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# To Love the World Most Deeply: The Phenomenology of the World as Gift in Augustine's *Confessions*

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## Abstract

While there is a tradition in western religious thought of "contemptus mundi"–hating the world–there is also a tradition of loving the world. Figures as diverse as Augustine, Nietzsche, and Freud have queried whether and how we can love the world: how we can enjoy it for its value. Whereas Nietzsche and Freud thought that a Christian theistic framework prevented us from loving the world, a close reading of Augustine's Confessions shows that this is not true, at least in one sense. For Augustine, this article tries to show, theorizes how it is precisely within a Christian theistic framework that we can love the world most deeply and take the most delight in the world. This vision of Augustine's is not without its own challenges, but it offers at the least a significant "response" to claims by those like Nietzsche and Freud who believe that Christian theism and loving the world are irreconcilable.

## Keywords

Phenomenology, Augustine, Gift, World

## I. Introduction

Freud and Nietzsche believed that religion hinders us from loving the world. Consider this comment from *The Future of an Illusion*: once humans have embraced atheism and surmounted the "infantilism" of religion, they can begin to invest "all their liberated energies into their life on earth".[1] In other words, while Freud's critique of religion as a defense-mechanism of infantile neurosis is the most famous part of Freud's book, the purpose toward which that critique is advanced

[1] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, tr. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 63.

is the love of the world. Thus Freud would say that all religious faith is marked by an ineliminable investment in mythologies of transcendence, mythologies that cannot but hinder the human ability to devote our love, attention, and care to this world and to the lives of ourselves and others in this world. Having anxiety about achieving a blissful afterlife or viewing this world as merely a stopping-ground on the way to eternity and real being and life prevents individuals and communities from loving this immanent world.[2] While Freud speaks for the modern suspicion that belief in a transcendent deity prevents us from loving the world that we can see and experience now, Nietzsche makes the point, as we would expect, with even more rhetorical force. Listen to this quote from *The Anti-Christ*: "God having degenerated into a *contradiction of life* instead of its transfiguration and eternal *yes*! God as declared aversion to life, to nature, to the will to life! God as the formula for every slander upon 'the here and now,' and for every lie about the 'beyond'! God as the deification of nothingness, the canonization of the will to nothingness!"[3]

Freud's and Nietzsche's criticisms are common knowledge, and religious commentators have been quick to argue that religion does not actually prevent us from loving this immanent world and our and others' lives in it. So in this paper, I want to show how someone like Augustine can be said to "reply" to Nietzsche and Freud in a way that is even more interesting than simply arguing religious people can indeed love the world. Augustine makes a more daring argument: he says that if we want to love the world as deeply as we can, then we must be religious. In other words, someone like Augustine will say that for us to attain the goal that Nietzsche and Freud set out for us—to enjoy the richest and most joyful love of the world that is possible—we must become religious and see the world as the gift of creation. With the help of Augustine, reflection on the claim that religion is life- and world-denying leads to the perhaps surprising conclusion that, in fact, only religion fully enhances and affirms our love for this world and our lives in it.

My paper will proceed in three stages. First, I will show how Augustine himself argues that, contrary to Nietzsche's and Freud's contentions, we can love the world in a theistic framework, but only when we love the goods of this world not as goods in themselves but rather as gifts from a transcendent deity. Second, I will show how phenomenological reflection on the experience of receiving a

[2] This is not foreign to what Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) calls the "affirmation of ordinary life" that defines modernity.

[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Judith Norman and Aaron Ridley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 15–16).



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gift shows that the world comes to be more valuable and loveable in a religious framework than in a non-religious worldview; this claim leads us to the conclusion that we should become religious if we want to love the world as deeply and pleasurably as we can. Third and last, I will raise a few critical questions about the argument I have presented by asking whether seeking to love this world and our lives in it as deeply and pleasurably as we can is as unproblematic a desire as it first appears.

## II. Loving the World as a Gift

How does someone like Augustine in his *Confessions* think that we can love the world as a gift in a theistic context? We need first to acknowledge how in *Confessions* Augustine *does* value creation as good and lovable: "All things are very good, whether they abide close to you or, in the graded hierarchy of being, stand further away from you in time and space, in beautiful modifications which they either actively cause or passively receive."[4] Creation is good in every particular and as a totality, and the totality is not only good but beautiful. Augustine even goes so far as to say that "'There is no health' in those who are displeased by an element in your creation, just as there was none in me when I was displeased by many things you had made."[5] The healthy soul is the soul that delights in every element of God's creation in so far as it exists. The immanent world is good, beautiful, and meant to be enjoyed. But the world is good only when it is loved as a gift. Augustine quotes First Timothy to say: "'All your creation is good and nothing is to be rejected which is received with thanksgiving.'"[6] It seems that creation is good and meant to be enjoyed because it is a gift from a transcendent gift-giver. Rather than hating the world, religious persons can love the world, Augustine says, and they love it by cherishing it as the gift of the Creator. Humans can enjoy the world and give themselves to life in it, but in the context of a metaphysics of the world as created, rather than as simply randomly present. Augustine thinks that we should focus attention on this world, but attention to this world and attention to God are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they reinforce each other. Belief in God allows us to love this world and our lives in it as gifts, and when we cherish this world and our lives in it as gifts from God we come to love God more in turn.

[4] Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. and tr. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 267, 12.28.38.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 126, 7.14.20.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 206, 10.31.46.



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## III. Why Christian Theism Allows Us to Love the World Most Deeply

But why does Augustine insist that we should love created goods—this world and our lives in it—not as ends in themselves, but only considered as gifts? To answer this question, we need to see the context for his account of loving the world as a divine gift. The context is the whole of *Confessions*, which Margaret Miles has rightly called a "text of pleasure"[7] in which Augustine offers the reader a religious faith that will give what Miles calls "maximal pleasure" in God.[8]

Augustine writes in Book Four that "if physical objects give you pleasure, praise God for them and return love to their maker."[9] He assumes that created goods—this world and our lives in it—give us pleasure, but Augustine wants us to praise and thank God for these goods in order to increase our pleasure. To be thankful means to feel and express love for God for the gift that has been given, love that arises out of love for the gift itself. In other words, Augustine should not be read as merely stating the human duty to show gratitude to God in all circumstances. Rather, the command—to give thanks to God—is actually a command to experience an increase of pleasure by loving the world not as simply present but as a gift. So in Book Four of *Confessions* Augustine says: "The good which you love is from [God]. But it is only as it is related to him that it is good and sweet. Otherwise it will justly become bitter; for all that comes from him is unjustly loved if he has been abandoned".[10] What Augustine means is that if our enjoyment of created goods is sundered from gratitude to the transcendent giver who has given them, then our enjoyment of these goods will become less enjoyable, because to love something that is simply present is less enjoyable than to love something received as a gift.

Remembering that the aim of *Confessions* is to maximize the reader's pleasure, we can see what Augustine is doing if we reflect phenomenologically on the pleasure we take in a gift and the love we feel for a gift. Consider how we love the objects that we possess. If I have a Chagall print on my wall that I purchased for myself, I will look at the Chagall print and feel a certain amount of joy and pleasure because I appreciate Chagall's themes, colors, and style. But say that the same painting is in my possession and hangs on my wall but, instead of having purchased it myself, it was

[7] Margaret Miles, *Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine's* Confessions (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 7.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 131.
[9] Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 63, 4.12.18.
[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64, 4.12.18.



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given to me as a gift from a beloved friend. In this situation, I would suggest, my joy will involve all the joy I would have experienced in the first scenario, but also more. For now I will have the joy of the themes, colors, and style of Chagall's work *and* the additional pleasure of knowing that the print was a gift of love. The Chagall print comes to have *more* value, and I come to love it more, when it is a gift that I received from someone who loves me.

Augustine asks whether it is not the same with the task and delight of loving the world? "You are the rich bestower of all good things",[11] he says to God. The Latin is even more excessive than Henry Chadwick's translation, which omits the superlative. Augustine's Latin runs thus: *sed bonorum omnium largitor affluentissimus tu es*.[12] I would translate it this way: "But you are the generous giver most overflowing with good things." So, again, we see a picture of the goodness of created realities, but we also have a picture of God's identity as a lavish gift-giver.

Here Augustine's text is making a claim about God in order to make a claim about how to love the world most deeply and pleasurably. To love the world with the deepest amount of love and pleasure possible, one needs to love the entire world as a gift from a loving giver. In this way religious faith is not a means of frustrating our love for this world and our lives in it; rather, faith becomes a means of loving the world with the most possible joy. In faith, Augustine thinks, we come to love the world with the maximal love possible and comes to feel grateful for the world with the maximal gratitude possible. Loving the immanent world maximally and with maximal pleasure, for Augustine, means believing in a transcendent, generous God: if we want to love this world as much as we can, with as much pleasure as we can muster, we must believe in, love, and thank God as its creator.

Thus we can understand better what Augustine means when he says at the beginning of his book that "to praise you is the desire of humankind... You stir humankind to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you".[13] Far from arguing that we should focus our attention solely on God at the expense of the world and our lives in it, we can now see that a significant aspect of what it means to praise God is to thank God for the world and thereby love the world maximally and with maximal pleasure.

We are now at a point where we can better understand what Augustine means when in other parts of *Confessions* he seems to be denigrating or devaluing the world. He is actually not devaluing the

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 31, 2.6.13.
[12] Latin text of *Confessions*, 2.6.13. My translation follows.
[13] Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 3, 1.1.1.



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world; he is devaluing not the world but a love for the world that does not consider the world's status as a gift, a love for the world that is less pleasurable and deep than it can and should be. When he seems to be denigrating this world, therefore, he is only saying that when this world is not theistically grounded it does not allow for maximal pleasure, something that Augustine believes every person wants. Such a theistic ground for creation in fact makes this world and our lives in it more valuable, and therefore most pleasurable, than what they could be were they not theistically grounded. When he writes of his pre-conversion sinful state in which he "had a taste only for this earth,"[14] he means that he did not have a taste for the earth as the gift of God; therefore, paradoxically, he did not have as much, as intense, as pleasurable of a taste for this earth as it was possible for him to enjoy. In other words, Augustine has believed that he could love created goods as ends in themselves and take pleasure in them as such. But when he tried to love created goods in such a way, he found that he could not really love them or enjoy them as much as he wanted to love or enjoy them! He speaks of this situation to God: "For you were always with me, mercifully punishing me, touching with a bitter taste all my illicit pleasures. Your intention was that I should seek delights unspoilt by disgust and that, in my quest where I could achieve this, I should discover it to be in nothing except you Lord, nothing but you."[15] Augustine does not mean that he wants to take pleasure in God over against the world; he means that he wants to take pleasure in God *and* take maximal pleasure in the world as the gift of God.

So to love created goods as ends in themselves is not to love them but to find them unsatisfying, i.e. not as pleasurable as they could be. Yet when one loves God and loves created goods as God's gifts, one gets the world as well as an intensely pleasurable gift. So when Augustine says "My God, how I burned, how I burned with longing to leave earthly things and fly back to you,"[16] he means he desires to leave behind his love of earthly things as goods in themselves, ends in themselves, that are less pleasurable than they could and should be. To fly back to God does not mean to leave the world behind—it means to love the world even more than before. The world from which he is fleeing is the world of "uncontrolled desire"[17] that makes created goods ends in themselves, and therefore less enjoyable, instead of gifts given by God, gifts that allow the maximal possible enjoyment. We can again go to the Latin to see even better what Augustine is saying: *non ego inmunditiam obsonii*

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 81, 5.8.14.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 25, 2.2.4.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 39, 3.4.8.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 206, 10.31.46.



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*timeo, sed inmunditiam cupiditatis*.[18] It is not so much uncontrolled desire, in Chadwick's translation, as it is foul desire: "I do not fear the foulness of food, but the foulness of desire." Desire is uncontrolled when it is foul, when it is broken. Foul desire is fundamentally desire that settles for too little pleasure. Augustine says of this misuse of created goods: "Sometimes I seem to myself to give them more honor than is fitting."[19] Sometimes he loves created goods as if they could, as simply present, slake his hunger for maximal pleasure.

Augustine's argument, in sum, is that if we want to love the world as much as we can with as much pleasure as we can, we must love the world as an unexpected gift given by a divine creator. Such is Augustine's radical "reply" to those who believe that theism necessarily devalues this world and our lives in it. To Nietzsche, Freud, and all those who have made this critique since them, Augustine replies that only theism makes this life and world as abundant as they can be and therefore makes love of this life and world as pleasurable as can be.

## IV. Concluding With Two Objections

I have tried to show that Augustine is much more than just a thinker who believes that religious persons can love this world. He is, in truth, a more daring thinker who believes that only belief in a theistic framework allows us to love this world and our lives in it with as much love and pleasure as possible. He is a thinker who, because of and in the context of his commitment to a religion of pleasure, not only affirms this world and our lives in it as valuable and worthy of love; he is a thinker who recommends belief in a theistic account of the world-as-gift in order to enable the deepest possible affirmation of the value of this world and our lives in it in order to enable the deepest and most pleasurable love of this life and world.

But, to be fair, we must admit that Augustine's "response" to Freud and Nietzsche is far from airtight. One problem that arises arises from the famous "experience machine"[20] thought experiment imagined by the late Robert Nozick. Reflection on the unattractive phenomenon "experience machine" would point to a problem with the conditional antecedent that says that we should wish to love the world as pleasurably and deeply as we can. Simply to summarize Nozick's argument, he says that even if we had the chance to be hooked

[18] Latin text of *Confessions*, 10.31.46. My translation follows.

[19] Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 207, 10.33.49.

[20] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42–45.



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up to a machine that would enable us to think we were experiencing uninterrupted bliss, we would reject the offer because the experiences and their attendant pleasures are not real. So Nozick would say that while pleasure is a good, it cannot be the only good. Authenticity, or living in reality as we know it otherwise, is also a good.

Nozick's point is easy to see in an example. Parents might be able to love a child even more deeply than they already do if they convince themselves that their child has a world-historical destiny to bring about international peace. Holding this belief might increase the love for and pleasure in the child that these parents have, but few of us would say that this pleasure makes their belief justified; their belief, no matter the pleasure it produces, is rather wishful thinking that results in an avoidance or lack of recognition of the child who really exists before them. Nozick might say that Augustine's assumption that we should want to love the world as deeply as possible and with the most pleasure possible is a debatable assumption. This objection does not mean that Augustine's argument is not powerful, only that we must also have other reasons for our religious belief, if we are to have it, than only the belief and experience that a certain theistic framework maximizes our joy in the world.

A second objection, familiar to those acquainted with the debate over "the gift" in the work of people like Jacques Derrida, John Milbank, and John Caputo, is that there is no such thing as a pure gift. Gifts entail obligations and debts. Even if the world is a gift, then, is it a gift that we should want? Augustine would answer in this way. He would say that even though we are indebted, we are made to be indebted, and our discharging of our indebtedness in love, praise, and gratitude to God is itself the intensely pleasurable perfecting of our nature. So this is not a debt in any oppressive sense (although there would have to be debate over certain particulars of how our love, praise, and gratitude to God take concrete form), or at least Augustine does not think so.[21] Second, Augustine would aver that precisely because God is perfect and self-sufficient joy and love in himself, he and only he can give the gift that is wholly for the sake of the recipient, God having no need that could demand or require any return.

What Augustine does do in *Confessions* is lay out a theistic vision of what it means to love the world, and how this vision, when we phenomenologically reflect upon it, leads to the deepest and most pleasurable possible love for the world. Will this argument convert anyone who does not already share Augustine's theistic framework? No, and, if we are fair, it probably should not. What it does do is raise and provide a very creative answer to a philosophical and theological

[21] Nietzsche, of course, would have problems with the whole grammar of self-gift in Augustine as something that is fundamentally masochistic.



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problem that has received far too little attention in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries: the reverse of *contemptus mundi*, the problem of loving the world.[22]

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