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Augustine's *The City of God* (fifth century A.D.): Patriarchy, Pluralism and the Creation of Man

Catherine Conybeare

[I]t is not hard to see how much better it is that God multiplied the human race from the one man whom He created first, than it would have been had He originated it from several. As to the other animals, he created some solitary and, as it were, lone-ranging: that is, more inclined towards solitude Others he made gregarious, and these congregate together and prefer to live in company But in neither case did God produce these from a single individual. Rather, he commanded that several should come into being at once. Man, however, whose nature was to be in a manner intermediate between angels and beasts, God created in such a way that, if he remained subject to his Creator as his true Lord, and if he kept His commandments with pious obedience, he should pass over into the company of the angels and obtain, without suffering death, a blessed immortality without end. But if he offended the Lord his God by using his free will proudly and disobediently, he should live, as the beasts do, subject to death: the slave of his own lust, destined to suffer eternal punishment after death. God therefore created only one single man: not, certainly, that he might be alone and bereft of human society, but that, by this means, the unity of society and the bond of concord might be commended to him more forcefully, mankind being bound together not only by similarity of nature, but by the affection of kinship. Indeed, God did not even create the woman who was to be united with the man in the same way as He created the man. Rather, it pleased Him to create her out of the man, so that the human race might derive entirely from the one man.¹

This passage comes from the twelfth book of twenty-two in Augustine of Hippo's 'great, uphill work' (*magnum opus et arduum*), *The City of God*. Augustine began

to compose the work in 413 CE, in direct response to the sack of Rome – still the symbolic, if not the political, centre of the empire in which he lived – by the Goths in 410. The first three books seem to be composed in the white heat of rage against ‘those who favour their own gods’ against the divine founder of the City of God (*CG*, preface); the subsequent seven are a more systematic re-examination of Roman history and demolition of her conventional beliefs. It is in the eleventh book that Augustine turns to a spacious exposition of God’s creation and ordering of the universe, and of humanity’s place in the divine plan: this preoccupies him for the rest of the work.

The excerpt quoted here seems, at first reading, paradigmatic of the patriarchalism with which the present volume is concerned. It describes the moment of God’s creation of the first man: its purpose and process. It sets man in the context of the hierarchical divine order: God, angels, man, beasts. It promises to man the possibility of attaining ‘the company of the angels’. And it insists on the priority of man’s creation, and the fact that woman was created ‘out of the man’. I shall not treat here of the role of God in this arrangement. His governing presence – whether or not you wish to call it patriarchal – is not in doubt for Augustine. Nor shall I treat of the angels, and the potential of a life (or afterlife) in their company. My focus is on the description of man’s creation, and its implications for his place in the earthly political order.

Man is, it seems, created alone as a patriarchal presence. Augustine goes out of his way to observe that birds and beasts, whether their habit is solitary or gregarious, were not created alone, but in groups. Man’s duty is to govern the beasts and to prove himself superior to them by the right exercise of his free will. The beasts are not singled out and differentiated as man is; his sovereign self is unassailable from that moment of singular creation onwards. The previous chapter ends, ‘In order that there might be [a] beginning, therefore, a man was created before whom no man existed’ (*CG* 12.21).

Moreover, Augustine has preferred the account of the creation of woman given at Genesis 2:22 to the apparently more egalitarian one in Genesis 1:27. Genesis 1:27 suggested that man and woman were made simultaneously, both according to God’s image: it reads, ‘And God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.’ Genesis 2:22, on the other hand, lays out a hierarchical order: ‘And God built the rib which He had taken from Adam into a woman, and led her to Adam.’ The suppression of the more egalitarian version in favour of the story about the patriarchal bestowal of a wife purpose-built for Adam would seem to clinch the charges of patriarchalism in Augustine. As an author who has himself been lambasted

through the centuries as the origin of much that is wrong in Christian doctrine, Augustine here offers a hierarchical interpretation of a patriarchal order - or so it seems. But we should look again. And looking again, we shall see that Augustine is striving towards a vision far more inclusive and less hierarchical - in short, far less patriarchal - than he is generally given credit for. This we see both in the specifics of his language and in his broader vision of how people (not just men) come together in community.

First, throughout this passage, instead of using the marked word *vir* which denotes someone biologically male, Augustine is at pains to use the more generic word for man, *homo*. In the singular form, this can generally be translated 'person'; in the plural, *homines*, 'humankind'. In other words, *homines* may include women as well. That Augustine is well aware of this distinction is shown in the final book of the *City of God*. Commenting on a passage of Paul which talks about striving to become a 'perfect man' (Ephesians 4:13), he writes:

Suppose ... that the 'perfect man' passage is indeed meant as a reference to the form in which each of us is to rise: even in this case, what is to prevent us from understanding the word 'man' [*vir*], here used instead of 'person' [*homo*], as applying to the woman also? For in the saying, 'Blessed is the man [*vir*] who feareth the Lord', women who fear the Lord are surely also included (CG 22.18).²

Here, Augustine is striving for inclusiveness even against the grain of the apparently restrictive term *vir*, so we may readily infer that the *homo* of book 12 is to be read with an eye to inclusion. It is also notable that nowhere in this account does Augustine give Adam a name: in fact, Adam is not named until the middle of book 13 (in the context of Adam and Eve's shame at their nakedness, CG 13.15).

This alone would mean little, for it is still the creation of Adam, and its precedence over Eve, that is being paraphrased in our passage. The important section explains why God created only 'one single man' (*unum ac singulum*): 'that, by this means, the unity of society and the bond of concord might be commended to him more forcefully, mankind being bound together not only by similarity of nature, but by the affection of kinship'. Augustine takes the biblical passage that is normally cited to justify woman's subjection to man and instead uses it to prove that every human being is always already born into a web of relationality. Far from man being sovereign and alone, his interrelation with woman is predetermined by their shared flesh, and the affective bonds that link them become the basis of all human sociality.

The fact that individual humans, rather than being autonomous and self-sufficient, are from the beginning interdependent and stand in relation to others has enormous importance for Augustine's ideas of political organization. We

learn about the necessary human qualities of sociality partly in their absence, when Augustine describes ‘a creature depicted in poetry and fable: a creature so unsociable and wild that people have preferred to call him a semi-man rather than a man.’ This is the monster Cacus, who is depicted in the eighth book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*:

he had no wife with whom to give and receive caresses³; no children to play with when little or instruct when a little bigger; and no friends with whom to enjoy converse ... (CG 19.12).

This is the ideal, evoked in its absence: conversation, affection, playfulness, teaching: sociality constantly enacted through interlocution and interrelation. Augustine goes on to observe that ‘pride is a perverted imitation of God. For pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and wishes to impose its own dominion upon its equals, in place of God’s rule’ (CG 19.12). Here is the ‘lust for mastery’ (CG preface; compare CG 3.14) which disarranges God’s order and perverts human relations. Yet Augustine continues:

Therefore, [pride] hates the just peace of God, and it loves its own unjust peace; but it cannot help loving peace of some kind or other. For no vice is so entirely contrary to nature as to destroy even the last vestiges of nature (CG 19.12).

Peace is the result of ‘bringing suitable things suitably together’ (CG 19.12), and it is the foundation of God’s entire ordering of the world:

The peace of a household is an ordered concord, with respect to command and obedience, of those who dwell together; the peace of a city is an ordered concord, with respect to command and obedience, of the citizens; and the peace of the Heavenly City is a perfectly ordered and perfectly harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God, and of one another in God (CG 19.13).

This, clearly, is not an argument for equality as such, the desire for a ‘fellowship of equality under God’ notwithstanding: it is an argument for equity, for each human being to have their own place in a balanced and peaceful community. But it is, at the same time, a vision of humans as always in relation to each other, with their ensuing obligations and responsibilities.

Augustine, in book 19, is revising Cicero’s definition of a people (*populus*) in his *Republic*, and he uses this revision to ground his notion of human relationships. The similarities are strong, but the differences between the two are instructive: in fact, they trouble the idea of patriarchal social structures. Cicero defines the people as ‘the gathering of a multitude, brought into association by consent to the law and common utility’.⁴ Augustine, on the other hand, defines

the people as ‘the gathering of a *rational* multitude, brought into association *through the harmonious sharing of the things it loves*’ (CG 19.24).⁵ In Cicero, no claim is made for the ratiocinative powers of the general throng (Cicero’s overall vision of the organization of the state is highly paternalistic), and they are brought together by the claims of law and expediency. For Augustine, the role of the rational soul, whose domain is both cognition and action, is crucial; and not law or expedience, but the objects of love serve as the bonds that unite the people.⁶

All this is assisted by the notion invoked in the very title of Augustine’s work: the city, *civitas* in Latin. The earthly and the heavenly cities are intertwined in this life, he tells us, to be untangled only in the next. He conceives of the cities not as things of bricks and mortar, but as gatherings or communities of citizens, *cives*. The word *civitas*, in fact, means not just ‘community’ or (in later Latin) ‘city’, but ‘the state of being a citizen’. This emphasis on the people that compose the city, rather than the city as place or material object, lends itself to a dynamic and inclusive notion of community. Yes, the *cives* are ordered in right relation to each other; but they comprehend both men and women – and, indeed, angels: anyone with a rational soul – and they are founded on relationality.⁷ This takes us back to our original excerpt, that God created woman from man so that ‘the unity of society and the bond of concord might be commended to him more forcefully’: for this is what grounds the *civitas*.

As mentioned earlier, immediately before this excerpt comes the statement, ‘In order that there might be [a] beginning ... a man was created before whom no man existed’ (CG 12.21). This seems at first sight a claim for a certain patriarchal supremacy. And yet, this is a favourite passage of Hannah Arendt, who quotes it in Latin: ‘[Initium] ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit’.⁸ In *The City of God*, the context is the creation of man *ex nihilo*, and the beginning refers to the balanced cycle of creation of the souls of the redeemed and the damned. But Arendt observes, ‘This beginning ... is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself’; and she links it to the uniqueness of any human being within the human condition of plurality.⁹ Furthermore, she links the beginning ‘of somebody’ to her whole concept of action: for action is the starting of something new and unexpected. It is the iteration of the principle of freedom that was created when man himself was created. Plurality, meanwhile, is linked to speech; for it is interlocution, for Arendt, that recognizes the simultaneous individuality and plurality of human beings.

It may seem anachronistic to read *The City of God* through Arendt; but Arendt was intellectually formed through her reading of Augustine, and her appropriation of his underlying structures is often revealing. Here, she points us to the significance of the creation of man – that is, *homo*, not *vir* – as a unique and single being: that both his own uniqueness and the ensuing plurality of human beings are recognized and held in constant dynamic tension with each other. For Arendt, the dynamic tension is sustained by speech; for Augustine, as we have seen in the Cacus passage, by speech and love. Finally, she can help us see the importance of Augustine's description of the province of the rational soul, which is cognition and action (CG 19.13). 'Action' is, in Arendt's theory, something quite particular, and it is not entirely applicable to Augustine; but the presence of action in the rational soul – which is the part of God's order that raises humans above beasts – points again to the dynamic individuality and freedom of human beings, while cognition points to the understanding and language that always bring humans into relation to each other (Arendt's plurality) and to God.

We cannot argue that Augustine's vision of humans in the world, and of their political organization, is not hierarchical. It is. But it is far more dynamic and egalitarian, through its recognition of others in their common humanity, than would be suggested by a patriarchalist reading. Indeed, as we have seen, it simply cannot support the blunt patriarchalism that careless readers have attributed to him. Augustine's vision of humans, from their creation forwards, eschews the notion of 'a self on one's own', to use the words of Charles Taylor,¹⁰ in favour of an insistence on the shared bonds of affection and kinship. And it emphasizes, always, the power and potential of a relationality that subverts the power structures of patriarchal domination.