


Reading *Contra Julianum* in Light of the *City of God*

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Abstract

Augustine's rejection of pagan virtue in the *City of God* is often connected to his anti-Pelagian works and so exaggerated. However, Augustine's actual account of pagan virtue, both in the *City of God* and *Contra Julianum*, is much more nuanced than is commonly recognized. Augustine connects true virtue to true religio, its end in the beatific vision, and the grace without which it is impossible, and consistently highlights the connection between virtue and worship. Nevertheless, the category of the pagan virtues, habits sufficient to promote the flourishing of Rome, is an important part of Augustinian virtue theory. Attending to the presence of pagan virtue in the *City of God* shines light on why Augustine repeatedly claims that his theology, and not that of Julian, is most opposed to Manichean claims. The *City of God* provides useful context for interpreting Augustine's theology of grace in the anti-Pelagian works, and so avoiding an over exaggerated theology of the Fall.

Keywords

Augustine, virtue, grace, City of God, Contra Julianum

Augustine's *City of God* is, as he himself declares, his *magnum opus*. Interpreting the great work, as the controversies surrounding it indicate, can be *arduum* as well. For that reason, it is not surprising that it is often read in light of other works of roughly the same time, the texts Augustine wrote during the Pelagian controversy. As Augustine laid out in his principles governing the interpretation of Scripture, one should use "the more obvious parts to illuminate obscure expressions."¹ While in this context the adage is applied to the Bible, there is no reason it cannot shed light upon non-scriptural texts; indeed,

¹ *Doctr. Chr.* II, IX, 14, tr. R.P.H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 37.

assuming textual coherence until proven otherwise is a key aspect of charitable interpretation. Augustine's principle is highly useful.

However, the misapplication of the principle can lead to distortions in how one reads Augustine, especially if the texts one believes to be clear are not so clear as they at first appear. Rather than reading the obscure in light of the obvious, one imposes a (mis)understanding of one text upon another. In the case of the *City of God*, the supposedly clear texts are Augustine's anti-Pelagian works, which together are taken as the authoritative expression of his theology of true virtue. Such an interpretive approach is common, and is not necessarily inappropriate. Robert Dodaro, for instance, devotes the second chapter of *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of St. Augustine* to a reading of pagan virtue in light of Augustine's theology of grace as expressed in the Pelagian controversy. In his words, Augustine's "analysis in Books 2–19 of the effects of moral ignorance and weakness on the practice of justice, and of the contrary effects of Christ's redemptive activity for the promotion of justice, is shaped by the Pelagian controversy."²

Dodaro is right to draw attention to the importance of a theological account of justice that corrects and perfects pagan conceptions of justice. Furthermore, Dodaro's own account of non-Christian virtue avoids the extreme reading of the pagan virtues as simply "splendid vices" – a term Augustine himself never used.³ Dodaro gets Augustine fundamentally right, and draws much fruit from reading the *City of God* in light of the anti-Pelagian works. However, other readers are not so careful, and Augustine's clear teaching on the necessity of grace for meritorious acts is taken to prove the viciousness of all acts unaided by said grace.⁴

In this article I will argue against this general tendency by proposing to read "perhaps the most important of the anti-Pelagian works,"⁵ *Contra Julianum*, primarily in light of the *City of God*, and not vice versa. This approach yields two conclusions. First, Augustine's insistent claim that his argument is rooted in the Catholic faith and is not the results of his ongoing Manichean hangover becomes much more

² Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 80.

³ See e.g. Robert Dodaro, "Political and theological virtues in Augustine, Letter 155 to Macedonius," *Augustiniana* 54, 1-4 (2004).

⁴ See Brett Gaul, "Augustine on the Virtues of the Pagans," *Augustinian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2009); E.J. Hundert, "Augustine and the Sources of the Divided Self," *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (February 1992); and especially John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

⁵ From the "Introduction" to "Answer to Julian" in *Answer to the Pelagians, II*, ed., tr. Roland J. Teske, S.J., Works of St. Augustine I, vol. 24 (New York: New City Press, 1998), 223. Unless otherwise noted, this is the translation cited in all of the quotes of *Contra Julianum*.

reasonable. Having exaggerated Augustine's emphasis upon human weakness post-Fall, modern readers often agree with the titular opponent of *Contra Julianum* that Augustine's later reading of Romans are fundamentally Manichean. Second, when Augustine's position on pagan virtue in the latter is kept in mind as the former is engaged, an exaggerated view of Augustine's theological anthropology is avoided. Augustine's account of pagans in the *City of God* acts as a firewall against Jansenist interpretations of his theology of the Fall. By reading *Contra Julianum* in this way, the text is both freed of internal contradictions and presents a more accurate account of human nature. Such a reading is not only more charitable towards Augustine than the usual readings, it likely better captures his thought.

The Two Cities: A Manichean Innovation?

Augustine's doctrine of the two cities, the most prominent theme and the backbone of the *City of God*, is sometimes connected with heretical theological movements. Johannes van Oort notes continuity between Augustine and Manichean thought, but concludes that any similarities present are the caused by their shared Jewish-Christian patrimony, the most likely source of the "two cities" language.⁶ Peter Brown suggests the possibility that Augustine was first exposed to the term in the writing of the Donatist Tyconius.⁷ Another author considers the theme to be Platonist in origin.⁸ This article will not take a position on the question of where Augustine first encountered the concept, or even points of similarity between how the Manicheans (or Donatists, or any other school) used the term. I am simply arguing that in Augustine's hands the two cities counter an illicit tendency to make evil independent of the good of human nature, with the corresponding implication that evil is something other than a negation, a parasite upon a good nature created by a good Creator. Whatever sources influenced him, Augustine's thought on this subject is rooted in his Christian commitment to God's creating action.

The order in which Augustine discusses the two cities in the last twelve books of the *City of God*, where he examines their origin,

⁶ Johannes Van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon: A study into Augustine's City of God and the sources of his doctrine of the two cities*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 357. J.J. O'Donnell, "The Inspiration for Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*," *Augustinian Studies* 10 (1979), 76, emphasizes the difference between the Manichean account of the two cities and the Augustinian use of the same term.

⁷ Peter Robert Lamont Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: a biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 314.

⁸ Patricia L. MacKinnon, "Augustine's City of God: The Divided Self/The Divided Civitas," in *The City of God: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Dorothy F. Donnelly (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

development, and ends immediately points towards which city is prior and which is posterior.⁹ Book Eleven begins by an extended account of God's creation of the world and time. Crucial for the work to come, this prolegomenon situates the city of God, those who "choose to live by the standards of the spirit"¹⁰ and are carried "by the love of God as far as contempt of self,"¹¹ in God's creative act. Augustine then moves to discuss the angels, "the greater part of that [heavenly] City, and the more blessed part."¹² Angels, and not demons, are first mentioned, and even Augustine's discussion of the demons in XI 11–15 focuses on the angels' creation in a state of something like happiness. If the fallen angels could not have had true beatitude given their future misery, they nonetheless were created in light "so as to live in wisdom and bliss," and whether the fallen angels were less blissful than those who persevered or as blissful, "we must certainly believe that they had some bliss, if they had any life before their sin, even though that bliss was not endowed with foreknowledge."¹³ The angels associated with the earthly city's "self-love reaching the point of contempt for God" were created good and lack something of the goodness in which they were created; as Augustine notes in the following book, "the contrasted aims of the god and the evil angels did not arise from any difference in nature or origin. It would be utterly wrong to have any doubt about that, since God created both and he is good in his creation and fashioning of all substances."¹⁴ The demons in the city of man are like tumors on the City of God, and the excised tumor nevertheless exists only because it was at one time part of a living and flourishing entity.¹⁵

The same applies, at least initially, to the human members of God's city. All human beings come from Adam and Eve, created in grace to be the human first members of the heavenly city. Adam and Eve were

⁹ Augustine consistently adverts to these three concepts as the framework of the second half of the *City of God*; see e.g. XI, 1.

¹⁰ *Ciu.*, XIV, 1.

¹¹ *Ciu.*, XIV, 28.

¹² *Ciu.*, tr. Henry Bettenson (Penguin Classics, 2003), XI. 9. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the *City of God* come from this translation.

¹³ *Ibid.*, XI, 11 and 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, XII. 1. For additional consideration of Augustine's theology of creation, see Janet Soskice, "Aquinas and Augustine on Creation and God as 'Eternal Being,'" *New Blackfriars* 95, issue 1056 (February, 2014), pp. 190-207.

¹⁵ The analogy, like all analogies, limps. Crucially, while the demons were created good, they were never a part of the eschatological heavenly city because that city is constituted by those "predestined to reign with God for all eternity" and the demons were not so predestined (XV, 1). That said, Augustine's eschatology of the two cities should not distract from his treatment in other places of a person's movement from one city to another, from earthly to heavenly. On this point, see James K. Lee's excellent article "Babylon Becomes Jerusalem: The Transformation of the Two Cities in Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos*," *Augustinian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2016), 157-180.

created free from physical corruption for the sake of “attaining an immortality of endless felicity, without an intervening death.”¹⁶ Far from the soul falling into a body, “God fashioned man out of the dust of the earth and gave him a soul . . . either by implanting in him, by breathing on him, a soul which he had already made, or rather by willing that the actual breath which he produced when he breathed on him should be the soul of the man.”¹⁷ Augustine is crystal clear that God, not angels and still less demons, created humanity, and indeed every created being.¹⁸

Augustine turns to the City of Man only in Book Thirteen, after having already discussed the creation of the angels and Adam. He concludes Book Twelve by noting that “in this first-created man we find something like the beginning, in the human race, of the two cities; their beginnings, that is, in the foreknowledge of God.”¹⁹ The beginning is in grace, not in sin. Human beings, as he points out throughout Book Twelve, were “social by nature and quarrelsome by perversion;” human beings as created good take precedence.²⁰

Augustine freely admits that, after the Fall, all human people begin as members of the earthly city; “now the reign of death has held mankind in such utter subjection that thy would all be driven headlong into that second death, which has no ending, as their well-deserved punishment, if some were not rescued from it by the undeserved grace of God.”²¹ Even here, though, God is redeeming something good, something he is willing to die for. Human nature, even post-Fall, is a good; a good that is not deserving of what God will do to redeem it, of course, but a good nonetheless.

The effectiveness of the argument Augustine is making in the *City of God* as a whole hinges upon the goodness of human nature and the rejection of Manicheism. Augustine’s organization of the text, that is to say, his rhetoric, emphasizes the priority of the good creation over sin by discussing humanity as created good before fallen humanity; the foundational truth of humanity is expressed before its perversion by sin is examined. Meanwhile, the substance of Augustine’s theology affirms the sovereignty of God as ruler of creation; to deny God’s creative act is to deny his power. Both form and substance are thoroughly anti-Manichean.

Indeed, it is striking that when Augustine does invert the order and treat the earthly city first, in his discussion of heaven and hell, he gives a reason for doing so; “the reason for preferring this order, and

¹⁶ *Cui.*, XII, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, XII, 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, XII, 25-26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, XII, 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, XII, 28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, XIV, 1.

dealing afterwards with the felicity of the saints, is that both the saints and the damned will be united with their bodies, and it seems more incredible that bodies should endure in eternal torment than that they should continue, without pain, in everlasting bliss.”²² Augustine all but apologizes for treating the saints last, and he justifies this choice not on metaphysical grounds but on epistemological concerns; he must set his readers’ minds at rest regarding something that seems impossible. The structure of the *City of God* is anti-Manichean.

Pagan Virtue in the *City of God*

It is well known that Augustine himself never called the pagan virtues “splendid vices.” However, many authors both ancient and modern have interpreted Augustine as *de facto* having done so.²³ The reason for this interpretation is understandable; Augustine is at pains to articulate the problematic connections between pagan worship and pagan virtue as well as the central role grace plays in human salvation. If pagan virtues are divorced from grace, they cannot incline their pagans to possess happiness, and so are not *verae virtutes*, true virtues, because they fail to live up to the definition of virtue as that which makes one happy. Augustine makes this point clearly in Book Nineteen. After sketching out the two hundred eighty eight possible schools of philosophy, Augustine concludes that all of them fail to make their followers happy because they all attempt “in their amazing folly, to be happy here on earth, and to achieve bliss by their own efforts.”²⁴ Yet, as he continues to emphasize, life on earth is fraught with peril, and happiness is possible only “in the expectation of the world to come.”²⁵ Because the philosophers refuse to accept this possibility, “they attempt to fabricate for themselves an utterly delusive happiness by means of a virtue whose falsity is in proportion to its arrogance.”²⁶ The source of human happiness cannot be

²² *Cui.*, XXI, 1.

²³ In addition to Gaul, Hundert, and Milbank, see Ernest Fortin, “Chapter 1: The Political Thought of St. Augustine,” in *Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theologico-Political Problem*, Collected Essays 2, ed. J. Brian Benestad (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), and Jennifer Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) and “Redeeming the Acquired Virtues,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 41, no. 4 (2013): 727-740. In contrast, Pierre Manent affirms pagan virtue, noting that in the case of Regulus, the most virtuous pagan Roman, is a case of “a paganism on the point of overcoming itself, of an earthly city in process of becoming – but it is impossible – a heavenly city;” see *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic*, tr. Marc LePain (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 248-249.

²⁴ *Cui.*, XIX, 4.

²⁵ *Idem.*

²⁶ *Idem.*

virtue, both because of the travails of the world and because the human being's ultimate good is the peace found by union with God. One cannot hope for virtue to make one happy; one's own self is too mean a good to bring about true happiness. Because the philosophers' virtue fails to make them happy, as they claim it will, it fails to be true virtue. True virtue orients one to the vision of God, and so this integral part of human happiness must be dependent upon God's grace. Augustine is on firm theological grounds here; if one defines virtue as he and the philosophers do, one must deny that the virtue connected to perfect happiness is possible without God's gift of grace, else one fall into a Pelagian naturalizing of the supernatural end of the human being.

Furthermore, because salvation is not indifferent to how one lives in the world, Augustine rightly affirms the necessity of grace in living well. It is not for nothing that in Letter 138, between affirming the "integrity of [ancient Roman] morals"²⁷ and "the great value of civic virtues, even without the true religion," Augustine speaks of the authority of God needed "not merely in order that people might lead this life with the greatest moral goodness, not merely for the sake of attaining the most peaceful society of the earthly city, but also for the sake of attaining everlasting salvation and the heavenly and divine republic of a certain everlasting people, to which faith, hope, and love admits us as citizens."²⁸ Grace affects one's life on earth, and Augustine argues that the society most open to grace will be most peaceful. A Christian Roman, one whose heart is enlivened by grace, will be a better Roman than his pagan counterpart. Augustine makes this point especially clearly earlier in the letter:

Let them give us such people of the provinces, such husbands, such wives, such parents, such children, such masters, such slaves, such kings, such judges, and finally such taxpayers and tax collectors as Christian teaching prescribes, and let them dare to say that this teaching is opposed to the state; in fact, let them not hesitate to admit that it would be a great boon for the state if this were observed.²⁹

Even the pagans' contributions to the common good are an instance for Augustine to remind his readers of their need for grace.

Even aside from pagan virtue's inability to save its possessor, its reliance upon pride as the spur for virtuous behavior weakens it still. Augustine's praise for the good effects of the Roman love for praise is muted by the reason for their exertions; "if men have not learnt

²⁷ "Ep. 138," 3, 17 and 3, 18. In Augustine, *Letters 100-155*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, tr. Roland J. Teske, SJ, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A New Translation for the 21st Century II/2* (New York: New City Press, 2002).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3, 18.

²⁹ *Ep. 138*, 2, 15.

to restrain their discreditable passions by obtaining the help of the Holy Spirit through their devout faith and their love of the Intelligible Beauty, at least it is good that the desire for human praise and glory makes them, not indeed saints, but less depraved men.”³⁰ Augustine affirms Sallust’s judgment that the love of praise is a “vice closer to a virtue,” and so not a virtue in the strong sense of the word.³¹

However, Augustine recognizes the “marvellous achievements” of those whose “passion for glory, above all else, checked their other appetites.”³² Because glory was only given to the virtuous man, the Romans had to pursue virtue, and did so single-mindedly, even though their pursuit of virtue for the sake of glory was an inversion of the proper relationship between the two; glory rightly comes to the virtuous person, but virtue is the higher good that should not be pursued for the sake of the lower good. Their virtue was the “slave of glory,”³³ but it was sufficient to make Rome deserving of great temporal success. Alluding to the hypocrite in Matthew 6:1, Augustine concludes that God did in fact reward the Romans for their love of praise; they who “took no account of their own material interests compared with the common good, that is the commonwealth and the public purse,” were rewarded with a glorious empire and its appreciation of their sacrifices. Such deeds are clearly not salvific, but the common good is a worthy goal, though one that should not have been pursued for the sake of praise.

Again and again in Book Five, Augustine adverts to the good habits of the Romans that resulted in the flourishing of Rome. He devotes the first ten chapters to defending human free will against Roman conceptions of fate, and concludes by discussing the relation between God’s providence and foreknowledge and human free will. Augustine does not deny Sallust’s distinction between the character of those who “arrive and honour, glory, and power by merit, not by the tricks of the canvasser” and those who “did not seek position and glory by Virgil’s ‘arts,’ but schemed for them by trickery and deceit.”³⁴ Indeed, Sallust is correct when he extolls the virtue of Cato, who was honored without asking for honor; although Sallust desired honor, by not asking for it Cato implicitly puts forth the truth that honor and glory “must be the consequences of virtue not its antecedents.”³⁵ True, Cato’s virtue does not live up to the definition of true virtue, because “the only genuine virtue is that which tends to the end

³⁰ *Cui.*, V, 13.

³¹ *Cui.*, V, 12.

³² *Idem.*

³³ *Ibid.*, V, 20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, V, 12.

³⁵ *Cui.*, V, 12.

where the good of man is, which surpasses any other good;”³⁶ it does not orient him to the heavenly city. Nevertheless, it “approached far more nearly to the true ideal of virtue” than did most other Romans’ moral characteristics.³⁷

Augustine’s strong affirmation of Roman virtue in Book Five is at the heart of his overarching critique of pagan worship in the first half of the *City of God*. By establishing that Roman temporal flourishing was the result of the Romans’ own hard work, he again emphasizes that good things on earth are not the gift of false gods. The false gods should be worshipped for the sake of neither temporal nor spiritual goods. In fact, the discussion of pagan virtue serves as the conclusion of the argument Augustine set forth in the first five books of the *City of God*. Augustine needs the robust account of pagan virtue to establish the value of true *religio*. Far from being an irrelevant aside, it is a crucial part of his rejection of the worship of the demons.

Augustine’s approach has two consequences for the argument at hand here. First, it affirms at least some capacity of the Romans to habitually work for the common good. Granted, they fail to have true virtue because the Romans will not enjoy the beatific vision, and their virtues are further weakened by being ordered to glory, an inferior end. They can lead to the sin of pride, and are rooted in the excessive love of praise. However, they are still effective in promoting the common good of Rome. To claim that every action of a non-Christian is a sin is to go against Augustine, and Augustine’s points in Book Five show another facet of his theology of virtue, one that, for rhetorical reasons, he did not bring to the forefront in his encounter with Julian of Eclanum.

The other consequence of Augustine’s qualified defense of Roman virtue is that it is yet another rejection of Manicheanism. The Romans are guilty of sin, no doubt, but even they can do limitedly good things because human nature, even wounded human nature, is a good. As Augustine will make clear in his argument with Julian of Eclanum, the “good tree” of the Gospels is predicated of “the good will of a human being which does not produce bad actions,” not his nature, for even a sinner has a good nature.³⁸ Augustine in effect foreshadows his argument in Books Twelve and Fourteen; human nature is not created evil. In rejecting irreligion, the overarching goal of the first ten books of the *City of God*, Augustine definitively rejected Manicheanism.

³⁶ Idem.

³⁷ Idem.

³⁸ *C. Iul.*, I, 9, 44. Earlier Augustine makes his reading of the good and bad trees even clearer in affirming that the goodness of human nature is what makes marriage a good; “For that divine teacher certainly does not want us to understand that the tree from which there comes the fruit about which he was speaking is a nature,” I, 8, 38.

Augustine's Manichean tendencies in *Contra Julianum*

Augustine's assertion that Julian is guilty of giving aid and comfort to Manichean theology is arresting to a modern reader. H. van Oort contends that in Augustine's "attitude towards sexual concupiscence and original sin one can see some striking parallels with Manichaeism and, on this point, Julian of Eclanum seems to be right."³⁹ In his extensive and illuminating examination of Augustine's relationship with Manicheism, Jason David BeDuhn contends that Augustine's reading of Paul is fundamentally Manichean. Augustine's Manichean trend in Scriptural interpretation began, not in his earlier dalliance with Manicheism as a young man, but in his reading of Paul as a priest and bishop. To counter Manicheism Augustine had to offer an interpretation of the Epistle to the Romans distinct from the well-established reading of the Manichaeans. Augustine thus committed the tactical blunder of engaging one's enemy on the battlefield of their choosing, and he suffered the consequences for it. While attempting to "rescue Paul from Manichaeism . . . he discovered elements in Paul's rhetoric to which, in his intellectual environment, only the Manichaeans gave due attention"⁴⁰ and, being unable to counter their established positions, did what "no Nicene writer had done before – he accepted the meaning Manichaeans found in them."⁴¹ As the narrative goes, this tactical mistake in choosing the field of contention did massive damage to Augustine's theology as a whole. Julian of Eclanum would happily agree with these modern authors. Augustine's (to us counterintuitive) argument can be understood in light of three of Julian's objections, the last of which will be treated in much greater depth: 1) that original sin cannot be present in a good human nature; 2) that concupiscence is a good; and 3) that the denial of true virtue for those without grace is tantamount to the denial that human nature is a good.

Julian's accusation that Augustine continues to suffer from a Manichean hangover appeals to Augustine's interpretation of Matthew 7:18, "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree bear good fruit."⁴² If human nature is good, it can only

³⁹ H van Oort, "Augustine and Manichaeism: new discoveries, new perspectives," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 27 (2): 2006, 724.

⁴⁰ Jason David BeDuhn, "The Problem of Paul." In *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma, Volume 2: Making a "Catholic" Self, 388-401 C.E.*, 192-238 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 193. For a mostly positive review of this text, see Johannes van Oort, "Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma in Context," *Vigiliae Christianae* 65 (2011) 543-567.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁴² New American Bible translation. All scripture citations are taken from the NAB unless otherwise noted.

produce good fruit.⁴³ Similarly, the virtuous pagan, in Julian's reading, is a "good tree," though one lacking the grace needed to be fruitful; he is a "barren good tree,"⁴⁴ and the same applies to the institution of marriage; if marriage is good, how can it be so tightly embroiled with the evil of concupiscence?

Augustine's response to the question of the good fruit is rooted in his anti-Manichean theology of sin as the privation of the good. Indeed, he provocatively appeals to Ambrose's statement "evil has come from good" in opposition to Julian's claim that "there has to be some evil from which and through which the bad fruit has appeared."⁴⁵ In contrast to claims that Augustine implicitly denies the goodness of human nature in Book One he goes out of his way to affirm that the human being, ontologically speaking, is good *qua* human being, and he rejects the pat answer offered by Julian to explain human sinfulness. In the parable Christ was not speaking about "a nature or about marriage which God instituted, but about the good will of a human being which does not produce bad actions."⁴⁶ It is because fallen human beings possess a weakened will that they sin; moral evil cannot exist without some preexisting good nature. Again and again Augustine affirms the parasitic characteristic of evil; it "derives from what is good" because to derive from what is evil would be to posit its existence apart from God's good creation, the heart of the Manichean error. Far from being a Manichean twisting of the Word of God, Augustine's interpretation of the good tree parable avoids Manichean dualism far more effectively than does Julian's theology as reported by Augustine.

Augustine's account of concupiscence can be read as opening himself to aspects of Julian's charge of Manicheanism, but can also be read in an orthodox light more in keeping with his theology as a whole. Augustine does spend a great deal of time warning his reader of the dangers of unchecked desire, and perhaps his kindest comments to Julian emphasize that Julian himself opposes excessive sexual inclinations; in his words, "I believe that you fight against what you praise, but I am grieved that you praise what you fight against."⁴⁷ At times Augustine seems to identify any pleasurable sensation with concupiscence, and to see any pleasure at all as dangerous; "what sober-minded person would not prefer, if it were possible, to take food or drink as sustenance without any gnawing carnal pleasure as we take the sustenance of air."⁴⁸ Augustine intends to remind his

⁴³ *C. Iul.*, I, 9, 44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, IV 3, 33.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 9, 44.

⁴⁶ *Idem.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 26, 66.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, 14, 68.

reader of the vehemence of the passions, but in the process lends himself to be interpreted as a Puritan, if one may be so anachronistic. However, in other places Augustine shies away from such an overly strong position. After proposing a “tranquil arousal” hypothesis of Adam and Eve possessing sexual organs without any sexual desire before the Fall, he entertains the alternative possibility, “would they not at least have the sort of sexual desire whose arousal would not anticipate reason or go beyond its limits?”⁴⁹ Augustine further suggests that “the motion of sexual desire was indecent because it was disobedient,”⁵⁰ and goes so far as to affirm the acceptability of pleasure as long as the mind “leads the pleasure which follows.”⁵¹

In these texts Augustine does not argue that pleasure is a sin, nor even that it is unbecoming. Rather, he consistently points out the danger of pleasure as a motivating force. In fact, St. Thomas Aquinas’s interpretation of another Augustinian text hits the mark. Aquinas affirms the presence of the passions in Christ, but distinguishes them from fallen humanity’s experience of the passions, causing Aquinas to call them “propassions.” Christ’s propassions do not “tend towards what is unlawful,” but follow from reason instead of rebelling against reason, and do not deflect reason from what it has chosen.⁵² In Aquinas’s reading, Christ was truly sad in the Agony in the Garden, but that sadness did not lead him to disobey the will of the Father. The passions should not control the will, but should rather flow from the choice of the will. Augustine makes the same argument regarding Adam’s pre-Fallen emotions: “if, then, in paradise one did not have either to obey sexual desire or to make war against it, it either did not exist there or it was not in paradise the sort of thing it is now.”⁵³ This priority of the will over the emotions is Augustine’s primary concern. The mechanism by which this priority is attained is less important; strengthening the will and moderating the draw of the passions accomplishes this end just as effectively as extinguishing pleasure altogether.

Augustine’s theology of the passions in *Contra Julianum* is fundamentally sound. Granted, Augustine overstates his position at times and does not always offer as much nuance as his reader would like. Nonetheless, his intuition that the passions should follow reason, or at least not overwhelm it, seems unobjectionable, as even Julian would admit; Augustine agrees with Manichean accounts of the passions only insofar as those accounts are in continuity with Christian

⁴⁹ *C. Iul.*, IV, 5, 34.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, V, 7, 25.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, V, 16, 59.

⁵² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, tr. Fathers of The English Dominican Province (Christian Classics: Ave Maria, FL, 1981), III Q. 15 A.4.

⁵³ *C. Iul.*, V, 16, 62.

theology. Put another way, if affirming the superiority of the intellect and will over the passions is Manichean, who is not a Manichean? Augustine's thought in *Contra Julianum* coheres with his discussion of the passions in the *City of God*; "yet if we felt none of these [appropriate] emotions at all, while we are subject to the weakness of this life, there would really be something wrong with our life."⁵⁴ The issue at hand is not primarily about the passions, although there is certainly a great deal of disagreement between Augustine and Julian, and between Augustine and his modern interpreters; in his conclusion to a helpful article on Augustine's discussion of the passions, Johannes Brachtendorf highlights the importance of this question: "is *libido*, if only ruled by reason and prevented from abuse, a natural good that contributes to full humanity and leads us to achieving the good of propagation, as Julian asserted; or is it always an evil that unwillingly has to be taken into the bargain to realize the good end of procreation, as Augustine claimed?"⁵⁵ Augustine seems to be willing to consider the possibility of sexual desire so different from every fallen person's experience that it is difficult to conceive of without falling into the error of identifying it with *libido*, as did Julian, but he is unwilling to commit to such a position. Rather than the passions themselves, the capacity of the will to direct the passions and the will's need for help, that is, the relation of virtue and grace, is more proximate to the central disagreement between Augustine and Julian.

The Virtues in *Contra Julianum*

Augustine offers his most sustained thought on virtue in Book Four, where in the course of fourteen pages he affirms *en masse* his thought in the *City of God*. Augustine readily concedes some of Julian's most important claims about pagan capacities. For example, Augustine acknowledges that not all non-Christians were engaged in unchaste behavior. However, this truth does not mean that they are truly chaste; in the falsely chaste, the "evil desire in them conquers and reins in the other evil desires."⁵⁶ Indeed, Julian has done "a grave injustice to the Scipios in attributing continence, which you have praised in them with such great eloquence, even to people in the theater."⁵⁷

Strikingly, even in denying that non-Christians possess the virtue of chastity, Augustine here affirms something of a distinction between pagan virtue and vice. One may not simply equate the depraved actor

⁵⁴ *Cui.*, XIV, 9.

⁵⁵ "Cicero and Augustine on the Passions," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes*, 43 (1997), 289-308

⁵⁶ *C. Iul.*, IV, 3, 18.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, IV, 3, 18.

with the statesman, even if both lack true virtue. And lack true virtue they do; in a statement that could have been in the *City of God*, Augustine reminds his reader that chastity without charity is not a true virtue because “if unbelievers do not have true righteousness, then, even if they have some virtues, they will not have any true virtues, which are their companions and colleagues [because when the gifts of God are not referred to their author, by this very fact that bad people who use them become unjust].”⁵⁸ Augustine affirms Cicero’s connection of virtue and happiness, but turns Cicero on his head by invoking the Christian understanding of happiness as the beatific vision. However, as he does in the *City of God*, even while denying that Regulus possesses true virtue, Augustine is willing to distinguish between the character of Regulus and that of the more depraved Roman citizens.

Augustine even affirms aspects of goodness in pagan actions. The following quotation, with emphases added, is a fair representation of Augustine’s thought:

You know then, that the virtues are to be distinguished from the vices, not by the actions, but by their ends. **An action is what one ought to do, but an end is that on account of which one ought to do it. Therefore, when persons do some action in which they seem not to sin, if they do not do the action on account of that for which they ought to do it, they are found to be guilty of sinning.** Because you do not pay attention to this point, you have divorced ends from actions, and you have stated that one should call true virtues the actions apart from the ends. Such great absurdity follows from this that you are forced to call justice true justice, even when you find that greed is master. For if you are thinking of the action, to keep one’s hands off another’s property could seem to pertain to justice. But when you ask why a person does this and receive the answer “To avoid losing more money on court cases,” how could this have been done as true justice, since it is in the service of greed? Epicurus introduced such virtues as the servants of pleasure, because they did absolutely everything they did for the sake of obtaining or holding on to pleasure. Heaven forbid, however, that true virtues serve anything but him and for the sake of him to whom we say, *God of virtues, turn us to you* (Ps. 80:8).

Thus virtues which serve carnal pleasures or any temporal advantages or gains cannot, of course, be true virtues. But those which aim to serve no purpose are not true virtues either. True virtues in human beings serve God who gives them to human beings. In the angels they serve God who gives them to the angels as well. But any good that is

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, 3, 17. “True righteousness” is a translation of *veram iustitiam*: “Porro si veram iustitiam non habent impii; profecto nec alias virtutes comites eius et socias, si quas habent, veras habent [quia cum non ad suum referuntur auctorem dona Dei, hoc ipso mali his utentes efficiuntur iniusti] : ac per hoc nec continentia sive pudicitia vera virtus est impiorum.”

done by a human being and is not done on account of that for which wisdom commands that it ought to be done, even if it seems good as an action, is a sin by reason of the incorrect end.⁵⁹

The end a person assigns to his action is as crucial to understanding him as the action itself. In the case of the vicious pagan, he does bad actions for a bad end. In the case of the actor or the vestal virgin, a good act is done for unrelievedly bad ends, preparing to do something already sinful and honoring the gods, respectively. However, in the case of the virtuous pagan, an additional qualification seems to be necessary. Regulus does a good action (keeping his word) for a deficient, though not utterly deranged, end (the common good). Insofar as he fails to honor God, to whom all actions should be referred, he sins. However, the character of his sin is markedly different. True, the common good includes “temporal advantages” for Roman citizens, including Regulus himself. It is an insufficiently good end. However, it is still a better action than the alternatives outlined above, and is a better action than failing to do the good action at all. Accounting Regulus’s action in this way affirms the distinction Augustine himself seems to draw in 3, 18, and does draw in the *City of God*, between the different aspects of pagan actions.

Augustine’s argument here coheres with his rigorist reading of Romans 14:23 “Everything which does not come from faith is sin.” Claiming that every action done by the pagan lacking grace is a sin full-stop is an overly strong position, and one that Augustine’s readers should not follow Augustine in holding. Augustine himself at times approaches and at times shies away from such a reading. Augustine’s reticence about the pagan virtues is clear, but, in James Wetzel’s words, “this is not quite to say that no pagan could ever be virtuous (for Augustine would not, in his most imperious of moods, have claimed quite that).”⁶⁰ So too, John Rist concludes that Augustine categorizes the virtuous pagan as vicious reluctantly and tends “to recoil from condemning them outright as vicious.”⁶¹ Augustine’s interpretation of Romans is not always clear and certainly admits of gray areas, but his distinction between Christian virtue, pagan virtue, and pagan vice remains unscathed by these difficulties.

The quotation above also brings to light the foundation of the disagreement between Augustine and Julian, what Augustine perceives to be Julian’s introduction of “a kind of human being that can please

⁵⁹ *C. Iul.*, IV, 3, 21.

⁶⁰ “Splendid Vices and Secular Virtues: Variations on Milbank’s Augustine,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32, no. 2 (2004), 272.

⁶¹ *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 172. Rist’s later works consider Augustine in a less flattering light. See John Rist, *Augustine Deformed: Love, Sin and Freedom in the Western Moral Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

God by the law of nature without the faith of Christ.”⁶² Those who know and follow the law inscribed in their hearts will be saved by Christ and are “righteous because they live from faith;” virtuous deeds, because they flow from God’s gifts, are themselves the fruit of grace and not its precursors.⁶³ Augustine recognizes that, aside from Christ (and possibly Mary, although Augustine does not seem to have a considered position on Mary’s sinlessness) all have sinned, and will continue to sin as long as they are on earth. The pagans can contribute to the common good, and can even intend to do so, although their willing will also include other desires that make their willing imperfect. However, they are still sinners needing mercy; Dodaro profoundly highlights Augustine’s point here in stating that, in contrast to the attempt to claim virtue for oneself, the “more authentically virtuous political discourse” of the statesman is his confession of sin.⁶⁴ In Augustine’s mind, the chief theological bone of contention is the question of grace as a gift freely given by God that brings about virtue; “for you want the pursuit of holiness without God’s help to come first in the human will so that God ought to help it according to its merit, not gratuitously. In that way you believe that human beings can in this life of pain be without sins so that they do not have in themselves any reason to say, *Forgive us our debts*.”⁶⁵ Augustine’s doctrine affirms hope for everyone, not just for those who claim their own perfection. By putting the cart of virtue in front of the horse of grace Julian confuses the entire question. Far from denying the natural-supernatural distinction Julian consistently appeals to, and far from denying distinctions between virtue and vice on the fallen natural order, by affirming the supernatural character of the beatific vision Augustine affirms them.

Conclusion

As has been shown, Augustine’s rejection of the Manichean moniker, and his move to accuse Julian of implicit Manichean tendencies, was a rhetorical stroke that nevertheless contains a great deal of truth. The *City of God’s* account of the development of the city of God, indeed the work as a whole, is anti-Manichean at its core. The city of God is ontologically prior to the city of man. Consequently, the city of man is a parasite, not a separate creation by a demiurge. It exists, but it exists in lacking something that it ought to have, and that lack is why it fails to be what it should be. Even the best

⁶² *C. Iul.*, IV, 3, 23.

⁶³ *Idem*.

⁶⁴ Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, 183.

⁶⁵ *C. Iul.*, IV, 3, 29.

elements of the earthly city testify against a Manichean connection. While the pagan virtues are not true, they are certainly better than pagan vice, and the Romans possessing them have received important temporal benefits because of them. These earthly benefits are a good, and these pagan virtues, if they would only be taken up by Christian faith and purified of their excessive self-love, would be conducive to heavenly flourishing as well. Pagan virtue, something Augustine keenly recognizes even while pointing out its imperfection, has value precisely because it pursues real though imperfect temporal goods that the Christian justly values. Even ignoring the obvious points of contrast, at a fundamental level the City of God runs counter to Manichean thought.

This same opposition is implicit in *Contra Julianum*. As the city of man is parasitic upon the city of God, so sin is parasitic upon human nature. As in the *City of God*, the earthly benefits from virtue are considerable and are worth pursuing, a point both Julian and Augustine agree upon. While the different context of the later work results in a different emphasis, nothing in the later argument contradicts Augustine's earlier claims. Rather, it presupposes them; Augustine is clear in his account of pagan virtue and its limits in the *City of God* that virtue apart from grace is not salvific and fails to live up to the full definition of virtue, and nowhere does he equate pagan virtue with virtue united to charity. In *Contra Julianum* Augustine is clear that he is not positing the intrusion of some evil nature, but is rather lamenting the lack of what should be but is not.

Perhaps some of Augustine's claims in *Contra Julianum* are excessive. He seems inclined to argue that the desire to procreate was not present in Adam and Eve (although even here he is willing to consider a hypothesis remarkably similar to Aquinas's account of the propassions in non-Fallen people). At times he may even seem to deny the possibility of even the graced person to possess even imperfect virtue; Peter Brown interprets Augustine's account of the venerable married man out of the blue taking a young lover as proof of Augustine's preoccupation with the uncertainty of human perseverance and the need for the grace of predestination.⁶⁶ Augustine was correct to emphasize the human need for God's continued grace, and experience and the theology of grace alike testify to the human ability to suddenly change for the worse. However, such an abrupt loss of virtue that the man in question had exhibited throughout his

⁶⁶ Peter Brown, *Augustine*, 405, citing *Contra Julianum* III 11, 22. In the specific context at hand, Augustine is citing this event as proof that concupiscence is active even in the old; he is not making an argument about sin, grace, virtue, or another disputed question in theological anthropology in broad brush strokes, but is rather making a particular point, one closely related to questions of biology, that the old still feel sexual desire and can still be lead astray by it.

life is rightly surprising, and Augustine could have better accounted for the stability of virtue even while he affirmed the necessity of the grace of perseverance. Indeed, he affirms the possibility of virtue in the same book; “I do not say that the strength of sexual desire is so great that human reason, when set afire and helped by God, cannot govern it and hold it in check.”⁶⁷ However, these excesses are not evidence of crypto-Manicheism, as Julian and some modern authors would claim. Far from being foundations, they are superficial aspects of his thought that can be corrected without affecting his theology as a whole. These missteps, and further misinterpretations, can be avoided by returning to the *City of God* throughout our study of Augustine’s anti-Pelagian works.

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⁶⁷ *C. Iul.*, III, 26, 65.