

Augustine's Psychological Configuration of Almsgiving and its Correlation with the View of Society

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I INTRODUCTION

Examples showing how Augustine refers to the theme of poverty and the poor from his youth onwards are found not only in his early writings but also in many of his letters and homiletic works. This subject has attracted increasing interest, in particular when we appreciate the work by the research group of the Centre for Early Christian Studies, Australian Catholic University, which 'considers the plight of the poor and responses to them from the early Roman empire through to late antiquity and Byzantium.'¹ In chapter four entitled, 'Augustine on Poverty,' Pauline Allen and Edward Morgan set out the framework for his discourse within which both types of his caritative model, flesh-and-blood and theological ones, are found to occur. It is also evident that the crucial element of 'his caritative programme was constituted by almsgiving'.² Augustine encouraged his congregations to give alms, so that they would develop a sense of commitment and solidarity among them. Efforts are, thus, focused on largely rhetorical constructs of the poor in his works that contribute to the limited advocacy for the common humanity, along with social, psychological, and eschatological dimensions. But how did Augustine think about almsgiving? Did Augustine primarily attempt to achieve psychological improvement of the donor's soul? It is my intention in this paper to consider his view of almsgiving and its relation to the view of the society, a deliberation which would help to construct a more holistic picture of almsgiving in late antique society.

2 THE PROBLEMATICS OF ALMSGIVING

My account of almsgiving begins by examining Augustine's references to the inner state of the almsgiver found both in *City of God* and *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity*. Since these texts were written around the same time (the former finished by

¹ P. Allen, B. Neil, and W. Mayer (eds.), *Preaching Poverty in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Realities*, *Arbeiten zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte* 28 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2009) 15.

² P. Allen and E. Morgan, 'Augustine on Poverty', in *Preaching Poverty*, 119–170 at 163.

426/427, and the latter composed in 421/422), we may find a similar concern with respect to the problem of almsgiving.

In the main part (Books 11–22) of *City of God*, Augustine's representation of the poor and poverty-related themes may be divided into two groups: first, he occasionally interprets the meaning of the poor appeared in several scriptural passages; second, he focuses on the eschatological dimension of poverty. It is remarkable, then, that he clarifies the point that the behaviour of mercy would be defined as a means of both realising the future benefit and improving the inner disposition of the almsgiver. Augustine agrees with those who claim the suitable act of mercy must be done in order to atone their sins. It would be increasingly difficult to gain the divine forgiveness by virtue of their alms. For how could they know the appropriate level of the practice? Augustine turns his attention to consider the disposition of the giver.

And yet if they had distributed all their goods to the needy members of Christ in atonement for just one sin, this could not have been of any service to them, if they had abandoned such practices by the acquisition of the 'love which does no evil' (cf. 1 Cor. 13:4). Therefore, anyone who would perform acts of mercy in adequate proportion to his sins should begin with himself in their performance. For it is wrong not to do to oneself what one does to one's neighbour, since we have heard God saying 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'; and we have been told to 'have compassion on your own soul by pleasing God' (Lev. 19:18; cf. Matt. 22:39; Ecclus. 30:24). If anyone does not show this mercy to his own soul, that is, by pleasing God, how can he be said to perform acts of mercy in adequate proportion to his sins?³

It is not only in *City of God* that a set of scriptural passages, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Matth. 22:38; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27), and 'Have compassion on your own soul by pleasing God' (Ecclus. 30:24) is found to occur: these are the passages common in his writings, applied to the idea of the properly ordered love such as the soul's movement towards the self rather than outwards.

A person who wishes to give alms as they should be given must begin from himself and give them first to himself. Almsgiving is a work of mercy, and the saying is very true: Have mercy on your soul and please God (Eccl 30:24). . . . The Pharisees, having neglected the justice and the love of God, used to tithe the tiniest items of their produce for the alms they gave, and so they did not begin from themselves when giving alms or show mercy first to themselves. Because of this order of love it is said: You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Lk 10:27). So, after rebuking those who washed themselves outside but were full of greed and wickedness within, he taught them to purify themselves within by giving alms of the kind that a man should give himself first of all; he said, But for the rest give alms and see, everything is clean for you (Lk 11:37–41).⁴

Not only does he regard almsgiving as an expression of alleviating the punishments in this life, thereby expecting his hearers to provide for the future repose, but it should

³ Aug. *De civ. dei* 21.27.2, trans. H. Bettenson (1972) 1016.

⁴ Aug. *Enchiridion* 20.76, trans. B. Harbert, WSA I/8 (2005) 318.

be predominantly and primarily advocated for taking care of the individual giver. Augustine shows a clear preference for the moral and spiritual development, rather than the expected favour of both the receiver and the donor of alms. His interest here is revealed in the coherent expressions of temporal sequence: 'should begin with himself ... give them first to himself ... show mercy first to themselves ... should give himself first of all'. In its psychological dimension, therefore, almsgiving has to be conducted first by looking after a defective, poor status of the donor's soul.

Augustine's conviction that it is necessary to perform a work of mercy which should give alms first to the individual's own self, thereby purifying the inner aspects of the soul, is relevant to his emphasis on the necessity to attend to both the intention of the giver and the power of spiritual alms. He recapitulates precisely what he says with some examples of the donor such as the Pharisees and 'a man of great wealth'.

God is not concerned about the recipient of a gift, but about its motive.⁵

We are reborn in order to please God, ... These are the first alms we gave ourselves.⁶

Augustine's primary concern is with the intention of the giver that serves as a driving force to the spiritual giving. Although he does not decrease the value of material alms and 'describes almsgiving as having two poles, the spiritual and the material,'⁷ it is clear that almsgiving of this kind opens the way for a transformation of the self.

3 THE PROBLEM OF THE INNER DISPOSITION

We shall now turn to some texts in Augustine's homiletic and theological works in which the question of almsgiving and of the inner disposition of almsgiver is prominent. I shall begin with his remarks about the issue found in *Sermones ad populum* and *Enarrationes in Psalmos*.

It is noteworthy that, within his discourse on almsgiving, Augustine repeatedly expresses concern about the intention of the almsgiver. At the beginning of the first exposition of Psalm 48, while directing his hearers' attention to the opening addresses repeated, he focuses on those to whom the utterance is addressed. And he juxtaposes the contrast between the 'earthlings' (sinners) and the 'sons of men' (the faithful and just) with the difference of the 'hearts' between the rich and the poor.

The word rich applies to the earthlings, and poor to the sons of men. Take the rich to be the proud, the poor to be the humble. Someone may have plenty of money and resources, and yet not be haughty about it, and then he or she is poor. Another may have nothing, yet be covetous and puffed up, and then God classes him or her with the rich and reprobate. God questions both rich and poor in their hearts, not in their treasure-chests or their houses.⁸

⁵ Aug. *De civ. dei* 21.27.3, trans. Bettenson, 1016–17.

⁶ Aug. *Enchiridion* 20.76, trans. Harbert, 318.

⁷ Allen and Morgan, 'Augustine on Poverty', 141.

⁸ Aug. *En. Ps.* 48, *Serm.* 1.3, trans. M. Boulding, WSA III/16, 352–353.

This view of the opposition between humility and pride lies at the heart of Augustine's view of the inner intention. It is a desirable attitude in relation to God. The poor are seen not as a worthy recipient of material alms but as an exemplar of the spiritually poor who 'remain immovably attached to him who created the whole'.⁹ It is not 'their treasure-chests or their houses' but the nature of people's disposition in which God examines both the poor and the rich.

A sinner borrows on interest, but will not repay. He or she receives, but will not give back. Give back what? Gratitude. What does God want of you, what does God demand of you, except what it profits you to give? ... Contemplate poverty on the other hand, plenty on the other. The first receives, but will not pay his debt; the second is merciful and lends, and yet is wealthy. What if the merciful person is poor? He or she is rich nonetheless. Direct those God-fearing eyes of yours at his riches.¹⁰

In the second exposition of Psalm 36, in which he shows both the will of God and the mixture of different types of people in this life, the just and the unjust, Augustine expects his congregations to give alms as much as they can and yet not to make a total renunciation of personal property. When he describes what it is that he values in the act of almsgiving, the emphasis not on their amount of such as money, food, clothing, and other supplies but on a compassionate sharing of their possessions in proportion to their capacity is evident. Thus, good intentions of the almsgiver should be highly honoured.

Cleanse the things within, he advised them, and then things without will be clean too (Mt 2:26). In another place the Lord says, Give alms, and everything will be clean for you (Lk 11:41). But where does almsgiving spring from? From the heart. So true is this that, if you open your hand but have no compassion in your heart, you have done nothing, whereas, if you have nothing in your hand to give but have merciful intentions in your heart, God accepts your alms.¹¹

Such is the way Augustine describes the intention of the almsgiver as the psychological, proper rationale of almsgiving, and appreciates the crucial importance of compassion in the act of almsgiving. If there exists no 'merciful intentions in your heart', then the alms diminish its value.

Apart from these homiletic texts, it is noteworthy that, in one of his early works, Augustine explicitly identifies the merciful intentions as a crucial source of almsgiving and shows a method of improving the inner disposition. In *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus manichaeorum* (written in the years 387–389), in which, while portraying the poor and needy only in the most general terms (e.g. *pauper*, *mendicans*, *equentes*, *indigens*, or *inops*), Augustine's primary concern was to characterise the donor's attitude as well as practice of almsgiving. It should be classified under mercy (*miser cordia*).

⁹ Aug. *En. Ps.* 48, *Serm.* 1.3.

¹⁰ Aug. *En. Ps.* 36, *Serm.* 2.13, trans. M. Boulding, WSA III/16, 113.

¹¹ Aug. *En. Ps.* 125.5, trans. M. Boulding, WSA III/20 (2004) 73.

Hence, those who dutifully and humbly provide all these means by which such evils and difficulties are warded off are called merciful [*misericors*], ... For who can fail to know that mercy [*miser cordia*] received its name because it makes miserable the heart of a person who suffers along with another's woes?¹²

Augustine states that the wise is totally free from an emotional response to the sight of misfortune, 'when he helps someone in need, when he offers food to someone hungry and drink to someone thirsty'.¹³ The most important feature of almsgiving is, thus not the deep affection for the poor, but the tranquillity of mind of the donor, in which the person rightly judges the intention and integrates it with proper behaviour. Confronted with the most pressing necessity to the donor of almsgiving, Augustine strongly emphasises the need of pedagogical discipline for the health (*sanitas*) of soul.

when we exhort and teach people to give to the needy [*indigens*] those things that we said should be provided for the body. For, when we do these things, we assist the body with help, and when we teach people to do them, we assist the mind with instruction [*disciplina*].¹⁴

The passage again suggests that the beneficiary is understood as being needy in general arising from material deprivation. My interest is, however, in the phrase 'when we do ... we assist' that is repeated. The almsgiving is clearly promoted in the double context of the recipient and the donor. The motivation for this is not merely an attempt to improve physical conditions for the donee; it apparently helps the giver to impose 'instruction' upon their mind. Thus, to be so indefinite and abstract would be Augustine's design that almsgiving sets a frame of instruction on the part of the donor. The almsgiver's respected virtue can be secured only by responding to the exhortation to exercise their state of mind in the practice of almsgiving.

In conjunction with the particular interest in the inner disposition of almsgiver and the problem of almsgiving, there appears to be a persistent concern in which Augustine sets out to define the nature of civil society in the context of salvation. To appreciate how he moderates an idea about the improvement of the giver's soul, let us look at the view of society in his writings.

4 AUGUSTINE'S VIEW OF SOCIETY

In North African society, still retained the economic prosperity in the crisis of the Vandal invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries, there existed the definite dividing line between landholders and tenants. Those non-landholders were in the majority, and found themselves excluded from the privileges held by the ordinary citizen in Roman Africa. Farm-workers could have access neither to the civil benefits nor both private and institutional patronage available to urban dwellers. Not only did their economic and social circumstances cause widespread indignation, but in fact they were harshly and unjustly treated by their landowners, one of whom, Romulus, was

¹² Aug. *De moribus* 1.27.53, trans. R. Teske, WSA I/19 (2006) 55.

¹³ Aug. *De moribus* 1.27.53.

¹⁴ Aug. *De moribus* 1.28.55, trans. Teske, 56.

sharply rebuked for allowing his agents (*actores*) to oppress his tenants.¹⁵ While the Roman officials (*ordines*) were gradually being burdened and exhausted from the fiscal demands of the late Roman empire, most of the peasants were left with no possibility of upward mobility granted legitimacy by the social system. And yet, Augustine was clearly conscious of the ineffective power of bishops to reduce the growing alienation of the socially and materially destitute poor. One might expect to catch an echo of urgent concern about a vision of social change and social mobility in his writings.

Despite his readiness to refer to the issue of almsgiving and the poor, Augustine did continually speak of society from the viewpoint of its order and stability. In his discourse on poverty, in particular homiletic writings and letters, whose audience could drive concern for oppression in the status quo, Augustine was not questioning the necessity of radically changing the social realities. His concern was rather with a legitimate intervention into social relations, which includes some cases in his letters, where he would definitely alleviate injustices against the poor. Indeed, nowhere did he urge the improvement of their social status. His involvement against injustice in the society was always conducted according to the order of society and obligations that laid upon its members. But apart from his conviction that the social order is an indispensable basis for social beings, Augustine's view of this order embodied in institutions and political authority was being transformed into a distinctively Christian concept. It is his focus on Pauline epistles in the mid-390's which is crucial. In his early works, under the influence of neoplatonic philosophy of cosmic order, Augustine regards the social order as part of the cosmic one. His remarks to the social order is sporadic and, provided that it has its ground in the divinely established order of the universe, he describes the social order in the locative expression.

What is more hideous than a hangman? What more savage and horrible than that soul? But he holds a necessary *place* among the laws themselves and is placed into the order of a well-moderated city.¹⁶

Augustine's sensitivity to the power of sin, the vulnerability of moral order, and the divine initiative in grace, a sensitivity transformed by his deepened study of Paul, has led him to a new perspective on the arrangements of social living.

he [*scil.* God] has mercy on whom he wills and does not have mercy on whom he does not will—may be believed with utter tenacity and firmness as pertaining to a kind of justice that is hidden from that which is sought and must be observed in our human affairs and earthly agreements.¹⁷

Despite of his interest in the idea of order, he can no longer trust the orderly progress towards a destined goal. The gulf between the social and cosmic order is fundamental and unbridgeable. He would reconfirm the validity of the social order and its

¹⁵ See Aug. *Ep.* 247.

¹⁶ Aug. *De ordine* 2.5.12, trans. M. P. Foley (1999) 214. Italics is mine.

¹⁷ Aug. *Ad Simpl.* 1.2.16, trans. B. Ramsey (2008) 197.

functioning: not to incorporate the ultimate rationality into society, but to adjust individual and social interests and minimise conflict in society.

Another change resulting from his reading of Pauline epistles is recognisable as that of his insight into human disturbance within the divided self: 'For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh' (Gal. 5:17). The struggle within the self is derived from the original sin of pride. There is no escape from the inmost experience of alienating humans from their Creator. It is interesting to note that Augustine's understanding of inner dislocation serves as an exemplar of disorders and conflicts it brings into human affairs. Indeed, human estrangement from God is inextricably linked with the dislocation from the self, creatures, and society. Given the reality of the fallen human condition, all human efforts cannot restore its primordial wholeness. The current social system inevitably faces difficulties in achieving cohesion and unity of the society. Thus, while he regards the civic community as the proper form of human existence, to which some degree of value is attached, Augustine's concern comes to be more with the monastic community. It is not because the monks were able to recover the primitive condition in the present life. He did see this community as the foreshadowing of the city of the saints in the life to come, thereby providing the exemplar of community, in which the decision of a person to join the group should not be made according to the social realities, to which its member formerly belonged. In this respect, the monastic community opens up the possibility for them to transform the status quo in all other spheres of social life.

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Within the limitations of this investigation, it can be seen how, in Augustine's discourse on almsgiving, the giver's merciful intention and psychological transformation of the self continued to be an appropriate focus for the evaluation and to serve as the basis for an act of charitable giving. According to Allen and Morgan's paper, as well as a dispositional element in his view of almsgiving, Augustine was seen as a staunch advocate for almsgiving in order to develop a sense of solidarity in the community. In fact, he made an attempt to direct his congregation in the view that, while the poor will not be necessarily exalted to heaven in proportion to the extent of their possessions, some humble rich persons will be. Attention should shift to the inner disposition. As we have shown in this paper, together with other sets of social and eschatological dimensions that would help to appreciate the strategic, even if sporadic, approach to this issue, the very fact that he regarded almsgiving in terms of its inner intention indicates that Augustine used almsgiving as a means of securing the support for the improvement of the giver's soul.

Although Augustine's concern with almsgiving was subsidiary to his reflection on theological and spiritual problems more elaborately extended in his corpus, there did nevertheless exist a significant relationship with his view of the limits and possibility of the social realities. This leads to some understanding of how the alms for the poor status of almsgiver was conditional upon the social context. The influence of his

reading of Pauline epistles about the society and the nature of the fallen humanity was strong. Because of the lost confidence both in the social justice embodied in a civil community and in the restoration of the primordial human condition, Augustine emphasises the nature of the monastic life as a prefiguring of the communion of saints in the heavenly city. It follows that monks are members of society constituted by the divine commandment to love God and their neighbours.

Nor should they give themselves airs because they now find themselves in the company of people whom they would not have ventured to approach before.¹⁸

This injunction was directed towards the monks who were 'formerly so poor that they could not even afford the very necessities of life,' and some of them were slaves 'in their earlier lives.' And similar rules were given to the female poor sisters and lay brothers. Despite the attention devoted to the monastic life as a model for Christian communion, Augustine would not readily accept change of the status quo among his monks. The uncompromising approach to their status offers a clear contrast with his repeated advocacy of the spiritual care for his congregations.

It is clearly admitted from his discourse on almsgiving that Augustine thought of almsgiving as a means of making moral progress for his congregations, and did not restrict it to a certain group: 'His congregations were encouraged to give anything that was needed to anyone who needed it'.¹⁹ The crucial point in his dispositional approach is the question as to whether it is to be treated on the model of reciprocity based on common humanity. Indeed, while advocating the indiscriminate giving, he was never keen on raising the status of the poor. There is the case which provides us a clue to the understanding of the context in which alms are given to a social group: Augustine drew the line between monks in his monastic community, but in the heavenly city they will be able to withdraw from their former status and join the communion of saints. What difference does it make to their status? A difference lies in the fact that the social relations are not intended to extend beyond a group within which the bonds of reciprocal feeling and mutual concern are interpreted as the continuity of their social relations. There is a clear preference for the long-standing commitment to their membership. Thus, while he wished those monks to remain within their own social sphere, in the eschatological community there will be no real distinction to be drawn between social groupings. His view of almsgiving makes it clear how the alms for the recipient was conditional upon the social environment.

¹⁸ Aug. *Regula* 1.6, trans. R. Canning (1984) 12.

¹⁹ Allen and Morgan, 'Augustine on Poverty', 163.