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1997 St. Augustine Lecture

Democracy and Religious Values
Augustine on Locke, Lying and Individualism

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This paper is intended as an experiment in ethical theory: I want to apply what I take to be Augustinian ideas in a late twentieth-century context; and I want to challenge those who for whatever reason are unwilling to do so.[1]

In thus appropriating Augustine I shall begin with what may seem the shocking suggestion that the word "democracy" is *often*—not only in overtly totalitarian regimes—a code-word for all sorts of unpleasant and implausible attitudes and behaviors, and that we—individually and collectively—fall into moral, philosophical and religious traps unless we are clear about better and worse *forms* of democracy, and why they should be considered better and worse. I shall thus invoke, though not precisely describe, the future possibility of our

1. The text that follows is substantially what was read as the Augustine lecture at Villanova University. Earlier versions were delivered to the Rainbow Club in the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem and as an Aquinas day lecture at Blackfriars in Cambridge, England. I should like to thank those who contributed to the discussion on these various occasions.

living in a society in which the forms of what you may believe to be your preferred version of democracy are retained while the substance has been removed—thus adding myself to the very few Cassandras who have so far warned of this tendency to be satisfied with names rather than things. In my nightmare scenario we shall be living comfortably, at least for a while and in privileged places like Villanova. There will be no police-state, few *overt* governmental excesses—indeed why should there be, since most of the opinion-forming groups will assume they are living in a comfortable democratic state where their choices, including that of being pro-choice, seem adequately maximized—even if a satirist might characterize their society as a happy cross between a Club Med and a well-stocked department store. Wakey, wakey, happy . . . hedonists; and you don't have to bother to vote (this seems to be already happening here in the United States)—though you could, out of a nostalgic sense of civic virtue—because you know that whatever party you support, there will be no significant change—especially, though not exclusively, on what are sometimes known as "conscience issues."

Most of this has been said before, a lot of it as far back as Plato's *Gorgias*, so I proceed at once to some preliminary discussion of terminology. To begin with, what I call a hedonist is someone who, habitually, at least wants what is pleasurable for him or her specifically because pleasure is the good, but before someone asks me "Why shouldn't I eat the odd ice cream simply because I like it?," or whether doing so gives me a provisional share in what a British promoter of alcoholic lemonade recently termed, approvingly, the "fun-loving lifestyle," I'd better hurry on to my definitions.

Democracy and religious values. What sort of "religious values" am I concerned with, and what do I understand by "democracy"? Perhaps surprisingly I find the first question the easier to answer, at least from the position of this paper.

So first "values"—though I don't much like the term. I take at least some values to be goods in themselves and to exist without reference to the mere preferences of human speakers; that is, they are in some sense part of the world's furniture, not constructs of the human mind. A few decades ago, it might have been assumed that to say as much is merely to say what must be said by anybody in anything which might remotely be called a theistic tradition, but that is no longer the case: I once reviewed a book by a Christian minister who refused to call himself an atheist despite proposing that the only God for mature Christians, indeed for mature subscribers to any religious faith, must be first conceived (i.e., immaculately invented) by the believer, then projected

into "quasi-reality" and finally treated as (or possibly as if) an object of worship.[2] This self-styled last word in state-of-the-art theology is both more deceptive and more absurd than the worship of some more material divinity, such as a golden calf.[3]

I am going to refer to religious values dogmatically as those realities—or supposed realities—in a spiritual, moral and aesthetic universe which are only intelligible if a transcendent God exists. Following Nietzsche and Dostoievski, I shall regard such values as constitutive of a moral structure which, if God does not exist, fails to find adequate philosophical justification. Nietzsche himself, assuming it to be self-evident that the demise of morality will follow closely upon the already apparent vindication of atheism, put the position well in the *Genealogy of Morals*: "As the will to truth thus gains self-consciousness —there can be no doubt of that—morality will gradually *perish* now: this is the great spectacle in a hundred acts reserved for the next two centuries in Europe—the most terrible, most questionable, and perhaps also the most hopeful of all spectacles."[4] According to Nietzsche's calculation we have just under a hundred years to go.

More recently a philosopher at Princeton, Gilbert Harman—no Nietzschean he—remarked that "An extreme version of nihilism holds that morality is simply an illusion. In this version we should abandon morality; just as an atheist abandons religion after he has decided that religious facts cannot help explain observations."[5] Both Nietzsche and Professor Harman closely associate the growth of atheism with the end of morality, and even if Nietzsche had primarily in view the collapse of a specifically Kantian morality, it can hardly be doubted that the implication of his remarks heralds the last days of any form of morality as traditionally received.

Though I draw different conclusions from those of Nietzsche and his contemporary followers—the growing band of those who are aware and of those who are unaware of the most powerful spokesman for their position—I could make a reasonable shot at defending their premiss that without a transcendent

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2. J. M. Rist, review of David A. Hart, *Faith in Doubt: Non-Realism and Christian Belief* (London, 1993), in *Priests and People* 8 (1994), pp. 169-170.

3. Cf. R. J. Neuhaus' "obituary" of Joseph Fletcher, who was an Episcopalian. "Anglicanism," wrote Neuhaus, "prides itself on being inclusive; Fletcher's superiors seemed to see no reason why atheism, too, should not be fairly represented among its clergy."

4. *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, 1967), third Essay, section 27, p. 161.

5. G. Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (Oxford, 1977), p. 11.

reality morality is indefensible—and perhaps also conclude prudentially that we had better not tell people about that; they'll find it out for themselves quickly enough. Such discussions, however, will extend into a book, and must therefore be temporarily deferred.

There is good reason to suppose that Christians cannot offer anything approaching a satisfactory apologia for their morals, let alone for their faith, if they do not hold fast to the transcendence of God. I will therefore assume that when I speak of religious values I refer not to what we may happen to like or dislike as ideals—though we may like or dislike them—but to what, like it or not, is the case. Were this not so, there would be nothing definitive about such a claim as that "Jesus was a good man."

But there is a caveat. Despite what might be falsely inferred from this last proposition, I am not using "religious" only with reference to the Christian religion; there will be religious values in the sense I am trying to give to the terms in some, but not all, religions. I would also regard certain metaphysical claims in secular philosophy as religious claims. For present purposes I would regard Plato's hypothesis about the transcendent Form of the Good as a religious claim, as well as his corollary that the intelligibility of all claims for goodness in particular acts and in particular people is ultimately dependent on the existence (and not merely the as-if existence) of that Form. That is, for present purposes, I define a religious claim not by reference to revelation—though some such claims may be induced or promoted by revelation—but by reference to their content: they are religious if they propose the existence of some supra-sensible reality on which claims about morality—and even about meaning—depend. Here, however, I will not discuss meaning.[6]

"Democracy" is complicated and some history is called for. The word, obviously, is Greek, and very broadly it referred originally to political entities—as in Athens, at times—in which 50% plus of the adult male citizens governed, and where there was little protection—bar good fortune—for the rights—whatever *they* are!—of minorities. There is, however, no word for "rights" in classical Greek,[7] and the notion of human and *inalienable* rights is virtually unknown. Even though it may be approached—as in Sophocles' *Antigone*—via

6. See however George Steiner's *Real Presences* (London, 1990).

7. Nor has the concept any significant role, despite anachronistic attempts to introduce it (e.g., that of Fred R. Miller, Jr., *Nature, Justice and Rights in Aristotle's Politics* (Oxford, 1995). For refutations of Miller, see R. Kraut, "Are There Natural Rights in Aristotle," *Review of Metaphysics* 49 (1996), pp. 755-774, and (even more damning over anachronistic readings of Greek culture and the Greek language) M. Schofield, "Sharing in the Constitution," ibid., pp. 831-858.

the related but not identical notions of justice and duty, it is hardly developed either in philosophical ethics or in social practice and belief. Since in Greek democracy the *demos*, the "people," was sovereign, there was no appeal against its decisions; what higher authority could there be? Such polities had some resemblance to (though also many dissimilarities from) what we still occasionally call "People's Democracies," with People's courts. Rousseau might have liked them, emphasizing their implicit, though not explicit, assumption of something like a General Will, but most of us (had we resembled our present selves) would have agreed with Plato in finding them oppressive, tyrannical, and arbitrary.

At times such states relied on what became almost an explicit theory, such as is attributed to Pericles by the historian Thucydides: the individual finds his glory in the city's glory and flourishes (dare I say "is fulfilled"; no, it would be an anachronism) not as himself, nor as the representative of his family or clan, but as the representative of his city. The city is the Homeric hero writ large. The city is the means of making each citizen better, of enabling him to show his excellence as her lover—but when not engaged in public affairs the Athenians, in their democracy, also claimed that each is as good as anyone else; each can claim as much "freedom" as anyone else to do as he likes. Such a negative notion of "freedom"—freedom, that is, seen as mere freedom from restraint—was in ancient times an especial target for anti-democratic polemic.

If an ancient democracy attempted to combine freedom from restraint with the thesis that man is made better as a citizen, an active member of a community, than would be possible for him as a mere private individual, then one might ask, "How big a community?" As already noted, children, women, slaves and foreigners are normally viewed as outside the community of peers, or within it as dependents. Theoretical writers of various sorts attempted to enlarge the community; women (or some women, as in Plato's *Republic*) might be included; national boundaries might be transcended. A Stoic emperor could say that he should view himself as a member of the city of Zeus, a city as wide as the inhabited world itself, and soon afterwards the Romans extended their citizenship, for what it was worth at that time, to all the free inhabitants of their Empire. Note here a phenomenon, both theoretical and practical, which requires attention: if all are equal, or at least if most are equal, in terms of political rights, and valued equally as human beings, then their value, in practice as well as in theory, could be zero. Such egalitarianism is leveling with a vengeance; but it is often curiously attractive—one of those facts which seem attributable to man's fallen nature. Democracy (ancient and modern) appeals

not only to the idealism of opportunities for all, but to malice: if someone else has what I cannot have, let's make sure that neither of us has it! Virtually all democratic movements both in the ancient and in the modern world are a mix of the politics of idealism and the politics of envy, and it is interesting to notice that a *contemporary* philosopher of the libertarian right, Robert Nozick, wants to argue that envy is necessary for a sense of self-esteem.[8]

Here, however, is an objection: many of our comments on democracy thus far are irrelevant. Modern democracy is liberal democracy: democracy in which minority rights, even individual rights, are paramount and inalienable; democracy in which, as some—like Ronald Dworkin—would say, rights are trumps. We are tempted to agree, and not to bother about those philosophers who wonder about the nature of this funny entity called a "right." Yet from the religious point of view, and if we are thinking about the relationship between democracy and religious values understood in the sense we outlined above, we *should* worry about such funny entities.

John Locke was one of the earliest explicit rights theorists,[9] one of the patron saints of the various forms of democracy in France, Britain and the United States, as well as in the various nations which have inherited something of their political traditions or developed parallel ones. All government, thought Locke, should rest on the consent of the governed—or one might talk of a necessary dependence of polities on what Hegel called "the principle of subjective freedom," that is, of the valued autonomy of the individual human will.[10] Otherwise—leaving "paternalism" aside—one gets (in practice if not in theory) overweening kings, bishops and other undesirables. But why should government so rest? Because, Locke believes, God created all men (which here may even include all women) equal in his sight and thus endowed them with equal "rights." Modern "rights theory" derives largely from a religious (and indeed specifically Christian) thesis—though one available, it would seem, at least to other "Peoples of the Book" or to anyone who holds that man is "in the image and likeness" of his Creator.

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8. R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York, 1974), p. 274.

9. For recent information about precursors, dating back perhaps well beyond Ockham, see A. S. Grade, "Aristotle's Place in the History of Natural Rights," *Review of Metaphysics* 49 (1996), pp. 803-830. I suspect that *inalienable* rights must be a specifically theistic notion; outside (providential) theism people may try (unsuccessfully) to defend natural rights, but in the end they are usually talking about legal or social rights. They are on safer ground to stay, with Aristotle, with justice and duty.

10. See G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right,* trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford 1952) paragraph 185, Addition.

Historically, modern democratic theory and practice depend significantly on theistic assumptions, as distinct from that of the Greeks which depended on the notion of citizenship and the conferral of (civil) security and liberty by family-membership or by public law or the "natural" development of societies. Admittedly, as we noted, even then there was also wider reflection by poets and philosophers on "unwritten laws"—the phrase itself is used in Sophocles' *Antigone*—which overrule those of the city. But such religious reflections were hardly taken seriously by the majority and had little effect on democratic practice.

If early modern theory was dependent on Christian theology, as in Locke, it also depended (perhaps even in Locke) on a Christian *heresy*, that heresy best known through the writings of its earliest and most powerful opponent, St. Augustine, as Pelagianism. Pelagius seems to have been a native of what is now the United Kingdom: perhaps one can infer a not untypically British attitude to religion in both him and Locke!

But how is the fifth-century Pelagius—certainly no democrat, though an ardent fighter against corrupt practices—relevant to our present concerns? Precisely in that Pelagianism is the heresy of believing that man, as we find him and without further present help from God, can make the good life for himself. If Locke is concerned with the rights of the individual, Pelagius is concerned with the moral excellence of the individual, not, please notice again, as he once *might* have been created by God, but as we now find him around us—say in the late twentieth century.

What effect have Locke and Pelagius had on current debate? Much of Locke has disappeared, but we still want the Lockean concept of inalienable rights without its theistic underpinnings—and there are desperate attempts to dredge it out of the most unlikely sources. Recall that we are not thinking about mere civil rights, but about the foundations on which such rights are often supposed to be grounded and to which their protagonists regularly (even if only implicitly) appeal when they say "Racism is just wrong," or "Of course people should not be sent to concentration camps; everyone has the right not to be treated like that." But if Locke's God, the guarantor of rights, is no more, what has become of those rights which he was said to have distributed? They remain wishful thinking, resting on lies and self-deception—as unintelligible as the officially long-discredited Ideas of Plato, or so the comparison might be supposed to run.

Thus Locke. But Pelagius is alive and well, though not in the guise he intended—He would have been as horrified as Locke to see his ideas flourishing

in an atheistic or agnostic context—but in the secular form to which those ideas naturally tend, namely that man is capable on his own of attaining (or rather constructing) happiness (or, in Pelagius' more traditional term, salvation). So when Locke's source of rights (that is God) disappeared, Pelagius' source of human capability (namely God's original dispensation) had also disappeared. Mankind, modern liberal democracy merely asserts, can claim rights for itself and has the capacity to live according to the highest ideals of benevolence and generosity, thus founding a society in which, by the spread of universal education, medical assistance, and population control, we shall become perfect, or at least as perfect as we need to be. We can do this, we hear, in virtue of our own freedom and valued autonomy, and in accordance with the pursuit of our own individualistic self-realization in a democratic society in which all are given the opportunity to compete against all without resort to the open violence Hobbes had rightly supposed would follow—indirectly if not directly—from such liberty.

At this point, at last, we naturally invoke Augustine. Such a vision of democracy constituted by the triple and interlocking ideals of liberalism (that is, the optimizing of freedom of unrestricted choice as a supreme good), of individualism (the notion that each of us is a self-sufficiency, competing with our fellows by economic and social means on a "level playing field" for "fulfillment,") and, thirdly, of moral as well as legal toleration for individual tastes (provided those tastes do not conflict with a similar freedom for the tastes of others—a utopian calculus which seems to be beyond our capacity to measure out): such a threefold vision, Augustine will tell us, is a dangerous fantasy.

A democracy in which rights are distributed by God and acknowledged to be so, in which freedom is viewed as the right to compete not "on a level playing-field" for one's own advantage, but for a common good, accessible to all directly—not according to some "trickle-down" theory—would escape much of Augustine's censure; the present liberal democratic consensus, based on competitive and possessive individualism, on toleration of everything which cannot be demonstrated (*per impossibile*) as harmful, and on a denial of the objective importance of God, would emphatically not.

Augustine's charge would be that the contemporary version of democratic man typically makes at least three cardinal errors: he believes, or assumes he believes, in metaphysical entities called inalienable rights for which he has no philosophical or theological basis; he elevates freedom of choice into the primary and sometimes the only good, showing a blind disregard for the *empirically* observable nature of "fallen" man, as of the significance which

must—in any rational view of the world—be attached to the nature of our possible objects of choice; he supposes thirdly that human society is a mere collection of individuals—one might almost say a collection of moral atoms. Margaret Thatcher expressed this creed with accuracy—though she is currently attempting to disclaim her dictum—when she said, "There is no such thing as society; there are only individuals." Or as one of her disciples, at the time Minister of Health, suggested more specifically a year or so ago: as long as *I* drink moderately, I have no responsibility for anyone else.

In the rest of this paper we shall consider each of these errors in turn. For most of us have forgotten what Augustine once knew, not only about God—which knowledge might seem problematic—but also about man and woman, where his observations, I shall claim, are largely indisputable. First the baselessness of rights. I have already hinted that those like Locke (and I take him as symbolic and representative of a group) who laid the groundwork for contemporary orthodoxies, offered two possible justifications for their position, one theological, the other based on that democratic mix of envy and the sense of justice. The theological one is the view of God as just creator and distributor: when Adam delved and Eve span, who was then a gentleman? The empirical one is that some, indeed many, members of any political community are treated less well than others: this seems both unfair and irrational, and it also offends against the more envious reading of that unfairness which says, "If he has it, why should I not have it?" Or, "if I can't have it, why should he?" Or perhaps more ominously: "If he does it (whatever it is) why should I not be allowed to do it too?" A contemporary version of this was seen at the beginning of the "sexual revolution." With the contraceptive pill available, it was claimed that women were able to say "If men are allowed—by the old double standard—to be promiscuous, why shouldn't women be promiscuous too?": an early step to the position that anything should be tolerated so long as it is "freely" chosen and is alleged not to "hurt" someone else, however such "hurt" is supposed to be measured where long-term as well as short-term effects are hardly to be computed even by cavalier consequentialists.

Rights-theory grew up as a reasonable response to the abuse of power, both political and ecclesiastical, with a built in appeal to the Judaic principle that we are all created in God's image. It was also part of a reaction to radically conflicting claims, both religious and political, which led to the belief that universal toleration—now we reach the second of the absolute goods of democracy—is the only way to avoid ideological and religious strife. Such toleration, of course, will only produce its desired effects if everyone accepts

it as a practical and universal policy—and agrees on its limits. If a few Thrasymacheans—I designate them after the nihilist anti-hero of book 1 of Plato's *Republic*—do not accept it, they can turn the well-meaning tolerance of the majority into a way of pushing their own extremist or anti-social preferences. This route, and the reactions to it, may end up in autocracy, even brutality. One can think of recent examples.

The notion of the maximizing of free choice (where the term "free" simply invokes the ability to do what one wants—remember how this came up in Greek democracy too), combined with maximum toleration of any and every form of human behavior, would be censured by Augustine in two ways. First he would deny the correctness of the contemporary (label it the Humean) account of freedom, replacing it by the older notion that freedom is the ability to perform good and godly acts; second he would argue that if rights are nothing more than tolerated wishes given some absolute status, then no wish, in a godless world, should reasonably be accorded any such status.

Suppose there is an all-powerful ruler in possession of the means to spread noxious diseases. Such a ruler, on the view that freedom is the right to use and abuse, might be said to be free to spread—say—anthrax; that is, he has the power to do so. Suppose we say to him, "It might be helpful or amusing to spread anthrax. Did you ever think of doing that?". If he were a good man, he would reply, "Of course I did not think of it; what sort of person do you think I am?" And if he were philosophical he might perhaps add: "Of course I have the power to do so; in that sense I am free to do so, but I am not morally free to do so; I am *morally* constrained not to do so. Indeed if I choose to act in that way I would not be free at all, but enslaved to a vicious urge. A correct account of freedom must refer to a power to act in accordance with what is good." And Augustine, taking over at this point, would add: "And in any case, how do you know what is good, as distinct from what merely appears to be in your short-term best interest? You do not, unless you introduce God. You may think you do; you may act as though you do; but the Thrasymacheans are right: you cannot justify your stance when challenged. You can only say, 'My will (or our will) is what is good and knows what is good'. Or, 'I want to have rights; I want to assert that rights exist'." But who cares for your assertions—unless of course you have the power to enforce them? And then we are back to Plato's tyrannical man and Hobbes' war of all against all. Of the Humean and contemporary account of freedom, seen as the right to use and abuse what is one's own, Augustine would say that, however "democratic" it may seem, it should be erased from the conceptual framework of our proposed democratic society. It can justify neither rights nor rational toleration, nor any intelligible life-plan.

Our Augustine has now treated not one but two of his original charges. He has connected his claim that without God there can be no honest account of inalienable rights, with an argument that equally, without God, there can be no workable account of toleration: decisions about what to tolerate will become increasingly arbitrary, as is presently the case. Indeed without an objective and realist account of goodness there can be no reasonable account of freedom which allows room for anything approaching what has been traditionally called "morality." What then is the connection between the Humean account of freedom—roughly the option to use and abuse what one has—and the Augustinian, and more generally Christian, account whereby to be free is to enjoy (like God himself) the opportunity and capacity to choose the good? It is that the former is the theoretical precondition of the latter. Humean freedom offers not moral freedom but the necessary arena in which moral freedom is played out. Unless it were theoretically possible to choose the bad, there would be no merit in choosing the good. Unless the gun could be fired, there would be no virtue in habitually *not wanting* to pull the trigger.

That brings us to a further Augustinian challenge, a challenge which appears to be faced in virtually every work of the historical Augustine, and especially in his anti-Pelagian writings. The challenge is that even if, *per impossibile*, we were able to know on all occasions the most appropriate moral behavior, and to understand in some detail the type of society which would best fulfill both our noblest ideals and the will of a beneficent God, we would be unable to achieve it. Worse still, Augustine would continue, we should always be inclined to say both that we know what we should do and that we are able to do it. We can somehow project ourselves into the position of knowing the better and never, or hardly ever, doing the worse. And we can imagine that we will never find ourselves in a situation when we detest all apparently available options: a situation, however, very familiar to Augustine, powerfully highlighted by Macchiavelli, and retailed anew in a modern version by Roy Holland in *Against Empiricism*.

A moment's historical reflection should be enough for us to recognize that such Enlightenment errors were perhaps excusable in the nineteenth century—though the excesses wrought by the French Revolution and other upheavals should have given renewed warning of man's capabilities for evil, and of his certainty of activating them if he puts himself in the place of God. Enlightenment man wants to be God himself, God his creator, not God's created image, and since his will is his highest good, he can come to believe that whatever he wills, at least in the moral and political sphere, he can bring about. In strictly

Augustinian language, out of his arrogance (his *superbia*) and consequent lust for power (*libido dominandi*), he can persuade himself not only that there is no such thing as original sin (meaning a fatal weakness, however acquired, in man's capacity for moral behavior, whether at the individual or at the social level), but that if there were a god it would be us and our divine will to choose for ourselves. (As Nietzsche put it, prophetically, "If there were gods, how could I endure not to be one?".) And since there are no gods, the argument runs, we have the power and indeed the obligation to make ourselves into some practical equivalent.

As for fresh testimony for original sin, we should note the point made in a recent and devastating book entitled *Wartime*:[11] "It [World War Two] was a savage, insensate affair, barely conceivable to the well-conducted imagination. . . . and hardly approachable without some currently unfashionable theory of human mass insanity and inbuilt, inherited corruption." Augustine's conclusion would be that if we had a shadow of justification for Enlightenment attitudes in the nineteenth century, the history of the twentieth century, with its gulags, concentration camps, *programmes* of genocide and now abortions by the million, presents us with no merely a priori argument against arrogant delusions about our individual and collective excellence, but with a direct appeal to empirical and historical fact: not just metaphysics, Augustine might appropriately remark, but history—salvation or other. And he would add—in contradiction of the views of certain commentators on the massive tragedies of the twentieth century, and the prospect of many more to come in the next millenium—that it is not that we have now learned of God's non-existence the hard way, but that we have been reminded of the sinister side of the character of man, a being with the capability of satanic evil as well as (perhaps indeed because of) the capacity for divine imitation. *Corruptio optimi pessima;* the best, corrupted, is the worst. In the field of democratic theory and political practice that sinister side may take the form of flattering self-deception about what will happen if we tolerate worship of our own (or anyone else's) unrestricted moral authority.

Let us consider freedom in light of what is sometimes called the paradox of pleasure. It is a commonplace that although at least some pleasures are goods, their direct pursuit, rather than the acceptance of them when they arise as accompaniments of activity (as Aristotle and others would have it) can lead to their turning to dust and ashes in our hands; in our frustration, we watch them

11. P. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (Oxford, 1989), p. 132.

slip through our fingers. The concept of freedom can be understood in a similar way. It is likely—and certainly Augustine would so have it—that too much direct pursuit of it will lead to its loss. Let us again go back to an earlier theme: we may argue, in a theistic context, that only if we recognize that the value of each individual depends on his existence as a creation of God, and that, as Jesus said, he should in some sense give himself up, renounce himself, for God: only, that is, by a refusal to turn our fellow human beings—in the course, say, of the worship of democracy—into idols, can we recognize that they have a genuine, though subordinate dignity of their own. In other words, without God's superior dignity, there is no dignity for man, democratic or other, merely the wish for it, and a belief that one has it. And if this is to be a justified belief, it can be nothing less than the belief that God exists.

Underlying the idolatry either of man as democrat or of democracy itself lies a merely attractive, fatally attractive, cognitive error about man's incapacity for evil. This we desperately try to evade by means of another of the more dangerous features of modern democracies, the lie seductive: not necessarily the more obvious lies of racist or nationalist or religious bigotry, but the more soothing lies about needs and the heaven to be procured with money and consumer "goods." Perhaps the ability to lie seductively is so necessary in much of the modern democratic world that the system would be unable to work without it: life would seem too economically complicated or too politically difficult. Neither politicians nor pressmen could easily bluff their way out. "How can you tell if a politician is lying?" "See if he is moving his lips." The joke doubtless pushes the point too far. Still, given the complexities of present global problems and the bizarre ways in which politicians often reach the leadership of their various parties and states—plus the lack of time and intelligence they have for sorting out *which* frightful truths they can risk speaking out on if they wish to be re-elected—it is hard not to see systematic lying and misinforming as a necessary feature of a democratic state. And we know how uncompromisingly—even impossibly—tough Augustine is on lying.

Which brings us to the last Augustinian challenge: his objection to the notion basic to most of the more advanced forms of contemporary theory—admittedly now beginning to face the first whispers of criticism, even if rarely of a principled sort: the notion that democratic man is his own—owns himself—a moral atom who owes nothing to his fellows unless he opts to owe it, and who may explain this consent by means of some implicit or mythical contract theory of the state. Again one can see the Lockean origins of this kind of idea: indeed what is now called The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism goes back

to Hobbes as the subtext of Locke.[12] But in their days there was the urgent motive of release from present tyranny, a motive which is still legitimately felt in much of the Third World but has little substance among the middle-class and affluent advocates of liberation, self-fulfillment and privacy who call the shots in Europe and—particularly—in North America. They are concerned not with liberation from tyranny, but with something closer to what Augustine thought of as a boundless possibility of self-love, even of self-worship.

Here again, Augustine would point out—in line with almost all philosophers in the West before Descartes—there is another refusal to accept basic facts about human nature, not as we might wish it to be, but as it is. If we view ourselves as moral atoms, we are trying to force ourselves to be what we are not. But why should we not make such an attempt? Since Augustine would agree that we are not yet the unitary moral subjects we believe ourselves to be, or make claim to be, what would be wrong with making ourselves into something which we are not? The obvious answer is that there are many things which we are not, and in so far as we are a diversity of selves there are many things which we are not wholly yet; but there are some things which we cannot be: if I am talented at swimming and playing the violin, I may become a swimmer or a violinist, but it may not be possible for me to become a philosopher.

Modern discussions of rational decision-making in ethics treat of how we live together under the terms of some kind of contract, implicit or explicit—or should so live if we want to plan what is the rational, that is—so they say—the moral thing to do. Reading such discussions, we find that society is thought of as a possible set of rational agents, all supposedly mature adults. What these mature adults would do if they were in a position to think out the most rational behavior for themselves, without knowledge of the wealth, health, gender,[13] nationality and so on which they will in fact possess in the actual world, is supposed to be the rational and moral course. There are various reasons why such thought experiments are of very limited value: not least because no one lives in such a situation and never will, and to conjure up what hypothetical persons would do in such circumstances is much less helpful than it may

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12. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford, 1962).

13. Gender is the reasonable addition by Susan M. Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (Basic Books, New York, 1989), to the list supplied by J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass. 1971). M. Nussbaum, in a review of Okin in the *New York Review of Books* (October 8, 1992) 45, notes that "Rawls doesn't seem to have thought much about the family." She also (rightly but astonishingly) observes at the end of her review that "liberalism. . . . continues to lack. . . . a satisfactory account of the human good" (p. 48).

appear in determining what actual (or, as some put it, "real") people will calculate in the "unfair" situations in which they find themselves. For as Kenny has observed, "Neither ancient paganism, nor mediaeval Christianity nor modern secularism has done anything to undermine the conclusion that the world operates on principles quite other than of equality, and that no human institutions can radically alter the basic unfairness of life."[14] Which is in no way to imply that life cannot be more or less fair and that we should not try to make it fairer.

Contractarian and rational decision theories depend on the hypothetical behavior of supposedly mature and isolated adults. Minors and the handicapped are problematic. Hence encouragement for two apparently contradictory tendencies: on the one hand a desire to encourage the suicide or legalized killing of those whose "quality of life" is supposed (usually by, or under the pressure of, others) to be unacceptable; on the other hand a wish to increase children's rights against their parents and other elders, not simply to protect them from abuse, which would be proper, but because of a false inference that, since the worth of a child is as great as that of an adult, then the child has as much right and capacity to decide for itself as has the adult.

Of course no theorist of individualism would claim that we start our lives as pure individuals. Even if we could all be produced by single females availing themselves of sperm-banks—or, better, by the growing of zygotes under impersonal laboratory conditions—there would still arise the necessity of nurturing infants and in some sort educating our offspring. The theory at best seems to claim that after education we outgrow the need for others, and even the wishes of others—unless as part of our own self-assertion we consent to grant them the "level playing field," or unless we identify with them as a pressure group which we can treat, and use, as an extension of the self. Such a concept would provide one limited model of democracy. Everyone has at least the opportunity, though—the world being as we have seen it to be—only tendentiously the equal opportunity, to compete. Each individual has the supposed "right" to an equal opportunity to exploit his fellows, and the state—neutral about promoting one person's concrete preferences over another's (as well as about ideals)—should only intervene to preserve equality of that sort. The aim of the state, if positive at all, is on this theory again to maximize *choices*, not *goods*. Choice, in and of itself, becomes again the supreme good, though only partially realizable in any actual society.

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14. A. Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 84-85.

Let us conclude with Augustine's peculiarly Platonic theory as to why maximizing such choices—which is the inevitable result of seeing individuals not as mutually dependent, even in their mature state, but as striving to achieve a maximum of independence of one another—is destructive of the human being, who cannot survive as a moral unity under such conditions. Such a theory is Platonic not because Augustine read it in Plato but because he found it in a Platonic tradition and redeveloped it—developed it, in fact, beyond what Plato had achieved, because he had an additional theological tool at his disposal which was not available to his Greek master. That tool is the Christian doctrine, which Augustine took out of what he found in Paul, that we are, essentially, "one in Adam" and will, by faith, be one in Christ. At present, we are many in Adam, since we continually divide ourselves from each other and even from ourselves by erratic and mutually incompatible acts of will.

Let us pursue the idea further—in philosophical rather than theological terms. Plato's original insight in the *Republic* is that, unless redeemed by the right kind of education in the right kind of community, we are at present constituted as a bundle of potential selves. That is an idea which we can readily grasp, for we regularly speak of having a private life, a public life, a love-life, and so on. Only he who would present an entirely consistent set of attitudes and behaviors in all his experiences in society would not be a bundle of this sort. But while we are such bundles, we are identified as certain sorts of people by the characteristics which seem to predominate, and which may indicate the kind of selves we are striving to become, and which—for better or worse—we *may* become. Roughly speaking, Plato sees the two extreme possibilities as that of the philosopher whose life is a harmony and whose behavior is always in accordance with reason and with a rational life plan, and that of what he calls the "tyrannical" man whose life is an ever more frantic attempt to satisfy his individual wishes, either dramatized as needs or insisted on merely because he chooses to do so and because he sees them as his. In such a case the bundle will eventually collapse into a madness as the agent finds the perpetual satisfaction of his lusts and whims beyond the bounds of possibility in the time and space in which he lives. This is the case of the man with extreme opportunities for maximizing his choices—that is, of acting out the tyrant will.

Augustine recasts these ideas in the form of a theory of what he calls in Latin *voluntas*—a word for which there is no exact equivalent in classical Greek thought but to which the English neologism "mind-set" approximates. It involves the loves and hates which we try to satisfy in the increasing malevolence or developing nobility which through habit has become our "second nature."

Thus we can embody many "wills," many moral *personae* at the same time, but—and here comes the move *beyond* Plato—we can delude ourselves in two ways: either that we are really just the *good* will (this is the Manichaean alternative) or that in any case we *are* a single unity though in diversity: this Augustine would call a diabolical unity in that it is the unity we try vainly to muster when we pit our forces against God. Such a unity, built on the whim to *choose* to be whatever we "want" to be, can only be self-deceiving, and Augustine—a rigorist, as we have observed, against lying and deceit in all their forms—seems to regard that attempt as a sophisticated form of blasphemy.

But lying, both as propaganda aimed at the deception of others and ultimately as the half-wished deception of oneself, is itself—though religiously a vice—the necessary feature, as we have seen, of some, perhaps eventually of all surviving, forms of modern democracy, based as they are on deception about human nature and deception about public institutions, which, as Augustine was hardly alone in realizing, will always tend towards the corrupt and must therefore be constantly scrutinized by those who look for the human good.

Thus in the end it all comes back to that primary philosophical question with which we began: "What exactly do you mean by X?" In our case X stands for democracy and our Augustinian conclusion is that when "democracy" is a flattering code name for unrestricted libertarianism and individualism, underpinned by deliberate or systemic deception—as, for example, about the possibility of universal peace or of full (and just) employment in a contemporary Western state, or of substantial improvement in the condition of the poor, the marginalized and the handicapped without increase in direct taxation—not only should religion reject it as pernicious, but philosophy should denounce it as grounded on hot air at best. It is not enough to cover all kinds of sins by the term "democracy": indeed fair-seeming words ought always to be suspected in what Augustine termed this "darkness of social life." A recent historian (developing Tacitus) once observed that in ancient Rome the brutal usurpation of power never took place without a claim that someone was being liberated from something and that some long lost good—even civilization itself—was now being triumphantly restored.

All this of course is not to state that a democracy based on ethical values is impossible, but that the only honest democracy will derive its values from the religious truth of men's equality as created by God; only so can democracy be both conceived in principle and—more hesitatingly—established in fact, and in the teeth of the challenges to honesty and compassion now arising within *so-called* democracies from bureaucrat, impatient reformer and "enlightened"

free-marketeer alike. If God did not exist we would indeed have to invent Him: to base our claims for the "virtues" of democracy, on a disposition to behave—*pace* the Hobbesians and Thrasymacheans—with the emotional intensity and directedness cognitively appropriate only if there were indeed a beneficent God. And the final Augustinian paradox is that for that we would in any case all require grace.

The quasi-divine status unthinkingly attributed to "democracy" in the Western world of today has three options: to be grounded in the theistic tenet from which it sprang—man's equality as created by God; to be grounded in an atheistic "as if" copy of the above which people must be conned into believing; or simply to continue to be accorded the unchallenged status of a divine shibboleth without suffering the examinations of philosophic folk. If we are to think usefully about democracy, we shall have to acquire the *habit of suspicion* in the face of each and every manifestation of conventional wisdom and apparent profundity.