The Hippo and the Fox: a cautionary tale

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Matthew Fox's popular but over-simplified retelling of the history of Christian attitudes to creation makes St Augustine the prime enemy. In the table at the back of *Original Blessing*, Augustine is the first-named spokesperson in the enemy camp, so to speak, of 'fall-redemption' theologians. It might seem appropriate therefore to borrow the pages of a Dominican journal to ask whether Fox has somewhat missed the point.[1] It seems important to correct the distorted account for two reasons, negatively because Fox's sharp distinction into either 'creation-centred' or 'fall-redemption' theologians allows him to pretend that these two fundamental elements of Christian theology are conflicting rather than complementary; positively, because Augustine himself has a great deal to contribute to serious thought about creation.

I should like to trace three themes which Augustine explored in the light of both Biblical thought and ancient (particularly Neoplatonic) philosophy and which run through his reflections upon creation. I want to argue that far from being the pernicious influence that led the Western world to an uncritical anthropocentrism, Augustine in fact provides certain valuable insights for a balanced and properly theocentric theology of creation. The three themes I shall discuss are:

(i) 'reason' as the thing that distinguishes humans from animals;
(ii) the goodness of all created things;
(iii) the dependence of the creation upon the Creator.

Versions of the first theme have been much stressed in both popular and philosophical thought, in particular, it seems, since the Enlightenment, and have been exploited from Hellenistic times on by those who wish to deny that the treatment of non-human creation is an ethical issue. Since Darwin one version of it has been under attack for biological and historical reasons; and more recently it has been the target of some well aimed (and some wild) shafts from philosophers interested in animal rights and conservation, or simply in a more accurate story about human beings.[2] The second and third themes, on the

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other hand, seem to have been submerged by various post-medieval trends (though never, of course completely obliterated). The second theme is beginning to make a comeback in 'Green' philosophical circles.[3] By rescuing the notion of the goodness of all creatures, and reminding ourselves of the utter dependence of creation on the Creator, we might, with Augustine's help, be able to reappropriate a more balanced context for a more nuanced theological understanding of the place of human being within the created order.

'In the image and likeness of God'

Until Darwin it was a commonplace to hold that human beings are distinguished from other animals by the possession of a single quality, 'reason' or its equivalent in other languages. In the earliest philosophical debates on the moral status of animals, 'reason' had been seen by the 'anti-animal rights' party as crucial. Augustine, along with the other Patristic writers, inherited the belief that 'reason' was the distinguishing mark of human beings. However, as I shall argue, he interpreted the content of that 'reason' in a thoroughly theocentric way, which sets in perspective his elevation of human beings above non-human animals.

The best evidence for the ancient debate on animals comes in a fascinating treatise *On Abstinence from Animal Flesh* by the Neoplatonist Porphyry, the pupil and biographer of Plotinus. His main targets were the Stoics, who (for the most part) saw the ordering of the sub-lunar world in strongly anthropocentric terms. Everything was there for human benefit: for Chrysippus, the pig was created for nothing other than slaughter, and God, 'mixed soul in with its flesh like salt' (i.e. as a preservative!).[4] The Stoics had inherited from Aristotle the view that humans, because they, unlike other animals, shared *logos* (its range of meanings includes 'speech', 'language', 'reasoning', 'reason') also shared a conception of benefit and harm, justice and injustice, and were therefore the most fully social animals.[5] The Stoics sharpened Aristotle's distinction and used it in defence of their claim that there was neither fellowship nor justice between humans and other animals. Porphyry took them severely to task, producing in his treatise a wealth of arguments aimed at weakening the rigid Stoic distinction between 'rational' and 'non-rational'. In the ancient world the question of rationality was already central to discussion of 'animal rights', and many of the stock arguments of the modern debate are already to be found in the pages of Porphyry.

Although Augustine himself on two occasions resorted to Stoic arguments in order to counter Manichee arguments against meat-eating,[6] this theme is marginal to his account of the distinctive nature of human

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beings. His fullest explanation of the significance of *ratio*, of what it is that makes humans different, comes in his frequent reflections on the text of Genesis I. 27: 'God created man in his own image'.

This text too has been used to justify cruelty towards animals; and critics of Christianity have been quick to point this out.[7] Augustine frequently comments on it, and explains the 'image of God' in terms of reason. It is interesting therefore that he never uses the text to justify exploitation of animals. His concerns are, rather, theological: our *ratio*, the 'image of God' in us, is primarily our capacity to know God. This has been corrupted by the Fall, and our task is to renew it: to live rationally is to live in faith and in the love of God:

> 'For after original sin, man is renewed in the knowledge of God according to the image of his Creator. Similarly, before he grew old by sin, he was created in that very knowledge in which he would subsequently be renewed.'[8]

Ratio includes our general capacity to recognise truth and our ability to discern good and evil. To live rationally is also to live virtuously. To be in the image of God is indeed a privilege, but one that carries with it responsibilities rather than a licence to exploit:

> 'We ought therefore particularly to cultivate in ourselves the faculty through which we are superior to the beasts, and to resculpt it somehow, and reshape it. . .Therefore, let us use our intelligence . . . to judge our behaviour.'[9]

Augustine does comment on rare occasions on dominion over other animals. However, he does not argue from the fact of being in God's image to the right of dominion, but rather uses the fact that animals can be tamed as revealing that dominion.[10] Furthermore, he talks not of exploitation or destruction of animals or the rest of nature, simply of the phenomenon of domestication. Augustine does not once draw the conclusion that because we are in God's image we may do with animals whatever we like. Far from it: our possession of this privilege summons us to live up to our capacity for religious and moral understanding, that is to serve and praise God as we ought. Theocentricity and not anthropocentricity in the ground of Augustine's vision of the cosmos.

'And God saw that it was good.'

Augustine made five attempts to comment on the beginning of Genesis, most magisterially in the twelve books of the *Literal Commentary on Genesis* (401–414). Had Matthew Fox turned to these,[11] he might have

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been surprised to discover Augustine's own version of the theme of 'original blessing', his extended reflection upon the words 'And God saw that it was good'. The goodness of all created things was a fundamental plank of Augustine's theology. A large proportion of his early works (including his first commentary on Genesis) were directed against the Manichee sect (to which he himself had belonged for ten years). The Manichees believed that the material world was basically evil; the point of religious practice was to free the divine light in us (and in some plants, particularly cucumbers and melons!) from the evil matter that entrapped it. They explained the state of the world by a bizarre and baroque cosmogony: in brief, during the primeval battle between the Kingdom of Darkness and the Kingdom of Light, the personification of Sin was slain, and, falling to the ground, produced trees that were the ancestors of all plant life. Animals were produced by the copulations of the aborted foetuses of some of the female deities.

The Manichees supported the grim view of creation that resulted by appealing to those bits of nature that sometimes seem inconvenient: weeds and thistle, vipers and maggots, and so on. Augustine grasped the thistle, so to speak, with an enthusiasm worthy of David Attenborough: 'I could speak at length', he remarked, 'In praise of the worm', and proceeded to do just that.[12]

Augustine makes use of two strands of Classical thought in his explanation of goodness.[13] Aristotle, the first great biologist, had explained the natures and lives of individual species in teleological terms; so, for example, an elephant's trunk was there (*pace* Kipling) for it to feed and breathe, adapted to its size, its habitat, and its habits; and the form of life it served, Aristotle held, was good in itself.[14]

Stoic thought tended rather to stress the goodness of the whole. In its anthropocentric mode, the entire sub-lunar creation was organised for the benefit of human beings There was, however, a more holistic Stoic account of goodness, which was given expression in particular by Marcus Aurelius. This account saw the value of the universe, nature, the all (the terms were mutually interchangeable) as residing precisely in the whole; the purpose of each part was to play its role in the whole. Something could seem evil only because one's perspective was faulty:

> 'Loss is no other than change; this is a source of joy to the nature of the Whole and all that happens in accordance with it is good.'[15]

Augustine's profound meditations on what it means to be created wove elements of these traditions into a Christian whole. He used biological teleology to explain to the Manichees how maggots and

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worms too were good and beautiful. If you viewed them on their own terms, in the light of their own natures, you would realise this. The Manichee mistake was to see them in terms of human convenience rather than *convenientia*, their fittedness to their own form of life.[16] Manichee (like Stoic) anthropocentricity failed to see other types of value. The insight of Stoic (and Plotinian) holism served Augustine's exegesis of Genesis I. 31, 'And God saw that it was very good'. Each individual part is good; the whole is very good, not (as he might have argued) because humanity was now included, but because the universe functioned as an ordered whole, greater than its parts.[17] However, Genesis did not allow Augustine to slip into the extreme holism of Marcus.[18] He does not forget that the individuals parts too are good. It is interesting to see him adapting inherited analogies to preserve this insight; so, for example, when Plotinus argues that the whole is beautiful even if the part is not, just as a body is beautiful even if a toe on its own is not, Augustine changes the comparison: an eye is beautiful even on its own, but more beautiful still when seen as a part of the whole.[19]

In seeking to provide the metaphysical underpinning for his argument against the Manichees, Augustine turned to a third strand of Greek thought, Platonism. 'Socrates' in Plato's *Republic* had suggested that everything derives its being and its goodness from the unchanging Form of the Good.[20] In Plotinus, this hint was incorporated into a full-blown metaphysics: everything that exists depends for its existence on the overflowing power of the One. But Plotinus remained ambiguous about the goodness of the lowest level, matter.[21] Augustine in appropriating his ideas turned them into a sharper and more powerful tool. Everything including matter had been made by God from nothing. Therefore matter too must be good. In fact, everything, in so far as it is, is good. Evil is an absence of goodness, a failure on the part of an individual nature to be fully the sort of thing it is. Evil is parasitic upon goodness, a rotten apple only exists because an apple exists; and as an apple, the thing is good, even if not fully so. As a solution to 'the problem of evil' this account has some limitations; but it is, perhaps, primarily a response to the problem of good, an explanation against the Manichees of why the material world is not evil, even though it is limited and changing. Augustine developed this theory precisely as a defence of the Creator and of the goodness of his creation.[22]

'In Him we live and move and have our being'

Finally, Augustine was deeply conscious of the dependence of all creatures on the Creator. If you asked a Manichee whether an 'elect' human being was more like God or a worm, he would, I think, have

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answered unhesitatingly, 'God'. Augustine would have disagreed: every being in heaven and earth, is created, everything 'from an angel to a worm'.[23] All creatures are utterly dependent upon God. The story of the *Confessions* portrays this truth for the individual; the *City of God* for the community. In both cases, God is at work, in and through us even despite ourselves. So, to take one example of several from the *Confessions*, when Augustine left Carthage for Rome, he thought he was doing so to escape from rowdy students. God, in his providence, knew better. Similarly, God worked through the success of the Roman empire, although the Romans themselves were driven by false ambition.[24] The same truth holds of the natural world; the *Literal Commentary on Genesis* reveals the continuous and complete reliance of every part of the universe on God's sustaining presence:

> 'What more absurd or foolish opinion can be maintained, therefore, than to hold that the will of God and the ruling power of his providence are lacking in that whole region whose lowliest and smallest creatures are obviously fashioned by such a remarkable plan that a moment's serious attention to them fills the beholder with inexpressible awe and wonder?'[25]

Augustine is certainly a theologian of transcendence, hence his refusal against the Manichees to characterise the human soul as partly divine. That does not, however, mean that God is detached or distant. Far from it. It is precisely because he is utterly omnipresent that it makes sense to talk of our total dependence upon him:

> 'For the power and might of the Creator, who rules and embraces all, makes every creature abide; and if this power ever ceased to govern creatures, their essences would pass away and all nature would perish. When a builder puts up a house and departs, his work remains in spite of the fact that he is no longer there But the universe will pass away in the twinkling of an eye if God withdraws his ruling hand.'

Again, more concisely:

> 'By his unchanging and surpassing power he is within *(interior)* each thing, because everything is in him, and outside *(exterior)* each thing, because he himself is above everything.'[26]

Again, it is possible to see Augustine's account as one that remodels Greek philosophical concepts in the service of Christian Biblical thought. Plotinus had taught him how to understand the transcendence

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of God, the One beyond change, matter, and even thought, from whom flows everything that is. The Stoics had shown how the world can be seen as pervaded by *logos*, the Word or Reason that for them was God. Augustine's Christianity combines and reinterprets the two insights: God's Word is indeed omnipresent, the pattern and the sustainer of the entire cosmos. But that Word is also one with the the Father, the transcendent ground of all that is. God is intimately involved with every part of the universe, actively loving it and nurturing it in a way that Plotinus' One does not; but he is also its source, distinct from and far greater than the whole.[27]

Augustine's understanding of the relation between God and the world gives him a tremendous sense of *gratia*, the graciousness, the free giving, of the all-sustaining God; this in turn leads him to preempt one of Matthew Fox's own most valuable insights, that the proper response to the gifts of God is gratitude and praise. Once he compares creation to a wedding-ring given to us by God as a sign of his promise; we should certainly love what our betrothed has given us, but not at the cost of loving it instead of him.[28] If the Manichees would recognise the beauty existing in even maggots, he argued, they would 'think for themselves about the beauty of everything both high and low and praise God everywhere as their maker'.[29] When in the *Confessions* he questions the elements of the created world, each part in turn answers him, 'I am not God, seek above us'. He questions, and 'their beauty is their reply'. The move he makes here from creation to Creator is not one of rejection, but precisely of thankfulness, turning in praise from the gift to the giver.[30]

It is true that Augustine talks most frequently of gratitude in the context of grace; indeed, he explicitly links God's graciousness *(gratia)* with our appropriate response, thanksgiving *(gratias agere)*.[31] But that was not because he despised the gift of creation; it was simply that the gift of redemption, and God's sharing of his life with us, was an even greater gift, and one that in the contemporary theological climate needs greater emphasis. Thus, in the *City of God*, he writes:

> 'We can, to be sure, never give him adequate thanks for our existence, our life, our sight of sky and earth, or our possession of intelligence and reason, which enable us to search for him who created all these things. But there is more than this. When we were overwhelmed by the load of our sins, . . . even then he did not abandon us . . . . He sent us his word, who is his only son. {Here he describes the incarnation, redemption, and promise of heaven.} In view of all that, what heart or what tongue could claim to be competent to give him thanks?'[32]

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Augustine's teaching about gratitude, it is true, can seem harsh by comparison with Fox's. But then, early fifth-century Hippo was a harsher place than late twentieth-century California. Augustine knew first hand what it was like to live in a society in constant fear of violence; he lived amidst riots, thuggery and the threat of war; he died while Hippo was under siege from the Vandals. The advice concentrate on enjoying harmless sensual pleasures might have failed to strike a chord with his congregation. It was more realistic, if harder, to warn against the temptation to give thanks to God only when things were going well for you.[33]

Conclusion

To sum up, then: Augustine's overall view of the created order is far from being 'anthropocentric' or 'dualist'. It is thoroughly theocentric, and steeped in the recognition of the goodness of all created things and their dependence on the Creator. His account of the superiority of humans to non-rational animals must be seen in this context.

We ourselves might draw some valuable theological lessons from Augustine's approach by reflecting further on its implications. First, it sets in a wider context the story of God's love for the human race, as revealed both in the providential ordering of creation and in the redemption. It becomes possible to believe that human beings are the crown of creation while at the same time recognising that appropriate respect is due also to other creatures. Our being in the image of God provides not with a licence to exploit, but rather with a call and a responsibility to serve and to worship.

Secondly, God's providence extends to every detail of his creation: maggots and thistle are also good. If we are to cooperate in God's providential rule of his creation, there is no room for the suggestion that certain parts of it have no intrinsic value. Consequently, mere human convenience can never be an adequate justification for destruction of the natural world. Our treatment of other creatures (just like our love of each other) should be determined not by our own pleasures, but by loving service of God. Augustine's own moderate and balanced asceticism, inspired by the detachment of the pilgrim, might provide a useful model for a society that needs to learn to make lighter demands on the earth's resources.

Finally, our primary attitude to our own existence and that of the rest of creation should be one of gratitude for a gift. The 'otherworldliness' of, for example, the tenth book of the *Confessions* consists just in this attitude of thankfulness and praise, in the move from the gift to the giver, from the beauty of creation to the surpassing beauty

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of its Creator. Augustine's spirituality is not creation-centred, but that does not mean either that he fails to value the created order, or that he is *anthropo*centric. In sum, by making the Creator the focus of his prayer and thought, Augustine provides us with a proper perspective for our own, more urgent, attempts to develop a Christian theology of, and a Christian practice in respect of, the rest of creation.

Despite the efforts of Flanders and Swan, the Hippo may seem a less attractive beast than the swift and handsome Fox. But a student of St Augustine learns to look for goodness and grace in unexpected places. It takes some effort to appreciate the solid and balanced beauty of the Hippo; but it is, it seems to me, an effort well worth making.[34]

Abbreviations

DGL *A Literal Commentary on Genesis*. Quotations are taken from the translation by J.H.Taylor (Ancient Christian Writers, vols 41–42).
DGcM *On Genesis against the Manichees*

1 I am not, of course, the first to complain of Fox's rather cavalier treatment of his heroes and his villains alike; see, for example, Simon Tugwell's review of *Breakthrough* in *New Blackfriars*, April 1982 , Oliver Davies, 'Eckhart and Fox', *Tablet*, 5 August, 1989, Kenneth C. Russell, 'Matthew Fox's *Illuminations of Hildegaard of Bingen*', *Listening*, vol. 24, no. 2, Spring 1989 and (on the medieval mystics in general) Margaret Brearley, 'Matthew Fox: Creation Spirituality for the Aquarian Age' in *Christian Jewish Relations*, vol. 22, no 2, Summer 1989.

2 An outstanding treatment of the last theme is Mary Midgely's *Beast and Man* (Ithaca, 1978). For criticism of the abuse of the concept of rationality with reference to the treatment of animals, see Midgely, *Animals and why they Matter* (Harmondsworth, 1983) and, more radically, S.R.L. Clark, *The Moral Status of Animals* (Oxford, 1984).

3 See e.g. T. Regan, 'The nature and possibility of an environmental ethic', in Regan *All that Dwell Therein* (London, 1982), Holmes Rolston III, 'Are values in nature subjective or objective?' in R. Elliot and A. Gare (edd.), *Environmental Philosophy* (St Lucia, 1983), K. Goodpaster, 'On being morally considerable', *Journal of Philosophy*, June 1978.

4 Porphyry, *On Abstinence form Animal Flesh* III. 20.

5 *Politics* I. 2, 1253a7–18.

6 *City of God* I. 20, *On the Customs of the Manichees* 54. Augustine's move here is in fact an odd one; I have discussed this in an article forthcoming in the *Bulletin for the Institute of Classical Studies*, '"In praise of the worm": Augustine on the goodness of creatures'.

7 E.g. John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, p.184.

8 DGL III. 32.

9 *Sermon* XLIII. 4; For a full discussion see see A.G. Hamman, *L'Homme, Image de Dieu* (Paris, 1987), chapter 10. Augustine's exegesis has, of course, a great deal in common with other church fathers (see H J.Somers, 'Image de Dieu: les sources de L'exégèse augustinienne' in *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 1961).
Incidentally, the claim that Fox repeatedly makes of Augustine '"Man but not woman is made in the image of God", he wrote' (e. g. *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, p.31, is simply false. In fact that is a position that Augustine was at pains to refute

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(*DGL* III. 22, cf XI.58, *On the Trinity*, XII 10–20).

10 *DGL* IX. 25, *DGcM* I. 29; *Sermon* XLIII. 4, *On Free Will* I.16. Sometimes he attributes the wildness of most animals towards humans to the effect of the fall (e.g. *DGcM* ibid., *Tractate on the Letter of John* III. 6–7). One of the 'original blessings', perhaps, was a greater communion with non-human animals.

11 He does remark once, in passing, 'even Augustine alludes to creation' (*Original Blessing*, introduction, p.21). Fox might perhaps have paused to ask why his hero Eckhart considered Augustine's *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* one of his favourite works (*Meister Eckhart: the Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, ed. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, (New York, 1981), introduction, p. 29).

12 *On True Religion*, XLI. 77.

13 I am not assuming that Augustine used Aristotle and Marcus Aurelius as direct sources.

14 *On the Parts of Animals*, II. 16, *Phyics* II. 3, 195a23–25.

15 *The Meditations* IX. 35 (translated Grube).

16 *On the Customs of the Manichees* 11.

17 *DGcM* I.32, *DGL* III. 37.

18 Marcus' holism is shared by some modern 'Green' thinkers. Pantheism, however, is not the intellectual ally some of its 'Green' admirers think (see S.R.L. Clark, 'Amando il mondo vivente,' *Cenobio* 40, 1991; a shorter version is in *Argument* I, 1990)

19 *DGL* III. 37, cf *Enneads* III.II.3; compare also *DGcM* I. 25 with Marcus Aurelius VIII. 50.

20 507a ff.

21 See John Rist, 'Plotinus on matter and evil', *Phronesis* 1961.

22 For an account see e.g., *Confessions* VII. 11–16 and *Encheiridion* 9–15.

23 *Tractate on the Gospel of John* I. 13.

24 *Confessions* V. 8, *City of God* V. 5–17, 21.

25 *DGL* V. 43; the same passage preempts another of Fox's favourite themes, the wonder of living bodies.

26 *DGL* IV. 22, ibid. VIII. 48 This treatise, incidentally, quotes plentifully from the Wisdom books so favoured by Fox. Cf also *De Trinitate* III. 13 on God working 'inwardly'.

27 For a full and rich discussion see S. J. Grabowski, *The All-Present God: a Study in Saint Auustine* (London, 1954).

28 *Tractate on the Letter of John*, II. 11.

29 *DGcM* I. 26, cf *DGL* III. 22.

30 X. 6.

31 E.g. *Commentary on Psalm XLIV* 7.

32 VII. 31 (translated Bettenson).

33 E.g. *Commentary on Psalm* XLVIII, 10.

34 Fox is just one of an army of current journalists and popular writers eager to blame Augustine, with various degrees of historical implausibility, for an astonishing range of contemporary evils. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. I offer a five-pound book token for the most plausible and imaginative proof of his responsibility for the introduction of the poll tax.

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