

3

Developments in Christian thought

Chapter 16

Augustine on human nature

1 Introduction

Chapter checklist

This chapter considers the human potential to do great acts of good and evil and what this tells us about human nature and the purpose of life. It focuses on Augustine's life and the reasons why he developed his distinctive theology of the Fall, Original Sin, guilt, the divided will and grace. The chapter concludes by considering some contemporary theological and non-theological discussions of the issues raised by Augustine.

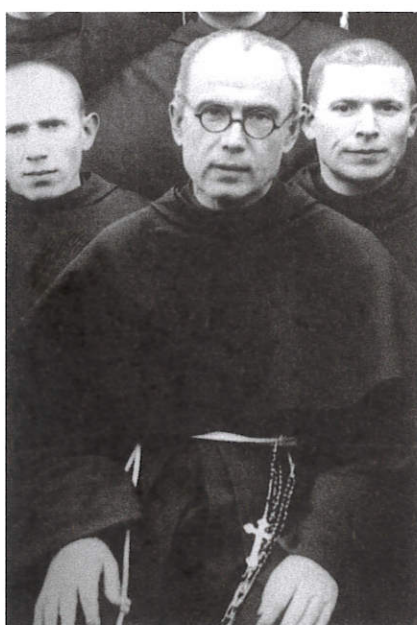
2 The human potential



Anders Breivik

Anders Breivik shocked the world when he carried out a series of attacks and mass murders in 2011. On 22 July 2011 he killed eight people by setting off a van bomb in Oslo followed by the shooting and murder of 69 young people at the left-wing Workers' Youth Club League at their summer camp on the island of Utoya, Norway. His motives were to cleanse Europe of non-European elements such as Islam, cultural Marxism and multiculturalism. He was diagnosed as having a narcissistic personality disorder. He was convicted in 2012 of mass murder and imprisoned for life.

In July 1941, three inmates escaped from Auschwitz concentration camp. The deputy camp commander selected ten men to be starved to death in an underground bunker as a deterrent. One of the men cried out that he had a wife and children and Maximillian Kolbe offered himself in exchange for the man's life. Kolbe supported the nine men to the last over two weeks while they starved to death until only he was alive. Finally, the prison guards killed him using a lethal injection.



Maximillian Kolbe

Key person

Maximillian Kolbe (1894–1941): was a Polish Catholic priest and Franciscan friar. He was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War because the monastery where he lived was publishing anti-Nazi literature. He was transferred to Auschwitz 28 May 1941 where he died. He was canonised by the Catholic Church 10 October 1982.

Key question

To what extent are humans in control of their lives?

Key persons

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78): French philosopher and writer. He set out his political philosophy in *The Social Contract* (1762) where he distinguishes between humans originally living in a 'state of nature' and the need for a social contract.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679): Educated at Oxford and later began writing political pieces of which *Leviathan* (1651) is his most developed work.

Key quote

The life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.
Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan* XIII.9

These two examples illustrate the polar opposites of human nature. Breivik's nature is of a self-obsessed narcissist, cold-blooded and life-denying, whereas Kolbe's nature is selfless, generous, courageous and life-affirming. It seems that human beings have the potential to act in diametrically opposed ways. Rousseau and Hobbes give two very different philosophical explanations why this should be so.

- The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that humans are essentially generous and only act otherwise when situation and circumstance cause them to act otherwise. He famously said that, 'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains'. The metaphor of the chains describes how the human competition for land, resources and power had resulted in loss of freedom. For Rousseau, the purpose of life is to cut free from these chains and rediscover the 'state of nature' by learning to be more co-operative and appreciative of each other.

Key quote

Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains. Many a man believes himself to be the master of others who is, no less than they, a slave.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *The Social Contract* Book 1.1

- The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes' starting point was very different from Rousseau. He thought that in a 'state of nature' humans are not naturally co-operative but selfish and brutish (animal-like). Humans are, however, in one vital respect different from animals; the human power of reason is enough to realise that if they co-operate with each other, life becomes more tolerable. The purpose of life is to conquer the brutish animal side of human nature and create just and fair societies.

Describing and understanding human nature must be the starting point for ethics, politics, sociology and philosophy. However, it is less obviously the starting point for theology. Theology is after all the 'study of God', whereas the 'study of humans' is the domain of anthropology. But there need not be a sharp distinction because in understanding what it means to be human we are also asking what the purpose of human life is and that is as much a theological question as it is philosophical, psychological or biological.

3 Augustine on human nature

Augustine's influence on Western Christianity is fundamental both for Catholics and Protestants. Even today, in the light of modern science, history and psychology, his judgements and insights continue to be the source of fruitful reflection. It is largely because he is so honest about his own inner experiences that his theological and philosophical reflections on human nature have considerable influence. The main source for his early life up to his conversion to Christianity is in his book the *Confessions* (written between 397 and 400AD).



Augustine of Hippo (354–430AD)

Key term

Esoteric Teachings which are only intended to be understood by only a small number of people with specialised knowledge.

Key question

Why did Augustine find the Manichean belief that the world is evil convincing?

Key term

Manicheism A form of esoteric Christianity which believed that suffering and evil in the world are not caused by God but by a lower power (Satan). Humans have two souls: the higher soul desires God and the lower soul desires evil.

(a) Augustine's life

Augustine was born in Thagaste, North Africa in 354AD. His mother Monica was a devout though uneducated Catholic Christian and his father, Patrick, a merchant. Although they were not well off, his father realised his son's genius and gave him the best education he could. Augustine did not share his mother's faith, but he grew up knowing about Christianity and probably attended festivals with his mother.

In 370AD at the age of 16, Augustine went to Carthage to study law but changed courses to study rhetoric (a mixture of philosophy, literature and public speaking). He quickly rose to the top of his class and impressed his professors. But his experience of Carthage was not favourable and he described it as a 'hissing cauldron of lust'; the students were rowdy and constantly disrupted classes. Although Augustine never formally joined the 'Wreckers', a club for fashionable students, he mixed with its members and enjoyed their riotous company.

During this time two important things occurred:

- The first was when he read Cicero's *Hortensius* as part of his rhetoric course. It was the first time he had read a serious philosophy book and it stirred up in him a strong desire to pursue wisdom. By comparison he found the Bible full of contradictions and unable to deal with the questions raised by Cicero.
- The second was his encounter with a group of extremely **esoteric** Christians called the Manicheans. The Manicheans offered Augustine the answers to the questions he was seeking replies to and he 'gulped down' (*Confessions* 3.6) everything they taught. They thought that only they knew the truth and they despised Catholic Christians. His mother, Monica, was appalled and refused to let Augustine home, but she was advised by her bishop not to do so because he knew that as an intelligent young man Augustine would soon grow tired with the Manicheans, and eventually he did.

Key person

Cicero (107–43BC): Marcus Tullius Cicero was a Roman consul, philosopher, politician, lawyer, orator and political theorist. *Hortensius* or *On Philosophy* was written around 45BC and is a philosophical dialogue on the pursuit of happiness.

(i) Manicheism

In studying Cicero, Augustine became increasingly more interested in the problem of evil and suffering. He wanted to know what caused it and what we could do about it. If philosophy is about the quest for wisdom and happiness, how can we know which philosophical or religious path will lead there? **Manicheism** appeared to offer Augustine the rational view of the world which gave him the answers he was looking for.

The Manicheans were dualists and believed that suffering and evil in the world are not caused by God, but by a lower evil power:

- the world is a battlefield between the forces of light and darkness
- the higher human soul is a particle of light which has become trapped in the material body

- the human task is to liberate the higher soul so it can return to the Greater Light
- the lower human soul craves the delights of the material world
- release can be accomplished by prayer, abstinence from all the enjoyments of evil such as riches, lust, wine, meat, or luxurious houses.

It was during this time that Augustine took on a mistress and by her had a son, Adeodatus. He never names her but it is clear that he loved her and even though she was not his wife, they lived together as husband and wife. In this he was different from other young men of his class who often had several mistresses. But the experience was a formative one for Augustine and his later writings often make reference to the powerful psychological effects of sex.

(ii) Platonism

As a gifted young man of 19, Augustine was offered a post at Carthage to teach rhetoric in 374AD. But he found many of the students badly behaved and he gladly accepted a teaching position in Rome in 383AD. He had many admirers in high places and although he hadn't been in Rome long he was offered the position of orator at the imperial court in Milan in 384AD. Now that his career was moving towards a role in government, he did the 'respectable thing' and sent his mistress back to Carthage and became engaged to a girl from a high-ranking Milan family.

Increasingly Augustine had become dissatisfied with the inability of Manicheism to give satisfactory explanations for the universe based on the latest mathematics and astronomical observations. He was coming to the conclusion that despite its appeal to reason, Manicheism was in many ways no better than superstition. This was confirmed after his meeting with the Manichean bishop, Faustus – a kind but intellectually weak man.

During this time Augustine had become increasingly involved with a group of intellectuals called the Platonists. Although the Platonists were great admirers of Plato, their **Platonism** (or Neoplatonism as it is now called) differed in some important ways:

- Firstly, under the influence of Plotinus they believed that some human minds are able to contemplate the One (i.e. God) by ascending up different levels of reality from this material world to the One. The soul and body ought to work in harmony but in practice the soul cannot control the body in the material world and this is the cause of evil and suffering. Truth, wisdom and happiness can only be achieved once the soul has separated itself from all material influences through contemplation and merges with the One.
- Secondly, they combined Plato and certain passages from the New Testament. The Platonists of Augustine's day developed a form of Christianity which did not believe that Christ had died for the sins of the world but saw him as an enlightened being or *logos* (as referred to in the opening of John's Gospel) who had pure knowledge of the One.

Neoplatonism played an extremely important role in Augustine's theology. His view of the soul and its relationship to the body is strongly Platonic and his early writings share the Platonic optimism that the soul can find wisdom and happiness through its own efforts.

Key term

Platonism Usually referred to as Neoplatonism is the term scholars use to refer to the followers of Plato in the third century AD, notably Plotinus (205–270AD). They believed that the soul can ascend to merge with the One (or God) where it encounters truth, wisdom and happiness.

Above all it solved the problem of evil: evil is not a separate power (as the Manicheans believed) but the absence of good. But Augustine did not find Platonism emotionally or spiritually satisfying: he still experienced an inner conflict which intellect alone could not solve.

(iii) Conversion to Christianity

However, despite his career prospects, hope of marriage and new-found intellectual stimulation with the Platonists, Augustine was still struggling to make sense of his emotions, sense of guilt and lack of inner happiness. It was during this time that he managed to arrange a meeting with Ambrose, the Catholic Christian bishop of Milan. Ambrose was a man of great learning and was much sought after for his wisdom. What Augustine learnt from him was how to read the Old Testament at a symbolic level. This suddenly removed many of the objections Augustine had struggled with and resolved the problem of conflicting passages.

Then in 386AD, when he was 32, he relates in the *Confessions* how he had spent an emotional day in the garden of the house he shared with his friend Alypius. His body was in turmoil; he recorded in the *Confessions* that he tore his hair, hammered his forehead with his fists and was weeping. Embarrassed he left Alypius and then, sitting under a fig tree, he heard a voice of a boy or girl (he wasn't sure) say, 'Take it and read, take it and read.' He took it as God's command and returning to his study he picked up the copy of St Paul's letters he had been reading earlier and read:

... not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Romans 13:13–14

It appeared the passage provided the last part of the intellectual and emotional jig-saw he had been looking for; wisdom cannot be provided by the pursuit of intellect alone but through God's grace in Jesus Christ. Augustine and his son Adeodatus were baptised by Ambrose in 387AD much to his mother's delight. After Monica and Adeodatus' deaths two years later, Augustine returned to North Africa on his own.

(iv) Life as a Christian bishop

On his return Augustine joined a monastic community at Thagaste and was ordained priest in 391AD. In 396AD (when he was 41) he was consecrated bishop of Hippo where he remained until his death in 430AD. During this time, he completed his *City of God* (410AD). His last few years were dominated by his two great theological struggles with the Donatists and Pelagians. Of these two the Pelagian controversy had the greatest effect on altering his theology.

(v) Dispute with the Pelagians

His life was marked by conflict but it was his dispute with the Pelagians from 411AD onwards, which marked the biggest shift in his theology. Pelagius was a Christian monk who did not believe that Original Sin

caused universal guilt which only God could remove. The Pelagians argued that humans have sufficient free will to overcome personal sin. Pelagius taught:

- Even if Adam had not sinned he would have died.
- Adam's sin harmed only himself not the human race.
- Children are born in the same state as Adam before his Fall.
- The whole human race neither dies through Adam's sin or death nor rises again through the resurrection of Christ.
- Even before the coming of Christ there were men who lived without sinning.

Augustine opposed Pelagius, stating that human nature, after the Fall of Adam and Eve, is entirely corrupt and that Adam's Original Sin and guilt is passed on from generation to generation. Therefore, because all humans are born in sin they are incapable of choosing to do good or to follow God, that is only possible because of God's grace. But in refuting Pelagius, Augustine took an increasingly hard-line view that God's grace would only extend to a select few, the elect. Although he had officially rejected Manicheism this aspect of his theology was strongly reminiscent of Manichean teaching.

(b) The human will before the Fall

Augustine's starting point is Genesis 1–3. Here we are given accounts of the creation of man and woman, their time in the Garden of Eden (paradise), their relationship with each other, the natural world and God. Until **the Fall** humans enjoyed a time of harmony. Harmony is expressed in the complete obedience of Adam and Eve to God and in their duties to other living creatures. It is also, according to Augustine, a time when the human body, will and reason are in complete co-operation with each other.

(i) The will as love

The will is God-given, created along with humans *ex nihilo* (from nothing) and can choose to do good or evil, to believe in God or to reject him. The will determines the kind of person we are. Above all, the will is synonymous with love – a kind of force or weight pulling us in various directions. Therefore, the will is driven by *cupiditas* (self-love) and *caritas* (generous love). *Cupiditas* and *caritas* are both necessary elements of the will, for in order for a person to love his neighbour he must also love himself; this in turn leads to the love of God.

(ii) Sex and friendship

Augustine wrote extensively on friendship. In his ground-breaking commentary on *Genesis*, Augustine argued that in paradise Adam and Eve were not only married, (other theologians of the time argued that marriage only occurred after the Fall to control lust), but married as friends, where they equally and mutually participated in the friendliness of God. Augustine argued that as God had commanded Adam and Eve to be 'fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth' (Genesis 1:28) then friendship between men and women also included reproduction as well as the pleasure of sex. Nevertheless, sex is always secondary to friendship; friendship being the highest expression of human existence.

Key person

Pelagius (354–440AD): He was born either in Britain or France, became a monk and taught in Rome. After the sack of Rome in 410AD, he fled to Carthage where he briefly met Augustine before settling in Palestine. His unorthodox teaching on free will meant that he was regarded as a heretic.

Key term

The Fall The moment described in Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve rebelled against God and were punished by being expelled from Eden (paradise). After the Fall humans are in disharmony with God and nature.

Key question

Why is obedience a virtue?

Key terms

Cupiditas and **caritas** Two Latin key words used by Augustine meaning love. The will is driven by *cupiditas*, self-love and *caritas*, generous love. Before the Fall they operate in harmony but after the Fall they work contrary to each other.

Key quote

For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all darkness of doubt was dispelled.

Augustine: *Confessions* Book 8. 2

Key quote

Then (had there been no sin) the man would have sowed the seed and woman would have conceived the child when their sexual organs had been aroused by the will, at the appropriate time and in the necessary degree, and had not been excited by lust.

Augustine: *City of God* Book XIV, chapter 24

Therefore, sex when required would occur without lust and Adam could summon an erection at will; the will was in complete harmony and in control of the body.

Even after the Fall, friendship continues to express *caritas* as *amor Dei* (love of God). But in a fallen world friendship is far more complicated and fraught with anguish. Even so, as Augustine wrote in one of his letters, 'There is nothing truly enjoyable without a friend'. The solution is that true friendship (as experienced before the Fall) is only possible for those who love Christ first. Love for neighbour is then generous, forgiving and non-judgemental – it is removed from *cupiditas*. Christ, Augustine famously said, did not choose his friends because they were senators but because they were fishermen – people without pride or arrogance.

(c) The human will after the Fall

And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'

Genesis 3:16–17

(i) Pride and disobedience

Augustine discusses the Fall (from Genesis 3) at length in his *City of God*. The key problem which faced Augustine was what caused humans to reject their perfect relationship with the world and with God. The answer is pride. Augustine interpreted Adam and Eve's decision to eat from the forbidden tree of knowledge in Eden to be a sign of their desire to be like God, knowing good and evil and having its powers. Pride means that they can never again enjoy the harmonious relationship with God and with each other because *cupiditas* has now been separated from *caritas*.

Nevertheless, there still remained the question of how the idea of wanting to have God's knowledge and disobeying God's command could have entered the minds of Adam and Eve in the first place. Augustine's answer is based on the tradition that Satan was originally an angel who through pride fell from grace and tried to rule the Earth. In Eden he takes on the form of the serpent and out of envy he plants the idea of disobedience into Eve's mind. Augustine describes the Satan's intention as the serpent in this way:

After his fall, his ambition was to worm his way, by seductive craftiness, into the consciousness of man, whose unfallen condition he envied, now that he himself had fallen.

Augustine: *City of God* Book XIV, Chapter 11

Satan's idea of disobedience is not the cause of the Fall but it provides the stimulus for the will to disobey God's commands. God may have foreseen that Adam and Eve would disobey him, but Augustine stresses that the act of rebellion is entirely the result of human free will. As he says more than once, 'the evil will precedes the evil act'. So, Augustine argues, as obedience is the 'mother and guardian of all the other virtues', pride (disobedience) is the cause of all other vices.

Key question

Why do people do the things they don't want to do?

For they would not have arrived at the evil act if an evil will had not preceded it. Now, could anything but pride have been the start of the evil will? For 'pride is the start of every kind of sin'. And what is pride except a longing for a perverse kind of exaltation?

Augustine: *City of God* Book XIV, Chapter 13

Importantly, if the evil will precedes the evil act, then it is not the body which is corrupt but the will; Augustine resisted the Manichean idea that the body (along with the rest of the material) was evil and corrupt. But now that the will is weakened it is unable to control bodily desires and the natural desires for food and sex – especially sex – are no longer in harmony with the will but dominate it.

(ii) The divided will

Augustine argued that the distorted soul or will had now become divided. Although it was still rational enough to know what is morally good, the damage done to it in the Fall meant that despite willing to do good it is weakened by desires and does the opposite. This is the paradoxical state of the will which St Paul describes in his Letter to the Romans:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Romans 7:15, 19–20

Ancient philosophers called this problem weakness of will or **akrasia**. Plato and Aristotle doubted whether there really is such a state as weakness of will. For example, when I lie in bed for another ten minutes in the morning when I should be getting up, it is not that I lack moral will power, it is simply that I have given preference to one choice over another. Or it could be that I have unconsciously reasoned that I need more sleep so although it may *feel* as if I have weakened, in fact I am only doing what I intended to do. But the explanation for Augustine (as it is for St Paul) is that the will is weakened because of the sin caused by Adam at the Fall.

Augustine presents his commentary on Romans 7 in his *Confessions* Book 8. Here he describes this will as 'half wounded' and divided, ingrained out of habit, like trying to leave a comfortable bed but failing to do so. The will is at war with itself and unable to obey its own orders. Augustine realises that he cannot put behind him his past relationships with women and embrace celibacy. Even the vision of '**Lady Continence**' calling him to the pure, serene and chaste life is not enough to overcome his desires:

But by now the voice of habit was very faint. I had turned my eyes elsewhere, and while I stood trembling at the barrier, in the barrier, on the other side I could see the chaste beauty of Continence in all her serene, unsullied joy, as she modestly beckoned me to cross and hesitate no more ... I was overcome with shame, because I was still listening to the futile mutterings of my lower self.

Augustine: *Confessions* 8.11

Key terms

Akrasia (weakness of will)

Aristotle describes four stages of the moral life: wickedness (*akolasia*); weakness (*akrasia*); self-control (*enkrateia*); and temperance, life without struggle (*sophrosyne*).

Continence Self-restraint

especially to abstain from sexual pleasures. Augustine describes continence using the metaphor of a beautiful chaste woman.

Key term

Concupiscence Sexual lust but can also refer to uncontrolled desires of all kinds such as craving food, power, and money.

Key quote

Human nature then is, without any doubt, ashamed about lust, and rightly ashamed.

Augustine: *City of God* Book XIV, Chapter 20

See pages 250–252 on Manichaeism.

Key quote

The snare of concupiscence awaits me in the very process of passing from the discomfort of hunger to the contentment which comes when it is satisfied.

Augustine: *Confessions* 10.31

Key question

Should Original Sin be understood symbolically or as a reality?

Key term

Post-Lapsarian The world after the Fall of Adam and Eve, or simply the fallen world.

Augustine believed that it was because of Adam's disobedience that it has from that time onwards made it impossible for humans to be truly good.

(iii) Concupiscence

In his fallen state man is no longer able to control his libido and the appetitive or desiring aspect of his soul is completely dominated by **concupiscence**. Augustine was careful not to accept either the Manichaean argument that the body is evil and sinful or the Neoplatonic notion that because it belongs to the realm of flesh the body is necessarily imperfect. The body cannot be sinful because it was created to be good by God. But now that the will is weak and divided, concupiscence dominates human existence. Unmoderated, the body craves power, food, money and above all sexual intercourse.

| Concupiscence | |
|---|---|
| In morality | In theology |
| The bodily appetites or tendencies, or simply passions. | The proneness of sin in humankind's nature due to the fall of Adam and Eve. |

Concupiscence is most clearly and painfully experienced in friendships. Augustine shared with his philosophical friends the idea that nothing could be better than a community of friends as equals. But in reality even with the closest friends jealousy, betrayal, even death all conspire to cause pain and undermine true friendship. We also invest so heavily in friendships that we are distracted from loving God. Friendship illustrates Augustine's deep ambivalence about human nature. For example, although he had many women amongst his friends he would never meet them alone. Peter Brown comments:

He would never visit a woman unchaperoned, and he did not allow even his own female relatives to enter the bishop's palace. He expelled a young clergyman who had been found speaking with a nun 'at an inappropriate hour of the day'.

Peter Brown: *The Body and Society* (1988), p. 396

(iv) Original Sin

In the **post-Lapsarian** world the effects of Adam's sin can be seen in the continued rebellious state of the will. Everywhere one looks the effects of the Fall on human nature can be seen. Man has spontaneous erections, wet dreams and loss of rational control during sexual orgasm. The presence of concupiscence illustrates the lack of control that the rational soul has over sin. Even impotence or lack of libido is a sign that the uncontrolled body mocks the weak and divided will.

Key terms

Original Sin The Christian notion that despite being created in the image of God, all humans fail to fulfil this potential and live in disharmony. This is the human condition. Original Sin is different from actual sins which are committed by individuals.

Ontology The study of how something exists and the nature of its properties.

Key quote

Hence from the misuse of free will there started a chain of disasters: mankind is led from that original perversion, a kind of corruption at the root, right up to the disaster of the second death.

Augustine: *City of God* Book XIII, Chapter 14

Key question

Does Augustine's teaching on predestination suggest he has a pessimistic view of human nature?

See pages 279–281 on predestination.

Augustine had now forged a very distinctive view of **Original Sin**. Whereas other theologians took the phrase from St Paul that 'sin came into the world through one man' (Romans 5:12) to describe the inadequacies that all humans are prone to, Augustine made this sin an **ontological** condition of human existence, not just a description of our behaviour on occasions. No one is truly good however virtuous they might appear to be.

The chief characteristic of Original Sin is that it is passed on from the first or original moment to all generations. Augustine describes Original Sin in the following ways:

- **Double death.** The first 'death' is caused by Adam's rebellious will which kills the relationship of friendship between humans and God; it is symbolised by Adam and Eve's embarrassment of their nakedness in front of God (Genesis 3:8–10). The second death is the mortal state of every human and is God's punishment for the first disobedience (Genesis 3:19).
- **Transmission of sin.** The original act of disobedience is transmitted by a 'chain of disasters'. Just as a bad tree bears rotten fruit, so Adam's children also bear his rebellious nature. Every act of sexual intercourse is tainted by concupiscence, so that every human is 'born in sin'. Therefore, with the exception of Mary, who conceived Jesus without lust, all other humans are tainted with the Original Sin of Adam.

Hence from the misuse of free will there started a chain of disasters: mankind is led from that original perversion, a kind of corruption at the root, right up to the disaster of the second death, which has no end. Only those who are set free through God's grace escape from this calamitous sequence.

Augustine: *City of God* Book XIII, Chapter 14

(v) Free will and predestination

Augustine's view of free will changed over time. As a young scholar, Augustine believed that humans do have free will. He argued along Platonist lines that living the virtuous is possible; sin and evil are merely the failure to do good. Later he radically revised his book *On Free Will*; he no longer accepted that the Platonist view that reason is sufficient to live a good life and he now concluded that the sex drive, ignorance and death were punishments for human rebellion which no amount of human reasoning could ever overcome. His important Christian insight was that human beings do not voluntarily choose to sin but are inevitably prone to sin whether they will it or not. Humans prefer falsehoods to truth because their souls are 'fettered' and chained down by sin.

Augustine's sense of sin is so powerful that even those living a chaste life as a monk or nun, will never be free or strong enough to resist concupiscence – particularly the desire for sex. For that reason he encouraged married couples to abstain from sex after having children.

But the implications of this reasoning and his strong rejection of any view which undermined God's grace (in particular Pelagianism) led him to a hard-line view of predestination which even he found worrying. As only God knows who is deserving of his grace (the elect) to be rewarded

with heaven then all humans can do is to persevere in hope and faith. From this point of view Augustine is not a pessimist but an optimist – for without God's grace no one would be saved from the effects of Original Sin. Augustine was much criticised by his contemporaries (as he is now) for a view which undermines the Christian belief in the God of love and the sacrifice of Christ for all the 'sins of the world' not for the sins of a few.

(d) Grace

Human nature offers a tantalising possibility that with just a bit more effort we could achieve the harmonious relationship with God which would lead to the *summum bonum* – the greatest good. Augustine's experience of life, his memories of past pleasures which continued to haunt his dreams, led him frequently to ask the question posed by St Paul, 'who will rescue me from this body of death?' (Romans 7:24). There is only one answer and that is God. It is through God's generous love that the damaged will can be healed and the human relationship with God restored. The wound is healed through God's **grace** alone as expressed in God's gift of his son Jesus Christ in which the guilt and punishment of the Original Sin committed by Adam and Eve are removed. If this were not so, then there would be no possibility of redemption for humankind.

Augustine concludes that although he admires the philosophy of the Platonists and Stoics, he does not accept their belief that humans have sufficient reason to live the good life. Just as he rejected Aristotle's interpretation of the weakness of will (*akrasia*), he also dismissed the idea that through self-control humans can live life without struggle (*sophrosyne*). The purpose of faith is to recognise the failings of human nature and to place one's trust in God's love and grace.

Key question

Is Augustine right that sin means that humans can never be morally good?

Key term

Grace God's generous, undeserved and free act of love for the world expressed supremely in the giving of his son Jesus Christ in order that humans might overcome their sinful natures.

4 Interpreting Augustine today

(a) The Fall and Original Sin

(i) The Fall as symbol of a person's spiritual journey

For many, the symbols of the Fall, renewal (dying to sin rising to new life) and redemption are positive symbols of the spiritual and psychological life.

Many Christians today consider creation, Fall and redemption not as separate events in world history but the history of each person's individual life. The Fall as described in Genesis 3, might be interpreted generally as an imaginative story about humans and their relationship with the world and specifically as the moment when each of us loses our innocence and have to engage with the harsh realities of life. In other words, the Fall is not a one-off moment in the mists of time, but a crucial moment when each person rebels against God and acts selfishly for their own ends.

This interpretation is much closer to the Jewish interpretation of Genesis 3. For in Judaism there are no doctrines of Original Sin and Fall. Genesis 3 is read as an example of the human journey towards perfection made possible through the subsequent giving of the Torah. Whereas for

Key term

Redemption When humans are freed from sin, suffering and death. In Christian thought redemption of the world is through Jesus Christ.

Key question

Does Augustine's teaching on the Fall actually cause emotional harm?

Key quote

What kind of ethical philosophy is it that condemns every child, even before it is born, to inherit the sin of a remote ancestor? ... But now, the sadomasochism. God incarnated himself as a man, Jesus, in order that he should be tortured and executed in *atonement* for the hereditary sin of Adam.

Richard Dawkins: *The God Delusion* (2006), pp. 251–252

Christians it is Christ not the Torah which is the example of perfection, many Christian theologians today consider that Augustine's idea of the 'Fall' does not leave enough room for human moral and spiritual development.

While contemporary science and philosophy may have challenged some aspects of the Augustinian tradition, the value of Augustine's assessment of the human condition is that he highlights the significance of the *spiritual* dimension of being human. Even so, some modification of Augustine is needed. For example, some scholars have pointed out that Augustine has misinterpreted what Paul meant when he spoke of our 'body of death' (Romans 7:24). What Paul meant by 'body' is not a Platonic separation between the corrupted body on the one hand and soul or spirit on the other, but the whole human personality which has fallen short of perfection. The spirit is not a disembodied power but the aspect of an individual's personality which is open to God and desires **redemption**. The Fall is the symbolic moment when a person first realises his situation and begins his spiritual journey.

So, if the Fall is a moment in the Christian human narrative describing the beginning of every individual's spiritual life, then the end of the narrative concludes as each person achieves a state of wholeness in Christ. In other words each person's life is not merely a biological journey from birth to death but a spiritual journey of body *and* spirit. This Christian view believes that human existence is not defined by death but the hope that the spiritual journey will continue on until each person is united with God after death. It is not an easy journey, as Augustine's evocative examples of human behaviour illustrate, for even the greatest of human achievements are counterbalanced by acts of human horror.

(ii) Belief in Original Sin is irrational and dangerous

Richard Dawkins finds the whole Christian notion of Fall and Original Sin not only entirely contrary to evolutionary biology but also absurd and dangerous. He blames a very great deal of human suffering and conflict on the 'Original Sin' tradition which Augustine created. Dawkins argues that:

- It is absurd to imagine the corruption of all humans rests on two individuals. As evolutionary biology considers that humans (as *Homo sapiens*) emerged from less sophisticated animal forms who did not have the kind of consciousness which enabled them to make an active decision to rebel, then a literal belief in Adam and Eve makes no sense.
- Even a symbolic account of the Fall does not rid Christianity of its unhealthy obsession with sin, guilt, violence and repressed sexuality.
- The idea that God should wish to restore human nature by killing Jesus on the cross is sadomasochistic and irrational.

Key person

Richard Dawkins: An evolutionary biologist and outspoken atheist critic of religion. He was professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University and has published widely. His many books include *The Selfish Gene* (1976), *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) and *The God Delusion* (2006).

Key question

Do humans become less violent as society becomes more rational and less religious?

Key terms

Post-Enlightenment Refers primarily to the eighteenth-century thinkers such as Hume, Rousseau and Kant who argued that knowledge could only be obtained through human reason and observation and not through divine revelation or other authorities.

Humanitarian principle Proposes that humans get on better when each person takes into account the interests of others.

Key person

Steven Pinker (b. 1954): The Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology at Harvard University whose research interests include language and cognition.

Key question

Would public leaders achieve more if they believed in the reality of sin?

(iii) The challenge of the humanitarian principle

Dawkins' views are shared and developed by the psychologist Steven Pinker. Pinker's argument is that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, has been responsible for violence, suffering and the debasement of humanity until **Post-Enlightenment** when the irrational superstitions of Christianity such as the Fall, Original Sin and grace were replaced by the **humanitarian principle**. The humanitarian principle makes the simple but significant proposal that humans get on better when each person takes into account the interests of others. This works because as each person is a rational being then each respects the interests of others as rational beings. This doesn't require God's grace as it can be done through autonomous rational negotiation.

You and I ought to reach this moral understanding not just so we can have a logically consistent conversation but because mutual unselfishness is the only way we can simultaneously pursue our interests. You and I are better off if we share our surpluses, rescue each other's children when they get into trouble, and refrain from knifing each other than we would be if we hoarded our surpluses while they rotted, let each other's children drown, and feuded incessantly.

Steven Pinker: *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), p. 182

Pinker argues that for the past two hundred years since the humanitarian principle has become established as self-evidently right, the West has seen the rapid decline of capital punishment, everyday use of torture in the judicial system, wars of religion, abuse of women, tyrants and despotic leaders.

(b) Sin and collective moral responsibility

Reinhold Niebuhr argued that although the post-Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume, Kant, Bentham and Mill (the tradition which Pinker associates with) have made it unfashionable to talk about sin, failure to understand sin leads to colossal mistakes being made by society and especially by those in power.

Key person

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971): An American theologian and influential writer on ethics and politics. As a young man he embraced a liberal form of Christianity but in the 1930s he transferred to neo-orthodoxy because of its realistic understanding of sin and the human condition. For most of his career he was professor of Christian Ethics at the Union Theological Seminary, New York. His books include *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) and *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941).

Niebuhr's argument is quite simply that the rationalism of Western philosophy and politics has failed. The optimistic vision of the post-Enlightenment thinker has not only failed (war, poverty and cruelty abound) but more worryingly the idea has corrupted the human sense of

responsibility. By rationalising and rejecting the traditional notion of sin, humans at every level fail to realise that no action can ever be entirely good and this causes greater injustices and more suffering. This may not be so apparent at the individual level, but collectively when people act in groups then their faults become greatly exaggerated.

Key quote

The perennial tragedy of human history is that those who cultivate the spiritual elements usually do so by divorcing themselves from or misunderstanding the problems of collective man, where the brutal elements are most obvious ... To the end of history the peace of the world, as Augustine observed, must be gained by strife. It will not be perfect peace.

Reinhold Niebuhr: *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), p. 256

In Augustine's terms the inner spiritual will is defeated by egoism and self-interest. In particular, Niebuhr accuses both religious and non-religious leaders of ignorance if they think that the power of reason and belief in moral goodness is enough to bring about just and fair societies. This ill-founded idea must be rejected.

But Niebuhr is no fatalist; he does not think, as some Augustinians have, that there is nothing we can do to remedy the human condition as this would remove all responsibility; the solution is for the human ego to understand its own nature fully by coming into a proper relationship with God. Once the ego comes into contact with God it is able to realise both its limitations and its possibilities.

Niebuhr has had enormous influence on a wide range of theologians. His illustrations of the paradoxes of human behaviour have reminded theologians that human nature cannot be easily defined as either good or evil. Three such paradoxes are that:

- Original Sin is both 'inevitable but not necessary'.
- Sin is apparent in evil as well as good acts. Evil people can do kind things; good people still selfishly desire self-affirmation.
- At an individual level good people may do good things but when acting as part of a group they do not.

Niebuhr's teaching on sin shares similarities with Augustine's sense of its power and pervasiveness while avoiding linking it to sex and the body. But it is in his challenge to moral and political philosophy and theology where his impact has been most felt.

(c) Sex and human nature

Just how significant is the sex drive for understanding human nature? Many have argued that it is largely Augustine's fault that for hundreds of years, Western societies have felt guilt about sex. During this time the Church has seen its role as controlling sexual behaviour through marriage and teaching people to repress and banish all sexual impulses. Sigmund Freud's considerable contribution to the Western view of sex and human

Key quote

Has Christianity focused too much on sex and sin?

Key person

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939): Lived and worked for most of his life in Vienna and was one of the founders of psychoanalysis. In helping his patients overcome their psychological disorders he developed an idea that the ego (the conscious self) represses traumatic experiences into the id (the unconscious self). Once the ego can confront these repressed experiences then often the disorders can be resolved. Freud argued that many traumas are caused by sexual problems relating back to childhood.

Key term

Libido The instinctive sex drive or energy.

nature has been a significant challenge to the Augustinian tradition, though not necessarily a negative one.

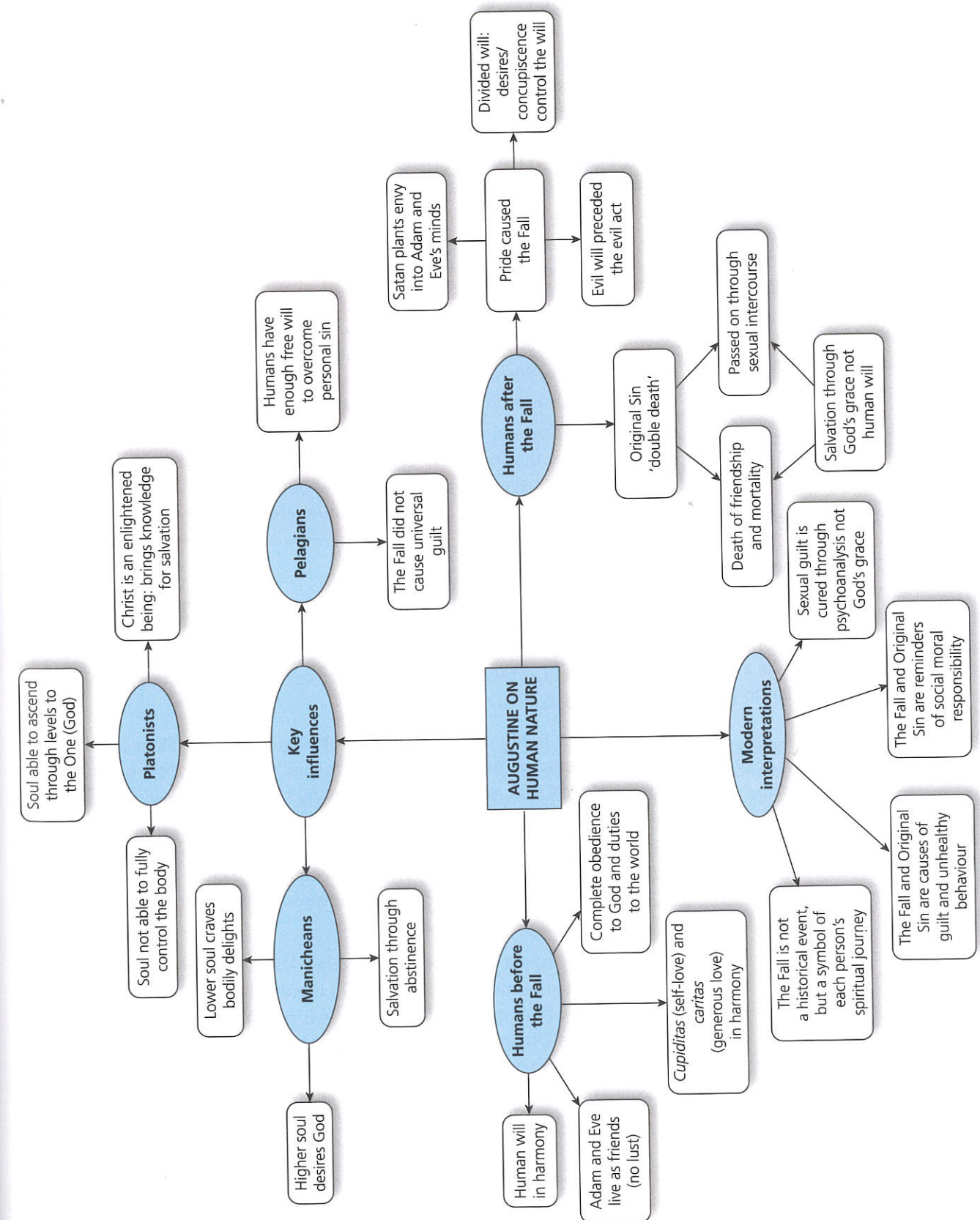
Even though Sigmund Freud's analysis of human nature and sexuality may reject Augustine's unfortunate connection between the Original Sin of Adam and Eve and its transmission to future generations through sexual intercourse, it does not deny the centrality of the libido (sex drive) in the development of a person's personality. In fact, Freud argued that the **libido** is a vital and natural element of human development – sex is not merely to reproduce but is the defining factor in human relations.

As an atheist, Freud rejected any notion that humans fell from grace and were punished by God for their guilt, but this doesn't mean that he completely dismisses Augustine's psychological insights. For example, Freud noted that the psychological problems exhibited by his neurotic patients could almost always be traced back to an original historical event in their early life – usually in childhood. Thus Freud shares Augustine's notion that human personality is not chosen by the individual but is the result of history and environment. He even accepts that sexual neurosis can be passed on through culture and society – this is not so very different from Augustine's teaching on the transmission of an Original Sin.

However, Freud's suggested remedy for neurosis and feelings of guilt is very different from Augustine. Whereas for Augustine hope and redemption for the human condition lay only in God's grace, for Freud the cure for neuroses is through psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis involves recalling (through dreams and free association) the events which have caused a particular trauma and helping a person to live a happy life. Freud considered that belief in God only increases a sense of guilt.

The influence of Freud on Christian theology has been profound. Most Christians today do not consider that sexual intercourse is purely for procreation, as Augustine did; nor do they think that sexual pleasure is a sign of sin and loss of control as Augustine so often illustrated; nor do they think that sexual intercourse by necessity passes on universal guilt. Even though Freud is often criticised today, his ideas have been instrumental in questioning and adapting Augustine's teaching on sex and human nature.

Summary diagram: Augustine on human nature



Revision advice

By the end of this chapter you should be able to explain the central aspects of Augustine's theology on human nature including: the state of the human will before and after the Fall; free will and predestination; the significance of Original Sin and God's grace. You should be able to discuss and analyse these ideas using contemporary philosophical, theological and scientific views.

Can you give brief definitions of:

- grace
- concupiscence
- continence
- Original Sin
- Pelagianism?

Can you explain:

- Augustine's idea of the divided will
- Augustine's teaching on the relationship of *caritas* and *cupiditas*
- Reinhold Niebuhr's teaching on collective sin, power and politics
- the Fall as a symbol of each person's spiritual journey?

Can you give arguments for and against:

- whether the doctrine of Original Sin explains why humans fail to act well
- whether belief in God's grace makes people less violent
- whether the world and human nature are essentially evil?

Sample question and guidance

Assess the view that Augustine's teaching on human nature is too pessimistic.

The essay might begin by setting out Augustine's main ideas such as his explanation of men and women's relationship before the Fall and the notion that in this state of harmony the body and will were one and Adam and Eve enjoyed perfect friendship. It might then go on to explain that the Fall was caused by the rebellious will and that the disharmony which followed can be seen in the failure of the will to control the natural drives of the body and in the failure of society to live according to God's laws.

The essay might then consider whether Augustine's view of life and human nature is pessimistic. On the one hand, as the Fall has destroyed human free will, then there is nothing humans can do to overcome Original Sin – Augustine's notion of predestination and human depravity is pessimistic especially when compared to other Christian interpretations of human nature. On the other hand, it might be argued that his teaching is realistic and society should take into account the effects of sin (as Niebuhr suggests).

Further essay questions

'If the Fall did not actually happen, then Christian teaching on human nature makes no sense.' Discuss.

✕ Critically assess Augustine's analysis of human sexual nature.

To what extent has Augustine's teaching on human nature caused more harm than good?

Going further

Augustine: *The City of God* (Penguin, 1972). Book XIV deals with the Fall and its effects.

Peter Brown: *Augustine of Hippo* (new edition, University of California Press, 2013). This is the classic biography which was first published in 1967; read chapter 16 on the *Confessions*.

Henry Chadwick: *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 1986). A very accessible introduction; read it all but chapter 10 is specifically on human nature.

Reinhold Niebuhr: *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932). A highly influential book which deals with the effects of collective sin and its impact on society.

Steven Pinker: *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (Penguin, 2012). Chapter 4 describes society before and after the emergence of the humanitarian principle.

Rowan Williams: *On Augustine* (Bloomsbury, 2016). Chapter 5 on evil provides a useful way of combining Augustine's analysis of human nature and the study of evil in the philosophy of religion section of this course.

Other books we've talked about in this chapter are:

- Brown P. *The Body and Society* (Columbia University Press, 1988).
- Dawkins R. *The Blind Watchmaker* (Norton, 1986).
- Dawkins R. *The God Delusion* (Bantam Books, 2006).
- Dawkins R. *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press, 1976).
- Niebuhr R. *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (Prentice-Hall, 1941).