, Manichaeism did assert a certain hatred for the body in its teaching. Some believe that such teachings have crept into Christianity through Church Fathers such as Augustine, but in fact no greater contempt could be had by anyone for Manichaeism than that which Augustine harbored. In *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*, Augustine argues that the “upright posture” of human beings (in contrast to all other animals, which are bent over) indicates that we are physically made in the image of God and are intended to worship him (57). Elsewhere, in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, he asserts that were it not for the fall of Adam we could only be ‘ensouled’—a state inferior, in his mind, to being inspirited. But because we now die, he states, “[In the resurrection] we shall also be renewed in the flesh . . . when this perishable thing puts on imperishability (1 Cor 15:54) so that it may be an ‘inspirited’ body” (321). Thus, through the resurrection in which our bodies and spirits are renewed, uncorrupted, we will be in a truly ideal state, even greater than if the fall had not occurred.

His later teaching on sexuality is that it is good if it is used with the intent of procreation, pursuant to God’s plan to populate the earth (or to “be fruitful and multiply” [Gen. 1:28]). Lust is defined as sexuality used for any purpose other than procreation within a family (including sexuality between husband and wife not intended to result in children). This teaching may well be said to be the cause of modern Catholic teaching on sexuality, as the Roman Catholic Church’s position closely follows Augustine’s views (*Catechism* 569).

While not all may agree with Augustine's thoughts on the purpose of sexuality, it is clear that it is not ultimately unfavorable except under certain circumstances. In this sense it matches much of modern Christian rhetoric on the topic of birth control and family planning. The vast majority of Christians teach that sexuality is ordained of God, and many would agree that its purpose is procreation. This is a very natural conclusion as sexual intercourse naturally results in children and measures must be taken to avoid childbirth if it is undesired. Augustine's doctrine is far more down-to-earth than his critics would have us believe.

Objections from Textual Evidence

One may still object to these proofs, holding up further textual evidence contrary to this opinion. In his *Soliloquies*, for example, Augustine appears to have a very Platonic view of the body. He writes,

You must entirely flee from these things of sense. So long as we bear this body we must beware lest our wings are hindered by their birdlime. We need sound and perfect wings if we are to fly from this darkness to yonder light, which does not deign to manifest itself to men shut up in a cave unless they can escape, leaving sensible things broken and dissolved. When you achieve the condition of finding no delight at all in earthly things, in that moment, believe me, at that point of time, you will see what you desire. (38)

The reference to Plato's cave, the apparent desire to be rid of this mortal body, and the chaining down of the self all point to an apparent detestation of the human body. Augustine would have likely been motivated to these views by an aversion to his own prior indulgence in bodily pleasures. These things could easily have been the foundation for a lifelong detestation of the body, one which underlies all of his work, in spite of his later mildness on the subject. One scholar, G.R. Evans, argues that, notwithstanding Augustine's later moderation and positivism with regard to his views on the body, "there persisted . . . a lingering association between matter and evil which Augustine never quite severed" (36). Given this evidence, it seems that there may still remain a cogent claim that Augustine had a very Platonic view of the body.

However, a deeper textual analysis reveals this rebuttal to be invalid. David G. Hunter, writing in *A Companion to Augustine*, argues that by the end of his life Augustine had definitively abandoned the Platonic conception of the body as being an object of detestation, and that this view was

an early one which Augustine later regretted. Hunter, quoting Augustine, reasons as follows:

“I should have been on my guard,” he writes, “lest I be thought to hold the opinion of the false philosopher, Porphyry, according to which every body must be fled from” (*Retr.* 1.4). Augustine proceeded to note that in “the new heaven and the new earth” of the world to come “things of sense” would indeed endure; only the corruptibility of sense objects would be eliminated in the future life. (355)

Not only does he regret his harsh stance on corporeality, he also clearly regrets his association with the Neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry, further invalidating claims that he was more Neo-Platonist than Christian.

An Objection to Augustine’s Incorporeal Formulation of God

Notwithstanding Augustine’s positive view on corporeality, he still held humanity to be inferior to God. There is little doubt that Augustine’s views of heaven and the nature of God contain elements of Neo-Platonism, and that this is due to the Platonic reasoning that simple things are superior to compound things, timeless things superior to time-bound things, and ultimately, that intellectual or spiritual things are superior to physical things. Though Augustine abandoned his hatred for the human body, he maintained that human beings are forever inferior to God, the First Cause, and necessarily so. In Augustine’s view, apotheosis would be absurd—for becoming like God in every respect would entail there being two (or more) where the One ought to be. Thus, those wishing to criticize him on the impossibility of apotheosis for humanity may rightly do so. Augustine would have little to answer this ascription of belief, other than it is entirely accurate and true. As such I feel no need to refute this attack—volumes have been written on the debate of God’s nature, and such is not within the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

Critics’ estimation of Augustine as hating corporeality is grossly inaccurate. I have demonstrated that an overarching analysis of his thought as well as individual instances of quotations directly refuting such assertions clearly show that Augustine does not hate the body and revere only the spirit. He appreciates the role of corporeality. To love bodily pleasures

above spiritual ones is evil, he would argue, but the body itself is not evil. He would agree with the view of the *Book of Mormon* figure King Benjamin, who states, “the natural man is an enemy to God” (Mosiah 3:19).

Viewing Augustine as a dualist fails to account for why he is so well revered even to this day for his candid confessions of sinful behavior. He has gone full circle, repented, and his views on corporeality and sexuality are reasonable. Were this not so—if he did, in fact, condemn fleshy existence outright as being entirely evil, and that true goodness was to be had as a disembodied spirit—his philosophy might have fewer adherents in the West. Hating the flesh (as he himself has argued) is unnatural; hating the misappropriated, lustful desires of the flesh, however, is natural. His message is against the corrupt state of the flesh and not against the flesh itself. The value of his message is that we must (and that we can, through Christ) rid ourselves of our wicked appetites and love God. We can attain salvation by the grace of God, who will intervene on our behalf to reorder our affections, if we but desire to love him and place our trust in him. What is more is that he writes not merely from a theoretical perspective but from the position of one who has actually made (or more appropriately, is still making) the journey that he endorses. Augustine’s message is powerful because it bears truth.

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