
The Philosophy of (Erotic) Love



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Augustine

from The City of God

Augustine (354–430) became the leading theologian and spokesman for Christianity, which had been made the official religion of the Roman Empire only a half century before by Constantine. The first part of his life, much of which he spent in Rome, was devoted to eros and the pleasures of life. But after his conversion to Christianity in 386, he recast his views of erotic love through the harsh eyes of the Christian condemnation of the flesh. In the following passage from The City of God, Augustine traces the origins of erotic lust back to the Fall, Adam and Eve's disobedience to God's commands. Procreation, he argues, was part of God's divine plan, but lust and eroticism, which blindly drive us to have intercourse, were rather the consequences of our own disobedience. In Paradise, he argues, we would have been fruitful and multiplied, but the procreative act would have been strictly a matter of will, not of the indecent and shameful desires of the flesh. True love is the spiritual love of God to which eros can only serve as an impediment. Much of the subsequent history of love and its spiritualization as well as our still ambivalent attitudes toward sex and love can be traced to these early Christian teachings.

On the justice of the retribution that was meted out to the first human beings for their disobedience.

Man, as we know, scorned the bidding of God who had created him, who had made him in his own image, who had placed him above the other animals, who had established him in paradise, who had provided him with an abundance of all things and of security, and who had not laden him with commands that were numerous or onerous or difficult but had propped him up for wholesome obedience with one very brief and easy command, whereby he sought to impress upon this creature, for whom free service was expedient, that he was the Lord. Therefore, as a consequence, just condemnation followed, and this condemnation was such that man, who would have been spiritual even in flesh if he had observed the order, became carnal in mind as well. Moreover, this man who had pleased himself in his pride was then granted to himself by God's justice; yet this was not

done in such a way that he was completely in his own power, but that he disagreed with himself and so led, under the rule of the one with whom he agreed when he sinned, a life of cruel and wretched slavery in place of the freedom for which he had conceived a desire. He was willingly dead in spirit and unwillingly destined to die in body; a deserter of the eternal life, he was doomed also to eternal death, unless he were freed by grace. Whoever thinks that condemnation of this sort is either excessive or unjust surely does not know how to gauge the magnitude of wickedness in sinning when the opportunity for not sinning was so ample. . . .

When we say that the flesh feels desire or pain, we mean that it is either man himself, as I have argued, or some part of the soul affected by what the flesh experiences, whether it be harsh and painful or gentle and pleasant. Pain of the flesh is only a vexation of the soul arising from the flesh and a sort of disagreement with what is done to the flesh, just as the pain of the mind that we call grief is a disagreement with the things that have happened to us against our will. But grief is generally preceded by fear, which is also something in the soul and not in the flesh. Pain of the flesh, on the other hand, is not preceded by anything like fear on the part of the flesh that is felt in the flesh before the pain. Pleasure, however, is preceded by a certain craving that is felt in the flesh as its own desire, such as hunger, thirst and the desire that is mostly called lust when it affects the sex organs, though this is a general term applicable to any kind of desire.

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Therefore, although there are lusts for many things, yet when the term lust is employed without the mention of any object, nothing comes to mind usually but the lust that excites the shameful parts of the body. Moreover, this lust asserts its power not only over the entire body, nor only externally, but also from within. It convulses all of a man when the emotion in his mind combines and mingles with the carnal drive to produce a pleasure unsurpassed among those of the body. The effect of this is that at the very moment of its climax there is an almost total eclipse of acumen and, as it were, sentinel alertness. But surely any friend of wisdom and holy joys, who lives in wedlock but knows, as the Apostle admonished, "how to possess his bodily vessel in holiness and honor, not in the disease of lust like the gentiles who do not know God," would prefer, if he could, to beget children without this kind of lust. For he would want his mind to be served, even in this function of engendering offspring, by the parts created for this kind of work, just as it is served by the other members, each assigned to its own kind of

work. They would be set in motion when the will urged, not stirred to action when hot lust surged.

But not even those who are enamoured of this pleasure are aroused whether to marital intercourse or to the uncleanness of outrageous vice just when it is their will. At times the urge intrudes uninvited; at other times it deserts the panting lover, and although desire is ablaze in the mind, the body is frigid. In this strange fashion lust refuses service not only to the will to procreate but also to the lust for wantonness; and though for the most part it solidly opposes the mind's restraint, there are times when it is divided even against itself and, having aroused the mind, inconsistently fails to arouse the body.

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It is reasonable then that we should feel very much ashamed of such lust, and reasonable too that those members which it moves or does not move by its own right, so to speak, and not in full subjection to our will, should be called pudenda or shameful parts as they were not before man sinned; for we read in Scripture: "They were naked, and not embarrassed." And the reason for this is not that they were unaware of their nakedness, but that their nakedness was not yet base because lust did not yet arouse those members apart from their will, and the flesh did not yet bear witness, so to speak, through its own disobedience against the disobedience of man. . . .

Let us consider the act itself that is accomplished by such lust, not only in every kind of licentious intercourse, for which hiding-places are prerequisite to avoid judgment before human tribunals, but also in the practice of harlotry, a base vice that has been legalized by the earthly city. Although in the latter case the practice is not under the ban of any law of this city, nevertheless even the lust that is allowed and free of penalty shuns the public gaze. Because of an innate sense of shame even brothels have made provision for privacy, and unchastity found it easier to do without the fetters of legal prohibition than shamelessness did to eliminate the secret nooks of that foul business.

But this harlotry is called a base matter even by those who are base themselves, and although they are enamored of it, they dare not make public display of it. What of marital intercourse, which has for its purpose, according to the terms of the marriage contract, the procreation of children? Lawful and respectable though it is, does it not seek a chamber secluded from witnesses? Before the bridegroom beings even to caress his bride, does he not first send outside all servants and even his own groomsmen as well as

any who had been permitted to enter for kinship's sake, whatever the tie? And since, as a certain "supreme master of Roman eloquence" also maintains, all right actions wish to be placed in the light of day, that is, are eager to become known, this right action also desires to become known, though it still blushes to be seen. For who does not know what goes on between husband and wife for the procreation of children? Indeed, it is for the achievement of this purpose that wives are married with such ceremony. And yet, when the act for the birth of children is being consummated, not even the children that may already have been born from the union are allowed to witness it. For this right action does indeed seek mental light for recognition of it, but it shrinks from visual light. What is the reason for this if not that something by nature fitting and proper is carried out in such a way as to be accompanied also by something of shame as punishment?

Human nature then doubtless feels shame at this lust, and rightly so. For its disobedience, which subjected the sexual organs to its impulses exclusively and wrested them from control by the will, is a sufficient demonstration of the punishment that was meted out to man for that first disobedience. And it was fitting that this punishment should show itself particularly in that part of the body which engenders the very creature that was changed for the worse through that first great sin. No one can be delivered from the meshes of that sin unless the offence that was committed to the common disaster of all and punished by the justice of God when all men existed in but one, is expiated in each man singly by the grace of God.

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When anyone says that there would have been no copulation or generation if the first human beings had not sinned, does he not imply that man's sin was required to complete the number of saints? For if by not sinning they would have continued to be solitary because, so some think, they could not have produced offspring if they had not sinned, then surely sin was required before there could not be just two but many righteous persons. But if that is too absurd to believe, we must rather believe that even if no one had sinned, a sufficiently large number of saints would have come into existence to populate that supremely happy city—as large a number, that is, as are now being gathered through the grace of God from the multitude of sinners, and as will be, so long as "the children of this world" beget and are begotten.

This leads to the conclusion that if no sin had been committed, that marriage, being worthy of the happiness of paradise, would have produced

offspring to be loved, yet no lust to cause shame. But there is now no example with which to illustrate how this could have been effected. Nevertheless, that is no reason why it should seem incredible that the will, which is now obeyed by so many members, might also have been obeyed in the absence of this lust by that one part as well. Consider how, when we choose, we set our hands and feet in motion to do the things that are theirs to do, how we manage this without any conflict and with all the facility that we see both in our own case and in that of others, especially among workers in all kinds of physical tasks, where a natural capacity that is too weak and slow is fitted for its employment by the application of greater dexterity and effort. May we not similarly believe that those organs of procreation could, like the others, have served mankind by obedience to the decision of the will for the generation of children even if there had been no lust inflicted as punishment for the sin of disobedience?

Certain human beings too, as we know, have natural endowments that are quite different from those of others and remarkable for their very rarity. They can at will do with their bodies some things that others find utterly impossible to imitate and scarcely credible to hear. For some people can actually move their ears, either one at a time or both together. Other people, without moving their head, can bring all the scalp that is covered with hair to the forefront and then draw it back again at will. . . . From my own experience I know of a man who used to perspire at will. Certain people are known to weep at will and to shed a flood of tears.

The body then, as we have seen, even now remarkably serves certain people beyond the ordinary limits of nature in many kinds of movement and feeling although they are living our present wretched life in perishable flesh. That being so, what is there to keep us from believing that human members may have served the human will without lust for the procreation of offspring before the sin of disobedience and the consequent punishment of deterioration? Man therefore was handed over to himself because he forsook God in his self-satisfaction, and since he did not obey God, he could not obey even himself. From this springs the more obvious wretchedness whereby man does not live as he chooses. For if he lived as he chose, he would deem himself happy; but yet he would not be happy even so if he lived an indecent life.

Heloise and Abelard

Letters

Heloise (whose parentage still remains disputed) was the abbess of the convent at Paraclete and one of the most learned persons of the twelfth-century Renaissance. Her husband, Peter Abelard, was born into a minor aristocratic family but renounced his noble rights and became the keenest and most influential scholar-theologian of his day. He was already renowned as a brilliant thinker and lecturer in Paris when he was brought into the house of Heloise's "uncle," Fulbert (surmised by some to be her father), to be the young girl's tutor. The relationship soon grew beyond its pedagogical bounds, and Heloise and Abelard became lovers, indeed, two of the most famous lovers in the Western tradition. But their love became famous first of all through a brutal tragedy. Fulbert would not tolerate the dangerous liaison between his ward and her tutor—even their secret marriage and their baby would not stem his jealousy—and he had Abelard attacked and emasculated. Heloise went off to the convent, and Abelard retreated to the Abbey of St. Denis, where he continued his theological disputations and wrote a history of their calamitous affair.

For the remainder of their lives, they kept up a passionate correspondence in which they explored, as deeply and with as much pathos as any lovers in history, the meaning of love and its place in life. In their letters, the split between sexual eros and philosophy implicit in Socrates and manifest in the Christian teachings of Saint Paul and Augustine turns into moral turmoil. In most of her letters, Heloise adopts a classical rather than a Christian perspective on love, but it is a Socratic perspective in which "disinterested" (sublimated) friendship is the ideal, "virtue joined to love, disengaged from the senses." To such a love, warmed by the memories of their passionate physical union, Heloise devotes her life. Abelard, on the other hand, seems to have a harder time with his passion and his humiliation. He sees both his love and his physical condition as antithetical to his philosophy; whereas Heloise sees her love as freedom, Abelard seems to feel his idealized philosophical freedom compromised by his. It is worth noting that, despite their marriage, both Heloise and Abelard praise love and dis-