Creating an Object of Study... Augustine and the Theological Foundations for the Move from Organism to Mechanism

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Carpaccio, Visione di Sant’ Agostino (Venice)
Approach

I am a historian, not a systematic theologian or philosopher attempting ‘the best’ appropriate answer, rather a scholar looking at:

- Changing patterns and perceptions over time;
- Ways of understanding the context for a set of ideas which both particularize them giving them a real place and space within which they operated and in a sense relativize them establishing their relevance in their own place and time before one cherry picks them out for contemporary use.
- If an author intended to convey the message as received;
- Sources of an idea or approach and the particular sources for an author’s ideas;
- Impact of an idea and/or an author which varies by time and place.
- Developing understanding of and a sympathy for the lost worlds which transcend our own particular, and immediate imagination, so as to be able to get into the mindset of the writers from other ages.
I. A text without a context...

Vittore Carpaccio: Visione di S. Agostino
(b. 1472, Venezia, d. 1526, Capodistria)
Painted 1502, in the Oratorio della Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice
A text without a context... is a pretext

Vittore Carpaccio: Jerome — the Golden Legend and Death
in the Oratorio della Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice
Discovering Augustine of Hippo

- 93 of his 94 books extant
- Delivered 4k-10k sermons (ca 950 extant)
- 299 letters extant

6th cent fresco in the Lateran: the remains of Gregory the Great’s Lateran Palace (under the Scala Sancta), Rome
Context: Augustine’s world

Chaos, Civil War & Persecutions 235 – 270
Diocletian’s persecution 303
Civil War (again!) 306
Constantine & legalization of Christianity 313 on
Laws against Paganism initiated 320’s on
Council of Nicaea 323/4
Theodosius makes Christianity state religion 386
Sack of Rome by Gothic Tribes 410
Augustine’s Basic Dates

- Born: 354
- Converted: 386
- Ordained Priest: 391
- Manichaean Debates: 386 - 401
- Donatist Challenge: 391 - 412
- Consecrated Bishop: 395/6
- Confessions: 397 - 401
- On Christian Teaching: 401 - 404 & 426
- Debates with Pelagians: 413 - 430
- City of God: 413 - 426
- Died: 430
Intellectual Context

- Early Christian attitudes toward reason
  - Pilfering pagans: Justin Martyr & Clement of Alexandria
  - Pessimistic separatism: Tertullian & Jerome
- Late Antiquity’s enchanted world
  - Neoplatonic: chain of being
  - Stoics: bodily definitions
  - Gnostics: dualism and competing forces
  - Pagan religion: hierarchies of competing gods
- Greco-Roman science
  - The fourth century arguably a period of decadence and decay
  - Ancient and Classical mechanics, motion as a result of soul/s:
    - Both in polytheism and monotheism
    - Motion due to either an embodied soul, or the direct result of a divine will and act
Augustine on Natural Reason

- Early views on reason: Reason certainly is not trustworthy and should not be relied on in any way:
  - On True Religion

- Transition of late 390’s: Reason is uncertain and fallible but not to be utterly rejected:
  - Confessions

- Mature Augustine of 5th century: We possess partial knowledge but it is shadowy, incomplete, and affected by our own fallen decadence; hence reason does not offer certitude so is untrustworthy as a complete guide....but nor should it be ignored:
  - Literal Commentary on Genesis
  - On Christian Instruction
  - City of God
Augustine on Scripture & Study of Nature

“There is knowledge to be had, after all, about the earth, about the sky, and about the other elements of this world, about the movements and revolutions or even the magnitude distances of the constellations, about the predictable eclipses of moon and sun, about the cycles of years and seasons, about the nature of animals, fruits, stones and everything else of this kind. And it frequently happens that even non-Christians will have knowledge of this sort in a way that they can substantiate with scientific arguments or experiments. Now it is quite disgraceful and disastrous, something be be on one’s guard against at all costs, that they should ever hear Christians spouting what they claim our Christians scripture has to say on these topics, and talking such nonsense that they can scarcely contain their laughter when the see them to be toto caelo, as the saying goes, wide of the mark. And what is so vexing is not that misguided people should be laughed at, as that our authors should be assumed by outsiders to have held such views and, to the great detriment of those about whose salvation we are so concerned, should be written off and consigned to the waste paper basket as so many ignoramuses.

Whenever, you see, they catch out some members of the Christian community making mistakes on a subject which they know inside out, and defending their hollow opinions on the authority of our books, on what grounds are they going to trust those books on the resurrection of the dead and the hope of eternal life and the kingdom of heaven, when they suppose they include any number of mistakes and fallacies on matters which they themselves have been able to master either by experiment of by the surest of calculations?"

Literal Commentary on Genesis 1.19
Returning to the beginning: Augustine’s Cosmology

- Preoccupation with opening chapters of Genesis
  - 5 commentaries (between 389 and 426)
  - cites Gen 1.1 more than 700 times
  - cites John 1 more than 1000 times

- Probably heard Ambrose's Hexameral sermons: influenced by them but notably rejecting his volitional view of nature

- Worked out key questions
  - *facio ex nihilo*
  - *Formatio, deformatio, reformatio*
  - Desacralizes and disenchant the *saeculum*
  - Sees a structure and pattern to the cosmos
Augustine's Cosmology: Three-fold Pattern

• “We must, therefore, make a threefold distinction in speaking of creation. First, there are the unchangeable forms in the Word of God; secondly, God’s works from which He rested on the seventh day; finally, the things that He produces from those works even now.” *Literal Commentary on Genesis (de Genesi ad litteram)* GNLI 5.12.28

• “There are two moments of creation: one in the original creation when God made all creatures before resting from all His works on the seventh day, and the other in the administration of creatures by which He works even now. In the first instance God made everything together without any moments of time intervening, but now He works within the course of time, by which we see the stars move from their rising to their setting, the weather change from summer to winter....” GNLI 5.11.27

• “arranged all things by measure, number, and weight [Wisdom 11.20]” GNLI 4.5.12
Three Reasons

1. Eternal *rationes* in the Word as a blueprint: *rationes incommutabiles*
   - “the form, therefore, according to which a creature is created, exists first in the Word of God before the actual creation of the work itself.” *Quaemadmodum ergo ratio, qua creatura conditur, prior est in uerbo Dei quam ipsa creatura, quae conditur* GNLI 2.8.17
   - “eternal, unchangeable, and fixed exemplars of the coeternal Word.” *aeternis atque incommutabilibus et stabilibus rationibus ceaeterni sibi verbe* GNLI 1.18.36

2. Unchangeable *rationes* in Genesis 1 created immediately /simultaneously
   - “One will ask how they were created originally on the sixth day. I shall reply: ‘Invisibly, potentially, in their causes, as things that will be in the future are made, yet not made in actuality now.’” *invisibiliter, potentialiter, causaliter, quomodo fiunt futura non facta* GNLI 6.6.10

3. Seminal *rationes* in Genesis 2 created over time: *rationes seminales*
   - For through *Wisdom* all things were made, and the motion we now see in creatures... comes to creatures from those causal reasons implanted in them, which God created as seeds at the moment of creation when ‘He spoke and they were made, He commanded and they were created.’ *ex illis reationibus insitis veniat quas tamquam seminaliter sparsit Deus in ictu condendi cum dixit et facta sunt* GNLI 4.33.51
The Nature of things...in their cycles

• “It is thus that God unfolds the generations which He laid up in creation [saecula] when first He founded it; and they would not be sent forth to run their courses if He who made creatures ceased to exercise His provident administration over them.” Literal Commentary on Genesis (de Genesi ad litteram) GNLI 5.20.41; cf. 4.12.22; 9.15.27

• “the sacred writer, therefore, was not ignorant of the nature and order of the elements when he described the creation of visible things that move by nature throughout the universe in the midst of the elements, putting first the luminaries of the heavens, then the living creatures of the waters, and finally the living creatures of earth.” GNLI 3.6.8

• “Such change is in every creature either as a possibility, without actually taking effect, as in the creatures of the higher heavens, or as a reality, bringing about the beauty of the temporal order in the creatures of the lowest rank, produced by the decay and production that goes on in an orderly cycle in mutable nature, as we observe in all things earthly and mortal.” GNLI 4.1
Movement

• “God moves His whole creation by a hidden power, and all creatures are subject to this movement ... stars moving in their courses, the winds blow on earth ... meadows come to life as their seeds put forth the grass, animals are born and live their lives according to their proper instincts.”

*Literal Interpretation of Genesis* 5.20.41
Cosmos: a process by design

“The whole course of nature that we are so familiar with has certain natural laws of its own, according to which both the spirit of life which is a creature has drives and urges that are somehow predetermined and which even a bad will cannot bypass, and also the elements of this material world have their distinct energies and qualities, which determine what each is or is not capable of, what can or cannot be made from which. It is from these base-lines of things, so to say, that whatever comes to be takes in its own particular time span, its risings and continued progress, its ends and its settings, according to the kind of thing it is. Hence the fact that beans are not produced from grains of wheat or wheat from beans, nor human beings from cattle or cattle from human beings. But over and above this natural course and operation of things, the power of the creator has in itself the capacity to make from all these things something other than what their seminal formulae, so to say, prescribe—not however anything with which he did not so program them that it could be made from them at least by him. He is almighty, for sure, but with the strength of wisdom, not unprincipled might; and he makes from each thing in his own time what he first inscribed in it that he could make from it.” GNLI 9.17.32
Unfolding Cosmos

• This cosmology provides Augustine with the means for explaining the ongoing governance of activity in nature. Not all reasons (*rationes*) are always evident and some are only employed for a particular purpose in time.

• Presents the structure to argue for a universe where ongoing operations are maintained by natural causes:

• Each activity requires the Creator’s design, foundation and system but not an individual divine act to drive each instance. This does not prevent miracles but it moves away from the volunteerism that would attribute every particular activity in nature to particular divine will, or caprice at that moment.
Implications for view of nature

- Augustine presents a natural world that is created, contingent, rational, capable of being understood to some degree by humans and worthy of at least some attention.
- Nature is wholly distinct from the Creator—not enchanted or animated—yet possesses value and legitimacy. Augustine offers a theological basis for natural reason rejecting the notion that the Greeks (and any others) either lacked knowledge or where they had it, it was by theft.
- Cosmos operates in an orderly manner according to a structure imposed and maintained by the Creator.
- Nature’s activities are indicators of the working of Providence so they are not capricious.
- Some knowledge then comes via these rationes which are based ultimately in the Word... and this is the basis for his notion of the ‘Two Books’.
- And this also gives a different way of approach the problem of evil.
Evil: not a Person but a Privation of the Good

GNLI provides a structure for understanding evil as privation. This idea which took shape relatively early in his writings and given substantive space in Confessions and on the Nature of the Good, work itself out in his massive Genesis commentary, Literal Commentary on Genesis, which is so crucial to his mature thought and undergirds so much of later work.

- This term is important in multiple works
- God created substance not vices; vices are not a substance.
- Evil Is the Removal of Good, a corrosion or corruption of the originate nature, not a destruction but a perversion and a loss of its proper telos.
- Humans, not nature, have a corrupted nature (natura vitiata) due to the original pair's volitional act which harmed themselves and thus deformed their own nature into which the physician enters and provides healing resolving the deformity. (cf. Nature and Grace 3.3 and 30.34)
- This leads to a changed view on imago dei and the Fall
Privatio boni and decay

“And it was made clear to me that all things are good even if they are corrupted. They could not be corrupted if they were supremely good; but unless they are good they could not be corrupted. If they were supremely good, they would be incorruptible; if they were not good at all, there would be nothing in them to be corrupted. For corruption harms; but unless it could diminish goodness, it could not harm.” Confessions 7.12

“Therefore, when as a result of deficiency of being things decay, either they have not received any further being and there is not fault, (in the same way that there is no fault if, while they exist, they receive not further being), or else they refuse to be what they had the power to be if they chose. Since what they might have possessed is good, they are guilty if they refuse it.” On Free Choice 3.15.4

“as a result of sin, humans lost the natural state of being” On the Free Choice 3.17.5

“evil is the removal of good” Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity 3.10

“God created substance not vices; vice is not a substance” Enarration on Psalm 48.5
Privatio boni — Lost States

- “as a result of sin, humans lost the natural state of being” On the Free Choice of the Will 3.17.5
- “evil is the removal of good” Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity 3.10
- “God created substance not vices; vice is not a substance” Enarration on Psalm 48.5
Providence: Natural vs Voluntary

- Natural Providence: there are no accidental forms; the *rationes* set out the parameters (‘measure, number and weight’)
  - controls the coming into being, development / growth of bodies

- Voluntary Providence: allows for accidents; it is outside God’s particular determination but not outside God’s management and makes free will possible and ontologically necessary (*Literal Interpretation of Genesis 2.6.14*)
  - controls the provision made for food, clothing and well-being

- Affects both body and soul: “by nature it is provided that it lives and has sensation; by voluntary action it is provided that it acquires knowledge and lives in harmony.” (*Literal Interpretation of Genesis*)
Decay and the Nature of Non-essential, Contingent Existence

- Distinguishes darkness of the world with darkness of demonic and human evil (Ennaration on Psalm 34, sermo 1.4)
- Wickedness described as a perversion of will, not nature (Conf 7.16)
- Describes a both a poisonous viper as disagreeable and a worm, which represents rot, as both being created good; created to suit the lower order of creation (Confessions 7.16)
- Natural world bounded by time and includes change and revolution... and is perishable
  - “the very ordinary and accustomed course of nature, whereby the seasons are rapidly revolved, in all things after their kinds, however temporal and perishable....” (Ennaration on Psalm 118, sermo 27.1)
- Like Athanasius (On the Incarnation 4) decay is essentially a part of any contingent being / creaturely state and “the defect would not deserve blame unless it were voluntary” (On Free Choice of the Will 3.15.42)
- Nowhere suggests that decay, violence and chaos began after the fall
“It would be ridiculous, on the other hand, to regard the defects of beasts, trees and other mutable and moral things which lack intelligence, sense or life, as deserving condemnation. Such defects do indeed effect the decay of their nature, which is liable to dissolution; but these creatures have received their mode of being by the will of their Creator, whose purpose is that they should bring to perfection the beauty of the lower parts of the universe by their alternation and succession in the passages of the seasons; and this is the beauty in its own kind, finding its place among the constituent parts of this world....... Consequently, in those areas of the universe where such creatures have their proper being, we see a constant succession, as some things pass away and others arise, as the weaker succumb to the stronger, and those that are overwhelmed change into the qualities of their conquerors; and thus we have a pattern of a world of continual transience. We, for our part, can see no beauty in this pattern to give us delight; and the reason is that we are involved in a section of it, under our condition of mortality, and so we cannot observe the whole design, in which these small parts, which are to us so disagreeable, fit together to make a scheme of ordered beauty.... As for those defects, in things of this earth, which are neither voluntary nor punishable; if we observe them closely we shall find that, on the same principle as before, they attest the goodness of the natures themselves, every one of which has God as its sole author and creator.”

City of God 12. 4
Decay / Defect and Fault

“The defect, however, would not deserve blame unless it were voluntary.... Consequently it would be most absurd to say that temporal things ought not to decay. They are placed in an order of things such that, unless they decay the future cannot follow the past, nor can the beauty of the ages unfold itself in its natural course. They act in accordance with what they have received, and they pay their debt to Him to whom they owe their being, in accordance with the measure of their being.” On the Free Choice of the Will 3.15.42

“Therefore no one rightly blames a failure in these things which thus decay. They have received no further being, in order that everything may occur at its proper time. No one can say: It ought to have lasted longer; for it could not pass the limits assigned to it. But it is in rational creatures that the beauty of the whole creation reaches its fitting climax, whether they sin or not.” On the Free Choice of the Will 3.15.43
A Well-ordered Universe: Teleology in Whole and Part

- “The painter knows where to place the shades in order to beautify his paintings; and you think that God would not know where to place the sinner in order to establish order in His creation?” Sermo 301

- the continuum of being from the highest spiritual objects to the lowliest physical objects. The higher end of the spectrum offers greater degree of being without mortality, but those are just the angels, mortality—decay in its gory finality—is experienced by all lower creatures as part of their design. All together these compose an ordered, rational design in the Cosmos expressing the Creator’s will. Ennarration on Psalm 144.13

- The whole contains and demonstrates a beauty both gathers together and transcends its individual parts. The goodness of the whole includes the frailty of individual creatures. Conf 4.13.20; Psal 47.19.31 and 135.4-5; Conf 7.12.18
The problem of ‘natural evil’

After the Fall, humans are alienated from creation; nowhere do I find Augustine saying that the corporeal world has itself metamorphosed into something else as a result of the Fall which also is alienated from God. In fact, the direction of his thought and numerous statements present quite the opposite view.

• He rejects the notion that creation after the Fall became alienated from God and that decay has come into the world as a result of the Fall. They have confused the nature of the alienation as used by Augustine.

• The physical world is not by nature evil for Augustine; this is a known and commented point that undergirds much of Augustinian thought. It’s implications, though have not always been understood as also means that neither animal predation nor physical cataclysms such as a volcano or hurricane should be called or understood to be forms of evil resulting from the Fall.
Afterword....

- Bede was an important transmitter of Augustine’s thought.
- The twelfth century is sometimes described as the period when a discovery of nature first occurred. Perhaps better understood as a rediscovery / adaptation of earlier views, including the re-collection of Augustine’s views on nature as well as other Church Fathers.
- Augustine’s Literal Commentary on Genesis was widely copied and used in the Medieval West
  - Peter Lombard cites the commentary 129x
  - Bonaventure cites it 223x (cf. cites the City of God 299x)
- Augustine was widely read and copied during the Renaissance and a regular subject for painters as a further indication of his influence.
- Of central importance to Reformed theologians, Pascal, Wesley and others.
- Known and used by Galileo (and Early Modern natural philosophers).
Conclusions

1. Augustine disenchants nature and along with no longer treating it as an organism, elevating nature, he re-envisions the nature of evil, its impact on humans and also the dignity maintained as image bearers.

2. Augustine helped open the door to a positive view of the cosmos, positing human knowledge as corresponding to the external world, so that we can objectively understand it, and offers the intellectual springboard to the ‘Two Books’ analogy (scripture and nature), an analogy which he coined.

3. Augustine provides a foundational and influential theology for the treatment of the cosmos as a coherent system and structure. The change from treating the cosmos as a mechanism rather than an organism was not an *ex nihilo* innovation of the early Modern thinkers.

   • Parallel moves are happening in the Greek world with the work of Cappadocians and Maximus but these have rather less impact on the West.

4. The set of ideas played a crucial role in the development of the experimental methods

   • cogent structure/system to nature descralizing nature
   • making it dependant on God but not dependant in each instance on divine
Conclusions

The set of ideas played a crucial role in the development of experimental methods

- Cogent structure/system to a desacralized, coherent nature not dependent on the moment by moment caprice of gods, or the alterable will of a sovereign God (yet God holds it together and is able to intervene in a way that is consistent with his original design).

- Making the cosmos dependent on God but not dependent in each instance on divine will and whim, hence a degree of continuity designed by God and into which God is still free to act in contravention of the natures we know but not the natures He designed

- Privation of evil: corruption of human nature, spiritual and rational decay

- Reason’s utility but ultimate untrustworthiness as a competent guide in its own right due to the corruption of human nature and hence the inability of reason to offer certitude and be a trustworthy guide, offering certitude fall), played a crucial role in the development of the idea of experimental method in early modern science. (cf. Peter Harrison on the influence of Augustine in the positing of untrustworthy reason and the turn to repetition)
And by the way, in Augustine’s thought...

Destructive physical phenomena, objects, and corporeal decay now torment humans and are a cause of pain but these do not happen because destructive phenomena unexpectedly enter in and disrupt a pristine state where such was previously absent.

- In other words, he does not argue that the human fall is the cause of animal predation, physical destruction and catastrophes or altered animal natures to make them a source of death.

- Perhaps one might say, as a result of the fall, however, humans relate to such things differently and so experience torment; fear and anguish and other such responses are moral reactions to physical phenomena and Augustine blames the fall for

  - adding fear and anguish into the human condition,
  - disrupting an intervention the preservation and addition of a new grace which would have preempted such.
FYI: the shape of Heavens & Planets/Earth?

- Greco-Roman, Medieval philosophers & theologians agreed
- Erastothenes calculation of the circumference of the earth
- Ptolemy’s armillary sphere, a model of the heavens... and earth
- Greco-Roman & Medieval notions of perfection: spheres of course
- Early Christian commentaries on Genesis
- San Marco mosaics, Venice (13th c.) based on Cotton Bible, Alexandria (5th c.)
- San Vitale mosaics, Ravenna, Italy (5th c.).

Spherical... ...Obviously!
Augustine on Scripture & Science

“There is knowledge to be had, after all, about the earth, about the sky, and about the other elements of this world, about the movements and revolutions or even the magnitude distances of the constellations, about the predictable eclipses of moon and sun, about the cycles of years and seasons, about the nature of animals, fruits, stones and everything else of this kind. And it frequently happens that even non-Christians will have knowledge of this sort in a way that they can substantiate with scientific arguments or experiments. Now it is quite disgraceful and disastrous, something be be on one’s guard against at all costs, that they should ever hear Christians spouting what they claim our Christians scripture has to say on these topics, and talking such nonsense that they can scarcely contain their laughter when the see them to be toto caelo, as the saying goes, wide of the mark. And what is so vexing is not that misguided people should be laughed at, as that our authors should be assumed by outsiders to have held such views and, to the great detriment of those about whose salvation we are so concerned, should be written off and consigned to the waste paper basket as so many ignoramuses.

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