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Augustine on Heart and Life

Essays in Memory of William Harmless, S.J.

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1. An Augustinian Theology of the Heart’s Privacy

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Abstract

A contested line between the public and the private is well attested in Augustine’s writings and runs through every human society and individual human heart. What Augustine calls “privacy” involves a movement where the human heart resists observation, turns away from the shared and given, and toward the individual and owned. Despite the enormous cost of what turns out to be a failed protective strategy and the manner in which it inevitably becomes entwined with ignorance, fear, and sin, Augustine maintained a policy of respecting the secrets of others, and he articulated a theology in which privacy becomes the very space in which the sinful heart is lured out of its self-containment by divine grace present in the bodily acts of Christ’s followers. Augustine’s highly nuanced and practical position supplies resources for those concerned about the controlling effects of the growing surveillance powers of contemporary state and corporate actors.

Keywords: Augustine of Hippo, confession, early Christianity, privacy, secrets, torture

The Joy Set Before Us

“Do not imagine he is without a dungeon; his dungeon is his own heart” (Augustine, *J.* 211.2; Hill 1993: III/6: 129).

Scholarly concern about the rapid dissipation of individual privacy before the invasive vision of state and corporate actors is growing as it becomes increasingly difficult to demarcate the boundaries of the private self and to justify efforts to preserve it.¹ When one looks for structural constants that span Augustine’s forty-some years of writing, that is, for the scaffolding that holds together everything else, one finds, among other things, a persistent contrast between what is common, shared, given, and public versus what is individual, unshared, owned, and private.² What one learns is that human happiness has a great deal to do with loving what can be enjoyed or possessed without being made any less available for others. Indeed, according to Augustine, authentic experiences of joy are those made better because they are shared. He instructed his congregation, “After all, the eye is able to absorb light, and yet that does not diminish the light – I mean, the light will not be any the less because it is seen by several people; it gratifies the eyes of several people, and yet remains exactly as much as it was to begin with; they are pleased, and it is not diminished – if God has given this capacity to the light which he made for the eyes of the body, what must he be himself as light for the eyes of the mind?” (*J.* 127.6; Hill 1992: III/4: 285, adapted; see also *Lib. arb.* 2.14.37; *Civ.* 15.4).

We are social by nature and our happiness is best described by Augustine as taking the form of the interconnected lives of those living together as “citizens of a free city and who share in eternal peace, where there is no love for one’s individual (*propriae*) and, so to say, private (*privatae*) will, but rather a love that rejoices in the common (*communi*) and immutable good and joins many hearts (*cor*) into one – namely, a love which is perfectly at one in the obedience of charity” (*Civ.* 15.3; Babcock 2013: 142, adapted). Understanding our hearts as naturally desiring such openness and communion, Augustine questioned aloud, “It is on account of what we individually possess that litigation arises and enmities, quarrels, wars, riots, dissensions, scandals, sins, unjust actions, and even homicide. And for what? Over the things we call our own. We do not go to court about things we possess in common (*quae communiter*), do we? In common we breathe in the air and in common we all behold the sun” (*En. Ps.* 131.5; Boulding 2004: III/20: 159).³

From his earliest published works, Augustine commended highly disciplined spiritual practices that trained the heart to desire only what was best for it. For example, he wrote, “Do

¹ For a partial survey of the contemporary literature, see Vincent. For the past, see Ariès and Duby. For the exponential growth of surveillance in national security, see Priest and Arkin; for Augustinian reflections on the subject, see Gregory.

² As often noted by Markus (see 1990a: 245-59; 1990b: 77-79). The contrast has an extensive history in Greek and Roman thought (see Wiltshire), but also how the distinction appears in the writings of Plotinus is not to be overlooked. In an *Ennead* Augustine surely read, Plotinus discusses the otherness that arises from the wish to belong to oneself and how this disproportional attachment to a part of the whole is a form of self-imprisonment (*Enn.* 5.1.1).

³ Compare *Lib. arb.* 2.7.16: “But surely you would not say that each of us has a private sun that he alone sees, or personal moons and stars and things of that sort” (T. Williams: 41).

we not seek, with as much energy as we can command, to gather our whole soul somehow to that which we attain by the mind, to station ourselves and become firmly entrenched there, so that we may no longer rejoice in any private possession (*privato*), which is bound up in transient things, but instead cast aside all attachments to times and places and apprehend that which is always one and the same?” (*Lib. arb.* 2.16.41; T. Williams: 60). In a rightly famous passage from his *City of God*, Augustine describes the human heart’s longing as culminating in an experience of knowing and being known, of seeing and being seen:

God will be known to us in such a conspicuous way that we shall each see him by the spirit in ourselves, in each other, in himself, in the new heaven and the new earth, and in every created thing that will then exist; and, at the same time, by the body we shall each see him in every body, wherever the eyes of the spiritual body are directed with their penetrating gaze. Our thoughts, too, will then lie open to each other (*Patebunt etiam cogitationes nostrae invicem nobis*); for the words of the Apostle will be fulfilled, who, after saying, “Do not pronounce judgment before the time” immediately added, “until the Lord comes, who shall bring to light the hidden things of darkness and shall make manifest the thoughts of the heart (*cogitationes cordis*), and then each shall have praise from God” (*Civ.* 22.29; Babcock 2013: 550-51; 1 Corinthians 4:5).⁴

The self, in this way, will be lured beyond itself into a realm of public joy exceeding anything to be had privately.

That Augustine believed that this is what the human heart most wants may explain why he expended such energy analyzing why all human hearts desire privacy even though they deeply desire to be known, and why no matter how much force we bring to bear on keeping our hearts safe and secure, our hearts continue to suffer from a relentless disquiet even when we are alone. It is these very hearts that, in spite of their desire to know as they are known (1 Corinthians 13:12), frequently experience the gaze of others as invasive, interest-laden, subjugating, and dehumanizing. In this case, privacy appears to be the only relief from the heart’s resultant powerlessness and vulnerability before others. After explaining why Augustine rejected privacy as a human good that arises from our nature, the remainder of this paper will contend that a great deal of Augustine’s theology and ethics can be understood as promoting an alternate strategy for caring for vulnerable human hearts in this life, one centered on the entirely novel experience of seeing oneself being seen yet discovering that experience of exposure to be life-giving and not dehumanizing.

The Heart’s Fall into Privacy and its Tragic Consequences

The explanation eluded Augustine of why, in the depths of the human past, the human heart first fell away, as it were, from joy in the shared and common good, and instead judged that more joy could be had in privacy, where the heart could enjoy what was “its own.” To supply a rational explanation would have come dangerously close to giving a justification to the unjustifiable (see R. Williams: 59-105; Wetzel; Mathewes). Instead, Augustine described

⁴ For further implications of how Augustine frames the present limits and future possibilities of human vision, see Cavadini 2014: 93-110.

that first motion away from happiness as having no human origin at all, but to have occurred “in secret” (*in occulto*; *Civ.* 14.13). Out of such primordial darkness emerged the voice of the mythic snake of Genesis who “sought to disseminate his poison by crafty means; he spat out poison because he spoke from what was his own, from what was private to himself” (*de proprio locutus est, de suo*). It was that voice emerging from primordial secrecy that the first humans followed as they “listened to him [and] forsook the common provision (*commune*) which was the source of their blessedness (*beati*). They were led away from it to what was their own (*ad suum proprium*), perversely trying to be like God, for this was what the tempter had told them. . . . Craving to be what they were not, they lost what they had received” (*En. Ps.* 103.2.11; Boulding 2003: III/19: 137-38, adapted).

As the heart finds different objects to desire and seek to make its own, it inevitably becomes fractured as those very objects compete with one another for affection. There is no serenity in the privacy of the self as any attentive reader of the *Confessions* knows all too well, where Augustine describes so vividly the endless internal struggle of the fractured human will, where one part of the will is always arising against another part as they vie with one another in their pursuit of different objects of affection. Although we all strive to have such “well-defended hearts” (*munita corda*), the divided heart is a battlefield with as many conflicts as it has desires (*En. Ps.* 99.11).

This same internal dynamic replicates itself, this time writ large, in the constant battles of the worldly city enumerated in the *City of God*. Self and society blur into each other as both lose track of any kind of happiness to be had that is not at the expense of another. In this way, Augustine explains how Latin wisely uses the adjective *privatus* for private property since it is a term “clearly expressing loss rather than gain; every privation (*privatio*), after all, diminishes” (*Gn. Litt.* 11.15.19; Hill 2002: 439, adapted). As he never tired of reminding his readers, the tragedy repeated both in the self and in human collectives involves the will’s snakelike sliding away “from the whole which is common to all into the part which is its own private property” where it “strives to grab something more than the whole and to govern it by its own laws” (*Trin.* 12.9.14; Hill 2012: I/5: 330). The problem, he continues, is that because “there is nothing more than the whole, it is thrust back into anxiety over a part, and so by being greedy for more it gets less.” As is well known, Augustine’s word for this movement is pride (*superbia*); in its love of privacy (of what is its own), that pride has an aversion to the truth that its happiness is found outside itself in conforming to a created order not of its own making and not intended for its private enjoyment. In Augustine’s words, “the soul lapses by pride (*superbia*) into certain actions of its own power, and neglecting universal law has fallen into doing certain things private (*privata*) to itself” (*Mus.* 6.16.53; Taliaferro: 374).

Privacy, as a consequence, has an element of fabrication or falsehood to it. It is so strongly associated with lying that for Augustine the lie is “the archetypal ‘private’ utterance” (Markus 1996: 132 n. 17). Augustine devoted no less than two treatises to the subject of lying, one written in 395 CE and another in 420. It was, accordingly, a subject he appears to have been more concerned about than many of his contemporaries and predecessors (*Mend.*; *C. mend.*; see, further, Griffiths; Ramsey). Augustine defines the lie in the following manner: “The person lies who has one thing in mind but expresses something else in words or by signs of whatever kind. For this reason, the heart of him who lies is said to be double, that is, there is

a double thought” (*Mend.* 3; Browne: 485, adapted).⁵ Thus, the essence of the lie is an intentional doubling where the public truth is set aside in favor of a private falsehood. The lie is a form of privacy insofar as it conceals one’s true thoughts from others and substitutes a falsehood of its own fabrication.

In this context, Augustine frequently quotes the words of Jesus that “the one who lies speaks from what is his own (*de suo loquitur*)” (John 8:44; *En. Ps.* 103/2.11; Boulding 2003: III/19: 137). Augustine explains, “The human soul, after all, can participate in the truth, but Truth itself is God, unchanging above the soul. So then, turn away if you will from this Truth and turn to yourself, and exult in your own seemingly free movements rather than in being directed and enlightened by God; but you will be plunged into the darkness of falsehood, since ‘whoever speaks falsehood is speaking from what is his own’” (*Gn. adv. Man.* 2.16.24; Hill 2002: 87). Although the lie involves a certain creaturely creativity in manufacturing its fictions, according to Augustine, it dramatically removes the liar from what is common, shared, and given, and instead confines him or her to what is individual, unshared, and owned. The lie, therefore, is only one result of the human fall into privacy, but it captures as well as anything the dynamic involved when the human will desires privacy because the flourishing it seeks is one where it only loves what is its own.

If such efforts of heart concealment ultimately fail, they are, according to Augustine, ancient. He noted how the humans who first believed the serpent’s lie in their shame covered themselves in fig leaves (Genesis 3:7) “to escape the notice of the one whom nothing escapes, and to conceal his flesh from one who is the inspector of the heart” (*Gn. Litt.* 11.34.46; Hill 2002: 456; so also *Gn. adv. Man.* 2.21.32). Shame (*pudor*) for Augustine and the Romans had to do with how one perceives oneself being seen by others.⁶ When one’s self-assessment conflicted with what one saw reflected back in the eyes of others, that very negotiation gave rise to shame unless it was mitigated through defined remedies, the most powerful being seeing oneself being seen as worthy (for an extended treatment of shame and practices constructed by Augustine for its redemption, see Kolbet 2017). If, however, one’s secret was successfully hidden, the dynamics of shame (*pudor*) became more strongly felt the more one was aware of being seen but not being known for who one was. The disjunction between who one perceives oneself to be and the perception of others is yet another means of confinement where the privacy offered by the heart’s secrets prevents the self from connecting with what is beyond its own artifice. In this case, privacy is exceedingly costly since its concealments ensure that the self cannot ever know if it is known or loved by another.

In the best of circumstances, even with the best of intentions, the hearts of the descendants of Adam are thereby far from transparent to one another.⁷ Augustine contends

⁵ *quapropter ille mentitur, qui aliud habet in animo et aliud uerbis uel quibuslibet significationibus enuntiat. Unde etiam duplex cor dicitur esse mentientis, id est duplex cogitatio.* See also *S.* 308A.7: “Many upright people have one heart, whereas a single deceitful person has a double heart” (Hill 1994: III/9: 60, adapted).

⁶ See Kaster: “After all, *pudor* is first and foremost about perceptions – about seeing myself being seen as devalued” (33; see also Bartsch).

⁷ In his unpublished manuscript, Harmless contends that “central to understanding Augustine the thinker and theologian” is the notion “that we remain perilously and fundamentally indecipherable to one another and even to our very selves” (2018).

that we have “only a hearsay acquaintance with any person’s conscience; we do not claim to judge the things hidden from us. ‘No one knows what goes on inside a person except the spirit of the person that is in him’” (*Civ.* 1.26; Babcock 2012: 29; 1 Corinthians 2:11).⁸ Elsewhere he insists, “We may observe someone from the outside, and all his or her possessions, but no one knows what that person is really like; only God knows” (*En. Ps.* 55.20; Boulding 2001: III/17: 100). “We cannot see into the human heart nor bring it out into the open” (*J.* 279.10).⁹ This ignorance of the hearts of others leaves us in a constant state of insecurity where every dependence upon others puts us at risk of betrayal and harm. Thus Augustine explains, “We count injuries, suspicions, hostilities and war as certain evils. But we count peace as no more than an uncertain good, for we do not know the hearts of those with whom we wish to be at peace (*quoniam corda eorum, cum quibus eam tenere uolumus, ignoramus*), and, even if we could know their hearts today, we still would not know what they might be like tomorrow. Again, who usually are – or ought to be – more friendly with each other than those who live in the same household? But who feels secure about this, when such terrible evils so often arise from the secret treacheries of people who live together?” (*Civ.* 19.5; Babcock 2013: 359).

Augustine is not suggesting here that we live in a Hobbesian state of “war of every man against every man” (*Leviathan* 13.8; Hobbes: 76). It is more the case that we have no way of seeing or foreseeing the effects of the everyday ignorance and passion in the hearts of those we depend upon and love. Transparency can be unwise since it is “with such deep sadness of heart that we hear” Jesus say that “one’s foes will be the members of one’s own household” (*Civ.* 19.5; Babcock 2013: 359; Matthew 10:36). We also have no way to assure those who depend upon us about ourselves since, according to Augustine, we do not know our own hearts either, let alone have the power to display their contents publicly.¹⁰ Even if one committed to a policy of relentless truthfulness and an ongoing narcissistic filibuster displaying what one takes to be one’s identity, one could never be fully assured that one is known by any other human being. The privacy the heart has acquired over time is not one that can be overcome either by the human eye or the facility of the human tongue. Even the luminous hearts of the authors of biblical texts are not open to public view by mere reading; they possess the same persistent indecipherability as the rest of us.¹¹

The ancient world (much like the modern world), however, had its methods of compelling hearts to yield their secrets in the form of confession – namely, torture. Augustine speaks of

⁸ *Nos per aurem conscientiam conuenimus, occultorum nobis iudicium non usurpamus. Nemo scit quid agatur in homine nisi spiritus hominis, qui in ipso est.*

⁹ *Cor hominis nec videre possumus, nec ostendere.*

¹⁰ *Civ.* 20.7: “Nothing is hidden from God, not even the future. A man, in contrast, sees a person only as he is at present – if he can really be said to see a person at all, when he does not see into the person’s heart (*cor*) – but does not see even himself well enough to know what sort of person he will be in the future” (Babcock 2013: 401).

¹¹ See the prominent theme of scripture’s obscurity in *De doctrina christiana* and, more generally, Augustine’s early lament about the inability of all readers to see into the hearts of authors, “By what arguments can I conclude, so as to be able to swear to it, what the intentions were of persons who are dead or absent? Even if they were present and could be interrogated, there would be many things that good persons would have to conceal out of a sense of duty” (*Util cred.* 5.11; Hill et al. 2005: 125, adapted).

people stretched on racks, of iron claws furrowing flesh, of burning with flames, or beating with rods (*Ep.* 133.2). Augustine mentions such things with a troubling familiarity because when the truth suspected to be hidden away in another's heart had to be known, it was thought that it could be had through such time-honored technologies. What the torturer represents is the legitimate claim of the public and the common good upon the private and the individual. This duty to the public is what, in fact, the torturer knows. In our language, the public has its own rights and responsibilities. Torture can be seen as something of a solution to the problem of the heart's privacy since, through its forceful techniques, torture appears to pierce through the heart's veil, discover the truth, and make what was once private public.

Augustine's famous parable in the *City of God* of the wise judge whose righteous task is to learn the truth for the public good, is, contrary to some presentations, no defense of torture.¹² It is a story of the abject human misery of an honorable man appointed to arbitrate the troubled line between the public and the private, but who, even with the full apparatus of the state, still lacks the resources to do so. This judge, honorably representing the public good, feels the pull of torture as a grim necessity, even though – and Augustine could not be clearer on this point – its invasive and dehumanizing means fail to produce the truth. Augustine explains how those “not sentenced to death very often die under torture or due to torture,” or innocent people who bring charges are themselves tortured to verify their claims, or the guilty do not “break under torture and confess, so that plaintiffs are unable to prove their charges even though the charges are true” (*Civ.* 19.6; Babcock 2013: 360-61).

Torture is no solution to the heart's privacy; in fact, it always presents the sizable risk of the public falling in love with its own power and private truths as the one tortured confesses to be truth only what the torturer wants to hear. Although torture fails to be the means of access to the truth that it claims to be, it rarely fails as a display of human power. Rather than a justification of torture, Augustine's parable of the wise judge is a warning to anyone prying into God's business with someone else. When do we know that the truth that we seek with our invasive vision is something we have a right to know? Fallen hearts, even as they are trapped in a privacy of their own making, are for the time being better cared for by honoring their voluntary concealment and joining the God who orchestrates all things to lure such hearts into the open.

Respecting the Fallen Heart's Privacy (For the Time Being)

Given Augustine's extended analysis of the toxicity of secrets and his insistence that they always involve their holders in experiences of sin, loss, fraud, and isolation, it may be surprising that Augustine was quite public about his practice of not divulging other people's secrets. This was a practice he commended widely since, for him, it was the explicit teaching of Jesus who counseled his followers to reprove one another privately (Matthew 18:15). In a sermon he recounts how a bishop always needs to keep in mind that the one whose secret he is privy to may well have enemies that could use the information for ill purposes. Augustine describes how “people sometimes find fault with us bishops, because we seem not to reprove sinners.

¹² For a more detailed account within the broader context of the late antique Roman judicial system, see Harries. While stressing that Augustine was a man of his time, she refers to this passage as “one of the most comprehensive critiques of judicial torture to survive from Antiquity” (132).

They either suppose that we know what in fact we do not, or they suppose that we say nothing about what we do know.” In fact, even in the case of a murderer Augustine “would neither give him away, nor ignore his sin.” He would “rebuke him in secret (*in secreto*) . . . [always preferring] to cure, not accuse.” He underscores how he follows the same procedure regarding the complaints of wives about the infidelity of their husbands. He describes it as a form of pastoral care that lets “the evil terminate where the evil happens” (*S.* 82.7-12, here 11; Hill 1991: III/3: 372-76). The Canons of North African councils during Augustine’s lifetime mandate that when dealing with the excommunicated, a bishop is not to divulge matters that were learned only through private confession and are not publicly verifiable. A bishop who did so would face excommunication himself.¹³ It is important to underscore that Augustine should not be understood to articulate norms like those governing practices of auricular confession that became normative only after the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215; he should be seen instead to have advocated a broad general policy of regard for what is best kept private even in the lives of sinners.¹⁴ As he explains, “To see the heart is God’s privilege; it is not for people, except to pass judgment on those things which are visible in the open” (*S.* 243.5; Hill 1993: III/7: 91, adapted).¹⁵

According to his friend and biographer Possidius, Augustine welcomed guests to his table along with the clergy he lived with, but he had no taste for gossip during meals. He preferred reading or discussing edifying topics. He, therefore, had inscribed on the table a couplet, “Whoever to slander an absent friend is able, must know that he is unworthy of this table” (Possidius, *Vita Aug.* 22.6; Geerlings: 70.5-6).¹⁶ Possidius recounts an occasion where Augustine become so exasperated at his guests (who were fellow bishops) that he threatened either to begin removing the inscription from the table or retire to his room for the evening (*Vita Aug.* 22.7). The secrets of others, whatever they were, were not to be the subject of table banter. While extolling his mother Monica’s aversion to gossip, Augustine lamented the “sad experience of innumerable hordes of people . . . who not only betray to angry people what their angry enemies have said, but add things unsaid as well, whereas it ought to be easy enough for any who have kindly feelings toward their own kind to avoid provoking or aggravating the enmity of others by reporting malicious gossip” (*Conf.* 9.9.21; Boulding 2012: 226).

Augustine, nevertheless, allowed an important exception to his policy of protecting secrets in the hearts of sinners: the misconduct of clergy functioning in their official capacity. Late in Augustine’s episcopate, the congregation gathered in Hippo the Sunday before Christmas to hear their bishop profess something that had been “a great grief” him (*S.* 355.3). When Januarius, one of the priests living in Augustine’s household who had purported to rid

¹³ *Concilium Carthaginense* (419 CE; CCL 149: 232.1620-1630): 132-33; *Concilium Hipponensis* (427 CE; CCL 149: 252.83-91): 8. Patout Burns drew my attention to these canons. For further details about penance performed in secret under episcopal supervision, see Burns and Jensen: 341-43.

¹⁴ On the difficulty of establishing auricular confession as a sacramental act prior to 1215 and what indicators there are, see Murray: 51-81; Bachrach: 3-22; Meens; and a number of chapters in Firey.

¹⁵ *cor videre, dei est; hominum autem non est, nisi de his quae manifesta sunt iudicare.*

¹⁶ *Quisquis amat dictis absentum rodere vitam, Hanc mensam indignam noverit esse sibi.* The couplet echoes, however intentionally, the *Satires* of Horace (*absentem qui rodit amicum* . . . ; 1.4.81), who defended himself against critics that slandered his work when he was not present.

himself of his property, was facing the prospect of his own death, he drew up a will. This was scandalous since Augustine had believed and explained to others that the clerical members of his household no longer had private interests, holding all things in common as the apostles did (Acts 4:32). One of Augustine's own community had fallen well short of this ideal, to Augustine's public embarrassment. In the new will, Januarius wanted to give his remaining property to the church and not to his two living children, a son and daughter who were asserting their own claims as heirs and disputing with one another about how to divide the property (S. 355.3; on the scandal, see Bonner: 128; Brown: 412-14; Lancel: 230-31; Meer: 199-234, 239-40; O'Donnell: 166-69).

The bishop explained that if other members of his household were continuing to hold property, "they are doing what is not allowed." He confessed that this may well be the case because he customarily refrained from excessive scrutiny of the private lives of his clergy: "I have a good opinion of my brothers, and believe the best of them. I have always refrained from making any inquiries (*ab hac inquisitione dissimulaui*), because to make such inquiries would, so it seemed to me, indicate I had a low opinion of them" (S. 355.2; Hill 1995: III/10: 166). Augustine pledged, nonetheless, to conduct an immediate investigation, to demand that any similar cases in his household be resolved quickly, and then to disclose the results publicly shortly after Epiphany (S. 355.6-7).

The ensuing extensive reckoning yielded a lot of unfinished business that largely pertained to those who had retained interest in their biological family's estate due to the complexity of disentangling inheritances. It included at least two cases of clergy who had continued to hold slaves that were emancipated on the day Augustine declared the results of the proceedings. Augustine painstakingly revealed the financial affairs of each priest and deacon of his household while insisting that it was "imperative that we should give the matter this thorough airing" (S. 356.2; Hill 1995: III/10: 174).¹⁷ Cases of such misconduct were not secrets to be kept. Augustine decided to refuse any portion of Januarius's inheritance and to leave it for his children to sort out. Priests who were honest in their declarations would not be defrocked; but to live in the clerical monastery as hypocrites would no longer be allowed. After the reckoning, however, any priest who continued to hide property would be barred from service in Augustine's diocese (S. 355.5; 356.14).

Augustine pledged that henceforth great transparency would be the policy, declaring "I want our life to be lived openly before your eyes" (S. 356.12).¹⁸ The ordained, by virtue of their ordination, would voluntarily sacrifice elements of their privacy for the common good. Clergy were entitled to the same care and concern as other members of the community, and they were not without their own searching private selves as Augustine had articulated so eloquently in his *Confessions*. However, privacy was not something the community could afford to offer its priests when it conflicted with the ministerial office itself. Other exceptions consistent with Augustine's thought readily come to mind wherein privacy is superseded by other goods; but in those cases privacy is surrendered on account of public office, ecclesial or otherwise.

¹⁷ *Haec fuit necessitas, ut ad hanc diligentiam veniremus.*

¹⁸ *ante oculos vestros volo sit vita nostra.*

A further area wherein Augustine eschewed privacy and insisted on public disclosure relates to his often-contentious arguments with representatives of competing religious communities. We have lengthy records of his debates with Arians, Manichaeans, Donatists, and Pelagians assembled from the notes of stenographers present at live events, Augustine's own reconstruction of events remembered after the fact, and his painstaking line-by-line responses to the written works of his opponents.¹⁹ The volume of such materials is so extensive that it has contributed much to Augustine's subsequent reputation as a polemicist. In any case, the public nature of such records made it possible for opponents to determine what was being said about them and to contest it.²⁰ Critics of Augustine may well judge the extent to which such voluntary disclosure of arguments were inadequate or self-serving, but the necessary point here is only that much of what we know of Augustine often comes from his own voluntary disclosures, which were extensive by anyone's account, and produced for the sake of what he understood as the common good.

Augustine is universally recognized as a writer and intellectual, but he is less frequently identified as the creative innovator of local communities that he was; and too rarely seen is the extent to which such community life was inseparable from even his highest ideals. During most of his adult life he worked at ways people could best live together: whether it was an early dream of a community of men sharing philosophical leisure, or the monastic house founded in Hippo, or the church he presided over for decades. For Augustine, the heart's difficulties were not resolved by merely intellectual solutions; they also had to do with how one lived and with whom one lived. The heart's unsteady balancing of its private interest and the common life it shared in was something that Augustine insisted had to be negotiated in community, with flesh, blood, sweat, and tears.

Augustine wrote a rule for the community of men with whom he lived. Its opening words address the heart's unity above all: "We urge you who form a religious community to put the following precepts into practice. Before all else, in your house live together in harmony in oneness of mind and heart (Acts 4:32) in God" (*Reg. 3* 1.1-2; *anima una et cor unum in Deum*; Canning: 11 [adapted]; see Martin; Lawless; Zumkeller). Likewise, he instructed his congregation, "All of our work in this life is to heal the eye of the heart so that God may be seen" (*S.* 88.5; Hill 1991: III/3: 422, adapted). Though this is not the place to discuss them, all the devotional and liturgical practices Augustine taught his congregation sought to heal and integrate hearts. His sermons commonly echoed the Eucharistic liturgy's exhortation to "lift the heart" (*sursum cor*; *Io. eu. tr.* 18.6.3; *S.* 52.15; 56.16).²¹ These were non-invasive spiritual

¹⁹ Possidius describes Augustine's insistence on the public nature of such proceedings (*Vit. Aug.* 14-18). Select examples of such records are *Contra Maximinum Arianum* and *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*.

²⁰ As Augustine frequently directs. See Augustine's early letter to the Donatist Bishop Maximinus, that encourages him to keep the letter and to produce it as a public record that would prove what Augustine had said, and would demonstrate, if necessary, where Augustine had violated his word (*Ep.* 23.7).

²¹ For many other references, see Kolbet 2010: 304 n. 201; Demura. For the Eucharist as a means of sharing in the common good, see Fitzgerald.

practices that cared for troubled hearts and gently coaxed them away from their individual retreats into privacy toward an experience of vision that was life-giving and shared.²²

Augustine spent decades teaching all kinds of people spiritual exercises that they would engage in together. Peter Brown, some time ago, identified how difficult it is for the contemporary biographer to find Augustine when he was alone (Brown: 50; also observed by Lawless: 3). The experience of vision to which he draws the most attention in *Confessions* happened not when he was alone, but in the presence of his mother Monica as they engaged in a highly intentional and practiced conversation “with hearts wide open.” That conversation ended in silence, but it was a silence they shared together (*Conf.* 9.10.23-27).²³

According to Augustine, Adam and Eve’s intentional covering of themselves, that is, their creation of a realm of privacy for their hearts, without a doubt resulted from sin. The consequent history – in which their descendants absolutized or even celebrated that privacy, located their aspirations in that private realm, and never managed to imagine a world where it would no longer be necessary – consists of manifold egregious personal and social failures. Augustine’s readers, nevertheless, need to exercise great care in specifying what is entailed in the undoing of that misbegotten privacy. The heart’s darkness is not to be cleaved as much as to be redeemed as God and only God receives the heart’s confession.

In the *City of God*, Augustine refers to the biblical report of the nakedness of Noah (Genesis 9:20-27). He identifies Noah in his nakedness as the suffering Christ whose presence brings out the true identities of his sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.²⁴ In the broader narrative of that great work, it is difficult to shake the powerful historical image of the venerable, but vulnerable, old man whose privacy was violated by Ham (*Civ.* 16.2).²⁵ And who would not argue that Shem and Japheth’s act of covering their father’s nakedness was an honorable preservation of his dignity rather than a dishonorable avoidance of the public good? That act portrays what faith often looks like for the wayfaring people of God as they respect privacy even as they believe in a more lasting city where hearts are ever transparent because of their mutual joy. For Augustine, that Christ comes to us naked in this way, or better, joins us as naked and vulnerable to being violated, raises interpretive questions. Much as it did for Noah’s sons, it may even require Augustine’s readers to decide who they will be when made aware of Noah’s risk of violation and exposure.

I suggest that Augustine has an operative category that is entirely applicable here, that of “honorable concealment.” This category appears frequently in Augustine. Think of the *disciplina arcani*. Augustine affirms, “The sacraments of the faithful are not divulged to catechumens . . . that they may be more passionately desired by them, they are honorably

²² For an extended analysis of such means of persuasion, see Kolbet 2010, especially for the psychagogic theory informing Augustine’s approach.

²³ *sed inhiabamus ore cordis in superna fluenta fontis tui, fontis vitae, qui est apud te*. For commentary on this passage, see Kenney: 73-86, 110-28.

²⁴ Augustine is preceded in his Christological reading by Cyprian (*Ep.* 63) and there is a significant subsequent history of artistic representations of the vulnerable Noah as an image of Christ (see Widdicombe).

²⁵ An alternate figurative reading of the story appears in *Doctr. chr.* 4.21.45 (where Noah’s drunkenness foreshadows the Eucharist) and *C. Faust.* 12.23-24.

concealed (*honorabilius occultantur*) from their view” (*Io. eu. tr.* 96.3; Harmless 2014: 198; see also *S.* 132.1). In the same way, scripture has its own secrets that are hidden from the view of all but those most serious readers. Listen to Augustine’s similar language about the obscurity of scripture: “Those who read them in a light-minded spirit are liable to be misled by innumerable obscurities and ambiguities, and to mistake the meaning entirely, while in some places they cannot even guess at a wrong meaning, so dense and dark is the fog that some passages are wrapped in. This is all due, I have no doubt at all, to divine providence, in order to break pride with hard labor, and to save the intelligence from boredom, since it readily forms a low opinion of things that are too easy to work out” (*Doctr. chr.* 2.6.7; Hill 1996: 131). Likewise, Augustine proposes that God has honorably concealed the details of the afterlife from us “precisely in order to keep us from slacking off in our eagerness to make progress toward avoiding all sins” (*Civ.* 21.27; Babcock 2013: 493). The mystery of the sacraments, the truths of scripture, and the details of the afterlife have all been concealed by God so that such things are not merely annexed by us as a sort of private knowledge, but instead require practices of attention to what lies well beyond our carefully constructed selves. What if the impenetrable secret in the hearts of even those we love the most has the redeemed purpose to create in us a longing, a kind of treasuring of what we do not yet know?

Augustine’s most characteristic doctrine, his doctrine of grace, at its core is an experience of *being seen* favorably by God; that is, it is an experience of seeing oneself being seen yet also loved and valued in a way that the heart can understand. Augustine explains, “Our common idiom associates the favorable glance with love, does it not? We say of God in the first place, ‘He has looked favorably upon me.’ How can you say, ‘He has looked upon me’ (*respexit me*)? Did he not see you before now? Or was he waiting up there, until he was alerted by your prayers to turn his eyes in your direction? Of course he was looking upon you before this; yet you say, ‘He has looked upon me. He has loved me’ (*Respexit me . . . Dilexit me*)” (*En. Ps.* 65.22; Boulding 2001: III/17: 305). It is this experience that is entirely novel and always surprising. It is an experience of seeing oneself being seen and yet discovering that experience of exposure to be life-giving rather than dehumanizing. That experience occurs for Augustine most often as an embodied grace wherein divine love is first seen by seeing our image reflected back at us favorably in the eyes of another person. It is that experience that Augustine instructed his congregation to enact toward one another during every Eucharist with a liturgical kiss, where “as your lips approach the lips of your brothers or sisters, so your heart (*cor*) should not be withdrawn from theirs” (*S.* 227; Hill 1993: III/6: 255; on the performative elements of Augustine’s thought, see McCarthy; Harrison).

Such assuring expressions of embodied grace – rather than technological instruments like torture – lure fortified hearts into the open and lessen the need for the private self’s costly ingenuity. Augustine explained that God, no doubt, could use more forceful means to instruct human beings; instead, by responding to human beings through “human temples,” God dignifies the human condition by having “his word administered to human beings by other human beings” (*Doctr. chr.* Pro. 6; Hill 1996: 103, adapted).²⁶ Without that human element,

²⁶ *sed abiecta esset humana condicio, si per homines hominibus deus uerum suum ministrare nolle uideretur.* See also his similar comment that “while nothing really worthy of God can be said about him, he has accepted the homage of human voices, and has wished us to rejoice in praising him with our words” (*Doctr. chr.* 1.6.6; Hill 1996: 109).

“love itself, which binds people together in the bonds of unity, would have no scope for pouring minds and hearts together, as it were, and blending them with one another” (*Doctr. chr.* Pro. 6; Hill 1996: 103, adapted). For this reason, when St. Paul was directly “struck down and instructed by the divine voice from heaven,” he was still “sent to a man to receive the sacraments and be joined to the church.” Although the centurion Cornelius had spoken directly to an angel, it was Peter who instructed and baptized him (*Doctr. chr.* Pro. 6; Hill 1996: 103; referencing Acts 9-10). The eunuch puzzling over the book of Isaiah was sent not to an angel but to Philip, who “in human words and human language opened up to him what was hidden in that passage of scripture” (*Doctr. chr.* Pro. 7; Hill 1996: 103; referencing Acts 8:27-35).

Conclusion: Redeeming the Private Self

State power in Augustine’s world, insofar as the Roman Empire can be described in such terms, took the form of public display. However much the Roman Empire may have struggled to exercise coercive force consistently throughout its vast territory, its intermittent displays of conspicuously visible force subjugated those whose powerlessness it revealed (Beard). They became spectators of power, invisible before what could not *not* be seen. Immersed in this culture of display, Augustine attempted to redeem it by presiding over his own humanizing spectacle, saying, “These are the Christian spectacles (*spectacula christiana*). God himself watches from on high, encourages us to participate, and gives us his help; he sets the prizes for the contests and awards them at the end” (*En. Ps.* 39.16; Boulding 2000: III/16: 212; see Lim). However invisible one may have felt otherwise, what Augustine offered was a place where one’s own participation in the spectacle rendered one visible before eyes both human and divine.

Even as Augustine humanized the Roman power of display, he could have never envisaged the transformation that state power would undergo in the modern world, where citizens are pacified not so much through display as through surveillance.²⁷ When in the mid-seventeenth century Thomas Hobbes searched for words to describe the “Mortal God” that was to be the modern nation state that he imagined people were to construct and, in turn, be subjected to, he invoked the image of the biblical sea monster, Leviathan. As he did so, he quoted the words of Job that there is nothing “on earth to be compared with him. He is made so as not to be afraid. He seeth every high thing below him, and is king of all the children of pride” (Job 41:33-34; *Leviathan* 17.13, 28.27; Hobbes: 109; 210). The many-eyed Leviathan was to possess a salvific power that brought with it a right to know the secrets of people’s hearts in order to save them from their own violent nature.²⁸ Likewise, in his own reflections on the nature of state power, Michel Foucault observes, “The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly. . . . It imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility . . . [and] holds them in a mechanism of

²⁷ Of course, this shift in the modality of citizen formation is the principle thesis of Foucault. For further reading on the surprisingly fruitful conversation between Augustine and Foucault, especially on their shared concern about the complexities involved in our relational dependence upon one another, see Schuld.

²⁸ See the original illustrations, with their image of the Leviathan’s body composed of many human heads with eyes, and the analysis of them as an important component of the work, in Brekekamp.

objectification” (Foucault: 173, 187). Power in our world is most potent when it is continuous, everywhere present, mechanical, and voluntarily internalized by individuals. It remains invisible even as it has the capacity to make anyone visible contrary to his or her will, not only through its own power of sight, but also through subpoena, questioning, and any variety of examinations it constructs.

Attending to Augustine’s care and concern for the heart’s privacy entails tracking not only the range of meaning of Latin words, but also the massive sea change over time in the political realities to which they refer. Although Hobbes and Foucault were both readers of Augustine, one may not need the ancient bishop to sense how very thin and delicate the private self is. The private self is mostly an illusion, and its self-justifications are comedic when they are not tragic. Even as it is subjugated and objectified by increasingly powerful surveillance apparatuses, it remains more something to look *from* than to look *at*. The private self is more product than source, and more of a fluctuating coping strategy than a fixed entity (see primarily Taylor; Marion; Drever; and the important qualifications of Cavadini 2007). This fragility renders it no less vulnerable to ancient imposed invisibility as it is to contemporary forced visibility. Even though Augustine saw its artificiality as directly as anyone ever has, for him the private self – despite being necessarily entangled in sinful tragic failures – is something human, worthy of consideration, due its own measure of respect, and ultimately to be redeemed.

It is not the case, however, that Augustine insisted that the individual’s right to privacy preempts the concerns of the state. In common with all the legal traditions of which he was aware, Augustine assumed the primacy of the *civitas* for human survival and flourishing (albeit for him it was the heavenly city composed of human beings and unfallen angels). The more pertinent Augustinian conviction calling for the need to preserve the heart’s privacy is the one observing that human exercises of coercive power are more likely to reify their own private truths than to reveal the secrets hidden in anyone’s heart. Awareness of how difficult it is to prevent our assumed right to know from controlling or even inhibiting the free decisions of others about the very lives for which they are responsible and accountable to God undergirds Augustine’s call for a self-imposed restraint upon our own invasive vision. Apart from such restraint, the heart’s indecipherability is not rendered transparent as much as it comes under the sway of the very power observing it. As problematic as the restless, searching, disoriented individual self is, its private world is something worthy of care, if only so that that heart can be enlarged and made more spacious as it comes to love what lies beyond its carefully constructed borders.

If Augustine is correct that the heart is so opaque that it resists all human attempts to understand it, the heart may well withstand any future technical innovations that promise at long last to capture and quantify the elusive human self. Although Augustine elaborated a theology establishing that the heart’s self-chosen privacy deserves remedial care, without doubt his pastoral advice would be to put more effort into purifying one’s loves than to hide and fortify that which, by its nature, offers no lasting security. What is most interior and deeply hidden in the self, yet most revealing of who we truly are, is the form taken by our capacity to love in this life. As Augustine asserts, “Delight orders the soul” (*Mus.* 6.11.29). The deepest truth worth knowing about individuals has most to do with what they love, and whether what

they love is noble. In the words of Augustine, “Each person is as is his love” (*Ep. Io. tr.* 2.14).²⁹ Unlike so many of the heart’s secrets, that love can be known and its existence is usually visible even to the casual observer. Whatever the shifting dynamics of state power may be, if that love is what there is to be seen, then whoever has it should not fear the suffering that comes from it or feel shame for having chosen it. No matter how subtle and complicated Augustine’s analysis was concerning the private human restlessness that afflicts the fallen self, the more basic and foundational truth about human beings was that that restlessness was to be taken as evidence that we were created for joy – a joy that only increases the more it is shared and seen.

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²⁹ *quia talis est quisque, qualis eius dilectio est.*

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