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Augustine – On Learning to Weep

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'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee' – probably the best known lines, and from the very opening paragraph of his best known work, his Confessions. Augustine's most restless organ, however, was not his heart, but his brain - and from his youth until his death (at the very advanced age for his day of 76) his restless minded changed and changed again as he worried away at what was really a single problem, but one which caused him to develop a theological theory of everything. So extensive are his writings, that a medieval source tells us simply not to believe someone who claims to have read the works of Augustine. But no matter the vast extent of these writings, the single, central problem behind his intellectual explorations is quite briefly and simply stated – whence comes evil and how should we face it?

There is one aspect of that problem about which Augustine and his contemporaries had more reason to be immediately troubled than we do. Death. Death was present to citizens of the Roman Empire in a way which it is hard for us to fathom. The figures looks grim alongside those for even the poorest third world country of our times. Average life expectancy was less than twenty-five years. Of course, very high infant mortality skews that number somewhat. But even those who made it past childhood, had little chance of reaching what we now think of as merely middle age: only 'four out of every hundred men, and fewer women, lived beyond the age of fifty.' The population of the ancient world was a population 'grazed thin by death' – to use the words of Augustine's contemporary, Chrysostom. Or as Augustine exclaims on another occasion: 'What an abyss of death!'[1]

In a literal sense, death stands at the centre of Augustine's Confessions – at just about page 160 in the 300 page narrative, Augustine recounts the death of his mother Monica: we heard some of that story earlier. And either side of that central death there are others. Before it, there is the death of a close friend, which Augustine feels very bitterly. On the other side of Monica's death, tellingly present by its absence, if you see what I mean, there is the death of his much loved son by a mistress – the son called Adeodatus, 'gift of God'. Augustine, the sometime Professor of Rhetoric, unsurpassably eloquent on almost any subject, surpasses himself here with the excruciating eloquence of his silence in relation to a death which he merely mentions in an aside and not again.

But the death of his mother Monica is not just central in the sense of occurring in the middle of the book, with other deaths on either side – it is rather that that wonderfully told narrative about the 33 year old Augustine, written when he was approaching 45, bears the traces of some very central shifts in Augustine's thought. If we detect these traces, then we shall see that it not just the tale of Monica's death, but a bigger story

[1] Augustine, Confessions, 32. And see references in Peter Brown's The Body and Society, 6, for demographic information.

altogether. We might call it the story of how Augustine learnt to weep – or more fully, how in practice, he overcomes two powerful intellectual systems which he had already rejected intellectually speaking, but from which his emotions and sensibilities had not yet been freed and how, in the process, he discovers (or invents) Christianity.

In his twenties in the modest town in north Africa where he had been born, Augustine was a follower of the Manichees. According to the mythology of the Manichees ('wild fables' as he put it later), human life was the site of a battle between good and bad. To be human is be body and spirit, so the ancient world almost universally said and thought – but for the Manichees this was a joining of enemies. Good spirit was joined to bad matter and salvation from this sorry state consisted in the release of spirit from the body at death. Manichees consequently took a very dim view of procreation since it perpetuated the tragedy of human life. A piece of advice – never invite a Manichee to a baptism – they will stand and look glum in a corner. But they will be great at funerals; the life and soul of the party at a funeral, for death is when spirit is released and soars to its rightful realm. No good Manichee smiled at a baptism or wept at a death – and Augustine, holding back his tears at Monica's burial, hasn't quite parted with the sensibilities appropriate to his earlier convictions.

Manichaeism was a major force in the early Christian era – and it had a considerable power and attraction. Had it not had this attraction, it would not have held the attention of the precociously clever Augustine. But he never took the step of becoming a fully paid up Manichee, and formally parted company with the Manichees as he left for Rome, on his way to make a name for himself at the imperial court at Milan. He rejected Manichaeism for a host of reasons, of which I mention but one: Manichaeism claimed to embrace Christianity, but it could make no sense of the Old Testament stories of creation which Augustine heard thoughtfully expounded by the great Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. The only sensible way to read the story of Genesis, so Augustine came to believe, is just as insisting on the goodness of the created world in which we live, of which the human body is a part. (In a later work you can find him singing a hymn of praise to the beauty of the human body, equipped as it is with features with serve no purpose apart from the aesthetic: his most arresting example is, perhaps, the male nipple.) But if the body is part of God's good creation, death cannot be a cause for celebration – it is certainly not the point of life, nor the goal to which we are travelling. It can only be a punishment or a curse – not a good.

The Augustine who was present at his mother's death had parted company with the Manichees a few years previously – but something was holding back his tears. It was not, however, just the sensibilities of a Manichee which were somehow restraining him: there was a second restraining influence.

When Augustine quit Manichaeism, he did not turn fully towards Christianity, but first towards philosophy and the books of the Platonists, as he called them, and in ethics towards the Stoics. Now the philosophers did not go in for the wholesale repudiation of the material world in general and the body in particular of the Manichees. According to the Platonists, the body wasn't evil; it was simply mortal and irrational, and in that respect unlike, and lesser than, the soul, which was immortal and rational. So the Stoics

didn't exactly cheer at a funeral, but you wouldn't find them weeping buckets either. Stoic philosophy in relation to death is briefly expressed in the well-known aphorism heard on a bus in Oxford – 'take it philosophically, dear - don't give it another thought'. The sage philosopher should exhibit the mental tranquility of knowing that to die is as for a chrysalis to become a butterfly. Death should be faced with the cool insouciance of one who is free of inordinate attachment to transitory goods (and that includes bodies and mothers).

Augustine never simply turned his back on this tradition – and we can find him saying Stoic-like things even after he has become critical of the limitations of philosophy: thus after a particular massacre, in a remark which certainly has a Stoic ring to it, and would probably have got him sacked from a TV job, he comments: 'As far as I know, no one died who wouldn't have had to die at sometime anyway'. But if he didn't simply repudiate philosophy, he came to see ever more clearly that it didn't fit with the world as seen from within the Church. There was, in particular, no way that the philosophers could accommodate the stories of Christ's very bodily resurrection. You may recall that in Luke's Gospel, the resurrected Christ eats fish (broiled fish to be more precise) – and in John's Gospel he prepares a beach barbeque with bread and fish for the disciples (cold beers are not mentioned in the text, but are reasonably inferred). The Platonists plans for life after death consisted in the contemplation of eternal verities for – well – eternity: they had no plans for attending barbeques, with or without beer, and took a dim view of such tales. But Augustine rejected not only the cosmology of the philosophers, which still saw salvation in rising above the material realm, but also the particular sensibilities of the Stoics which accompanied this intellectual picture – or rather perhaps their particular insensibilities. He came to think them cold, and inhuman and impractical. In The City of God, he asks a question which he had implicitly posed to himself way back when, when he moped around tearless in the days after Monica's death: if the lives of the dead 'brought us the consoling delights of friendship, how could it be that their death[s] should bring us no sadness? Anyone who forbids such sadness must forbid, if he can, all friendly conversation, must lay a ban on all friendly feeling . . . , must with a ruthless insensibility break the ties of all human relationships, or else decree that they must only be engaged upon so long as they inspire no delight in a man's soul. But . . . this is beyond all possibility'.

So, if freedom from the emotions of friendship and love which make death bitter to us is neither possible nor desirable nor appropriate, what is left in the face of death – how should a Christian approach or contemplate it?

If time permitted I would need to tell you about others, heretics as Augustine saw them, against whom his thought developed and took shape: Donatists and Pelagians. The first lot were wild enthusiasts, throwing themselves off cliffs at the drop of a hat in a contempt for death which Augustine read as a contempt for life; the second lot, grimmer even than the Stoics, sure that those who had been baptized could do justice, live righteously, and confidently expect a big reward for their troubles, forbad fear of death as simply for the feeble. Against all of them, with his profound conviction at the goodness of the world, the human body, and our daily life within it, he came to insist that we shouldn't celebrate death with the Manichees; nor brush it to one side

with the Stoics. ‘It is not possible to love death, only to bear it’ – so he will declare; or in the more poetic formulation of the Confessions: ‘I was glad to weep before you about her and for her, about myself and for myself.’

But how shall we bear it? Weeping is all very well, but how, more practically, to borrow the rather wonderful title of a recent book, can we ‘live up to death’.

Our final scene will be not Monica’s death – but Augustine’s own, some forty years later in 430. It is a great scene – worthy of an opera. Augustine lies on his death bed. The marauding Vandals (a tribe who had originally hailed from Southern Sweden and thus serve to add a pleasing Wagnerian touch to the proceedings) are practically at the gates of Hippo, which they will lay waste within the year. The city is flooded with demoralized refugees.[2] What are the themes we hear in this last scene of this great life: what, in practice, is Augustine’s answer to the challenge of living up to death as he faced it? Two things: charity and grace.

Charity. The answer to the loss of the world and self which must be experienced at death is the practice of charity – by which we learn to live for and in others, even as our own world contracts and disappears. Augustine is preaching, writing, teaching until he dies – attending to the care of the community which surrounds him (and what things a Bishop had to deal with – there is the tenant farmer who has sold his wife to a slave trader and replies to Augustine’s protestations by explaining how badly he needed the money; there is the would be convert who has to check with an astrologer on what day it would be best to become a Christian; there is the newly elected fellow bishop who has got himself elected so that his outstanding tax payments will become the responsibility of his congregation. And so it goes on.)[3] Oppressed with all woes wrought by a frail humanity, but patiently dealing with them up to his dying day, Augustine teaches us that as we leave our bodies, we need to live more and more corporately – for the sake of the social body of which we are no less a part on the day we die than on the day we are born.

And grace. If we are to practice charity we must hope for, open ourselves to, and expect grace – which means divine influence on our minds, thoughts and hearts. Augustine, so his first biographer tells us, had the penitential psalms attached to his walls by his bed as he lay dying – and so he died surrounded by some of the texts which had so graciously shaped this very great life.

I have been talking about death – and there is a final question on which Augustine speaks to us, albeit not directly. Is resurrection vertical or horizontal? By which I mean: is risen life a continuation via immortality of the soul? – horizontal. Or is it vertical – not the extension of life after death in some imperceptible realm, but the touching of our lives here and now in a transformative way?

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[2] Those whom, as Augustine so pointedly puts it in one of his last sermons, have given up under duress to the wicked those worldly goods they had not freely parted with for the sake of the poor.

[3] See Henry Chadwick, The Church in Ancient Society, 477, for references.

I don't know what Augustine would say to us today about the horizontal, but I do know what he would say to us about the vertical. Against the celebration of death by the Manichees, and the studied indifference of the philosophers, Augustine wants to affirm life and enable us to find the resources which will enable us to live up to death – and those resources include learning to weep. In the Confessions he refers to Christ as he who 'descended here and endured our death and slew it by the abundance of his life.' (64) Through charity and grace, so Augustine taught and witnessed by his life, we can share here and now something of that abundance of life. To put it in the paradox of the Gospel: he who gives his life, he who spends his life, does not lose it. It is the one who would keep his life, who would neither give nor spend it, who loses it.