

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ST AUGUSTINE IN THE CITY OF GOD: GENERAL PRESENTATION, DIVISION AND PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to bring out the philosophical thoughts of St. Augustine in the City of God. The title of his work and the content discussed Christian religion, spirituality, and theology. The structure of St. Augustine's master piece also revealed his defence of the Christian faith and truth against pagan thoughts and philosophy. His dependence on the Sacred Scripture gives the City of God a more spiritual outlook, both for believers and non-believers. However, the Augustinian threefold division of philosophy establishes a framework to discuss his physics, logic and ethics. The application of the analytical method in this study was significant in giving a general presentation of the book, in exploring the division of philosophy and in showing the anthropological importance of St. Augustine's work. The argument in this paper indicates that the City of God expresses the rational thoughts of St. Augustine and his philosophy. The study concludes that St. Augustine positioned philosophy in the City of God as a means to save the human soul.

Keywords: Anthropology, City of God, Logic, Morality, Physics

Introduction

Philosophy in the Middle Ages was linked to Christian thought. The great philosophers of that time were mainly pastors or men of the Church, including St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Anselm of Canterbury. Indeed, in the Middle Ages, philosophy was the harmonious articulation between faith and reason and served as the exercise of reason for the understanding of faith. This is the meaning of St. Anselm's aphorism *intelligo ut credam*, which emphasises the importance of elevating the human spirit to divine contemplation in the quest for understanding the truths of faith. The feeling that St. Augustine's major concern was the influence of the secular state against the Church/city of God suggests that *The City of God* was a spiritual work.

However, the title and content of St Augustine's master piece, *De Civitate Dei contra paganos* (The City of God against the Pagans), wield much influence and have contributed to philosophical thought in considerable measure. While it appears that St Augustine showed no intention of being a philosophical work, we affirm that there is a hidden philosophy in some of its chapters, which we will analyse. What appears to be St.

Augustine's philosophical principles are dominant in the work which we shall examine. The objective is to orient researchers on the need to rediscover the philosophical thoughts of the Bishop of Hippo and how his thoughts can serve humanity in modern society.

We will approach this subject beginning with a general presentation of the *City of God against the Pagans (City of God)*, followed by the analysis of the philosophy in this great work, division and themes of philosophy and finally, the anthropological significance of the philosophy in the *City of God*.

General presentation of The *City of God*

1. History and background

The *City of God against the Pagans* is one of Saint Augustine's longest works. He put a great deal of energy into writing it. He wrote it between 413 and 427; this means that the *City of God* was written over a period of 14 years. This shows the richness, depth and maturity contained in this work, which has remained relevant for future generations. It is possible to speculate that the works of Plato or Cicero, titled the *Republic* or the *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, inspired St. Augustine to choose the title *City of God*. However, the author of the great work being analysed affirmed that he drew the title of his work from Psalm 87:3, where it is written, "They speak of you in your praise, O city of God". Other indications concerning the title of this book are found in Part II, Book 11, Chapter 1.

Moreover, the choice and the meaning of "city" can be understood by paying close attention to what St. Augustine called "society" or "community". Sometimes, he used terms such as "house," "temple" or "family" to describe what he meant by "city". The term "city" should be taken in a symbolic sense. The two cities referred to in this book are Jerusalem (representing "The City of God") and Babylon (representing the earthly city). These are not empirical entities but primarily mystical ones. St. Augustine attempted to respond to the accusation that Christian morality caused the decline of the Roman Empire and divided its citizens. This venerable Saint described a city or republic as a group of people bound together by a consensual legal bond and a community of interests. However, he accepts the concept of pagan society and its search for justice and truth.

The philosophy used by Saint Augustine in the *City of God* is that of appealing to the light of reason and pure philosophy against pagan thought. How can we distinguish between theology and philosophy, the gifts of the Holy Spirit and pure reason in this work? For St. Augustine, 'pure philosophy is only clearly distinguished from theology and faith when it conflicts with them'. This is why modern philosophy only talks about religion, namely Karl Marx's dialectical materialism, Hegel's idealism and Sartre's atheistic existentialism.

2. The structure of The *City of God*

How is this work structured? The *City of God* is a single book that brings together 22 books. We will not go through all 22 books; the essentials that matter to us are concentrated in the eighth and eleventh books. And even in these two books, we will only examine the important chapters. Some authors have divided this work into two main parts: books I to X are a refutation of pagan opinions; books XI to XXII are [apologetic] defences and

illustrations of the truth of the Christian faith. However, St. Augustine himself explained the plan he followed in writing his work. According to him, books I to V examined the polytheism of Rome, books VI to X examined the Greek philosophy, especially Apuleius, the Neoplatonists, Plotinus and Porphyry, and books XI to XXII examined creation, time and eternity. The complexity of the book's structure reveals the author's desire to affirm and defend certain doctrines and philosophical positions.

Analysis of The Philosophy in The Eighth and Eleventh Books in The *City Of God*

a. The content of the eighth book

There are XXVII chapters in this eighth book, which is entitled *Natural Theology*, which showed interest in philosophers because they are the “lovers of wisdom”. However, he is only interested in philosophers who admit the existence of God but do not think that worshipping Him is enough to enjoy a blessed life. The definition of *Theology* as “reasoning or discussion about the Divinity” set the first philosophical reference of the philosopher Socrates, who was the first to speak of the philosophy of morals. Socrates believed that a soul purified depends on good morals. Before Socrates, philosophers had been concerned with seeking the first cause in nature, the cosmos. Having defined *Theology* and established that the “causation of the universe could be grasped only by a purified intelligence”, the eighth book of St. Augustine then proceeded to reappropriate Platonic philosophy by seeking the truth about God. Like Plato, St. Augustine divided philosophy into three parts: morality (concerning action), physics (concerning speculation) and logic (distinguishing between true and false). This division corresponds with the fundamentals of all philosophical investigation.

The originality of St. Augustine lies in how he used the intuition of faith to find the process of the illumination of human reasoning. However, opponents of the preceding view may claim that St. Augustine's approach to philosophy in Book Eight examines Platonic doctrines about God. This accusation is justified when examined against the claim that “Platonists realized that God is the creator from whom all other beings derive, while he is himself uncreated and underivative”.

b. The content of the eleventh book

It is in the eleventh book of the *City of God* that we find a refutation of pagan thought. The philosophical thought contained in this book revolves around the notion of time. The contention also concerns the question of what God was doing before he created the universe, the date and time of creation, the nature of rest after God created the universe and the consequences of affirming that the soul was created in time and will never perish in the time to come. In other words, did the decision to create come suddenly into the mind of God as an idea which he had never had? Does this imply that there was a time when the human soul was miserable and a time when it was happy? St. Augustine made an effort to respond to the preoccupations raised by saying:

The world was in fact made with time, if at the time of its creation change and motion came into existence. This is clearly the situation in the order of the first six or seven days, in which morning and evening are named, until

God's creation was finished on the sixth day, and on the seventh day God's rest is emphasized as something conveying a mystic meaning. What kind of days these are is difficult or even impossible for us to imagine, to say nothing of describing them.

Meanwhile, the question of time and creation in the *City of God* also examines at what time God felt satisfied about what he created, whether it was at the beginning of creation, during creation or after creation. It responds to the preoccupation with whether God knows the past and the future. St. Augustine declared that in God, there is no knowledge of the future or the past. God “knows time with an independent knowledge of time, as he moves temporal things without undergoing any temporal movement. Having examined the contents of Books eight and eleven, it will be good to give a detailed idea of the division and themes of philosophy in the *City of God*.”

Division and Themes of Philosophy in the *City of God*

St. Augustine's threefold division of philosophy is as follows: Physics, Logic and Ethics (which Latin authors commonly called natural, rational and moral philosophy). This philosophical division is also discussed or treated as natural science (physical philosophy), rational science (logic) and moral science (ethics). This division reveals that natural philosophy is devoted to speculation, rational philosophy to distinguishing between truth and falsehood and then moral philosophy relates to action. He attributed this division to Plato but did not concern himself with Plato as such, but with those who knew him, notably: the Pythagoreans, the Libyan, Egyptian, Indian, Persian and Chaldean sages, etc. Despite the diversity of their propositions, we find the threefold cause explaining the universe: being, truth, and goodness (*causa subsistendi, ratio intelligendi, ordo videndi*). He also asserted that philosophers did not establish but found the tripartite division of philosophy.

The naming of the division of philosophy according to science reminds us of the “Trinity” discussed by St. Augustine in his work *The Trinity*. In *The Trinity*, science is called a discipline. A person who practises a discipline or a science learns not only in order to know but also to orient themselves to acquire a blessed life. It is therefore evident that in *The Trinity*, science is a true tool of those who want to flee evil. Meanwhile, in the *City of God*, the division of science recognised God as the sole author of all nature, the dispenser of intelligence and the inspirer of that love which is the source of a good and happy life.

In the *City of God*, science is understood in the sense of what God knows about his works. In the Bible, we find “God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:4). The question that arises is this: when did God understand that his work was good, before or after creation? This is the fundamental concern Bk. 11. C 21, in the *City of God*. In God, there is no knowledge of the future or the past. This means that God's knowledge of his work did not double or increase his knowledge, as if it had been less before; he whose work would not have been perfect if the fulfilment of his will could have added anything to the perfection of his knowledge.

II. Physics (natural philosophy)

The first philosophy is called “natural philosophy”. It is a philosophy whose object was the

study of nature, especially the creation of the universe. The natural philosophy of St. Augustine explored the question concerning the origin of things and where they come from. Various philosophers attempted to provide answers concerning the origin of things. For Thales, it is water; Anaximenes said air; the Stoics said fire; the Epicureans said atoms. A pertinent question also seeks to know the origin of time and whether the beginning of the world and the beginning of time are the same. St. Augustine responded to these preoccupations in the *City of God*, especially in Bk. 11, C. 4-8. He taught that “the world was in fact made with time, if at the time of its creation change and motion came into existence”.

The creation of angels, their nature, the distinction between good and bad angels, where to look for any efficient cause of the evil act of will and whether the Creator is the author of the good will of the holy angels were fundamental questions that preoccupied the thought of St. Augustine. Concerning the reward of those who lived according to the principle of the city of God and those who lived contrary to the principles of this city, the natural philosophy of St. Augustine delved into the question of whether the physical body can suffer eternal pain. The affirmation that the flesh or matter can suffer in eternity implies “that anything which feels pain is alive, and no pain can exist except in a living thing”. This means that any matter or flesh which suffers eternal pain after death still possesses the soul, which is the principle of life. From this perspective, one can conclude that both the body and the soul suffer in those who are condemned. Those who do bad suffer in the *Lychnos asbestos*, that is, “in the inextinguishable lamp?” This suggests St. Augustine's interest in the origin and nature of fire, the punishment of offenders and also the proportion between the offence and the punishment in respect of time. The physics of St. Augustine shows his ingenuity and ability to explain whether the fire of hell is material or not.

The physics of St. Augustine in the *City of God* discussed people who “are subject to the celestial conjunctions” and not to the will of God. They rely on the positioning of the celestial elements to determine the day/time for sex, for planting and naming. According to Augustinian philosophy, physics studies the physical world, the living world from plants upwards, their evolution, and the world of animals endowed with sensitivity and passions that they share with humans. This study of nature is called “natural science”. And because it requires thought, this study is also called “speculative philosophy”. Physics is not atomism, nor the natural laws of the Stoics, but above all a metaphysics ascending towards God. However, St. Augustine criticised those who relied on astrologers to determine and shape their destiny. He attributed the series of orderliness in the universe, the chain of causes, to the will and power of the supreme God who knows all things before they happen. He also criticised Cicero, who dreaded the prospect of the future because things would happen in the precise order of foreknowledge without an efficient cause. He was afraid that human beings would not exercise their free will, but St. Augustine countered these fears and affirmed that the fixed order of causes does not take away our free will.

II. Logic (rational philosophy)

According to St. Augustine, logic is called “rational philosophy”. In Aristotle's logic, the criterion for truth is the senses/experience. For instance, “To judge that **A** was good for **B**,

C, &c., when ill of disease N, is a matter of experience”. This logic is purely based on empiricism and affirms that the efficacy of the use of a certain treatment A, for curing B and C, can also be applied in the treatment of other people when they suffer from disease N. St. Augustine specifically mentioned Epicurus, Stoics and other philosophers as those whose logic derives truth from bodily senses. Unlike Aristotle's logic, Augustine's logic seeks infallible truth in the intelligence enlightened by God. This shows that St. Augustine's logic is different from the formal logic of Aristotle, even though he sometimes applies arguments to explain theological truths.

To fully understand St. Augustine's logic, one must understand the purpose of his thinking, which is a logic that studies the spiritual soul of human beings and how the process of human thought opens the human person to truths. Those philosophers whose logic is founded on empirical relation “distinguished between the things discerned by the mind and those attained by the senses, without either detracting from the proper powers of the senses, or ascribing to them powers beyond their competence”. The implication is that there are things that can be attained by the senses and those that can be discerned by the human mind. However, unlike the sensualist thinking of the Stoics, the logic of the Bishop of Hippo went beyond being open to sensual truth outside to divine illumination.

From the foregoing point, St. Augustine tried to establish that human pride, ignorance and weakness of the will have made it difficult for human beings to see the logical connection between the actions of human beings and the effects/consequences of their actions. In Bk 2, C. 1, St. Augustine expressed it thus: “If only the weak understanding of the ordinary man did not stubbornly resist the plain evidence of logic and truth”. For instance, they could not see the logical connection between the calamities that befell the Romans and the worship of the pagan gods before Christianity displaced them, nor understand that gods who demanded obscene shows in their worship deserved no divine honours. Moreover, it is also logical to say that “if the gods had been concerned for righteousness, the Romans ought to have received moral instruction from them, instead of borrowing laws”. The logic inherent in Book 2 of the *City of God* is evident in the use of arguments to contradict most of the pagan beliefs.

But in Book X, St. Augustine's logic was expressed in the form of dialectical reasoning. Dialectics should be understood in the Epicurean or Stoic sense of “subtle art of disputation”. St. Augustine applied this logic to correct some philosophical error concerning illumination and the source of happiness, true worship and perfect sacrifice and the miracles performed through the ministry of angels. He affirmed in Bk. 19, C. 22 that the God who revealed himself to Abraham is the true God to whom all sacrifices are due, and that true happiness can only be found in him, while Jesus is the perfect sacrifice. From this point of view, St. Augustine proceeded to examine the coherence of the philosophical debates of the Epicureans, the Stoics and the Platonists concerning the highest good. The objective was to establish the appointed ends of “two cities, the earthly and the heavenly”. Concerning the highest good that would be enjoyed by the members of these two cities, St Augustine said: “when asked about each of these points, and first what view it holds about the Ultimate Good and the Ultimate Evil, the reply will be that eternal life is the Supreme Good, and eternal death the Supreme Evil, and that to achieve the one and escape the other,

we must live rightly”. It is therefore logical that the end of those who do evil, the citizens of the earthly city, should be wretchedness, death, conflict, and war. St. Augustine described this state as a condition of pain which continues to torment those in the earthly city and which will never cease lest the punishment also should cease.

III. Morality (“moral science” or “moral philosophy”)

The *City of God* contains a philosophy that has a social dimension, namely, an ethic for living in society. These are the principles and laws that govern human life. In other words, Augustinian philosophy is a praxis of good living in society, as is made explicit in Book XIX. Indeed, in St. Augustine's division of philosophy, the third part deals with morality, “moral science” or “moral philosophy”. It is worth noting that St. Augustine's ethics had a significant influence on Kantian ethics during the modern period. Augustinian ethics seeks the highest good. It is an ethic to which we relate our actions. It is “an ethic that we desire for its own sake, not for the sake of something else”. In the *City of God*, he described ethics as actions “which we seek for its own sake, not for any ulterior end, and the attainment of which leaves us nothing more to seek for our happiness. For this reason, it is called the 'end'; everything else we desire for the sake of this, this we desire for itself alone”.

The question of morality in the philosophy of St. Augustine is also linked to the discussion of the *Summum Bonum* (the Highest Good). The search for the Highest Good by human beings presupposes the division of the human person into “body” and “soul”. The belief that one or the other of the two constituents of human nature is the source of the Good, which guarantees happiness also means a search for the reference of all human actions. While those who propose that the body is the source of supreme Goodness are criticised for looking for it in lower elements in the human body, the proponents of the source as the source of the Highest Good appear to search for it in the nobler part of human beings. However, a third opinion that claims the existence of other goods, namely “honour, glory, money, or the like” is also rejected because what they proposed cannot be considered supreme goods, but “things that are desired for another end, which are good for the good and bad for the wicked”. The body or spirit of man may depend on these goods. Therefore, one should not seek good whose source is the human body or human mind but the Good which originates from God.

It is from this perspective that St. Augustine imagined that the Sovereign Good for Plato is to live according to virtue, and this is only possible for those who know God and imitate Him. He affirmed that this is the only source of happiness. By implication, it is easy to deduce that Plato will not find it difficult to assert “that to be a philosopher is to love God, whose nature is immaterial”. What happens to those who are unhappy because they love what they should not love? This question probably alludes to those who love material things, wealth and honour and seems to suggest “that the seeker after wisdom (which is the meaning of 'philo-soph-er') will only attain to happiness when he has begun to enjoy God”. The *City of God* acknowledged the existence of *Sages* or philosophers who are “Libyans of Atlas, Egyptians, Indians, Persians, Chaldeans, Scythians, Gauls, Spaniards” and whose search for morality is very close to the Christian position.

Anthropological Significance of The Philosophy in the *City of God*

The interest in the anthropological significance of St. Augustine's philosophy in the *City of God* lies in analysing certain aspects of human nature, particularly the purpose of life. Here are some points to note:

Human society and aspiration: St. Augustine tried to establish a theoretical framework of a dualistic society, namely, the heavenly city and earthly city. This configuration of human society determines the characteristics of each city, shapes the aspirations of human beings and their destiny after life. Considering that anthropology is concerned with the origin of human beings, the *City of God* examined this aspect beginning with the question of the creation of the universe, angels and human beings. In particular, the natural philosophy of St. Augustine revealed not only the composition of human beings but also discussed how the physical body can suffer in an inextinguishable fire. Concerning human aspiration, the *rational philosophy* of St. Augustine demonstrated the logical connection between human actions and their consequences. Those who aspire to live according to the principles of the city of God will enjoy eternal bliss while those who live a contrary life will suffer eternal damnation. Essentially, the reward of those who will inherit the eternal city depends on how best they apply the principles taught by *moral philosophy*. While the concept of “city” remains symbolic and could represent society, the work of St. Augustine strongly proposed a society in which human beings go beyond the natural laws of the Stoics to exercise their free will to ascend towards God.

Human will and freedom: The possession of free will and freedom constitutes an authentic identity of human beings as rational creatures. The *physics* of St. Augustine differs from that of the philosophers before and after him in the way in which they perceive the universe. The *City of God* affirmed that the *physics* of St. Augustine is not atomism nor based on astrology which denies free will. In other words, the human will is not constrained by the forces of conjectures of celestial elements, their movements and positioning. The distinction between things that can be known by the senses and those that can be discerned by the mind showed that the *logic* of St. Augustine is not empirical. The disputational or dialectical nature of the Augustinian *logic* expresses the ability of human beings to discover the true God who should be worshipped. It is logical for human beings to be rewarded with Ultimate Good (Supreme Good) and the Ultimate Evil (eternal death, the Supreme Evil), according to how they exercised their will and freedom. This means that *morality*, which consists in the search for the highest good, depends on human will and freedom.

Human transcendence and spirituality: The *City of God* embodies a philosophy of human transcendence. Notwithstanding the bodily composition of human beings, St. Augustine demonstrated the possibility of the body suffering eternally in a fire that does not go out. He criticised dependence on the heavenly bodies, which astrologers explained in terms of “determination” and “fate” and argued in favour of a complex, dynamic and relational nature of existence. Augustine's emphasis on theological truth shows his interest in how the soul should be more open to God. Although St. Augustine recognises the

empirical foundation of truth but appeared to appeal to a higher source of truth that can be attained by the human mind through divine illumination. The search for the reference of human action is transcendental. The reliance on the human mind or soul to know how to attain happiness shows the magnanimity of what is sought. Human transcendence is a universal quality of all people, irrespective of nationality and tribe.

Conclusion

This study appeared pointless since the *City of God* is a city far removed from human existence or an eschatological city that believers find and enter at the end of their earthly existence. The apparent religious and theological description of the *City of God* as a kind of paradise that is in contrast with the earthly city concealed the philosophical nature of St. Augustine's work. However, the metaphysical thinking of St. Augustine and his approach to interpreting what constitutes the division of philosophy present a classical Platonist philosophy.

The Augustinian philosophy in books 8 and 11 of the *City of God* includes physics, logic and ethics. His critical thought in these areas of philosophy was considered to be in accordance with pure reason because even pagans defend them without reference to revelation. His objective was to establish knowledge that brings deliverance to the soul. The soul here refers to the pure spirit of reason. The progress of the deliverance to the soul is evident in the division of philosophy, which represents a movement away from the materialist philosophers such as the Stoics and Epicureans (physics), towards his own metaphysical thinking (logic) and morality. In this sense, St. Augustine positioned philosophy as a science which has the task of delivering the human soul because of its universality and also because it has the highest doctrine and moral rules. But since philosophy is limited, he therefore defended the fact that the path to the deliverance of the soul is the knowledge of God, the knowledge of his Only Son, Jesus Christ. Knowledge of Christ delivers on three levels: physical, intellectual and spiritual.

The three divisions of philosophy are not the Augustinian synthesis of philosophical thought in the *City of God*. There is something of politics and society in Bk. 19, C. 13. We also find the beginnings of Cartesian “cogito” in the *City of God*, when Descartes, in asserting that “Cogito ergo sum”, was inspired by St. Augustine, who had already said “Fallor sum”, and Martin Heidegger also drew inspiration from Augustine on the subject of the notion of time in the contemporary era. This creates an opening to discuss how modern and contemporary philosophies are either a prolongation of the Augustinian philosophy or were inspired by his critical reflections on certain issues. This means that further research could be made to establish the link between Augustinian philosophy and some philosophical thoughts in modern and contemporary times.

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