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St. Augustine on the Structure and Meaning of History

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

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ABSTRACT

ST. AUGUSTINE ON THE STRUCTURE AND MEANING OF HISTORY

VICTOR DIAS

Historical meaning is dependent on the ontological structure of time and history such that if that structure be closed, in terms of a circle, then the possibility of ultimate historical meaning collapses. If the structure of time is linear and the structure of history is cyclical the same problem with ultimate meaning remains. Augustine, on the other hand, argues that linearity, a sequence of unique moments, and finality characterize the structure of history. For Augustine a certain structure is a necessary prerequisite for ultimate historical meaning.

To complete the claim that there is ultimate historical meaning Augustine argues that a unique and final destiny, which gives to the whole of historical life a definite meaning, is dependent on the role of a supreme being. According to Augustine, final historical meaning depends on this divine purpose. Briefly, in the first chapter I defend Augustine's replies to objections against his assertions of a finite linearity. In the second chapter I defend his arguments against circularity. In the third chapter I defend the claim that Augustine makes possible the remaining requirements for meaning in history.

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DEDICATION

To

my parents who gave me life,

to

Karen my faithful companion in life,

to

Kendra, my daughter, who deeply enriches my life,

and to

the memory of St. Augustine

who taught me that the chief end of human life

is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

CITY OF GOD

A PHILOSOPHY OR THEOLOGY OF HISTORY

The following is a compilation of statements made by various scholars about the proper classification of the *City of God*. The purpose of listing these views is not to critique them as it is to highlight the wide spectrum of opinion on the question, is Augustine's *City of God* a philosophy or a theology of history? My own conclusion is stated subsequent to these views.

I begin with scholars who categorize the work as a philosophy of history. John N. Figgis writes: "no one who takes the Incarnation seriously can avoid some kind of philosophy of history. . . . Take a definite historical fact as your center, take an actual visible society as the special sphere of God's operation, a society which has a past and must have a future on earth; and then you are compelled to some philosophy of history."[1] He goes on, however, to say about the *City of God* that "even if this be not a philosophy of history, strictly so called, it is at least a justification of the Church, historically conceived."[2] Figgis is obviously uncertain about whether or not the *City of God* is to be classified as a philosophy of history.

Professor Hernshaw claims that a philosophy of history is indeed what Augustine intended but the result is anything but a philosophy of history: "St Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* . . . may be regarded as the first attempt to frame a complete philosophy of history. . . . It was, however, a singularly unsuccessful

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[1] John N. Figgis, *The Political Aspects of St. Augustine's City of God* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1921), 34.

[2] Ibid., 37.

attempt; for it contained neither philosophy nor history, but merely theology and fiction."[3] R.H. Barrow, on the other hand, claims that the *City of God* is a philosophical work that contains both philosophy and history.

> When he adds 'of God' he selects the city which is his concern from other cities, though in actual fact he classes all that is not *civitas Dei* under one heading as *civitas terrena* - 'earthly city'. To select implies a standard or a theory of selection, a particular way of looking at the data and a principle of selecting some of the data and rejecting others. In the *dcD* history, the data, is looked at from the point of view of a theory, the principle on which the selection is made. The *dcD*, therefore is philosophical as well as historical in nature; it is a philosophical criticism of history.[4]

Barrow equally attributes a philosophy of history to Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, and Livy.[5] Evidently, for Barrow, Augustine's *City of God* is not the first attempt at a philosophy of history. Frederick Copleston qualifies the sense in which the *City of God* is a philosophical work. He writes: "if we speak of a philosophy of history in Augustine's thought, the word 'philosophy' must be understood in a wide sense as Christian wisdom. . . . The 'philosophy' of history, as he understood it, is the discernment of the spiritual and moral significance of historical phenomena and events."[6]

A second group argue that the *City of God* is not a philosophy of history but a theology of history. Karl Lowith writes: "Augustine's *City of God* is the pattern of every conceivable view of history that can be rightly called 'Christian.' It is not a

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[3] Quoted in John H. S. Burleigh, *The City of God: A Study of St. Augustine's Philosophy* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1944), 185.

[4] R.H. Barrow, *Introduction to St. Augustine, The City of God* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1950), 22. Note: *dcD* is Barrow's abbreviation for the *City of God*.

[5] Ibid., 164.

[6] Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. II, *Augustine to Scotus* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group Inc., 1963), 86.

philosophy of history but a dogmatic-historical interpretation of Christianity."[7] Marthinus Versfield says that Augustine's work "is not a philosophy of history but a theology of history. Philosophy is something which, in a sense, is possible without revelation. . . . One may well question whether a philosophy of history is in fact possible, since the course of history involves revelation."[8] Luigi Sturzo gives his reason for why the *City of God* is a theology of history. He states: "the reason for this is not because it lacks important philosophical ideas and developments, but simply because the religious-theological element in it is predominant, and because a strictly rational interpretation of history and its laws is not the object of St. Augustine's work."[9] Gilkey credits Augustine's work as the first attempt to do what speculative philosophers of history generally aim at, but argues that Augustine's interpretation of history is, strictly speaking, not a philosophy of history.

> For Augustine history 'goes somewhere,' possesses meaning for salvation and so intelligibility for reflection, with him begins the tradition of philosophy of history, an interpretation of the entire course of history exhibiting the intelligibility of its larger patterns and the relation of those patterns to ultimate salvation or meaning. Because the ground of both that intelligibility and that final meaning is the sovereignty of God . . . this interpretation is a 'theology of history'.[10]

A third group of scholars classify the *City of God* neither as a philosophy of history nor as a theology of history. John O'Meara insists that it is a 'theological interpretation of history.' O'Meara agrees that "on the whole it is better to abandon the idea that Augustine was attempting anything like a philosophy of history in any ordinary sense."[11] He goes on to say:

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[7] Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), 166.
[8] Marthinus Versfeld, *A Guide to the City of God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 58-59.
[9] Luigi Sturzo, "History and Philosophy" *Thought* 21 (1946): 49.
[10] Langdon B. Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 163.
[11] John O'Meara, *Charter of Christendom: The Significance of The City of God* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1961), 57.

> The phrase 'theology of history,' properly construed, should mean that history was an object of theology, and so it is; but strictly speaking it can be such an object only inasmuch as it is history as looked at from God's point of view. To describe history as looked at from man's point of view as an object of theology robs the term of its proper meaning. On the other hand if one spoke of a theological interpretation of history, one's meaning would be perfectly clear, one would use words more accurately, and one would lose but little in foregoing the suggestiveness of the phrase 'theology of history.'[12]

O'Meara concludes that "in brief the position adopted here is that the phrase 'theology of history' is a phrase both unnecessary and misleading: it seems to offer a vague promise that it cannot redeem. The *City of God* most certainly gives a theological interpretation of history: this is enough for us."[13]

Christopher Dawson comes to a conclusion different from all the rest: he does not think that Augustine's work is strictly a philosophy of history but neither does he conclude that it is strictly a theology of history.

> The *City of God* is not a philosophical theory of history in the sense of rational induction from historical facts. He does not discover anything from history but merely sees in history the working out of universal principles. But we may well question whether Hegel or any of the nineteenth-century philosophers of history did otherwise. They did not derive their theories from history, but read their philosophy into history. What St. Augustine does give us is a synthesis of universal history in the light of Christian principles. His theory of history is strictly deduced from his theory of human nature, which, in turn, follows necessarily from his theology of creation and grace. It is not a rational theory in so far as it begins and ends in revealed dogma; but it is rational in the strict logic of its procedure and it involves a definitely rational and philosophic theory of the nature of society and law and of the relation of social life to ethics. [14]

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[12] Ibid., 58.

[13] Ibid., 61.

[14] C. Dawson, "St. Augustine and His Age: The City of God," *St Augustine, His Age, Life and Thought* (New York: Meridian Books Inc., 1957), 43-44.

Similarly, John H.S. Burleigh points out that Augustine makes no clear distinction between philosophy and theology. No philosopher or theologian of history can ignore Augustine's approach because it is neither strictly a philosophy of history nor strictly a theology of history but a synthesis of the two: "the purpose and plan of God as revealed in the Bible is shown to fulfill itself within a Platonic universe."[15]

Some claim that the work is a philosophy of history, others a philosophical criticism of history, others a theology of history, others a theological interpretation of history, and others a synthesis of philosophy and theology. Finally, and perhaps not surprisingly, Luigi Sturzo concludes, "it is, in fact, a book that cannot be classified at all; it is *sui generis*. . . . The *City of God* is the *City of God*."[16]

A close reading of these various positions suggests that there are at least four reasons for the diversity of opinions amongst these scholars. The first is how each of them define and view the boundaries of philosophy, theology, and history. A second reason is the ambiguity of what constitutes a philosophy or a theology of history; perhaps even a bias as to whether a philosophy of history is even feasible. A third reason rests on the perception of what theme or aspect in the *City of God* dominates the whole work: if neither philosophy nor theology appears to dominate, then the work is seen as a synthesis. The fourth reason is the assumption about Augustine's methodology in the *City of God*.

In respect to this last point, it is my view that there is no single methodological approach in the *City of God*. Augustine is not constructing a historical theory in a

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[15] Burleigh, *The City of God: A Study of Augustine's Philosophy*, 188.
[16] Sturzo, "History and Philosophy", 57.

vacuum, but rather in relation to a number of competing historical theories.[17] Augustine adjusts his methodology depending on the particular historical theory being addressed. The following are three brief examples to prove this claim.

Augustine, for instance, refers to certain Millenarians who envision a future period of earthly bliss that will last a thousand years.[18] The theory is a result of a particular reading of Scripture. In Augustine's conception of history there is no future earthly millennium. The basis of this conviction is certainly not a result of philosophical analysis or historical research: it is rather a result of exegeting particular texts in Scripture. The twentieth book, in which this discussion on the Millennium takes place, begins with the statement: "I must start by laying down, so to speak, the foundation of the building, the evidence of inspired Scripture." Clearly, Augustine's vision of history requires more than just philosophical principles. He is quite specific on details about the origin of life; details which he admits do not originate in reason nor are discovered by empirical or historical methods.[19] In this case, Augustine's view of history depends on a clearly defined theology.

A completely different issue, however, is addressed in the first five books of the *City of God.* Augustine reports that a number of pagans, unsympathetic to Christianity, are blaming the Christians for the sack of Rome.[20] They use this event as a possible means of reviving the polytheistic religion which is presently prohibited. According to Augustine, the pagans are using Christians as scapegoats to explain the evils that have befallen the Empire. Augustine quotes a popular refrain reflecting this scapegoat

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[17] See Theodor E. Mommsen, "St Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress" *Journal of History of Ideas* 12 (1951) in which he claims that Augustine addresses four different theories of history in the *City of God.*

[18] Augustine, *City of God*, 20.7.

[19] Ibid., 12:9.

[20] Ibid., 2.2.

approach to history: "no rain! Its all the fault of the Christians."[21] A common theme running through the first five books is Augustine's attempt to enumerate similar, and far worse, disasters that befell Rome before the Christian era. Augustine's main arguments are drawn from the writings of Roman historians: "I was therefore bound to prove . . . the facts . . . from the evidence of the books in which their own authors have recorded the history of the past."[22] His methodology is largely historical.

A third theory that Augustine addresses is the theory of cyclical history. Here, too, Augustine adapts his methodology to the particular theory and examines the claims that are made. The controversy between cyclical theorists and Augustine rests on a number of philosophical and theological assumptions: this applies both to cyclical theorists and Augustine. The arguments made against Augustine's linearity, for example, are both philosophical and theological. By theological, however, I do not mean that they are derived or based on some authoritative religious text. Augustine, for example, refers to the theological positions of Neoplatonists: "there are philosophers who have conceived of God, the supreme and true God, as the author of all created things, the light of knowledge, the Final Good of all activity, and who have recognized him as being for us the origin of existence, the truth of doctrine and the blessedness of life."[23] Although the Neoplatonists are presented as having much in common with Christian theists, they provide the main opposition against Augustine's emphasis on linearity. To ignore or downplay the theological assumptions on both sides of the controversy, inevitably distorts the nature of the controversy.

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[21] Augustine, *City of God*, 2.3. Mommsen, in his article, does not address this theme as a distinct theory of history in the *City of God*. In my view there are more than four historical theories that Augustine addresses.

[22] Augustine, *City of God*, 4.1.

[23] Ibid., 8.9.

The main theory that I address in my thesis is the cyclical theory of history. I begin then with a statement about the methodological approach that I deem necessary to do justice to the controversy between Augustine and cyclical theorists. However, it must be pointed out that just as there is no single methodological approach in the *City of God,* so likewise there is no single methodological approach that does justice to Augustine's total position against cyclical theory.

In the first chapter of my thesis, it is my view that the discipline that seems to best characterize the nature of many of the arguments between cyclical theorists and Augustine is philosophical theology. By this I mean a philosophical analysis of theological concepts, positions and presuppositions. The benefit of understanding part of this controversy as philosophical theology is that both the philosophical content of the work and the theological side of the work are equally acknowledged. In this first chapter I deal with cyclical cosmology which provides the framework in which cyclical history and ultimate meaning are later analyzed.

In the second chapter, however, much of the content can be called Augustine's philosophy of history. In this chapter I deal with questions such as: What constitutes a cyclical theory of history?; What constitutes a unique event for Augustine?; How successful are the arguments for and against cyclical theory?; Can cyclical theory provide history and personal existence with meaning?, etc. Most of the arguments in this chapter do not depend on theological assumptions.

The content of the third chapter reflects what I think best summarizes the whole of Augustine's *City of God.* The *City of God* reflects Augustine's philosophy of life: it is an attempt to formulate a coherent and consistent world-view that does justice to the

totality of existence. For this reason, God, spiritual beings, history, the community, the State, and the individual are all given due consideration. The total range of Augustine's vision begins with eternity, moves to creation, then to the origin of human life, then to the rise and progress of history, then to the final destiny of life and history, and ends with eternity.

Augustine presents this as a framework in which the intelligibility of life and a meaningful history can be understood. He answers the question: 'what must be assumed if life and history are to have meaning'? To accomplish this task Augustine becomes all things to all persons: with philosophers he argues philosophically; with theologians he argues theologically; and when the facts of history are in question, he argues as a historian. This, in my view, explains why there is so wide a spectrum of opinions on whether Augustine's *City of God* is a philosophy of history or a theology of history.

CHAPTER I

AUGUSTINE'S DEFENSE OF FINITUDE

Structure of Time and Events

A number of alternatives are available when considering the relationship between time and events. Without exhausting these alternatives there are at least three that can be briefly mentioned here. The first is Augustine's position and the two others are rival theories. For Augustine both time and events have a linear structure: "an event in time happens after one time and before another, after the past and before the future."[24] An alternative position is if time and events are structured cyclically. A third alternative is if time and events have a non-corresponding structure such that time has a linear structure and events have a cyclical structure. In this scenario only events are repeated and not time.

Some scholars question the accuracy of the claim that the Greeks assume a cyclical view of time while the Judeo-Christian tradition assumes a linear view of time. In his article, "Views on Time in Greek Thought" G.E.R. Lloyd claims,

> There is no such thing as the Greek view of time. In particular, the attempt to contrast a Greek with a Jewish view of time, and to see the former as essentially cyclical, the latter as essentially linear, is - at least so far as the Greek material is concerned - quite misconceived. The so called cyclical conception of time meant . . . quite different things to different Greek writers. Most decisively, there is clear evidence of linear as well as cyclical conceptions in Greece.[25]

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[24] Augustine, *City of God* , trans. Henry Bettenson (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books, 1986), 11.6.

[25] G.E.R. Lloyd, "Views on Time in Greek Thought," chap. in *Cultures and Time* (Paris: Unesco Press, 1976), 117. Others who defend a similar position are: G.J. Withrow, *Time in History*

As for the *City of God* I can cite no text that warrants the conclusion that Augustine's rivals espouse the position that both time and events are cyclical. It is evident from Augustine's discussions that historical events are cyclical, what remains unclear is whether time is also cyclical; this may or may not be the case. It is primarily the theory that there is an infinite recurrence of events in exact repetition that Augustine sets out to discredit in the *City of God*: "our present concern is to combat the theory of cycles, which are alleged to effect the inevitable repetition of things and events at periodic intervals."[26]

That at least some Pythagoreans held the view that both time and events are repeated is evident from the following commentary made by Eudemus of Rhodes who lived sometime in the fourth century B.C.

> One might raise the problem whether the same time recurs, as some say, or not. 'The same' has many senses: the same in form seems to occur as do spring and winter and the other seasons and periods; similarly the same changes occur in form, for the sun performs its solstices and equinoxes and its other journeys. But if someone were to believe the Pythagoreans that numerically the same things recur, then I will also romance, holding my staff, while you sit there, and everything else will be the same, and it is plausible to say that the time will be the same. For of one and the same change, and similarly many other identical things, the before and after will be the same, as will be their number. Everything will be the same, and so time also.[27]

Eudemus' opening sentence indicates that a recurring time is problematic. The inference has been made that Eudemus is implicitly arguing that the notion of cyclical

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(New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 42.; Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1970), 134.; and, Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 184.

[26] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.20.

[27] Simplicius, *On Aristotle's Physics*, trans. J.O. Urmson (London: Duckworth, 1922), 732, 26-733, 1.

time is incoherent.[28] Whether or not this inference can be drawn, an argument can be made against this version of cyclical time. W.H. Newton Smith argues as follows:

> One sometimes finds the idea of cyclical time equated with the idea that of the same time's occurring again and again *ad infinitum*. The present is pictured as eternally circling the circle, coming back again and again to the same time. This is straightforwardly incoherent. For to entertain the idea of the same time occurring again and again is really to entertain the idea of the same time occurring at different times and that is just contradictory. Times are particulars. Each time occurs only once and there are no two ways about that. If we are inclined to think otherwise it is probably because we are incoherently trying to combine notions of linearity and cyclicality. In order to have the idea of repetition we need to think of a linear ordering of the repeated visitations of the present to some given time. But in that case the times in virtue of being present at different times are different times and we have lost the idea of cyclicality. [29]

The charge of incoherency is applicable only to the claim that the same time is repeated again and again. Newton-Smith concedes that it is not incoherent to claim that history repeats itself in linear time.[30] A complete historical cycle can take place during one time-frame and then the same history can be repeated in a subsequent time-frame. The upshot is, that if one assumes that Augustine's opponents hold the view that history repeats itself in linear time then Augustine's emphasis on time being linear is not in itself either problematic or novel for cyclical theorists.

If the linearity of time is consistent with the theory of an eternal recurrence of events, the claim that time has an absolute beginning is problematic. Augustine's position contradicts both cyclical time and infinite linear time: both of these theories have no place for an absolute beginning. For Augustine, if time has an absolute

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[28] Richard Sorabji, *Matter, Space and Motion* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 163.

[29] W.H. Newton-Smith, *The Structure of Time* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 97.

[30] Ibid., 57.

beginning then the universe has an absolute beginning; if the universe has a beginning then humanity has a beginning; if humanity has a beginning then history has a beginning. These beginning events are unique events. Furthermore, if time and the universe have a beginning, and other events are deemed unique as well, this requires an alternative conception of the ontological relation of temporal events to an eternal God. That God could be so related to a finite universe, characterized by unique events, is problematic for cyclical theorists. For the theory of eternal recurrence cannot account for any unique event. Augustine claims that this inability to reconcile beginning and unique events with a proper conception of God is one of the main reasons that cyclical theorists reject finite linearity.

> It is no wonder that those theorists wander in a circuitous maze finding neither entrance nor exit, for they do not know how the human race, and this mortal condition of ours, first started, nor with what end it will be brought to a close. They cannot penetrate 'the depth of God', the deep counsel by which, being himself eternal and without beginning, he started time and man from a beginning, and made man in time, as a new act of creation, and yet with no sudden change of purpose but in accordance with his unchanging and eternal plan.[31]

An absolute beginning of time and the universe is one facet of Augustine's replacement of cyclical theory. The first part of this chapter deals with Augustine's defense of three beginning events: time, universe, and humanity. The latter part of the chapter deals with Augustine's defense of the ontological dependency of these events on God. The over-riding objection leveled against Augustine's position on beginning events is the objection of incoherency. The main emphasis, therefore, is on the coherency of Augustine's position.

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[31] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.15.

The Beginning of Time

Time and Change

In order to contextualize Augustine's claims about time some background is needed. Some philosophers distinguish eternity and time as two different modes and realms of existence. Plato (427-347 B.C.), for example, contrasts eternity and time:

> For we say of it that it *was* and *shall be*, but on a true reckoning we should only say *is*, reserving *was* and *shall be* for the process of change in time: for both are motions, but that which is eternally the same and unmoved can neither be becoming older or younger owing to the lapse of time, nor can it ever become so; neither can it now have *become* nor can it come to *be* in the future.[32]

Plotinus (205-270 A.D.) echoes Plato's distinction: "Eternity and Time; two entirely separate things, we explain the one having its being in the everlasting Kind, the other in the realm of Process, in our own universe."[33] Augustine (354-430 A.D.), in line with these claims, argues that "if we are right in finding the distinction between eternity and time in the fact that without motion and change there is no time, while in eternity there is no change, who can fail to see that there would have been no time, if there would have been no creation to bring in movement and change, and that time depends on this motion and change."[34]

The claim that time and change are inseparable is consistent with two positions: Augustine argues that both time and change are finite while the second alternative is to

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[32] Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, ed. Betty Radice, *Timaeus*, trans. Desmond Lee (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada, 1980), 7.38.

[33] Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (Burdett, New York: Larson Publications, 1992), 3.7.1.

[34] Augustine, *City of God*, 11.6.

claim, as Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) does, that both time and change are infinite.[35] The objections that cyclical theorists raise against Augustine's position on a beginning time do not call into question the principle that time and change are inseparable. Instead, they argue that Augustine fails to establish the coherency of his claims that time and the universe have an absolute beginning.

The arguments that are intended to cast doubt on Augustine's position are here formulated as questions: If time has a beginning does this not imply that there was a time when there was no time?; If the universe has a beginning how is it that it did not come into being sooner than it did?; and What was God doing before creation?. The content that follows deals with Augustine's arguments for the coherency of a beginning time and beginning universe. Other responses from subsequent philosophers are also considered.

The Incoherency Charge: A Time Before Time?

One attempt to undermine Augustine's position on a beginning time is the objection that if time has a beginning then this implies that there was a time when there was no time. This objection raises at least three different issues and corresponding to these three issues Augustine defends three specific points. First. Augustine defends the coherency of 'a time before time'; secondly, he defends and explains how time can always exist and yet have a beginning; thirdly, Augustine defends the position that an absolute beginning of time does not logically imply a time prior to that beginning.

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[35] Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol 1, *Physics*, trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), 8.1 251b 10-28.

1. Time Before Time - A Coherent Solution

As for the charge of incoherency, Augustine claims that a time before time may or may not be coherent depending on what is intended by the claim. For example, a coherent position can be defended if a distinction is made between two kinds of time. Augustine explains:

> Time, we suppose, did not begin with the sky, but existed before it; though not indeed in hours, days, months and years. For these measurements of temporal spaces, which are by usage properly called 'times', evidently took their beginning from the motion of the stars. . . . Time, we suppose, existed before this in some changing movement, in which there was succession of before and after, in which everything could not be simultaneous.[36]

Augustine argues that one kind of time can be associated with planetary motion. This kind of time, consisting of minutes and hours, is not the sole source from which we derive our concept of time. For example, Augustine elsewhere invites his readers to imagine a universe consisting solely of disembodied souls or angelic beings. Augustine argues that one can infer the presence of time from the very activity of thought: "we must ask whether, apart from the motion of bodies, there could be time in the motion of an incorporeal creature, such as the soul or the mind, which changes . . . in its thoughts. In that change it has one thing earlier and another later, and that cannot be understood without the interval of time."[37] Any change, therefore, that can be distinguished by a before and after sequence is a change involving time.

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[36] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.16.

[37] Augustine, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*, trans. Roland J. Teske, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 84 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 843.8.

Augustine's position that our concept of time is not solely dependent on the motion of the stars is a position defended by other philosophers as well. Richard Sorabji argues:

> In relation to our concept of time, I believe that it cannot be maintained that time requires clock processes for its existence. Admittedly, our concept of time would be impoverished if we did not treat some processes or other as supplying a kind of clock, not even such processes as the generations of man, or the return of seasons. We could not then assign particular lengths to periods. But we would still have the concepts of before and after, and many other temporal concepts. We could even compare two processes as longer or shorter, either by simply remembering them as such, or when they overlapped in convenient ways, one extending beyond the other at one end, without being exceeded at the other. I conclude that if the existence of time requires that of change, this will not be because it requires the occurrence of clock processes.[38]

Augustine's distinction provides one sense in which the possibility of a time before time can be defended. If prior to the formation of the stars one assumes some change, say in the soul, then it is coherent to say that there was a time when there was no (other) time. The incoherency arises only if one fails to distinguish two different 'times'.

> To say 'there was a time when time did not exist', is as nonsensical as to say, 'There was a man when no man existed', or, 'This world existed when this world was not', If we are referring to different individuals, we can rightly say, 'There was a man when that man did not exist'; and so we can say, 'There was a time when this time did not exist'; but to say, 'There was a time when there was no time' is beyond the capability of the veriest idiot.[39]

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[38] Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 71.

[39] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.16.

2. Time and Angels: Existing Always yet not Eternal.

The second problem addresses Augustine's claim that prior to the formation of the heavenly bodies angelic beings may already be in existence. The objection points out that if time is co-extensive with these angelic beings then it follows that both angelic beings and time have always existed. To understand how this conclusion comes about a number of Augustine's assumptions must be stated. For example, given the assumption that angelic beings are in existence prior to solar time; given also that they are prior to all other existing temporal objects; given that time is present whenever there is succession; given all these assumptions, argue Augustine's opponents, the conclusion has to be that there never was a time when these angelic beings did not exist. If they have existed for all time then it follows that whatever exists for all time must be eternal. Whatever is eternal does not have a beginning and so angelic beings have no beginning and neither does time.

Augustine's response is that there is no contradiction in claiming that the first object to exist has existed for all time and then also claim that the first object had a beginning. To reconcile the claim that 'x' exists at all times and the second claim that 'x' has a beginning, one need only add the further claim that time has a beginning. The same argument applies to time: there is no contradiction in saying time has always existed and time has a beginning.

> For we shall not deny that 'times' were created, although no one doubts that time has existed for all time. For if time has not existed for all time, it would follow that there was a time when time was not. . . . And so since we say that time was created, while it is said to have existed always, because time has existed for all time, the fact that the angels have existed always does not entail that they were not created.[40]

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[40] Ibid.

Obviously, argues Augustine, time has existed for all time. Augustine states that once this is understood there is no confusion in saying that time, or objects coeval with time, have existed for all time and yet have a beginning.

3. The Implications of saying 'Before Time.'

A third problem surfaces when considering the issue of whether every present time logically implies a previous time. The problem is evident when the attempt is made to express the state of affairs prior to time beginning. For if we describe the state of affairs by saying that time has a beginning, and before this beginning there was no time, we seem bound to use words such as *before* and *was* which imply previous time. The objection, once again, is that attributing a beginning to time leads Augustine to speak incoherently. This objection can be traced back to Aristotle who writes,

> Since time cannot exist and is unthinkable apart from the moment, and the moment is a kind of middle-point, uniting as it does in itself both a beginning and an end, a beginning of future time and an end of past time, it follows that there must always be time: for the extremity of the last period of time that we take must be found in some moment, since time contains no point of contact for us except the moment. Therefore, since the moment is both a beginning and an end, there must always be time on both sides of it.[41]

This is clearly an argument against time having a beginning. There can be no beginning if every 'now' is a point between a past and future time. In claiming that time has a beginning Augustine rejects the position that every present time demands a prior time. To this end he distinguishes between an event occurring in time and an

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[41] Aristotle, *Physics*, 8.1, 251b 10-25.

event occurring with time.[42] Assuming the universe to have a beginning, the first event is understood as an event occurring with time rather than an event in time.

Aquinas (1224-1274), in line with Augustine, responds to Aristotle's claim by pointing out that, "if we held that motion is not eternal, we can say that the first instant of time is the beginning of the future and the terminus of no time past."[43] Both Augustine and Aquinas argue that a beginning time does not logically imply a previous time once an eternity of motion or change is denied. Elsewhere Aquinas makes the distinction between imaginary time and real time; a distinction I have not found in Augustine, although this novelty is consistent with his views.

> True, if time had a beginning, we are supposing its non-existence to precede its existence. But the supposition of time's non-existence does not compel us to assert its existence. . . . For the before that we speak of as preceding time implies nothing temporal in reality, but only in our imagination. Indeed, when we say that time exists after not existing, we mean that there was no time at all prior to this designated now. . . . the imagination can add a certain dimension to the already existing thing; and just as this is no reason for attributing infinite quantity to a body . . . so neither does it justify the supposition that time is eternal.[44]

Augustine and Aquinas argue that there is no incoherency with a beginning time even if it involves some difficulties in expressing the position linguistically. They are not alone in their conclusion. W.H. Newton-Smith also argues that a beginning time is coherent. He acknowledges that "we cannot think of the beginning of time on an exact parallel with the beginning of things in time."[45] He goes on, however, to assert that one can still make good sense of time beginning.

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[42] Augustine, *City of God*, 11.6.

[43] Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Two, Creation*, trans. James F. Anderson (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 36.6.

[44] Ibid., 36.7.

[45] Newton-Smith, *Structure of Time*, 97.

> What we should have in mind when we say that time began is something akin to what we have in mind when, for instance, we say that the natural number series begins with zero. This means that there is no natural number coming before zero when the numbers are taken in the standard order. It is on this model that I will understand the notion of beginning time. That is, the claim that time began is to be understood as the claim that the set of temporal items has a first member under the basic temporal ordering relation. If we take the set of temporal items as the set of instances and the basic relation as that of being temporally before, the hypothesis that time had a beginning is that hypothesis that there is an instant such that no other instant is before it. And the hypothesis that time had no beginning is the hypothesis that for every instant there is a distinct earlier instant. [46]

To sum up, there are at least two distinct claims which Augustine makes. The first is that time requires some movement or change, and the second is that change is finite. If Augustine is correct about these two claims, then it is consistent to say that time began. If, on the other hand, it is argued that time does not require change then even if it is argued that change has a beginning it does not follow that time has a beginning. Focusing solely on whether or not the objection that a beginning time leads to an incoherent position, however, I agree with Augustine, Aquinas, Newton-Smith and Sorabji that these particular objections have failed to show Augustine's position to be logically incoherent.

Another possible argument against a beginning time is to argue that the universe and change are infinite. Here too, if it can be successfully argued that change is infinite, and if it is granted that time is inseparable from change, then it follows that time has no beginning. So that even though it is coherent to say that time has a beginning one must conclude that in actuality both time and the universe are infinite. The next objection attempts to undermine Augustine's position on a beginning universe; the objection is reflected in the question, 'Why not sooner?'

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[46] Ibid.

Beginning Universe

Why Not Sooner?

Given Augustine's claim that the universe has a beginning, the following objections highlight the problems that ensue. Sorabji explains:

> The point of the 'Why not sooner?' argument against the universe having a beginning is not merely that, if it began, we do not know the reason why it did not begin sooner. We can hardly expect to know everything. Rather, the point is that in the nature of the case there could not be a reason. If you say that the universe began, you must admit that it is in principle inexplicable why it did not begin sooner.
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> The difficulty could be made to look worse. If there was enough reason for the universe to begin at some given time, then there was surely enough reason for it to begin earlier, since the reasons available will not have been augmented, seeing that nothing was in existence, nor were any changes occurring. . . .
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> . . . That there could not be an answer to the question, 'Why not sooner?' is brought home by an argument of Simplicius: normally we explain why something is delayed, by pointing to earlier causal sequences, in order to show that the time was not yet ripe. Socrates could not have been born that much sooner, because his parents had not yet met. When we are inquiring about the whole universe beginning, however, there is no earlier causal sequence by reference to which we can explain why things have to wait.[47]

I will examine three responses to this question. Each of these responses follow a similar strategy by making the question irrelevant to the respective position. Following these three responses I will consider a fourth response given by Leibniz who provides a positive reply.

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[47] Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 232.

1. A Universe With no Beginning.

The first group that blocks the question includes all who claim the universe has no first event. If there is no beginning then it is pointless to ask, 'Why did the universe not appear sooner?' Again, if there are an infinity of cycles it is pointless to ask about the first cycle. To assert infinite cycles avoids the problem of a beginning.

2. The Concurrence of Time and Universe

A second position is the response given by Augustine: if time has a beginning, and the universe is concurrent with time, then it is impossible for the universe to have occurred sooner. The assumption that the universe may have come into being sooner than it did presupposes an earlier time. An earlier time is precisely what Augustine denies: for if time begins with the universe then there is no time sooner in which that universe could have appeared. The question 'Why not sooner?' is inapplicable.

Those posing the question to Augustine seem to misunderstand his position. There are a number of examples that can be cited prior to and contemporary with Augustine which indicate that even when the possibility of a beginning universe is theoretically granted empty time is still assumed. We find, for example, in Cicero's (106-43 B.C.) dialogues an Epicurean by the name of Valleius arguing that,

> If there was then no world time must still have been passing. Time, I say, and not those periods of time which are measured by the number of nights and days in the course of a year. I admit that these depend upon the circular movement of the world. But from all eternity there has been an infinite time, unmeasurable by any periodic divisions. This we can understand from the analogy of space. But we cannot even conceive that once upon a time there was no time at all.[48]

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[48] Cicero, *Nature of the Gods*, trans. Horace C. P. McGregor (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1972), 1.20-22.

Valleius claims that in the absence of a universe 'time must still have been passing'. This, of course, contradicts the principle that change and time are inseparable. Valleius cannot see how it can be argued that time has a beginning since that would lead to a time when there was no time. It is quite possible then that failing to conceive of a beginning time, the claim that the universe had a beginning did not entail the claim that time had a beginning also.

Similarly, against the Neoplatonists Augustine states that, "since God . . . is the creator and director of time, I cannot see how it can be said that he created the world after a lapse of ages."[49] Against the Manichees, who ask what God was doing before he created the world, Augustine reminds them that, "if before heaven and earth there was no time, why is it asked, What didst Thou then? For there was no 'then' when time was not."[50] These instances suggest that empty time is assumed even granting the possibility that the universe had a beginning.

It is interesting to note that the similar assumption is found in Kant's (1724-1804) formulation of the problem. He poses the question with the intent of showing that neither a beginning universe nor an infinite universe can be rationally defended. As for the argument against a beginning universe Kant states:

> Let us assume that the world has a beginning. Since the beginning is an existence which is preceded by a time in which the thing is not, there must have been a preceding time in which the world was not, i.e. an empty time. Now no coming to be of a thing is possible in an empty time, because no part of such a time possesses, as compared with any other, a distinguishing condition of existence rather than of non-existence; and this

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[49] Augustine, *City of God*, 11.6.

[50] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. J. G. Pilkington, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 11.12.

> applies whether the thing is supposed to arise of itself or through some other cause. In the world many series of things can, indeed, begin; but the world itself cannot have a beginning, and is therefore infinite in respect of past time.[51]

Kant's formulation of the problem assumes that if the world has a beginning there has to be empty time preceding the world. Kant does not offer any argument to justify the claim that time must be without a beginning. This, of course, is contrary to Augustine's position. For if time and the universe did come into existence together then we need not consider why the world came into being then and not sooner.

3. No Sufficient Reason Required

A third alternative is to argue that the creator is not bound to have a sufficient reason for all his acts. The 'Why not sooner?' question can be blocked even while assuming that the creator has existed through infinite time past. T.V. Morris argues that, "if God is a truly free creator then He need not have a sufficient reason for every aspect of everything He does. If He wants to create, He is free to arbitrarily pick a time for creation."[52] For Morris a perfectly free being could arbitrarily choose a time to create from an infinite range of possible time alternatives. The question assumes that there has to be a rational answer. The difficulty which the question assumes is by-passed if the principle of sufficient reason is softened to allow for exceptions.

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[51] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan Education Ltd., 1990), 2.2.2 B455.

[52] Thomas V. Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1991), 124.

Leibniz and Clarke on 'Why not Sooner?'

Prior to Kant the question was debated in an exchange of five letters (1705-1716) between Leibniz (1646 -1716) and Samuel Clarke (1675 -1729).[53] Clarke defends the Newtonian view of absolute time and argues that time can exist independent of change. Leibniz, on the other hand, defends a relative view of time arguing that time is not distinct from things existing in time. Time, for Leibniz, is inseparable from change. Both of these men, however, hold in common the view that the universe is created and thus has a beginning; and both appeal to the principle of sufficient reason - although Leibniz accuses Clarke of not understanding the principle.[54] In Leibniz's view the principle of sufficient reason entails the principle of the identity of indiscernibles.[55]

According to Leibniz, therefore, it would be impossible for God to choose between two absolutely identical alternatives. Leibniz states that "in things absolutely indifferent, there is no foundation for choice; and consequently no election, nor will; since choice must be founded on some reason, or principle. . . . A mere will without any motive, is a fiction, not only contrary to God's perfection, but also chimerical and contradictory; inconsistent with the definition of the will."[56] For Leibniz, if empty time is assumed, then there can be no sufficient reason for why God would choose to create at one time rather than another. A perfectly rational being is incapable of choosing between two identical alternatives; an eternal paralysis would ensue.

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[53] G. W. Leibniz and S. Clarke, *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, ed. H. G. Alexander (Manchester, Great Britain: Manchester University Press, 1956).

[54] Ibid., Leibniz's Third Paper, Section 7.

[55] H. G. Alexander, "Introduction," in *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, xiii.

[56] Leibniz, *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, Leibniz' Fourth Paper, Sections 1 and 2.

Clarke, in turn, writes: "undoubtedly nothing is, without a sufficient reason why it is, rather than not; and why it is thus, rather than otherwise. But in things in their own nature indifferent; mere will, without any thing external to influence it, is alone that sufficient reason."[57] According to Alexander, Clarke equates the principle of sufficient reason with the causal principle, viz. that nothing happens without a cause. For Leibniz, on the other hand, the principle of sufficient reason, as it applies to divine action, means that God must always have a motive for acting and the motive must always relate to the best possible act.[58]

Clarke is also of the view that postulating empty time and a universe in time leads to the necessity of a creator. That is, the best explanation for why matter originates at one time rather than another, or in one place rather than another, is if a creator's will made the difference. If all moments of empty time are numerically distinct but otherwise identical, the universe could not have a sufficient reason for appearing at one time rather than another. If there is empty time immediately preceding the universe then, according to Clarke, there can be no causal explanation for why the universe came into being when it did, or why the universe emerged at all, unless one posits a creative will. Far from destroying natural religion, says Clarke, the assumption of empty time leads to, and is consistent with, the belief in a creator.

Leibniz' Positive Response

Although, for Leibniz, time and change are inseparable, and the universe has a beginning with no empty time before it, he provides a theoretical response for why the universe came into being when it did and not sooner. According to Leibniz, for a

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[57] Clarke, *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, Clarke's Third Reply, Section 2.
[58] H. G. Alexander, "Introduction," in *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, xxii-xxiii.

response to be successful, it must explain how the universe could have come into being sooner than it did, and secondly, explain what possible differences might be implied in the timing of the universe. Leibniz, of course, rejects Clarke's claim that the universe could have been shifted back to an earlier existing time. For Leibniz there is no possibility of a time prior to which the universe can be shifted.

Reason dictates, according to Leibniz, that an all wise and good creator could only create the best possible world. If it can be shown that the timing of creation might affect the moral consequences of this world then Leibniz has found a way to connect a sufficient reason with the timing of creation. Continuing with the assumption that time is inseparable from change, Leibniz invites his readers to imagine the possibility of adding some change to the beginning of the world. If one can conceive how additional changes at the beginning of the universe can make a difference and grant that extra change implies extra time then there may after all be some reason why the universe was not created with those additional changes and therefore with additional time. Leibniz argues that, "things being increased, time will be also increased. But whether such an augmentation be reasonable and agreeable to God's wisdom, is another question, to which we answer in the negative; otherwise God would have such an augmentation."[59]

Sorabji explains how one could make sense of the question by thinking backwards from the present.

> Let us suppose for convenience that the solar system is as old as the universe and that both have lasted a million years. The 'Why not sooner?' question can then be put as the question; 'Why did not the universe begin a million and one years ago?' To bring this about, God would only needed to have tacked on an extra revolution of the earth around the sun at the beginning of the series. To imagine him doing so is not to imagine extra

[59] Leibniz, *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence,* Leibniz' Fifth Paper, Sections 55 and 56.

> time without extra change; on the contrary, the extra year would have involved an extra revolution of the earth. Why did it not occur? [60]

Indeed, someone may also ask the question, 'what possible difference could an extra revolution of the earth make? Sorabji replies:

> An extra revolution of the earth, in order to be a distinct revolution, would have to differ in some ways, possibly bad ways. It would also be likely to cause some differences, again possibly bad, in subsequent revolutions. Further it would alter the temporal distances between events, so that mankind, for example, would have had more time to degenerate between his initial creation and his confrontation with the trials of the present year. All these considerations could supply God with a reason for rejecting the extra revolution.[61]

For Leibniz, since this is the best of all possible worlds, and the world would have been a different world had it occurred sooner, it is therefore necessary that the universe begins when it did rather than sooner. In framing the question this way Leibniz provides, at least in principle, a possible reason for why the universe came into being when it did and not sooner. It is evident that it did not occur to Augustine to interpret the question in this manner. He did not envision a scenario where additional time and change are tacked on to the universe. In respect to the objection raised against a beginning universe Leibniz' response is consistent with the principle of sufficient reason and so the timing of the universe can be based on a divine rational act. Of course, Leibniz' response assumes many particulars: the principle of sufficient reason, the best of all possible worlds, the inseparable nature of time from events, a rational supreme being who creates the universe, and many other claims: it is within this Leibnizian framework that the solution is made plausible.

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[60] Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 235-236.
[61] Ibid., 236.

Leibniz aside, each of the three previous responses are successful in nullifying the force of the 'Why not sooner?' question. The first solution claims that the universe is without a beginning, the second solution emphasizes that time and the universe came into being together, and the third solution limits the scope of the principle of sufficient reason. Augustine's solution to this problem is coherent.

Beginning of Humanity

Augustine's defense of a beginning time and universe is accompanied by the defense of a beginning humanity. As already noted, it follows that if time and the universe have an absolute beginning then so must the human race. Philo (20 B.C. - A.D. 40), in contrast, records an argument that the world must be eternal because humanity is eternal.

> Critolaus . . . a lover of the Peripatetic philosophy, agreeing with the doctrine of the eternity of the world, used the following argument to prove it: 'If the world was created, then it follows of necessity that the earth was created also; and if the earth was created, then beyond all question the human race was too. But man was not created, since he subsists of an everlasting race, as shall be proved, therefore the world is eternal.' [62]

Unfortunately Philo does not inform the reader how Critolaus proceeds to prove his position. Augustine, however, quotes Apuleius, who supports the view that humanity has no beginning. Apuleius is quoted as saying: "man can come into existence only from man."[63] One rationale might be that since no one has ever seen or experienced the birth of another human being except as originating from other human

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[62] Augustine, *City of God*, 11.55.
[63] Ibid., 12.10.

beings it is necessary that the human race has always existed. Apuleius is also noted for describing humanity as, "mortal as individuals; but eternal as a whole species."[64]

In response, some philosophers state that not only is evidence lacking for an everlasting race there is plenty of evidence pointing to a recent humanity. Lucretius (99-55 B.C.), for example, writes, "why have so many heroic deeds recurrently dropped out of mind and found no shrine in lasting monuments of fame? The answer, I believe, is that this world is newly made: its origin is a recent event, not one of remote antiquity. That is why even now some arts are still being perfected: the process of development is still going on."[65] Philo also mentions those who argue that humanity is of recent origin because the arts are of recent origin. The assumption being that "the arts co-exist with man, so as to be exactly coeval with him, not only because methodical proceedings are appropriate to a rational nature, but also because it is not possible to live without them."[66] Augustine simply states that the belief that humans can only originate from humans is "based on mere supposition, not on knowledge."[67]

Augustine goes on to briefly describe the Epicurean position: "this present theory supposes that the world itself is rebuilt from its own material, and so it also holds that mankind is produced again out of its elements, and then from those first parents comes the progeny of mortals."[68] For Epicurus (341-270 B.C.), the emergence of human beings is accounted for, not by positing an everlasting race, nor by the

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[64] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.10.

[65] Lucretius, *The Nature of the Universe*, trans. R. E., Latham (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1966), 5.359.

[66] Philo, *Concerning the World*, trans. C. D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo*, Appendix 1 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1993), 887. See also Philo's critique of the argument in *Of the Eternity of the World*, *The Works of Philo*, 22.145.

[67] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.10.

[68] Ibid., 12.12.

intervention of the gods, but solely as a result of chance. The cyclical version adds the view that after each conflagration the same human beings reappear in endless cycles. These conflagrations can occur either in one continuing world or in different worlds.

Augustine, in turn, opposes these three positions: that the human race has no beginning, the human race is a product of chance, and the human race and its history is repeated endlessly. To state his positions positively: Augustine affirms that the human race has a beginning in time; that the history of the human race consists of a single non-repetitive linear existence; and the human race is a product of purpose. Chapter two of this thesis deals with the doctrine of eternal return and Chapter three deals with the question of purpose.

A Beginning Universe - a Problem for God?

I come now to the second part of the chapter. There are three further objections to Augustine's beginning universe. The importance of these objections, apart from the fact that they are raised to undermine Augustine's position, is that each objection also contributes to the rationale for an infinite universe and/or the necessity of an exact recurrence of events. The three objections address some aspect of Augustine's claims about the nature of God and God's relation to the world. The cyclical theorist, in turn, argues that unlike Augustine's linear approach, the theory of infinite cycles solves the problems at hand. The objections are: 1) the necessary connection between goodness and creative activity, 2) the necessary connection between an immutable will and a continual creation, and 3) the impossibility of infinite knowledge.

Two Theories on the Ontological Dependence of the Universe

To contextualize these three objections it is necessary to point out that the Neoplatonists do not disagree with Augustine's claim that the universe is ontologically dependent; their disagreement is about the nature of this dependency. For Augustine God is the Creator of everything that has being. All things are originally created out of nothing, which means at least two things for Augustine: 1) whatever is created is not of the same substance as God, and 2) created objects are not made from some other pre-existing substance.

> We believe that God made all things from nothing. For, though all formed things were made from this matter, this matter itself was still made from absolutely nothing. For we should not be like those who do not believe that Almighty God could have made something from nothing, when they observe that carpenters or any workmen cannot produce anything unless they have something out of which to make it. For wood helps the carpenter, and silver helps the silversmith, and gold the goldsmith, and clay helps the potter so that they are able to accomplish their works. For if they are not helped by that matter out of which they make something, they cannot make anything since they do not themselves make the matter. A carpenter does not make wood, but makes something out of wood, and the case is the same with all the rest of these workmen as well. But Almighty God did not have to be helped by anything that he had not made so that he could make what he wanted. For if something that he had not made helped him to make those things he wanted to make, he was not almighty.[69]

The Neoplatonists conceive of the ontological dependency of the universe differently. To explain this difference Augustine reports a number of rival interpretations of Plato's account of creation. Plato, for example, claims in *Timaeus* that "as for the world . . . we must ask about it the question one is bound to ask to begin with about anything: whether it has always existed and had no beginning, or

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[69] Augustine, *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees*, trans. Roland J. Teske, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 84 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 1.6.10.

whether it has come into existence and started from some beginning. The answer is that it has come into being."[70]

According to Augustine, some interpreters understand Plato to teach that the universe has an absolute beginning. These interpreters, says Augustine, claim that "when treating of the universe, and the gods . . . Plato distinctly affirms that they come into being and have a beginning; yet he declares that they will not have an end, but will continue for ever."[71] Augustine goes on to say that this interpretation of Plato's creation account is rejected by the Neoplatonists for it contradicts their principle that "nothing can have an eternal future which has not had an eternal past."[72] Augustine then explains how the Neoplatonists concede that the universe has a maker while simultaneously denying that the universe has a beginning.

> The Platonists have discovered a way of interpreting this statement, by asserting that this refers not to a beginning in time, but to a relation of dependence. 'If a foot,' they say, 'had been from all eternity planted on dust, the print of it would always be underneath; but for all that no one would doubt that the footprint was made by the pressure of the foot: and yet there would be no temporal priority, although one was made by the other.' 'Similarly', they say, 'the universe and the created gods in it have always existed, while their maker always exists; and yet they have been made'.[73]

It is clear that the Neoplatonists reject the claim that the universe has an absolute beginning and yet do not deny that the universe is ontologically dependent. To claim that the universe is ontologically dependent is not therefore an argument that necessarily supports a beginning time and a beginning universe. The Neoplatonists

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[70] Plato, *Timaeus*, 3.28.
[71] Augustine, *City of God*, 10.31.
[72] Ibid., 10.31.
[73] Ibid., 10.31.

main objection against Augustine is that he cannot reconcile a finite universe with certain assumptions about the nature of God and with his own claims about God.

1. What was God Doing Before Creation?

The question, 'What was God doing before he created the world?' constitutes one of the these objections against a beginning universe. This objection is already referred to by Origen (185-253 A.D.), a century before Augustine's time.

> This is the objection which they generally raise: they say, 'If the world had its beginning in time, what was God doing before the world began? For it is at once impious and absurd to say that the nature of God is inactive and immovable, or to suppose that goodness at one time did not do good, and omnipotence at one time did not exercise its power.' Such is the objection which they are accustomed to make to our statement that this world had its beginning at a certain time.[74]

It is by no means self-evident, however, how asking about God's activity, or lack thereof, constitutes a problem for a beginning universe. To appreciate the difficulty this objection is meant to raise it is important to be aware of some assumptions in Classical and Mediaeval metaphysics. One assumption, simply put, is that there is a necessary connection between Being, goodness, and creative activity. In the Middle Ages this is referred to as the metaphysical principle of diffusion.

The Principle of Diffusion

The principle of diffusion seems to have played a major role in Neoplatonist metaphysics. The principle expresses a vital connection between being and goodness. The nature of the Good is such that it must diffuse itself. A specific text which is referred to as the primary source for the principle of diffusion is found in Plato's

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[74] Origen, *De Principiis*, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, ed. Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 3.5.3.

Timaeus. Plato writes: "let us therefore state the reason why the framer of this universe of change framed it at all. He was good, and what is good has no particle of envy in it; being therefore without envy he wished all things to be as like himself as possible."[75] In Arthur Lovejoy's classic study *The Great Chain of Being* he traces the future implications that were perceived imbedded in Plato's creation account.

> A self-sufficient being who is eternally at the goal, whose perfection is beyond all possibility of enhancement or diminution, could not be 'envious' of anything not itself. Its reality could be no impediment to the reality, in their own way, of beings other than it alike in existence and in kind and in excellence; on the contrary, unless it were somehow productive of them, it would lack a positive element of perfection, would not be so complete as its very definition implies that it is. And thus Plato, tacitly making the crucial assumption that the existence of many entities not eternal, not supersensible, and far from perfect, was inherently desirable, finds in his otherworldly Absolute, in the Idea of the Good itself, the reason why that Absolute cannot exist alone. The concept of Self-Sufficing Perfection, by a bold logical inversion, was - without losing any of its original implications - converted into the concept of a Self-Transcending Fecundity. A timeless and incorporeal One became the logical ground as well as the dynamic source of the existence of a temporal and material and extremely multiple and variegated universe. The proposition that - as it was phrased in the Middle Ages - *omne bonum est diffusivum sui* here makes its appearance as an axiom of metaphysics.[76]

The Neoplatonists, build on this principle that goodness is essentially diffusive of itself, and thus establish a cosmology emphasizing the permanent emanation or creation of the universe from the ultimate Good. It is the nature of the Good to communicate itself; goodness cannot remain idle: it is active and thus produces things to share its existence. If God is equated with the Good then he cannot be idle but must be continually producing things.

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[75] Plato, *Timaeus*, 29E-30B.

[76] Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 49.

Two Responses to the Diffusion Principle

Those inclined to take seriously the principle of diffusion respond in one of two ways. For Philo a solution lay in affirming that prior to the visible universe God is actively engaged in creating the realm of intelligibility.[77] Creative activity, therefore, may relate to the realm of ideas and not only the creation of corporeal objects.

> Apprehending beforehand, as a God must do, that there could not exist a good imitation without a good model, and that of the things perceptible to the external senses nothing could be faultless which was not fashioned with reference to some archetypal idea conceived by the intellect, when he had determined to create this visible world, previously formed that one which is perceptible only by the intellect, in order that so using an incorporeal model formed as far as possible on the image of God, he might then make this corporeal world, a younger likeness of the elder creation, which should embrace as many different genera perceptible to the external senses, as the other world contains of those which are visible only to the intellect.[78]

Origen provides another alternative: "when we say that not then for the first time did God begin to work when he made this visible world; but as, after its destruction, there will be another world, so also we believe that others existed before the present came into being."[79] Origen argues that many worlds preceded the present world. Origen is well aware, of course, that his response is not altogether satisfactory since the Neoplatonists claim that there must be continual activity. It does not suffice, therefore, to merely posit a great many worlds prior to the present one. So Origen, like Philo, suggests elsewhere the creation of an intelligible realm.[80]

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[77] Sorabji defends the position that Origen, rather than Philo, is the author of this theory in *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, 206. I see no other way to explain Philo's claim here that the intelligible world is formed prior to the corporeal world.

[78] Philo, *On the Creation*, trans. C. D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1993), 4.16.

[79] Origen, *De Principiis*, 3.5.3.

[80] Ibid., 1.4.5.

A contemporary context in which the issue of diffusion is discussed deals with the ontology of numbers, properties, and propositions. Platonists defend the position that these entities have some 'existence' outside of time and space. Anti-Platonists deny that these abstract objects exist autonomously anywhere at all. T.V. Morris rejects both the Platonist and the anti-Platonist move; he prefers a position which he traces to Augustine. He writes,

> It is difficult to construct a satisfactory world-view without acknowledging some objective reality for numbers, properties, propositions and the like. So a great number of theistic philosophers have found the severe anti-Platonist move unacceptable. They have wanted to endorse the reality of numbers, properties and propositions, and have seen a way of avoiding the problems which attend the conception of these entities as abstract objects existing autonomously, wholly independent in their own realm of reality. To this end they have taken up and developed St. Augustine's suggestion that these things be thought of as ideas in the mind of God. The divine ideas tradition, as this way of thinking is referred to, maintains that it is an ontologically efficacious divine intellective activity which is responsible for the existence of these things which we customarily classify as abstract objects. They are ideas which God thinks, eternally and necessarily. And the creative efficacy of his thought gives them being. They are caused to exist by being thought. And they are as they are in virtue of being thought of, or conceived, as they are by God.[81]

Elsewhere he writes;

> It is not that God brings such things into existence at a time prior to which they have not existed. If they are eternal objects, he must eternally have been creating them. If they are necessities, he creates them, or gives them being, in every possible situation. But if they owe their being to God, as they must on an absolutely thoroughgoing theism, their necessity does not entail their aseity or ontological independence. Necessity is compatible with createdness. Only God is both necessary and independent.[82]

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[81] Morris, *Our Idea of God*, 156.
[82] Ibid.

Morris provides a viable answer to diffusion theorists who require continual creativity. If, on the other hand, it is suggested that abstract entities do not capture the essence of goodness then there is also within the Christian tradition the possibility of applying the diffusion of goodness amongst the different members of the Trinity. If it is argued that goodness requires the continual creation of a universe of rational beings then the move must be made towards adopting a principle of plenitude: the claim that every possible good must be created. This is no longer simply an appeal to the principle of diffusion.

The appeal to divine inactivity as a problem for theism seems to have some such principle of diffusion in the background. If creation is a unique event then God must have been inactive prior to creation. If inactive then God can not be the supreme good. Augustine states that this connection between goodness and creative activity contributes to the necessity of continual cycles.

> They say, his goodness cannot be thought of as ever inactive, for otherwise his activity would be temporary, with an eternity of rest before it; and it would seem as if he repented of his former everlasting leisure, and that was why he began to set to work. Hence, they say, there must be this continual sequence in which the same events happen repeatedly, and things pass away only to reappear. . . . Otherwise if we ascribe to God's works a beginning in time, we obviously suggest the idea that in some way he disapproved of his previous eternal inactivity, and condemned it as sloth and idleness, and therefore changed his ways![83]

Augustine here also refers to the second problem which led both the Manichees to argue against a beginning universe and the Neoplatonists to further argue for the necessity of infinite cycles. This is the problem of attributing novel activity to an immutable being.

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[83] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.17.

2. Problem of Novelty

To understand this objection against a beginning universe it is important to keep Augustine's conception of eternity in mind. Augustine claims, not only that God has neither beginning nor end, but that his mode of existence is changeless and timeless. If God undergoes any change then time would not begin with the universe but in God.

> Pass beyond all mutable spirit, beyond all spirit that now knows, now knows not; that now remembers, now forgets; that wills what before it wills not, that wills not what before it willed; either that suffers these mutabilities now or may suffer them: pass beyond all these. Thou findest not any mutability in God; nor aught that may have been one way before, and is otherwise now. For where thou findest alternation, there a kind of death has taken place: since, for a thing not to be what it was, is a death. . . . Whatever therefore dies, both from better to worse, and from worse to better, is not God; because neither can supreme goodness proceed to better, nor true eternity to worse. For true eternity is, where is nothing of time. But was there now this, now that? Immediately time is admitted, it is not eternal. . . . He alone hath unchangeableness, because He alone hath true eternity? Therefore no mutability is there.[84]

For Augustine eternity is a mode of existence where no change is possible. If there is change, and by change Augustine means a sequence involving a before and after, then there must be time. Whatever is eternal, according to Augustine, is changeless and what is changeless is also timeless. These two, timelessness and changelessness, are inseparable characteristics of an eternal mode of existence.

Although most of the objections considered thus far have come from the Neoplatonists and Stoics, the Manichees also contribute objections to a beginning universe. For instance, given Augustine's assumptions about the nature of God, the

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[84] Augustine, *Homilies on John*, trans. Rev. John Innes, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. VIII, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 23.9.

Manichees argue that it is inconsistent to claim that God authored the universe. The argument is that a changeless being cannot create an absolutely new thing without also changing his will. Augustine records their argument:

> If any new motion has arisen in God, and a new will, to form a creature which He had never before formed, however can that be a true eternity where there ariseth a will which was not before? For the will of God is not a creature, but before the creature; because nothing could be created unless the will of the Creator were before it. The will of God, therefore, pertaineth to His very substance. But if anything hath arisen in the Substance of God which was not before, that Substance is not truly called eternal. But if it was the eternal will of God that the creature should be, why was not the creature also from eternity? [85]

If creation is a unique event authored by God then some novelty must be attributed to him, and if so, he cannot be immutable. Essentially, the problem of novelty claims that given the universe has a beginning and God is its author, God's will had to undergo change. A novelty is introduced into God's experience and so therefore God is necessarily subject to an internal change. Applying the principle that where there is change there is time, it follows that God cannot be an Eternal Being.

Augustine attempts to reconcile the immutability of God and creation as a new event. He agrees that to claim that God is immutable, on the one hand, and claim that creation is a result of a new will, on the other hand, is to claim two propositions that are contradictory. The solution, according to Augustine, lies in affirming that the will-to-create is in fact not a new will but a timeless and changeless will. Augustine distinguishes between willing a change and changing one's will. In other words, a person who is alone responsible for initiating certain changes does not necessarily change his will while doing so; the person may have intended those changes all along.

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[85] Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.10.

For the will to undergo change, according to Augustine, one of two cases must apply: either the will "wills what before it wills not," or the will "wills not what before it willed."[86] According to Augustine the doctrine of a changeless will-to-create avoids the problem of any novelty.

Cyclical theorists are not convinced and thus raise another problem. If the universe has a beginning, and yet eternally willed, it appears that there had to be a self-appointed resolve to create. If so, there seems to be at least two actions: the act of withholding creation and the act of creating. Augustine acknowledges a difficulty in conceptualizing the act of creation but insists that these are eternal acts.

> Even if he rested first and started work later (and I do not know how man can understand this) this first and later refer, without doubt, to things which first did not exist and later came into existence. But in God there was no new decision which altered or canceled a previous intention; instead, it was with one and the same eternal and unchanging design that he effected his creation. So long as things did not exist it was his decree that prevented their existence at first, and when they came into being it was his will which brought them into existence later.[87]

3. The Problem of Infinite Knowledge

This problem aside, the Neoplatonists claim that the impossibility of acquiring infinite knowledge is the most effective argument for adopting a theory of infinite cycles.[88] The cyclical theorist assumes that God has finite conceptions in his mind of all the finite things He creates. For God to know or create an infinite number of temporal things he would have to have infinite knowledge - and this, they claim, is simply impossible: "infinite things are beyond the comprehension of any knowledge."[89]

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[86] Augustine, *Homilies on John*, 23.9.
[87] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.18.
[88] Ibid., 12.18.
[89] Ibid., 12.18.

The claim that an infinity is incomprehensible can be traced at least as far back as Aristotle who writes that "the infinite qua infinite is unknowable."[90] The argument, according to Augustine, goes like this:

> Let us assume . . . that God is regarded as having been always engaged in the creation of temporal things, but as creating different things in succession, eventually arriving at the making of man, as a novel creation. Then he would appear to have effected all his creation not with knowledge . . . but on the spur of the moment, as it were, just as it occurred to his mind, with haphazard capriciousness, as we might call it. But, they say, if we admit those revolutions which bring back the same temporal things and events time after time . . . we acquit him of rashness in the creation of the unforeseen. For if the same things are not repeated, then there is an infinite range of possible variations, and that could not be embraced within God's knowledge or foreknowledge.[91]

The Neoplatonists argue that if history occurs in exact repetition then the complete knowledge of all events is knowable to God. This same position is attributed to the Stoics by Nemesius of Emesa (fl. c. 390 A.D.): "the gods . . . not being subject to this periodic destruction, saw one world-cycle through, and, for that reason know everything that is going to happen in each succeeding world-cycle in turn. For nothing will happen out of course that has not happened before, but all things will be just the same and unaltered, down to the last detail."[92]

Two Responses to the Infinity Objection

There are at least two responses to the problem of infinite knowledge. Origen agrees that an infinity is beyond comprehension. For this very reason, he argues, the universe must have a beginning and an end, otherwise God could not comprehend it.

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[90] Aristotle, *Physics*, 1.4, 187b7.

[91] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.18.

[92] Nemesius of Emesa, *Of the Nature of Man*, *Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 4, ed. William Telfer (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1955), 38.55.

The problem of knowing infinity, far from being an argument against God's knowledge of the universe, is unproblematic if the universe is finite. He states,

> We would ask of him whether he asserts that God can, or cannot comprehend all things? To assert that He cannot, would manifestly be an act of impiety. If then he answer, as he must, that God comprehends all things, it follows from the very fact of their being capable of comprehension, that they are understood to have a beginning and an end, seeing that which is altogether without any beginning cannot at all be comprehended. For however far understanding may extend, so far is the faculty of comprehending illimitably withdrawn and removed when there is held to be no beginning.[93]

The second response is given by Augustine. He rejects the claim that an infinite knowledge cannot be comprehended by God. Augustine introduces a discussion on whether an infinite understanding is capable of knowing every individual number. If God's knowledge is finite then his knowledge of numbers is necessarily limited. That is, his understanding can contain only up to a certain number and no more. Augustine's response seems to assume that the Neoplatonists would not readily deny that God has knowledge of all numbers.

> Those philosophers who revere the authority of Plato will not dare to despise numbers and say that they are irrelevant to God's knowledge. For Plato emphasizes that God constructed the world by the use of numbers. . . . Never let us doubt . . . that every number is known to him 'whose understanding cannot be numbered'. Although the infinite series of numbers cannot be numbered, this infinity of numbers is not outside the comprehension of him 'whose understanding cannot be numbered'. And so, if what is comprehended in knowledge is bounded within the embrace of that knowledge, and thus is finite, it must follow that every infinity is, in a way we cannot express, made finite to God, because it cannot be beyond the embrace of his knowledge.
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> Therefore if the infinity of numbers cannot be infinite to the knowledge of God, in which it is embraced, who are we mere men to presume to set limits to his knowledge, by saying that if temporal things

[93] Origen, *De Principiis*, 3.5.2.

> and events are not repeated in periodic cycles, God cannot foreknow all things which he makes, with a view to creating them? In fact his wisdom . . . comprehends all incomprehensible things with such incomprehensible comprehension that if he wished always to create new things of every possible kind, each of them unlike its predecessor, none of them could be for him undesigned and unforeseen, nor would it be that he foresaw each just before it came into being; God's wisdom would contain each and all of them in his eternal prescience.[94]

The problem, according to Augustine, is that these philosophers attempt to compare the mind of a changeless being with their own mutable minds. An infinite mind can comprehend an infinity. As for the problem of counting all numbers, Augustine seems to argue that this is made possible for God by the fact that he does not count, as it were, with any succession of thought.[95]

To conclude, the cyclical theorists claim that given the necessary connection between goodness and creative activity, creation must be an infinite process. Secondly, given the impossibility for an immutable being to undergo change, a continual creation of the same events avoids the problem of novelty. Thirdly, given the impossibility of infinite knowledge, the repetition of cycles allows God to have a complete knowledge of events and create only that which he knows beforehand. According to Augustine, none of the above objections are conclusive against linearity. In fact, he is confident that he has succeeded in defending his position and providing an alternative to the infinite and endless cycles.

> Such are the arguments with which the ungodly try to turn our simple piety from the straight road, and to make us join them in 'walking in circles'. But faith ought to laugh at these theories, even if reason could not refute them. In fact we can do more than that. With the help of the Lord

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[94] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.19.
[95] Ibid., 12.18.

> our God, reason, and cogent reason, breaks up those revolving circles which speculative theory has devised.[96]

Conclusion

In this first chapter I have traced some of the theological roots of the cyclical-linear controversy. The controversy between cyclical theorists and Augustine cannot properly be assessed unless we understand these respective positions that hindered each of them from accepting the alternative cyclical or linear positions.

Augustine does not approach the meaning of history or existence directly. For Augustine, the problem of meaning is a consequence of affirming a cyclical cosmology in which history is repeated infinitely. Augustine, for example, after enumerating the sufferings and tragedies that characterize human life says in utter disbelief: "and to hear that the reason for this is so that God may be able to know his own works by means of those finite cycles."[97] To this end Augustine seeks to replace cyclical cosmology by establishing the coherency of a finite linear cosmology ontologically dependent on God.

Since, as will be argued in the final chapter of this thesis, God plays the central role in providing ultimate meaning for history, Augustine first seeks to establish the coherency of linearity at the level of cosmology. It is within a finite universe, ontologically dependent on God, that Augustine begins to make headway against cyclical theorists and establish the framework for a meaningful history. In the next chapter I analyze the similarities and differences between the cyclical and linear

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[96] Ibid., 12.18.
[97] Ibid., 12.21.

viewpoints. The focus is on the poverty of cyclical theory to provide the necessary context for ultimate meaning.

CHAPTER II

AUGUSTINE'S CRITIQUE OF CYCLICAL RECURRENCE

In order to properly assess the theories of linearity and recurrence the following questions are addressed in this second chapter: 1) What defines cyclical theory?, 2) Are cyclical and linear conceptions of history mutually exclusive?, 3) What constitutes uniqueness for Augustine?, 4) What arguments can be raised in support of cyclical theory?, 5) What objections can be raised to undermine cyclical theory?, and, 6) Is meaning consistent with cyclical theory?

Cyclical Theory and its Variants

In G.W. Trompf's book *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought*, Trompf traces the recurrence motif from antiquity to the Reformation. He includes the following variations as part of recurrence theory: 1) The cyclical view which stands as the belief that history or sets of historical phenomena pass through a fixed sequence of at least three stages, returning to what is understood to be an original point of departure, and beginning the cycle again; 2) The alternation view which states that there is a movement in history wherein one set of general conditions is regularly succeeded by another, which then in turn gives way to the first; 3) The reciprocal view is the view that common types of events are followed by consequences in such a way as to exemplify a general pattern in history; 4) The re-enactment, or imitation view, states that significant actions are repeated later in the actions of others; 5) Conceptions of restoration, renovation, and renaissance which entail the belief that a given set of general conditions constitute the revival of a former set which had been considered

defunct or dying.[98] These are but some instances of what Trompf includes under the heading of recurrence.

Following this inclusive approach to recurrence theory it is evident that no strict contrast between cyclical history as solely Greco-Roman and linear history as solely Judeo-Christian can be sustained. A significant number of scholars point out that there are plenty of examples of linearity in Greco-Roman thought as well as cyclical conceptions in Judeo-Christian thought.[99] Historian of antiquity, Chester G. Starr, notes that "on the whole Greek - and Roman - historical writing was in practice what we may call 'linear', even though the line almost never pointed upward toward progress."[100] Momigliano, another historian of antiquity, claims that "Greek philosophers often thought in terms of cycles, but Greek historians did not."[101] Trompf concludes that the main reason why some have assumed that the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian views of history are diametrically opposite to each other is because cyclical theory is often reduced to that of exact repetition.[102] In Trompf's view, the reduction of cyclical theory to an exact repetition of events is an oversimplification and misrepresentation of recurrence theory. Trompf goes on to state that "when scholars so confuse cosmological and historical conceptions that all linearity is removed from

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[98] G.W. Trompf, *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought* (L.A. California: University of California Press, 1979), 2-3.

[99] Mircea Eliade *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harpur and Row Publishers, 1954); Arnaldo Momigliano, "Time in Ancient Historiography," and Chester G. Starr, "Historical and Philosophical Time," in *History and Theory - Studies in the Philosophy of History* (Beiheft 6: Wesleyan University Press, 1966); G.W. Trompf, *Historical Recurrence*; G.J. Withrow, *Time in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[100] Chester G. Starr, "Historical and Philosophical Time," *History and Theory - Studies in the Philosophy of History* (Beiheft 6: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), 28.

[101] Arnaldo Momigliano, "Time in Ancient Historiography," *History and Theory - Studies in the Philosophy of History* (Beiheft 6: Wesleyan University Press, 1966), 13.

[102] Trompf, *Historical Recurrence*, 1-3.

Greco-Roman historiography and all cyclical conceptions from early Christian interpretations of world history, neat distinction has stretched the facts"[103]

Augustine on Unique Events

According to F.E. Manuel, Philo (20 B.C.- A.D. 40) is an early example of a thinker who fuses cyclical and linear conceptions into a single view of history. Manuel claims that Philo accepts the doctrine of circular vicissitudes as an adequate description of the history of Gentile nations whereas Jewish messianic history follows a linear pattern.[104] On a similar note, Hannah Arendt claims that Augustine distinguishes between the cyclical process of secular history and the linear process of sacred history. Arendt claims that the only events that are deemed unique in Augustine's view of history are events that occur within the boundaries of sacred history.

> 'Once Christ died for our sins; and rising from the dead, he dieth no more.' What modern interpreters are liable to forget is that Augustine claimed this uniqueness of event . . . for this one event only - the supreme event in human history, when eternity, as it were, broke into the course of earthly mortality; he never claimed such uniqueness, as we do, for ordinary secular events. . . . Augustine's attitude toward secular history is essentially no different from that of the Romans, albeit the emphasis is inverted: history remains a storehouse of examples, and the location of events in time within the secular course of history remains without importance. Secular history repeats itself, and the only story in which unique and unrepeatable events take place begins with Adam and ends with the birth and death of Christ. Thereafter secular powers rise and fall as in the past and will rise and fall until the world's end, but no fundamentally new truth will ever again be revealed by such mundane events, and Christians are not supposed to attach particular significance to them. [105]

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[103] Ibid., 205.

[104] F.E. Manuel, *Shapes of Philosophical History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965), 6.

[105] Arendt, Between Past and Future, 66-67.

Certainly, Augustine concedes that numerous empires have risen and fallen throughout history.[106] This, however, is a very commonplace observation and no one should conclude that this is an instance of Augustine's admission that secular history is cyclical. Indeed, throughout the *City of God* Augustine never once describes secular history, sacred history, world history, or specific events in history as cyclical. He never once refers to cyclical patterns in history. Unfortunately Arendt fails to show from Augustine's works where he refers to secular history as cyclical and sacred history as linear. Such a neat distinction is, in fact, contrary to the way Augustine describes the earthly city and the city of God: "my task is to discuss . . . the rise, the development and the destined ends of the two cities, the earthly and the heavenly, the cities which we find . . . interwoven, as it were, in this present transitory world, and mingled with one another."[107] Both cities, according to Augustine, follow a course of rise, development, and end.

Another claim that Arendt makes is that apart from the uniqueness of the Incarnation no other event is considered unique to Augustine. If this is indeed the case then Augustine has a very narrow view of what constitutes a unique event in history. On this point, however, Arendt is not altogether consistent. Initially she claims that the Incarnation is the only unique event but then subsequently claims that "the only story in which unique and unrepeatable events take place begins with Adam and ends with the birth and death of Christ."[108] Here Arendt includes events other than the Incarnation as unique for Augustine. So then, Arendt's final claim is that for Augustine unique events occur only within the scope of sacred history.

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[106] Augustine, *City of God*, 4:7.
[107] Ibid., 11.1.
[108] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 66-67.

In contrast to Arendt, Mommsen concludes that "from Augustine's conception of the course of history it follows that every particular event that takes place in time, every human life and human action, is a unique phenomenon which happens under the auspices of Divine providence and must therefore have a definite meaning."[109]

A closer look at Augustine's claims about unique events is in order. There are a number of different contexts where Augustine discusses unique events. For example, unique events are sometimes contrasted with the exact recurrence of every event. In this context Augustine argues against the cyclical version of the Physicists and applies uniqueness to every single event.

> On their theory, the same ages and the same temporal events recur in rotation. According to this theory, just as Plato, for example, taught his disciples at Athens in the fourth century, in the school called the Academy, so in innumerable centuries of the past, separated by immensely wide and yet finite intervals, the same Plato, the same city, the same school, the same disciples have appeared time after time, and are to reappear time after time in innumerable centuries in the future. Heaven forbid, I repeat, that we should believe this. For 'Christ died once for all for our sins.'[110]

Augustine is not solely interested in securing the uniqueness of the Incarnation. He does not suggest that it is irrelevant whether or not Plato returns so long as Christ does not return. What Augustine argues here is that granting the Physicist's cyclical theory there can be no unique event, including the Incarnation. If, on the other hand, it is the nature of historical events to be linear and unique then it is consistent to argue that Christ lived and died only once. Arendt does not deny that for Augustine every event is numerically unique.[111]

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[109] Theodor E. Mommsen, "St Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951): 355.

[110] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.14.

[111] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 65.

We have already encountered a second set of unique events when Augustine claims that there is a beginning time, beginning universe, and beginning humanity: these beginning-events are unique. These first works, says Augustine, "are unparalleled just because they are the first."[112] "In fact," he goes on to say, "these events would not be classed as extraordinary, if they had occurred in the normal course of nature."[113] Here we see Augustine contrasting certain unique events from all other events which take place within the 'normal course of nature'. In this discussion it is not simply their place in the order of events - which happens to be at the beginning of a particular series, but rather that these beginning-events are not part of the normal cause-and-effect nexus of physical nature. So that, for example, the beginning of the universe is an extraordinary event whereas the beginning of summer is not an extraordinary event. The element of the miraculous is being assumed here. Arendt concedes this as well.

Elsewhere, however, Augustine does allow for first time events to be called unique. These first time events are not the same as beginning-events which are never repeated. An example of a first-time event is provided by Augustine: "this dictator, Hortensius, brought the plebeians back; but he died before the end of his term of office, a thing which had never happened to any previous dictator."[114] What makes the event unique to Roman history is the characteristic of being a first time event.

If this last event happened outside of sacred history there is another event that occurs four centuries after Christ's birth. Arendt's position is that unique events only take place within the Adam-Christ linearity so that there are no unique events occurring outside of sacred history. She overlooks, however, Augustine's discussion on a certain

[112] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.28.
[113] Ibid., 12.28.
[114] Ibid., 3.17.

event that takes place during the sack of Rome. According to Augustine's account, a number of Roman citizens sought refuge in various churches when the Vandals began to pillage Rome. Alaric, the leader of the Vandals, showed unusual clemency to those seeking refuge inside the churches. Augustine refers to this particular event as unique:

> There are histories of numberless wars . . . let these be read, and let one instance be cited in which, when a city had been taken by foreigners, the victors spared those who were found to have fled for sanctuary to the temples of their gods; or one instance in which a barbarian general gave orders that none should be put to the sword who had been found in this or that temple.[115]

The fact that Augustine may have overlooked similar events in history is irrelevant. What is important here is that Augustine appeals to this event as unique in history. This event takes place in A.D. 410 and it occurs outside of the context of sacred history. Arendt, on the other hand, claims that no event after Christ's death is ever seen as unique by Augustine. Certainly this example proves otherwise.

Furthermore this incident also contradicts Arendt's claim that for Augustine "the location of events in time within the secular course of history remains without importance."[116] Augustine, goes on to provide a reason for why such an event occurred when it did and not sooner. He states that it is "because of the spirit of these Christian times."[117] On this occasion Augustine appeals to the historical context in which the event occurs in order to understand the peculiarity of the event. Moreover, Augustine does not appeal to the event as though its uniqueness were self-evident. He invites his opponents to read the various historical accounts of warfare: it requires historical research to know whether an event such as this one ever occurred in the past.

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[115] Ibid., 1.2.
[116] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 66.
[117] Augustine, *City of God*, 1.7.

It should also be noted that Augustine spends the first five chapters of the *City of God* emphasizing events that occur in Roman history prior to the time of Christ's birth. Augustine states that, "if I had decided to collect such instances of historical fact from all possible sources, when could I have brought the list to an end? And these events all happened in periods before the name of Christ."[118] Situating these events before Christ's life is crucial for his claim that Christianity is not responsible for all the suffering that has come upon the Roman Empire.[119] Hence the timing of events holds some importance for Augustine's argument.

It appears that Augustine's appeal to unique events is generally what is implied by the concept of uniqueness. A unique stone, for example, is unique either because there is something specifically peculiar about that particular stone, or the particular set of characteristics are different from all other stones. If, however, in order for a stone to be deemed unique, it is required that there be no point of similarity with other stones, then it is difficult to see how it can qualify as a stone. When Augustine calls events unique he means that there is something about the event that stands out when compared with other similar events. This applies equally to the uniqueness of individuals. Augustine could say of Cicero that he had a "unique mastery of words,"[120] and remind us of people who love Plato because of the "unique charm of his style."[121] Augustine does not presume that for an event to be unique it must be so in every way. As long as there is some category to which the object or event belongs, it is not absolutely unique.

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[118] Ibid., 4.2.
[119] Ibid., 2.3.
[120] Ibid., 9.5.
[121] Ibid., 22.28.

> There were men before us, there are men contemporary with us, and there will be men after us; and the same holds good for all living creatures, and for trees and plants. Even the very monsters, the strange creatures which are born, although different one from another, and even though we are told that some of them are unique, still regarded as a class of wonders and monsters, it is true of them that they have been before and they will be again.[122]

Elsewhere Augustine writes,

> Despite the countless numbers of mankind, and despite the great similarity among men through their possession of a common nature, each individual has his unique individual appearance. The truth is that if there were not this underlying similarity man could not be distinguished as a separate species from the other animals, while at the same time, without those individual differences, one man could not be distinguished from another. Thus we acknowledge that men are alike, and equally we discover that they are different.[123]

In H. Fisher's book *Historians' Fallacies* he accuses some scholars of having, what he calls, a metaphysical bias. He describes and responds to this antinomian fallacy as follows:

> Historical antinomianism commonly begins with the assumption that regularities do not exist in history, or that they do not exist significantly. It holds that every historical event is unique. This idea, of course, is self contradictory. If all historical events were unique, then they would be alike in their uniqueness, and therefore in that respect they would not be unique. Moreover they would be alike in their eventfulness and in their historicity, and therefore not unique in three important ways. If every historical happening was *sui generis*, no language could be found to communicate its nature.[124]

Augustine addresses the issue of uniqueness in a number of different contexts. In one context he emphasizes that every event is numerically unique. Elsewhere he

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[122] Ibid., 12.14.

[123] Ibid., 21.8.

[124] David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 95.

points out that some events are deemed unique because they stand out from the normal course of nature. Again, elsewhere, some events are deemed unique because they are first time events. In another place he emphasizes that an event is unique because of a specific characteristic that is absent from other parallel events. Finally, as Arendt reminds us, for Augustine the Incarnation is the supreme event in history.[125] To consider this list is to see that Augustine does not divide history into secular repetitive events and sacred unique events. This list broadens the scope of unique events in Augustine's conception of history.

Exact Recurrence and Unique Events

When Augustine and cyclical theorists debate the theory of exact recurrence both of them seem to assume that linearity and unique events are irreconcilable with the theory of exact recurrence. Of course it is possible that they are aware of some sense in which events can be said to be unique but thought it an insignificant point. However, on the issue of linearity: if one assumes that everything in the universe undergoes dissolution followed by an exact reduplication of the same events, it is still consistent for an observer within the historical cycle to describe events in terms of progress (upward swing) or regress (downward swing). The concepts of linearity and progress may provide a more accurate description of events within the cycle than recurring patterns. What there can not be in any particular cycle is either infinite progress or infinite regress - but there can be progress and linearity.[126]

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[125] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 66.

[126] I am indebted to Ivan Soll for this observation in "Reflections on Recurrence: A Re-examination of Neitzsche's Doctrine, Die Ewige Wiederkehr Des Gleichen," *Neitzsche A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 322-342.

It is equally consistent to argue that uniqueness is, at some level, applicable to the theory of exact recurrence.[127] For example, in each distinct cycle of history there is only one Socrates and one Plato. In each particular cycle no event is ever numerically repeated: repetition only occurs at the supra-historical level. This fact confirms that the exact recurrence of events is a consequence of a theory of cosmology and not simply a theory about history. This further confirms the need for the discussions in the first chapter of this thesis which deal with cosmology. In any case, the point here, is that the exact recurrence of events is compatible, in this qualified sense, with linearity and uniqueness.

That cyclical theory and linear theory are not mutually exclusive at every point, does not mean, however, that the differences are insignificant. I will now consider the essential differences between them. First, I shall consider the arguments in favor of cyclical theory and then subsequently the arguments against cyclical theory. Having done this, I shall proceed to take up the question whether exact recurrence, or eternal return, is consistent with historical and personal meaning.

Rationale for Recurrence Theories

In this section, the reader can expect to find a brief presentation of some of the main assumptions and arguments in favor of recurrence theory. There is no single argument that serves as a rationale for all the different types of recurrence theories: arguments relevant to one theory are irrelevant to another.

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[127] Ibid.

Four Types of Recurrence Theories

I distinguish four general types of recurrence theories: the first appeals to the recurrence of historical events without any reference to cosmological recurrence. History, in this case, is interpreted as an independent process. The second approach assumes that the human race is significantly dependent on the physical environment, so that recurrence in the environment becomes a crucial factor for understanding the recurrence of events in history. The third type of recurrence focuses primarily on the reincarnation of the soul. Some versions of reincarnation provide a moral explanation for the inequalities in historical life. The fourth type of historical recurrence places history as a kind of sub-set of cosmological recurrence. History, being part of the cosmos, is repeated each time the cosmos is repeated.

First Type: Cyclical Patterns in History

An argument for the general repetition of events can be drawn from considering some significant element in the process of history. Thucidydes' (460-400 B.C.) description of historical recurrence is void of cosmological references. He claims that the study of history is useful because history is bound to repeat itself. This repetition, he says, occurs because human nature does not change. He writes: "it will be enough for me . . . if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future."[128] Thucydides, as we read here, does not argue for repetition on cosmological grounds but rather because of what he, as a historian, has observed and concluded

[128] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada, 1980), 48.

about the role of human nature in history. There is no suggestion here that the repetition of history incorporates every detail of the past.

Polybius (200-118 B.C.), another Greek historian, claims that there is an observable recurrence within the process of political and constitutional change. Polybius assumes Thucydides view of the stability of human nature. In other words, this is how human nature reacts under political change:

> The first of these to come into being is one-man rule, which arises unaided and in the natural course of events. After one-man rule, and developing from it with the aid of art and through the correction of its defects, comes kingship. This later degenerates into its corrupt but associated form, by which I mean tyranny, and then the abolition of both gives rise to aristocracy. Aristocracy by its very nature degenerates into oligarchy, and when the populace rises in anger to avenge the injustices committed by its rulers, democracy is born; then in due course, out of the license and lawlessness which are generated by this type of regime, mob rule comes into being and completes the cycle.[129]

A modern proponent of the first type of historical recurrence is Arnold Toynbee. He, too, claims that recurring patterns can be observed by comparing the histories of different civilizations. He writes: "when we study the histories of these dead and moribund civilizations in detail, and compare them with one another, we find indications of what looks like a recurring pattern in the process of their breakdowns, declines and falls."[130] Here too, it is not cosmology that leads him to argue for historical cycles but the study of comparative historical civilizations. The basis for this recurrence theory, it is argued, rests on the empirical and historical evidence.

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[129] Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books Canada, 1979), 6.4.

[130] Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 38.

At least one objection that has been raised is that this type of recurrence is evident only at a very general and superficial level. For example, one historian, sympathetic to the general claim that history repeats itself, doubts the importance of recurrence when a detailed analysis of the various civilizations are completed.

> The most plausible form of cyclical theory is that which postulates a pattern in the rise and fall of dynasties, nations, or civilizations. There is an inescapable kernel of truth here. Nations do become more powerful and then grow weak once more. But it is difficult to suggest any consistent similarities between the various instances that would establish a regular pattern. The reasons that led Britain to concede independence to her colonies in the twentieth century, for example, were not the same as those that induced Portugal to part reluctantly from hers. Nations lose power for particular, distinctive reasons as well as for reasons that can be generalized. It is easiest to attempt generalizations about the fate of the largest of units, as when Toynbee selected whole civilizations for study. But even then it is possible, as Toynbee's critics found, to fault an analyst for misrepresenting the history of civilizations by trying to fit them into a preconceived mold. The rise and falls of history show no consistent pattern.[131]

Second Type: The Recurrence of History and the Physical Environment

It is possible to reject the total subjection of history to cosmological cycles and yet affirm a significant dependency of historical events on the cycle of nature. It is acknowledged, for example, that the physical environment, to some significant degree, is responsible for the pattern of events found in history. The most primitive rationale for recurrence theory is based on this assumption that there is a continual, albeit partial, destruction of the earth.[132] Once again, Polybius, writes,

> What then are the origins of a political society, and how does it first come into being? From time to time, as a result of floods, plagues, failures

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[131] G. W. Bebbington, *Patterns in History* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1979), 41.

[132] Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation, and the Continuum*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), 185.

> of crops or other similar causes, there occurs a catastrophic destruction of the human race, in which all knowledge of the arts and social institutions is lost. Such disasters, tradition tells us, have often befallen mankind, and must reasonably be expected to recur. Then in the course of time the population renews itself from the survivors as if from seeds, men increase once more in numbers and, like other animals, proceed to form herds.[133]

This theory can be found in Plato[134] as well as Aristotle,[135] and is also mentioned in passing by Augustine.[136] In this scenario there is first a recurrence of natural disasters and then as a result, the history of humanity also repeats itself. Nature, in this case, plays a significant role in understanding why the history of humanity has a recurring pattern.

Toynbee also espouses this type of historical recurrence: "there are," he writes, "some very obvious cyclic movements in physical nature that do effect human affairs in the most intimate fashion - as, for example, the recurrent predictable alternations of day and night and of the seasons of the year. The day-and-night cycle governs all human work."[137] He goes on to conclude from this observation that "on the whole, these recurrent predictable events in physical nature remain masters of human life - even at the present level of Western man's technology - and they show their mastery by subduing human affairs, as far as their empire over them extends, to their own recurrent predictable pattern."[138]

Granting that the cycle of physical nature effects the course of human events at some level, it is unclear the degree of importance that Toynbee is here attributing to

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[133] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.10.

[134] Plato, *Timaeus*, 22d,23a.

[135] Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 1, *Meteorology*, trans. E. W. Webster (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), I.352a33-5.

[136] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.10.

[137] Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*, 32.

[138] Ibid.

nature as a factor in the overall course and significance of history. Indeed one might have thought that those events of nature that have been unpredictable and irregular, such as unusually long and cold winters or earthquakes and the like, have had a greater or at least an equal impact, on the general course of history, than the mundane day-night cycle. Either way, it is safe to say that the course of human history is not separate from the course of the physical environment, or vice versa.

Third Type: Reincarnation as a Moral Argument

A complete picture for why some of the ancients espouse a recurrence theory is incomplete without some reference to the theory of reincarnation. Philosophers who adhere to some version of this theory include Pythagoras,[139] Plato,[140] Plotinus and Porphyry.[141] None of them, however, include the soul's reincarnation as part of an exact cycle. In each reincarnation there appears to be room for significant changes. The first three philosophers even envision the possibility that the human soul could be reincarnated into the life of an animal.

These philosophers agree that the soul's progress depends on a person's moral conduct throughout his earthly existence. The theory of reincarnation can provide, not only hope for the improvement of one's lot in the next life, but also a rational account for why there are moral inequalities from the very moment of one's birth. If this theory can provide comfort and meaning then we need to reconsider whether linearity is required to provide final meaning.

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[139] Eduard Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1980), 31-35.

[140] Plato, *Timaeus*, 49. 91-92, and *Phaedo*, 2.69E-72E.

[141] For a discussion on Plotinus' and Porphyry's positions see Augustine, *City of God*, 10.30.

One author that has given this doctrine much attention is Mircea Eliade. In his book *Cosmos and History - The Myth of the Eternal Return* Eliade argues that the doctrine of reincarnation has, in fact, provided people with meaning for human existence. Indeed, the doctrine provides meaning to life even at its worst moments. Eliade highlights the Hindu and Buddhist theory of cycles and claims that:

> The important point for us is that nowhere - within the frame of archaic civilizations - are suffering and pain regarded as 'blind' and without meaning. Thus the Indians quite early elaborated a conception of universal causality, the karma concept, which accounts for the actual events and sufferings of the individual's life and at the same time explains the necessity for transmigrations. In the light of the law of karma, sufferings not only find a meaning but also acquire a positive value. The sufferings of one's present life are not only deserved - since they are in fact the fatal effect of crimes and faults committed in previous lives - they are also welcome, for it is only in this way that it is possible to absorb and liquidate part of the karmic debt that burdens the individual and determines the cycle of his future existences. According to the Indian conception, every man is born with a debt, but with freedom to contract new debts. His existence forms a long series of payments and borrowings, the account of which is not always obvious. A man not totally devoid of intelligence can serenely tolerate the sufferings, griefs, and blows that come to him, the injustices of which he is the object, because each of them solves a karmic equation that had remained unsolved in some previous existence. Naturally, Indian speculation very early sought and discovered means through which man can free himself from this endless chain of cause-effect-cause, and so on, determined by the law of karma. But such solutions do nothing to invalidate the meaning of suffering; on the contrary, they strengthen it. [142]

First, a point of clarification: it is obvious that Eliade is not dealing with the cyclical theory of exact recurrence. In Eliade's discussion of suffering and karma there is room for the improvement of one's lot and diminishing the total amount of suffering on earth. Indeed, it appears that it is precisely because suffering is not eternally

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[142] Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1959), 98-99.

repetitive and the cycle allows for improvement, that hope of a better existence can be genuinely anticipated. It seems, therefore, that in so far as transmigration makes room for unique events and the possibility of escape from eternal recurrence, to the same degree meaning and hope can be introduced. This point has not escaped Eliade:

> The only possibility of escaping from time, of breaking the iron circle of existences, is to abolish the human condition and win Nirvana. Besides, all these 'incalculables' and all these numberless aeons also have a soteriological function; simply contemplating the panorama of them terrifies man and forces him to realize that he must begin this same transitory existence and endure the same endless sufferings over again, millions upon millions of times; this results in intensifying his will to escape, that is, in impelling him to transcend his condition of 'living being', once for all. [143]

But this is precisely what cannot happen in a theory of exact recurrence. Augustine points out that if the soul is part of a never-ending exact cycle then the theory of the soul's return can not provide a moral justification for the suffering and injustices experienced in this life. One can not justify the quantity or quality of suffering by appealing to the moral conduct of the soul in previous cycles since every cycle entails the exact same events. Barring every form of novelty, no moral justification can be given to explain the problem of suffering. According to Augustine, within a framework of exact recurrence, a person must contemplate the fact that there is no escape, no moral justification, and no progress from cycle to cycle.

Before considering the theory of exact recurrence in greater detail there are still two objections against the theory of reincarnation worth mentioning. The two following objections are articulated by John Hick. In his first objection Hick states that a theory of reincarnation fails to provide a moral and rational account for suffering because it

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[143] Ibid., 116.

involves an infinite regress; the second objection, which I quote in full, raises the issue of personal identity.

> I suggest that the solution offered is not after all a real one. . . . For we are no nearer to an ultimate explanation of the circumstances of our present birth when we are told that they are consequences of a previous life if that previous life has in turn to be explained by reference to a yet previous life, and that by reference to another, and so on in an infinite regress. One can affirm the beginningless character of the soul's existence in this way; but one cannot then claim that it renders either intelligible or morally acceptable the inequalities of our present lot. The solution has not been produced but only postponed to infinity.[144]

The second objection deals with the problem of personal identity. It is to be noted that the context in which reincarnation is analyzed takes place within a single history rather than from one cycle to another. The analysis, however, of what constitutes personal identity is helpful even when considering the theory of exact recurrence.

> The question that I now want to raise concerns the criterion or criteria by which someone living today is said to be the same person as someone who lived, let us say, five hundred years ago, of whom he has no knowledge or memory. . . . For when we remove the connecting thread of memory, as we are doing in our present hypothesis (which is to apply the 99.9% who have no previous-life memories), we have taken away one, and a very important one, of the three strands of continuity which constitute what we normally mean by the identity of a particular human individual through time. A second strand is bodily continuity, an unbroken existence through space and time from the newly born baby to the corpse in the coffin. It may be that none of the atoms that composed the baby's body are now part of the adult's body. But nevertheless a continuously changing physical organism has existed, and has been in principle observable, composed from moment to moment of slightly different populations of atoms, but with sufficient overlap of population and of configuration from moment to moment for it to constitute what we mean by the same organism. However, this strand of bodily continuity is also taken away by our rebirth

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[144] John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons and Company Ltd., 1979), 308-309.

hypothesis. For there is no physical connection between someone living in India today and someone who lived, say in ancient Greece two and a half thousand years ago. Nor does it even seem to be claimed by the doctrine of rebirth that there need be a bodily resemblance; for it is said that one is sometimes born as a man, sometimes as a woman, sometimes in one and sometimes in another branch of the human race; and sometimes indeed, according to one version of the doctrine, as an animal or perhaps as an insect.

Thus all that is left to be the bearer of personal identity is the third strand, which is the psychological continuity of a pattern of mental dispositions. It is this that now has to carry all the weight of the identity of two persons, one of whom is said to be a reincarnation of the other. For the only connection left, when memory and bodily continuity are excluded, is that of the psychological profile of personal character. It is claimed that B, who is A reincarnated, has the same personality traits as A. If A was proud and intolerant, B will be proud and intolerant. If A becomes in the course of his life a great artist, B will start life with a strong artistic propensity. If A was kind and thoughtful, B will be kind and thoughtful. But much now depends, for the viability of the theory, upon the degree of similarity that is claimed to exist between the total personalities of A at (t1) and B at (t2). Many people are kind and thoughtful, or have artistic temperaments, or are proud and intolerant; but so long as they are distinct bodily beings with different streams of consciousness and memory the fact that two individuals exhibit a common character trait, or even a number of such traits, does not lead us to identify them as the same person. Indeed, in the case of people living at the same time, to do so would be a direct violation of our concept of 'same person'.

In the case of people who are not alive at the same time such an identification is not, to be sure, ruled out with the same *a priori* logical definitiveness. But nevertheless it is beset with the most formidable difficulties. For the similarity between A (t1) and B (t2) must in most cases be so general as to be capable of very numerous exemplifications, since A and B may be of different races and sexes, and products of different civilizations, climates and historical epochs. There can be general similarities of character found in such qualities as selfishness and unselfishness, introverted or extroverted types of personality, artistic or practical bents, and in level of intelligence, between say a female Tibetan peasant of the twelfth century BC and a male American college graduate of the twentieth century AD. But such general similarities would never by themselves lead or entitle us to identify the two as the same person.

> Indeed, to make an identity claim on these grounds, in a case in which there is neither bodily continuity nor any link of memory, would commit us to the principle that all individuals who are not alive at the same time and who exhibit rather similar personality patterns are to be regarded as the same person. But in that case there would be far too many people who qualify under this criterion as being the same individual. How many people in each generation before I was born had character traits similar to those that I have? Probably many hundreds of thousands. On this basis alone, then it would never have occurred to anyone that I am the same person as some particular individual in the past. On this basis I could equally well be a reincarnation of any of many thousands of people in each former generation. Thus this criterion of character similarity is far too broad and permissive; if it establishes anything it establishes too much and becomes self-defeating.[145]

Without the continuity of memory it is difficult to apply the thesis that personal suffering in this present life is due to misbehavior in a prior life. If there is no remembrance of the crimes or faults committed in the past life it is difficult to see how one can learn from the present punishment. For it seems that one of the characteristics of a just punishment is that the person should at least know what he is being charged with and so understand why he/she merits this or that particular punishment. Otherwise a person is punished for evils they presumably committed and are presumably responsible for, but they do not know what precisely these evils are.

Other theories that involve particular and occasional recurrences can by-pass the above objections by denying any cosmic moral order. For example, an underlying assumption for Lucretius,[146] as well as Epicurus,[147] is that there are an infinite number of temporal worlds. Given these infinite worlds Lucretius thinks it possible that an individual may reappear at some later time as indeed he may have lived in some

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[145] Ibid., 306-308.

[146] Lucretius, *Nature of the Universe*, 2.1004-1069.

[147] Epicurus, *Letters, Principal Doctrines, and Vatican Sayings, Herodotus*, trans Russel M. Geer (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1964), 2E.45b.

earlier time. Lucretius explains, however, that the person returning is the same only in regards to the atoms that originally constituted him: there is no memory of any previous existence.

> Even if the matter that composes us should be reassembled by time after our death and brought back into its present state - if the light of life were given to us anew - even that contingency would still be no concern of ours once the chain of our identity had been snapped. We who are now are not concerned with ourselves in any previous existence: the sufferings of those selves do not touch us. When you look at the immeasurable extent of time gone by and the multiform movements of matter, you will readily credit that these same atoms that compose us now must many a time before have entered into the self-same combinations as now. But our mind can not recall this to remembrance. For between then and now is interposed a breach in life, and all the atomic motions have been wandering far astray from sentience.[148]

The fourth type of recurrence, however, envisions that every event is eternally repeated. Exact recurrence constitutes the main recurrence theory addressed in the *City of God*. It requires a section all of its own.

Arguments in Support of Exact Recurrence

In my first chapter four arguments favoring the theory of exact recurrence are introduced. First, there is the argument from the cyclical nature of time: if time is cyclical and repetitive, and events are in time, then events must also be cyclical.[149] The second, third, and fourth arguments include the connection between goodness and creation, the impossibility of novel activity, and the impossibility of an infinite knowledge of unique events. I now proceed to briefly present three other reasons for

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[148] Lucretius, *Nature of the Universe*, 3.854-855.
[149] Simplicius, *On Aristotle's Physics*, 732, 26-733,1.

favoring exact recurrence: the argument from astrology, the argument for the intelligibility of history, and an argument from probability.

1. Argument from Astrology

An argument in antiquity for the exact recurrence of events is constructed on the assumption that historical events are dependent on the circular movement of the planets. The relation is one of cause and effect; historical events are seen as a product of planetary movement. Nemesius of Emesa (fl. c. 390) attributes this astrological theory to the Stoics.

> The Stoics . . . assert that when the planets have wheeled about until they reach, once more, the same sign of the Zodiac, and the same height and position in it, which each of them had at the beginning, when the world was first made, at the stated periods of time, a burning up and destruction of all things is brought about. Then the world is reconstituted exactly as it was before, and the stars likewise go through their motions all over again. Each single thing, they say, happens in the same undeviating order as in the previous world-cycle, and takes its course without a single change. . . . Moreover they say that this rebirth of the world will take place not once but many times, or, rather, endlessly, and the same things will be repeated again for ever and ever.[150]

Origen (185-253) attributes a similar position to some Pythagoreans and Neoplatonists.

> The disciples of Pythagorus, too, and of Plato, although they appear to hold the incorruptibility of the world, yet fall into similar errors. For as the planets, after certain definite cycles, assume the same positions, and hold the same relations to one another, all things on earth will, they assert, be like what they were at the time when the same state of planetary relations existed in the world. From this view it necessarily follows, that when, after the lapse of a lengthened cycle, the planets come to occupy towards each other the same relations which they occupied in the time of Socrates, Socrates will again be born of the same parents, and suffer the same

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[150] Nemesius of Emesa, *Of the Nature of Man*, 38.55.

> treatment, being accused by Anytus and Melitus, and condemned by the Council of Areopagus![151]

The assumption here is that historical events are causally related to the particular configuration of the planets. When the planets re-group to their original positions so must all the events occur in the same repeated sequence.

2. Argument For the Intelligibility of History

Others argue that the theory of exact recurrence provides a theory whereby the whole realm of change becomes intelligible. This intelligibility is to be understood in light of a Platonic ontology and epistemology. Henri-Charles Puech argues that this thesis is behind much of the Greek attraction to cyclical thinking.

> Dominated by an ideal of intelligibility that assimilates authentic and complete being to that which exists in itself and remains identical with itself, to the eternal and immutable, the Greek holds that motion and becoming are inferior degrees of reality, in which identity is no longer apprehended - at best- save in the form of permanence and perpetuity, hence of recurrence. The circular movement that ensures the maintenance of the same things by repeating them, by continually bringing back their return, is the most immediate, the most perfect (and hence the most nearly divine) expression of that which, at the pinnacle of the hierarchy, is absolute immobility. . . . Consequently all cosmic becoming, and, in the same manner, the duration of this world of generation and corruption in which we live, will progress in a circle or in accordance with an indefinite succession of cycles in the course of which the same reality is made, unmade, and remade in conformity with an immutable law and immutable alternations.[152]

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[151] Origen, *Origen Against Celsus*, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, ed. Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 5.21.

[152] Quoted in Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 9.

3. Argument From Probability

Having noted these two arguments from antiquity, the third argument has been traced to Nietzsche (1844-1900). He assumes a scenario where every detail is repeated.

> This life, as thou livest it now, as thou hast lived it, thou needst must live it again, and an infinite number of times; and there will be in it nothing new; but every grief and every joy, every thought and every sigh, all the infinitely great and the infinitely little in thy life must return for thee, and all this in the same sequence and the same order. And also this spider and the moonlight through the trees, and also this moment and myself.[153]

Nietzschian scholars have been hard-pressed to find, within the whole corpus of Nietzsche's published writings, any sustained argumentation for the doctrine of eternal return.[154] There is, however, an attempt to defend the doctrine in his unpublished notebooks. This is an argument for eternal return on the grounds of probability. According to Robin Small there are at least two underlying assumptions, namely, that time is infinite and there are a finite number of arrangements of the universe.[155] From these two factors an attempt is made to construct an argument for the eternal return.

> If the universe may be conceived as a definite quantity of energy, as a definite number of centers of energy, - and every other concept remains indefinite and therefore useless, - it follows therefrom that the universe must go through a calculable number of combinations in the great game of chance which constitutes its existence. In infinity, at some moment or other, every possible combination must once have been realized; not only this, but it must have been realized an infinite number of times. And inasmuch as between every one of these combinations and its next recurrence every other possible combination would necessarily have been undergone, and

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[153] Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom*, trans. Thomas Common, vol. X. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1960), 341-343.

[154] Arthur Danto, "The Eternal Recurrence," *Nietzsche A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert C. Solomon (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 317.

[155] Robin Small, "Nietzsche, Duhring, and Time," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 28 (April 1990): 229.

> since every one of these combinations would determine the whole series in the same order, a circular movement of absolutely identical series is thus demonstrated: the universe is thus shown to be a circular movement which has already repeated itself an infinite number of times, and which plays its game for all eternity. - This conception is not simply materialistic; for if it were this, it would not involve an infinite recurrence of identical cases, but a finite state. Owing to the fact that the universe has not reached this finite state, materialism shows itself to be but an imperfect and provisional hypothesis.[156]

In Kaufmann's analysis of this argument he reiterates Georg Simmel's classic refutation of Nietzsche's proof. Simmel constructs an argument that proves that even if the two assumptions are granted, the same configurations might never be repeated: "suppose there were three wheels of equal size, rotating on the same axis, one point marked on the circumference of each wheel, and these three points lined up in one straight line. If the second wheel rotated twice as fast as the first, and if the speed of the third wheel was $1/\pi$ of the speed of the first, the initial line up would never recur."[157]

Others have noted that an appeal to probability cannot account for the exact recurrence of the same events in the same exact order. One would have to add that the whole chain of events is inevitable. The point is argued by Sorabji:

> Many adherents would not think they had reason to accept the theory of endless repetition, unless there were causes making the pattern of events inevitable. Why else should that pattern be the same on so many occasions? . . . On a probabilistic basis, states of affairs could be repeated in any order permitted by physics, and protracted to any length of time. One state of affairs, or sequence of states (however long), could be repeated indefinitely often before another was repeated once. There need come no time when these permutations were exhausted and had to be repeated in the original

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[156] Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Dr. Oscar Levy, vol. I, *Will To Power, Books One and Two* (Edinburg: Morrison and Gibb, Ltd., 1910), 1066.

[157] Walter Kaufmann, *Neitzsche Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (New York: Random House, 1968), 327.

> order. So any good rationale for accepting exact repetition is likely to presuppose causes which make the pattern of events inevitable.[158]

If, however, the whole chain of events is inevitable then the argument from probability (as a game of chance) cannot be sustained. If the same series and same events are inevitable in every cycle then any other logically possible arrangement of the events can never be actually possible. One has to understand Nietzsche to claim that the only possible events, and the only possible order of events, are the actual events and the actual order of events: thus equating what is possible with what is actual.[159]

To sum up, the arguments in favor of exact recurrence include the argument from cyclical time, argument from the impossibility of divine inactivity, the impossibility of novel activity in God, the impossibility of infinite knowledge, the argument from astrology, the argument for the intelligibility of history, and the argument from probability. Having considered the arguments in favor of exact recurrence, along with some objections, we will now consider further objections against the theory of exact recurrence.

Objections to the Theory of Exact Recurrence

I have already mentioned Augustine's argument that the theory of exact recurrence is especially vulnerable in its inability to account for moral evil and suffering. In other words, it is inevitable that these dark features of human existence must simply be accepted as part of the permanent, eternal, and inexplicable structure of things from which there is no escape.

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[158] Sorabji, *Matter, Space and Motion*, 177.
[159] Soll, *Reflections on Recurrence*, 330.

There are a number of further objections that have been leveled against the theory of exact recurrence both by Augustine and others: these include: 1) an argument from authority; 2) an argument based on the principle of identity of indiscernibles; 3) a free-will argument; 4) and arguments from the moral and psychological consequences of exact recurrence.

1. Argument from Authority.

One of Augustine's arguments, mentioned already by Arendt, is an appeal to authority: "heaven forbid . . . that we should believe this. For Christ dies once for all for our sins; and in rising from the dead he is never to die again: he is no longer under the sway of death. And after the resurrection we shall be with the Lord forever."[160] Elsewhere Augustine states that if eternal life is in fact a permanent state then "cyclical revolutions have no place. The eternal life of the saints refutes them completely."[161]

These claims are part of Christian dogma and so as arguments are relevant to those who share the Scriptures as authoritative. It is important to note, however, that Augustine makes reference to certain individuals, at times leaving them nameless, who attempt to reconcile the content of the book of *Ecclesiastes* with a modified version of the Stoic's theory of the repetition of events.[162] The author of *Ecclesiastes* observes that "what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, 'Look! This is something new'? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time."[163]

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[160] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.14.
[161] Ibid., 12.20.
[162] Augustine, *City of God*, 12:14.
[163] Ecclesiastes 1:9-10, *Holy Bible*, The New International Version.

Mommsen is of the view that the individual Augustine has in mind is Origen.[164] He points out that according to Jerome, Origen "allowed himself to assert that Christ has often suffered and will often suffer, on the ground that what was beneficial once, will always be beneficial," and who also "in his desire to confirm the most impious dogma of the Stoics through the authority of the Divine Scriptures dared to write that man dies over and over again."[165] Mommsen understands Augustine's reiteration of the apostle Paul's statement, "once Christ died for sins; and rising from the dead, he dies no more"[166] as a direct response to Origen's concession to cyclical theory. If Mommsen is correct then this argument is primarily used as an in-house argument.

2. Argument from the Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles

A more recent objection against exact recurrence depends on the validity of the principle of identity of indiscernibles. Leibniz, for example, claims that "there is no such thing as two individuals indiscernible from each other,"[167] and "to suppose two things indiscernible, is to suppose the same thing under two names."[168] The context of this discussion is not about cyclical history occurring in linear time, nevertheless, if the principle of identity is valid it can be grounds to deny the possibility of two worlds indiscernible from each other.

Clarke's reply to Leibniz is the kind of reply a cyclical theorist is likely to give in return: "two things, by being exactly alike, do not cease to be two. The parts of time, are as exactly like to each other, as those of space: yet two points of time are not

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[164] Origen, *De Principiis*, 3.5.3.
[165] Mommsen "St Augustine'and the Idea of Progress", 355.
[166] Romans 6:9, *Holy Bible*, The New International Version.
[167] Leibniz, *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*, Leibniz's Fourth Letter, Section 4.
[168] Ibid., Leibniz's Fourth Letter, Section 6.

the same point of time, nor are they two names of only the same point of time."[169] Leibniz seems to recognize the force of Clarke's reply for he goes on to say that "when I deny that there are two drops of water perfectly alike, or any two other bodies indiscernible from each other; I don't say, tis absolutely impossible to suppose them; but that tis a thing contrary to the divine wisdom, and which consequently does not exist."[170] Clarke, of course, objects to Leibniz having the final word on what is and is not consistent with divine wisdom.

The version of exact recurrence we are considering states that the same events are repeated in different cycles and at different and distinct times. In each cycle, as has already been noted, there is only one Socrates and one Plato. In this case, the theory of exact recurrence does not claim that the same events exist at the same time but rather at different times. Nevertheless, the principle dictates that "in order for two things, for example two times, to be distinct, there must be some feature that differentiates them."[171] This distinguishing feature can be provided by a modified version of recurrence. Origin, for example, reports that although some Stoics argue for an exact recurrence of events other Stoics modify the doctrine by proposing certain minor changes in every new cycle. An example of a minor change might be a freckle-faced person returning in the next cycle without any freckles.[172] Origen writes,

> The disciples of the Porch assert, that after a period of years there will be a conflagration of the world, and after that an arrangement of things in which everything will be unchanged, as compared with the former arrangement of the world. Those of them, however, who evinced their respect for this doctrine have said that there will be a change, although

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[169] Ibid., Clarke's Fourth Reply, Sections 5 and 6.
[170] Ibid., Leibniz's Fifth Paper, Section 25.
[171] Sorabji: Matter, Space, Motion 164.
[172] David E. Hahm, *Origins of Stoic Cosmology* (Ohio State University Press, 1977), 195.

> exceedingly slight, at the end of the cycle, from what prevailed during the preceding.[173]

The admission of slight changes within each cycle allows the Stoic to claim that there is always a distinguishing feature. For if there be a change, even one so slight as freckles, it is not *exactly* the same event.

W.H. Newton-Smith, however, contends that there is no good reason to accept the principle of identity as a necessary truth. It is his view that far from disproving cyclical history, "it is just such cases as that of temporally cyclical worlds that have seemed to many to cast doubts on the tenability of the principle."[174] He proposes that the principle of identity of indiscernibles be adopted as a regulative principle rather than a necessary truth.[175] This objection against cyclical theory is not conclusive.

3. Free-Will Objection

Although Origen may have held a modified version of recurrence, he is one of the earliest Christian theists to object to exact recurrence. He argues that if this theory is granted then free will must be denied. If free will is denied then the basis for morality is destroyed.

> Now, if this be true, our free will is annihilated. For if, in the revolution of mortal things, the same events must perpetually occur in the past, present, and future, according to the appointed cycles, it is clear that, of necessity, Socrates will always be a philosopher, and be condemned for introducing strange gods and for corrupting the youth. And Anytus and Melitus must always be his accusers, and the council of the Areopagus must ever condemn him to death by hemlock. . . . But if these things be granted,

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[173] Origen, *Origen Against Celsus*, 5.20.
[174] Newton-Smith, *The Structure of Time*, 75.
[175] Ibid., 76.

> I do not see how our free will can be preserved, or how praise or blame can be administered with propriety.[176]

Origen claims that no one can with propriety praise or blame someone for their actions if at the same time the appraiser assumes that the individual has no free will to do otherwise. The theory that there is an inevitable repetition of events leaves no room for alternative choices or alternative behavior. Hence genuine moral accountability is impossible and any moral appraisal of actions is a vain exercise. It may be a fact that Socrates corrupted the youth, but in the cycle of things, he must corrupt the youth and the youth must be corrupted. According to Origen Socrates can not be properly blamed for his actions. It is evident, however, that giving praise or passing blame is a common human practice. Cyclical theory, therefore, is inconsistent with this common practice and common assumption about human freedom.

Origen claims that given the eternal return of the same events free will is annihilated. It appears that Origen's reason for coming to this conclusion is either because the cosmological context does not leave room for alternative happenings or because the innate ability to choose an alternative course of action is lacking. Perhaps both of these factors are involved in Origen's conclusion that there is no free will. Once it is known that Socrates has corrupted the youth it is no longer possible for Socrates to avoid corrupting the youth. There is nothing, either in Socrates' total make up, or in the inflexible cosmological cycles that can account for any future novelty.

According to Zeller, however, "a man acts voluntarily so far as it is his own impulse that determines him; and he is also free to do what fate ordains, that is with his own assent; but he must do it under all circumstances."[177] It is consistent with exact

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[176] Origen, *Origen Against Celsus*, 4.67.
[177] Zeller, *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*, 217.

recurrence to claim that the will is one of the causes within the cyclical order. Indeed Zeller goes even further by stating that there is a sense in which a person may be said to be free: free, that is, to assent to what fate ordains. It has to be granted, however, that a man can give assent if and only if he has given his assent in the previous cycle! For no novelty, in the subjective-private realm or in the objective-historical realm, can occur in any cycle.

Although Origen does not claim that the will itself is annihilated, but only the freedom of the will, he seems to reject the position that the will can still be free to assent to fate. He writes, "souls are not driven on in a cycle which returns after many ages to the same round, so as either to do or desire this or that; but at whatever point the freedom of their own will aims, thither do they direct the course of their actions."[178] For Origen a strict cyclical theory determines even what a person does and desires and this, he says, can not be the case if a person is to be free.

Origen, of course, has not shown that cyclical theory is thereby untenable if it leads to a strict determinism. Cyclical theorists may grant the point that free will is ultimately an impossibility and even an illusion. They can do this without conceding to a non-cyclical universe. Moreover, it also needs to be said that determinism is not peculiar to a cyclically structured cosmology: some philosophers espouse a linear cosmology and yet are determinists. Assuming these are the only two available models, this allows cyclical theorists to argue that determinism can not count as an argument against cyclical theory if determinism is equally applicable in a linear structure.

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[178] Origen, *De Pricipiis*, 2.3.

4. Argument From the Psychological Consequences of Eternal Return

Origen on the Psychological Consequences of Eternal Return

Origen moves from the argument against the annihilation of free will to the psychological consequences of taking cyclical theory seriously. Origen, for example, teases Celsus by pointing out to him that if the cyclical view is granted then both of them must return in every future cycle to defend their respective positions against each other without success: "nay, Christians too will be the same in the appointed cycles; and Celsus will again write this treatise of his, which he has done innumerable times before!"[179] What is the point, Origen implicitly asks, of any serious discussion if progress in truth is never attainable? Even the best of arguments must be cycled into the infinite process of recurrence. The genuine search for truth is seriously undermined. On the other hand, if truth is worth pursuing, and it may be assumed by the very fact that people seek to convince one another that they think it is worth pursuing, then cyclical theory is inconsistent with the genuine pursuit of truth.

Nietzsche on the Psychological Consequences of Eternal Return

In a different context Nietzsche claims that far from depreciating human action, the doctrine of eternal return can result in providing a greater impetus for human action. According to Nietzsche, an individual comes to realize that every choice and action he/she makes has eternal consequences and is repeated without end. Thus the person, in a sense, establishes his/her own fate for all eternity. Nietzsche writes:

> If this thought were to gain possession of you, it would, as you are now, transform you, or perhaps crush you; the question in each and everything: 'Do you want this continually and innumerable times more?' -

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[179] Origen, *Origen Against Celsus*, 4.67.

> would weigh upon your actions as the greatest burden. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to desire nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal sanction and seal?[180]

The issue of the psychological impact of the doctrine of eternal return brings us back to the problem of the freedom of the will. Ivan Soll argues that since Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return involves a strict determinism the significance of choice is seriously undermined. In making his argument, Soll identifies two levels of determinism in Nietzche's eternal return.

> If, when confronted by what is ordinarily considered to be a decision, one's choice, being part of a state of the world, is determined by the previous state, and one's choice must also conform exactly to an infinite number of counterparts in earlier cycles, is there really any choice to be made or action to be taken? The classical problem, that the acceptance of determinism apparently undermines the meaningfulness or applicability of such concepts as free will, choice and action, is particularly acute for a proponent of Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence. First, in addition to the usual determination of choice by its precedents within the cycle, there is the added determination of choice by its correlates in all previous cycles. Second, the undermining of the significance of the concepts of choice and action is particularly problematic for a theory one of whose purposes is to increase our sense of the significance of the choices we make.[181]

Augustine on the Psychological Consequences of Eternal Return

It is interesting to further compare Augustine's reflections and conclusions regarding the psychological consequences of eternal return with Nietzsche's conclusions. According to Augustine, not only is the pursuit of ultimate happiness an illusion, temporal happiness also becomes problematic. In Augustine's view, if the eternal return is true, or even believed to be true, the psychological impact is

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[180] Quoted in Kaufmann, *Nietzsche Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 324.
[181] Soll, *Reflections on Recurrence*, 332-333.

devastating. I will quote Augustine in full in order to appreciate his sense of horror while contemplating the implications of eternal return on human existence.

> It is intolerable for devout ears to hear the opinion expressed that after passing through this life with all its great calamities . . . , that after all these heavy and fearful ills have at last been expiated and ended by true religion and wisdom and we have arrived at the sight of God and reached our bliss in the contemplation of immaterial light through participation in his changeless immortality, which we long to attain, with burning desire - that we reach this bliss only to be compelled to abandon it, to be cast down from that eternity, that truth, that felicity, to be involved again in hellish mortality, in shameful stupidity, in detestable miseries, where God is lost, where truth is hated, where happiness is sought in unclean wickedness; and to hear that this is to happen again and again, as it has happened before, endlessly, at periodic intervals, as the ages pass in succession.
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> Who could give a hearing to such a notion? Who could believe it, or tolerate it? If it were true it would be more prudent to suppress the truth, nay, wiser to be in ignorance - I am trying to find words to express what I feel. For if our happiness in the other life will depend upon our forgetfulness of these facts, why should we aggravate our wretchedness in this life by knowing them? If, on the other hand, we shall of necessity know them there, let us at least be ignorant here, that we may have greater felicity here in the expectation of the Supreme Good than there in the attainment of it, seeing that here we look for the achievement of eternal life, while there that life is known as blessed but not eternal, since it is at some time to be lost.
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> If, however, they say that no one can reach that bliss unless he has learnt by instruction in this life about those cycles in which bliss and misery alternate, what becomes of their assertion that the more one loves God the easier is the approach to bliss, when their own teaching must make that love grow cold? For surely anyone's love will grow feebler and cooler towards one whom, as he supposes, he will have to leave, whose truth and wisdom he will have to reject, and that after he has come to the full knowledge of them, according to his capacity, in the perfection of felicity. No one can love a human friend with loyalty, if he knows that in the future he will be his enemy.
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> But God forbid that what the philosophers threaten should be true, that our genuine misery is never to have an end, but is only to be interrupted time and time again, throughout eternity, by intervals of false happiness. In fact, nothing could be falser or more deceptive than a happiness than which

> we shall be ignorant of our coming wretchedness, even while we are in that light of truth; or else we shall dread it even while we are at the summit of felicity. If in the other life we are going to be ignorant of the coming calamity, our misery here on earth is wiser, for in it we know of our coming happiness, while if the imminent disaster will not be hidden from us there, the soul passes these periods of wretchedness in a happiness greater than that of its periods of bliss. For after the periods of misery have passed, the soul will be lifted up to felicity; whereas after the passing of the times of felicity the turning circle will bring the soul to misery once more. And so our expectation in our unhappiness is happy, and the prospect before us in our felicity is miserable. In consequence, because here we suffer present ills, and there we dread them as imminent, it would be nearer the truth that we are likely to be wretched all the time than that we may sometimes enjoy felicity.[182]

In contrast to Nietzsche, Augustine envisions a moral paralysis that ensues if this theory is taken seriously. Far from heightening the importance of human action the theory undermines human motivation. Augustine even goes so far as to say that if this theory were true it would be better to be ignorant of it.

To sum up, Origen's and Augustine's arguments draw out the negative implications of an exact recurrence for human personhood. This theory, says Origen, destroys human freedom as well as our moral intuitions that people should be held responsible for their deeds. It also undermines the genuine pursuit of truth. Given that this theory contradicts all of these basic human intuitions, it is best, argues Origen, to choose that theory which neither annihilates the will, destroys the foundations of morality, or renders the pursuit of truth inconsequential.

Augustine states that the eternal return contradicts the principles of religious life and undermines the possibility even of a temporal happiness. In Augustine's view there can be no solace for those seriously espousing this position: he calls it "the absurd

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[182] Augustine, *City of God*, 12.21.

futility of this circular route."[183] In order, therefore, to establish a meaningful existence and the possibility of progress in morality, truth and happiness, events must not be determined by unending cycles but directed towards an open future.

Cyclical Structure and Ultimate Meaning

The relation between cyclical structure and historical meaning requires additional clarification. Gordon Clarke's critique of Spengler's and Toynbee's theories of historical recurrence brings out the point effectively. He writes,

> The discovery, if such it be, that societies rise and fall in similar stages is interesting enough, but what does it signify? What does it all mean? Significance should be sharply distinguished from description. A watch, a radio, an auto can be accurately described in a blue print; but the blue print tells nothing of the value, the importance, or the use of the object. . . . It is clear . . . that so long as Spengler and Toynbee describe the similarities of cultural change, their writings may be stimulating, their descriptions may be accurate, and yet the really important questions may remain unanswered. Suppose it is true that one society gives birth to a second and then dies. Is this any more important than the fact that one generation of mosquitoes gives birth to another generation of mosquitoes, and then another, and another? What is the end of all this? Is there any end? The question, does history repeat itself? must therefore give way to the deeper question, does history have any significance? [184]

Clarke correctly distinguishes historical pattern from historical meaning. Even granting that there is a cyclical pattern to history we are still left with the question, 'are these cycles meaningful?' Clarke goes on to argue that "whether we shall dissolve into atoms with nothing remaining of human hopes, fears, joys, and sorrows, or whether we fight World War I and World War II and World War III, only to fight them over again

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[183] Ibid., 12.21.

[184] Gordon Clarke, *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), 74.

next time - in either case history can have no purpose."[185] Clarke claims that both positions, the theory of exact recurrence and a theory of the inevitable annihilation of life, are incapable of providing history with ultimate purpose; thus no ultimate meaning is in view. According to Clarke, if history inevitably repeats itself, history can never arrive at a final ultimate goal; and if there is no final goal then history can not have a purpose. If this conclusion is valid then structure is relevant to the question regarding ultimate meaning and purpose. So that a strictly cyclical structure precludes the necessary requirement for ultimate historical meaning and purpose.

However, before adopting Clarke's conclusion, we need to consider the possibility of a non-ultimate goal. Ivan Soll points out that Nietzsche, on several occasions, echoes the conclusion that the doctrine of eternal return leads to paralysis rather than comfort. Nietzsche describes the theory as: "the most oppressive thought;"[186] "duration 'in vain' without either goal or purpose, is the most paralyzing of thoughts."[187] Elsewhere, Nietzsche says: "let us think this thought in its worst form: existence, as it is, without either a purpose or a goal, but inevitably recurring, without an end in nonentity: 'eternal recurrence'. This is the extremest form of Nihilism: nothing (purposelessness) eternal!"[188] Nietzsche agrees that a strict theory of eternal return precludes an ultimate goal or purpose. Soll, too, grants this point. Soll argues, however, that the doctrine of eternal return need not preclude a non-ultimate goal within the cycle: the goal can even serve as a meaningful end for those within it.

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[185] Ibid., 77.

[186] Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Dr. Oscar Levy, vol II, *The Will To Power, Books Three and Four* (Edinburg: Morrison and Gibb, Ltd., 1910), 4.3.1059:2.

[187] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, vol. I, 1.4.55.

[188] Ibid.

> The argument for eternal recurrence certainly precludes the possibility of any absolutely final state and thus the attainment of any absolutely final ideal state or absolutely final goal. However, this idea appears somewhat less paralyzing if we -unlike Nietzsche - keep in mind that the doctrine of eternal recurrence itself does not preclude the possibility that each cycle end by reaching an ideal state or realizing a goal. To be sure, this state could be 'final' only in that it was the last in the cycle, and there would always be further repetitions of the cycle. If the world, however, achieved an ideal end state or goal in each historical cycle, it would not simply be a case of 'duration in vain.' The entire development of each cycle would exhibit a meaningful pattern. And one might derive great metaphysical comfort from the thought of the successful pattern of fulfillment displayed and repeated in each cycle.
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> Nietzsche saw, of course, no reason to believe that the course of history within a cycle displayed any such meaningful development, but whether there actually is 'reason in history' - to use Hegel's phrase for a meaningful teleological pattern within history - is a separate question, one not affected by the truth or falsity of the doctrine of recurrence. The supra-historical character of recurrence, by leaving open the possibility of any kind of meaning within the cycle of history, is, contrary to Nietzsche's conclusion, not 'the most extreme form of nihilism; the nothing (the 'meaningless'), eternally.' It also allows the 'meaningful' to be repeated eternally.[189]

If I understand Soll's argument we may envision a track-runner running so as to cross the goal line; it might plausibly be argued that the runner is able to get a certain satisfaction from both anticipating the goal as well as arriving at the goal. Of course, in the cycle of things, there is no final resting place for the runner: the same runner must begin the same race and anticipate the same comfort and enjoy reaching the same goal line. In order for this analogy to properly reflect Soll's position the track-runner must represent world history rather than personal history. For it is not necessarily within the span of an individual's life to experience the goal (unless, of course, a person's life

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[189] Soll, *Reflections on Recurrence*, 338.

happens to coincide with the end of history). Everyone, other than those who live at the end of the cycle, must take comfort in knowing that there is a goal to history.

Soll's meaningful cycle is, in some respects, quite similar to the cyclical version that Augustine rejects.[190] Augustine, in fact, assumes the scenario that there is a goal at the end of each cycle. He equates the goal with the vision of God. For the sake of argument let the vision of God simply be equal to Soll's ideal state in every cycle. In Soll's version of the eternal return, Augustine could take comfort from the fact that the whole city of God can experience the vision of God repeatedly throughout eternity.

Augustine, of course, drew no comfort from this thought at all. Augustine argues that the members of the city of God have to realize that they must soon forfeit the ideal state, which is obviously not an ideal situation, and then the citizens must reflect that they must return to a less than ideal life where the vision of God is lost and despised. So that one is either presently living in a less than ideal situation or anticipating the loss of an ideal situation. Thus there is never an ideal state.

But perhaps the ideal state and the metaphysical comfort that Soll envisions is not easily reconciled with a goal equal to the vision of God. If so, he does not provide us with any alternative scenario. In any case, Soll's imaginary meaningful cycle causes us to ask some important questions: what precisely constitutes meaning in history?; and, if a goal is necessary, what kind of goal is required for a meaningful history? These questions, however, anticipate the main content of the final chapter. I must postpone the discussion until the proper place.

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[190] See first paragraph of Augustine's quote provided on page 70.

Conclusion

Having presented the arguments for and against cyclical theory I conclude that there is no good reason to accept the thesis of exact recurrence. On the other hand, neither am I persuaded that any of the philosophical arguments presented against exact recurrence in this chapter are rationally conclusive. The arguments from the principle of identity, from free will, and from the moral, religious, and psychological consequences make valid and significant points in showing that, assuming eternal return, there can be no genuine sense of meaningfulness in personal life and history. To say, however, that it can not provide for meaning is not an argument against the logical and theoretical possibility of the eternal return. Augustine argues that the theory leads to an absurd existence, but had it been theoretically absurd, he would not have spent so much time and energy seeking to undermine its plausibility. Nevertheless, the point is, that none of the objections raised against the eternal return can serve as a knock-out argument. I do not say that there is no such rational or scientific argument available to logically disprove the thesis - I simply confess that I am not aware of it.

This issue aside, a number of points have been proposed in this chapter. First, there are a variety of cyclical theories. Second, a close analysis of these theories suggests that cyclical and linear conceptions of history are not mutually exclusive. Even the theory of exact recurrence can, in a qualified sense, be reconciled with linearity and unique events. Third, Augustine's critique of cyclical history is not to be confused with a critique of secular history. He does not claim that secular history is cyclical while sacred history is alone linear and characterized by unique events. Augustine distinguishes a number of senses in which an event may be said to be

unique. Fourth, exact recurrence is inconsistent with a final and ultimate goal. Such a goal, however, is a requisite for ultimate meaning and purpose in history.

In the first chapter the focus is on Augustine's attempt to construct a coherent linear framework. I argue that Augustine is generally successful in defending linearity against the cyclical theorists. In the second chapter the focus is on the poverty of cyclical theory. Although Augustine highlights a number of internal inconsistencies with various versions of cyclical theory, his main arguments are aimed at undermining cyclical theory by considering the moral, psychological, existential, and religious consequences of eternal return. In the third chapter I defend Augustine's remaining arguments for ultimate meaning for both personal life and history.

CHAPTER III

MEANING AND HISTORY

The final chapter addresses the problem of ultimate meaning. The approach I take throughout this third chapter is to consider arguments that have led philosophers to conclude that history and existence have no ultimate meaning. These arguments are then addressed and analyzed in light of Augustine's philosophy of life. The following questions are addressed in the first part of this chapter: 1) What constitutes meaning when the object of inquiry is history and existence?, 2) What arguments are raised in opposition to meaning and how does Augustine's philosophy provide a response?, 3) What is Augustine's view of historical destiny and how does his solution compare with other views on destiny?, 4) What role does the earthly city and the city of God play in determining the meaning of history?

Meaning and the Formal Structure of History

Hannah Arendt describes the modern concept of history in the following way: "the modern concept of process pervading history and nature alike separates the modern age from the past more profoundly than any other single idea. To our modern way of thinking nothing is meaningful in and by itself, not even history or nature taken each as a whole, and certainly not particular occurrences in the physical order or specific historical events."[191] If so, the major difference between Augustine's view of history and the modern view of history is the question of its meaningfulness.

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[191] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 63.

The dual features of linearity and unique events, however, are not sufficient to establish meaning in history. To say that life or history has meaning because it proceeds in a linear fashion rather than a cyclical fashion, and that the events are unique to a given historical age, or unique to some person's life, may at some level be important for the way we understand the structure of our existence but these formal characteristics are not sufficient to establish meaning. In fact, if linearity and uniqueness are the sole features of history it is consistent to argue that history is but a collection of unique events moving aimlessly forward.

Having said this, even if these two elements of linearity and uniqueness are alone assumed this does not mean that Augustine's insights on the structure of history are insignificant or that he merely transforms a meaningless circle into a meaningless line. If history is to be meaningful then linearity and unique events are prerequisites: structure is not irrelevant to the problem of meaning.

Furthermore, adding other features to the canvas of history, such as a historical beginning and a historical end, which form part of Augustine's framework of history, do not in themselves establish meaning. We can concede, for example, that history has a beginning in time and go on to argue that this beginning is a chance happening. We can also concede the possibility that human beings will one day drop nuclear bombs on one another and end it all. These features of beginning and end do not by themselves establish a meaningful history. Lowith correctly points out that "only by this reference to an absolute beginning and end has history as a whole a meaning. On the other hand, beginning and end are also not meaningful in themselves but with reference to the story

which they begin and end."[192] According to Lowith not any narrative that takes place within this formal linear structure is meaningful.

In fact, no matter how many features we add to the formal structure of history, these features can never amount to discovering a meaning in history. If there is meaning it must be grounded in something other than its formal structure. A meaningful history requires that the historical narrative itself be significant and that its significance be related to that particular formal structure of a finite linearity, unique events, and end.

Meaning and the Ultimate Context

In order to bring out the essential elements of meaning I will consider a number of contexts in which the theme of meaning is analyzed. I begin by considering the notion of an ultimate context. Some philosophers, for example, argue that attributing an ultimate meaning to a particular life, or sequence of events, depends on whether the ultimate context of existence is meaningful. This claim suggests that the problem of meaning, as it relates to the whole of existence, has a logical precedence over smaller meaning-contexts. If the whole is meaningless then there is no need to search for meaning amongst the parts. Thomas Nagel writes:

> What if your life as a whole did have a point in relation to something larger? Would that mean that it wasn't meaningless after all? . . . If one's life has a point as a part of something larger, it is still possible to ask about that larger thing, what is the point of it? Either there's an answer in terms of something still larger or there isn't. If there is, we simply repeat the question. If there isn't, then our search for a point has come to an end with something which has no point. But if that pointlessness is acceptable for the larger thing of which our life is a part, why shouldn't it be acceptable

[192] Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 169.

> already for our life taken as a whole? Why isn't it all right for your life to be pointless? And if it isn't acceptable there, why should it be acceptable when we get to the larger context? Why don't we have to go on to ask, 'But what's the point of all that?' (Human history, the succession of the generations, or whatever).[193]

Nagel claims that if the whole is meaningless then no matter what relation the individual parts may have to the whole - there can be no ultimate meaning for the parts. Simply being part of some greater entity or cosmic process does not provide the necessary prerequisite for a meaningful existence. The first question of importance is, 'Is the whole meaningful?'

According to Bertrand Russell there is no ultimate meaning to human existence precisely because the ultimate context is inconsistent with cosmic meaning and final purpose. Russell writes,

> That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins - all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.[194]

According to Russell if existence is a product of chance and the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms then the only conclusion is that there is no ultimate meaning; not for the cosmos, not for history, and not for the individual. Secondly, Russell claims that if there is a complete annihilation of the cosmos, which he thinks is

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[193] Thomas Nagel, *Meaning of it All* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 97-98.

[194] Bertrand Russel, *Mysticism and Logic and other Essays* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1917), 48.

reasonable to believe given scientific assumptions, then once again we are faced with the conclusion that life and history have no ultimate meaning. Russell, of course, has not come to his conclusion that life and history are meaningless by examining each individual life or event that occurs. His conclusion is based on the fact that his philosophy of life, which he assumes reflects ultimate reality, leaves him with no other option than to say that this universe has no final meaning. The conclusion that life and history are pointless is a product of contemplating existence as a whole.

Augustine, on the other hand, notes that, "although in each subject there is a wide variety of opinions entertained by individual thinkers, there is no doubt in any one's mind on three points: that there is some cause underlying nature, some form of knowledge, some supreme principle of life."[195] The three branches of philosophy that Augustine refers to is ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Like Russell, Augustine's position on the ultimate context is eloquently stated:

> The God of our worship is he who has created all beings, and ordered the beginning and the end of their existence and their motion. He has in his hands the causes of all that exists; and all those causes are within his knowledge and at his disposition. . . . He also controls the beginning, the progress, and the end. . . . He has created, and he directs, the universal fire, so fierce and violent, to ensure the equilibrium of the natural order in all its vastness. . . . He knows and orders all causes, primary and secondary alike. . . . He instituted the union of male and female to ensure the propagation of children. . . . It is the one true God who is active and operative in all those things, but always acting as God, that is, present everywhere in his totality, free from all spatial confinement, completely untrammeled, absolutely indivisible, utterly unchangeable, and filling heaven and earth with his ubiquitous power which is independent of anything in the natural order. [196]

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[195] Augustine, *City of God*, 11.25.
[196] Ibid., 7.30.

In contrast to Russell, Augustine claims that "God is the supreme reality."[197] The universe and human existence are not a product of chance but the product of intelligence. It is important to point out, as one author puts it, that "the question of God's existence is not simply whether one more thing exists in the inventory of reality. It is a question about the ultimate context for everything else."[198] The problem of meaning naturally leads us to ask questions about the existence of God which in turn can provide the framework for discussing the ontological status of the universe and issues relating to human destiny and historical meaning.

The claim that history is meaningful and the opposite claim that it is not meaningful are both claims that depend on a certain philosophy of life. Certain philosophies of life are either consistent or inconsistent with the possibility of ultimate meaning. The problem of meaning, therefore, is dependent on whether the ultimate context, in which life and history take place, is as Nagel and Russell claim it to be, or as Augustine claims it to be. For now I will simply conclude that the argument for meaning is based on the presuppositions regarding the ultimate context of existence. According to Russell's own criterion, ultimate meaning and purpose is impossible if naturalism is true. If, however, Augustine's ethical theism is correct then it is consistent to claim that there is an ultimate meaning and purpose for personal and historical existence.

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[197] Ibid., 5.11.

[198] T.V. Morris, *Making Sense of it All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 25.

Meaning as an Act of Endowment

The ultimate context provides the framework for thinking about ultimate meaning. It does not, however, solve every problem related to meaning. One must still address how life and history come to have meaning in an ultimate context. This problem can be addressed by first analyzing how things come to have meaning for human beings. It is important to point out that although Nagel and Russell reject an ultimate meaning to existence they are not bound to reject every notion of meaning. Some philosophers, for example, make a distinction between a subjective approach to meaning and an objective approach to meaning. Examples of the subjective approach are here provided first by Karl Popper and then by A.J. Ayer.

> History itself . . . has no end nor meaning, but we can decide to give it both. We can make it our fight for the open society and against its enemies; and we can interpret it accordingly. Ultimately, we may say the same about the 'meaning of life'. It is up to us to decide what shall be our purpose in life, to determine our ends.[199]

And now A.J Ayer's position:

> But without the help of such a myth (religion) can life be seen as having any meaning? The simple answer is that it can have just as much meaning as one is able to put into it. There is, indeed, no ground for thinking that human life in general serves any ulterior purpose but this is no bar to a man's finding satisfaction in many of the activities which make up his life, or to his attaching value to the ends which he pursues, including some that he himself will not live to see realized.[200]

The point being made here is that human beings are capable of bestowing meaning on their activities. T.V. Morris claims that this insight can serve as a general

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[199] Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 2, *Hegel and Marx* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1962), 278.

[200] A.J. Ayer, *The Central Questions of Philosophy* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1977), 235.

thesis about meaning. He calls it the Endowment Thesis: "something has meaning if and only if it is endowed with meaning or significance by a purposive personal agent or group of such agents."[201] Morris states that the act of endowing meaning is especially obvious in reference to words. A word does not carry its meaning as one of its intrinsic properties; words have their meaning by linguistic convention and by agreement among language-users. Karl Lowith makes a similar point about objects. He states,

> The meaning of all things that are what they are, not by nature, but because they have been created either by God or by man, depends on purpose. A chair has its meaning of being a 'chair,' in the fact that it indicates something beyond its material nature: the purpose of being used as a seat. . . . The purpose is not inherent in, but transcends the thing. If we abstract from a chair its transcendent purpose, it becomes a meaningless combination of pieces of wood. [202]

Popper, too, claims that the act of bestowing meaning provides the sole basis for discussing the meaning of life and history: "facts, as such," he writes, "have no meaning; they can gain it only through our decisions."[203] According to Popper, history is meaningful when individuals, acting alone or collectively, seek to bring about certain ends. Apart from this act of bestowing meaning there is no meaning. Each of these examples suggest that meaning is not an intrinsic property but something which is bestowed; meaning is derivative: it is a product of an intentional act. The quest for meaning then is translated into a question about the meaning personal agents give to their activities.

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[201] Morris, *Making Sense of it All*, 56.
[202] Lowith, *The Meaning of History*, 5.
[203] Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol 2, 278.

Meaning and Control

One consequence of the endowment thesis is that we can endow with meaning only those things over which we have the requisite control. That is, if meaning depends on this intentional act then everyone is limited to what is actually in their control. That which is not in their control lies outside their ability to bestow meaning. Ayer, in the previous quote, points out that life "can have just as much meaning as one is able to put into it." To the extent, therefore, that meaning cannot be bestowed on events to that same extent life and events cannot be meaningful.

Morris, for this very reason, argues that the subjective approach to meaning significantly limits an individual's ability to bestow meaning even on personal life. Morris claims that most of the significant events in a person's life lie outside of the realm of personal control. Answering the question, 'what lies outside of our control?' Morris states:

> Well, to put it bluntly, nothing more than birth, life, suffering, and death. And if all this is outside our control, we do not have the requisite control to see to it that our lives are completely meaningful, through and through, from first to last. We can create islands of meaning in this sea of existence we've been given, but it is beyond the power of any of us to endow with meaning the entirety of life itself or the entirety of any of our lives.[204]

Morris is not simply trying to point out that the subjective approach cannot provide an ultimate meaning for life. The point is to highlight the kinds of events that elude personal control. These events just happen to be the most foundational events of our personal history.

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[204] Morris, *Making Sense of it All*, 61.

Admittedly, the notion of control is an ambiguous notion; it is not always clear what kind of control is needed to bestow meaning and whether indeed we are in control. However, in order for Ayer and Popper to establish their position on bestowing meaning on life and history, some sense of control is obviously assumed. It is consistent to argue that the greater the control over life and events the greater one's ability to bestow meaning.

Interestingly, the notion of control is a central theme in Augustine's understanding of how history comes to have meaning. He states, "in his control are all the kingdoms of the earth;"[205] "He . . . is in control of the beginning, the progress, and the end."[206] Elsewhere he states that "no event is to no purpose under the all embracing government of God's providence."[207] It is consistent with Augustine's position to argue that if meaning is bestowed on events by some intentional act and by a person who has the requisite control then, since God is in control of life and history, God is also capable of bestowing meaning on life and history.

Control and the Problem of Freedom

Granting the coherency of the argument thus far we are faced with an obvious problem. If it is assumed that the kind of control necessary to provide ultimate meaning to life and history is a total control then there is no longer any room for human initiative. This appears to be Ayer's objection to the theistic approach presented by Augustine.

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[205] Augustine, *City of God*, 5.12.
[206] Ibid., 11.25.
[207] Ibid., 12.28.

> Either his purpose is sovereign or it is not. If it is sovereign, that is, if everything that happens is necessarily in accordance with it, then this is true also of our behavior. Consequently there is no point in our deciding to conform to it, for the simple reason that we cannot do otherwise. However we behave, we shall fulfill the purpose of this deity; and if we were to behave differently, we should still be fulfilling it; for if it were possible for us not to fulfill it would not be sovereign in the requisite sense. But suppose that it is not sovereign, or, in other words, that not all events must necessarily bear it out. In that case, there is no reason why we should try to conform to it, unless we independently judge it to be good. But that means that the significance of our behavior depends finally upon our own judgments of value; and the concurrence of our deity then becomes superfluous.[208]

Augustine recognizes that if all events are subject to a sovereign control then human freedom becomes problematic. Augustine, however, argues that sovereignty must not be so defined that it cancels human freedom and freedom must not be so defined as to cancel out sovereignty. He writes: "he directs the whole of his creation, while allowing to his creatures the freedom to initiate and accomplish activities which are their own; for although their being completely depends on him, they have a certain independence."[209] Explaining the mechanics and harmony of these two positions is, of course, a difficult matter and Augustine does not shy from the conclusion that after all is said and done there remains a mystery. On the other hand, giving a problem free account of human freedom is a problem for all philosophies of life - whether cyclical, pantheistic, materialistic, or theistic.

Perhaps one of the features that is conspicuously absent in Augustine's *City of God* is how the first cause is related to second causes. It is clear that Augustine distinguishes between a sovereign control and the willful causation of all events. He writes: "God would never have created a man . . . in the foreknowledge of his future

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[208] A.J. Ayer, *The Meaning of Life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 8.
[209] Augustine, *City of God*, 7.30.

evil state, if he had not known at the same time how he would put such creatures to good use, and thus enrich the course of the world history."[210] Or again, "evil men do many things contrary to the will of God; but so great is his wisdom, and so great his power, that all things which seem to oppose his will tend towards those results or ends which he himself has foreknown as good and just."[211] For Augustine, therefore, it is through and in accordance with human freedom that this ultimate plan is fulfilled.

Control and Theory of Progress

An alternative approach is to argue that if an overall pattern is evident in history then that pattern can be taken to provide a meaning in history even if that meaning is not bestowed by any supreme being. One might argue, for example, that within the course of history humanity is moving steadily towards a desirable goal. Bury defines the idea of human progress as,

> a theory which involves a synthesis of the past and a prophecy of the future. It is based on an interpretation of history which regards men as slowly advancing . . . in a definite and desirable direction and infers that this progress will continue indefinitely. And it implies that . . . a condition of general happiness will ultimately be enjoyed, which will justify the whole process of civilization; for otherwise the direction would not be desirable.[212]

Bury recognizes that there is some ambiguity in the idea of 'happiness' and acknowledges that one cannot prove that humanity is in fact moving towards a desirable goal; time alone can tell. Bury does, however, provide a necessary condition for progress. Bury claims that "the process must be the necessary outcome of the psychical and social nature of man; it must not be at the mercy of any external will; otherwise

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[210] Ibid., 11.18.
[211] Ibid., 20.2.
[212] J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Growth and Origin* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1960), 5.

there would be no guarantee of its continuance and its issue, and the idea of Progress would lapse into the idea of providence."[213] It seems that one of the differences between the idea of progress and Augustine's view of providence ultimately depends on whether or not the psychical and social elements of humanity are the sovereign factors in history. The issue of control is once again relevant to this discussion. I assume, however, that it ought to make no difference to Bury whether humans are at the mercy of an external will or at the disposition of an external fate. In either case the progress of humanity might be impeded by something superior to the psychical and social elements. In the end humans could not be guaranteed a happy and desirable destiny.

Bury's condition for progress is not, however, easy to reconcile with another statement he makes to the effect that "it cannot be proved that ultimate attainment depends entirely on the human will. For the advance might at some point be arrested by an insuperable wall."[214] Bury, for example, emphasizes the importance of the continuity of scientific knowledge if progress is to continue and then adds the condition necessary: "assuming that human brains do not degenerate."[215] It appears that Bury is conceding that historical progress is in fact ultimately dependent on factors other than the psychical and social; at least, he concedes that the material elements are as necessary to assure the results of progress as the psychical. Bury also makes the point that "if there were good cause for believing that the earth would be uninhabitable in A.D. 2000 or 2100 the doctrine of Progress would lose its meaning and would automatically disappear." Bury, however, is confident that "the possibility of Progress

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[213] Ibid., 5.
[214] Ibid., 3.
[215] Ibid., 3.

is guaranteed by the high probability, based on astro-physical science, of an immense time to progress in."[216]

It appears then that if Bury's view of progress is to be consistent he must add another condition: the condition being that both historical progress and nature's progress must be different facets of the same process at work. Without this condition I can not see how there can be any certainty about historical progress. This necessary condition, however, confirms the fact that humans are dependent on factors that lie outside their control. The claim that the psychical and social elements of humanity are sovereign cease to be true and the theory of progress becomes deterministic.

Any philosopher of history who assumes that a destiny is guaranteed must also claim that no event will hinder the historical process from reaching that destiny. In other words, if it is assumed that history has a certain goal, then no event which contributes to the historical process will be decisive in stopping the process from arriving at the goal. Assuming then that what is being guaranteed as a goal of history is a 'condition of general human happiness' or an 'ideal state of human freedom and equality': to guarantee such a destiny one must at the same time guarantee that there will be no event in nature, such as the total collapse of our solar system, and no event in history, such as the dropping of nuclear bombs, that can destroy the process from arriving at these particular goals. We certainly do not have, and it is reasonable to think we shall never have, the confidence that such catastrophes cannot or will not happen. That Augustine, therefore, should find the ground and certainty of a meaningful historical destiny in a sovereign God is not surprising.

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[216] Ibid., 6.

Meaning and Destiny

Russell, quoted earlier, claims that the pointlessness of our existence is intensified by the reasonable anticipation of the whole cosmos ceasing to exist in the future. Conversely, if significance is to be assigned to human history annihilation cannot be the end. There must be a purpose for which history takes place. As already noted, a purpose requires a goal. According to Augustine, the goal must be final, ultimate, and permanent.

A philosophy of history can include linearity and a historical goal, and yet from an Augustinian point of view, fail to solve the problem of historical meaning. Augustine's theory of destiny can best be analyzed by comparing it to alternative views of historical destiny. Assuming, for example, two assumptions about history: that there is a fixed pattern in the general scheme of the historical process and a final goal in the historical future. A.J. Ayer has some telling objections. According to Ayer, a teleological approach to history, in which I assume Ayer includes Marx and other theories of progress, does not escape the criticisms raised against a mechanical approach.

> How can life in general be said to have any meaning? A simple answer is that all events are tending towards a certain specifiable end: so that to understand the meaning of life it is necessary only to discover this end. But, in the first place, there is no good reason whatever for supposing this assumption to be true, and secondly, even if it were true, it would not do the work that is required of it. For what is being sought by those who demand to know the meaning of life is not an explanation of the facts of their existence, but a justification. Consequently a theory which informs them merely of the course of events is so arranged as to lead inevitably to a certain end does nothing to meet their need. For the end in question will not be the one that they themselves have chosen. As far as they are concerned it will be entirely arbitrary; and it will be a no less arbitrary fact that their

> existence is such as necessarily to lead to its fulfillment. In short, from the point of view of justifying one's existence, there is no essential difference between a teleological explanation of events and a mechanical explanation. In either case it is a matter of brute fact that events succeed one another in the ways that they do and are explicable in the ways that they are. And indeed what is called an explanation is nothing other than a more general description. Thus, an attempt to answer the question why events are as they are must always resolve itself into saying only how they are. But what is required by those who seek the meaning of life is precisely an answer to their question 'Why?' that is something other than the question 'How?' And just because this is so they can never legitimately be satisfied. [217]

Ayer's distinction between explanation and justification is that an explanation is simply descriptive of how things work whereas a justification, if I understand Ayer's point, provides some moral purpose for the whole process. If all that can be provided is a description of history, even an accurate description, then, according to Ayer, we do not have a justification and thus no meaning for life. A distinction is made between what is or will be the case with what ought to be the case. Augustine makes a similar observation: "it is one thing to tell what has been done, another to show what ought to be done. History narrates what has been done . . . but the books of the haruspices . . . aim at teaching what ought to be done or observed, using the boldness of an adviser, not the fidelity of a narrator."[218]

Augustine's view of historical destiny is not teleological. As Bury points out, "for Augustine, as for any medieval believer, the course of history would be satisfactorily complete if the world came to an end in his own lifetime."[219] The goal of history for Augustine is not simply a predetermined future event which history comes to in due time. History does not naturally reach its goal in the way a seed naturally

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[217] Ayer, *The Meaning of Life*, 8.

[218] Augustine, *Christian Doctrine*, 2.28.44. (Haruspices were a class of priests or prophets in ancient Rome).

[219] Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, 21.

grows into a plant. Historical destiny is not at the end of an inner process but rather it is imposed from outside the process. The end of history is abrupt: it is a transcendental and supra-historical event rather than an immanent event as we find in Marx.

Ayer's objection against a teleological approach raises the question of what constitutes a significant destiny rather than a merely factual destiny. Off hand it appears that all non-theistic approaches to historical destiny must be either teleological, as Ayer defines them, or cyclical such that the end of a cycle merely repeats itself and starts the whole cycle over again, or cataclysmic in which the end is one of total annihilation. If it is correct to assume that meaning must be bestowed by some person(s) then all approaches that are non-theistic cannot establish an ultimate meaning. In this sense the only solution that provides for a significant destiny is when the end of history is an intended and purposeful end.

On this latter point Ayer both agrees and disagrees; he argues that a theistic approach to destiny in the end fairs no better than the teleological alternative.

> Here again, the answer is, first, that there is no good reason whatsoever for believing that there is any such superior being; and secondly, that even if there were, he could not accomplish what is here required of him. For let us assume, for the sake of argument, that everything happens as it does because a superior being has intended that it should. As far as we are concerned, the course of events still remains entirely arbitrary. True, it can now be said to fulfill a purpose; but the purpose is not ours. And just as, on the previous assumption, it merely happened to be the case that the course of events conduced to the end that it did, so, on this assumption, it merely happens to be the case that the deity has the purpose that he has, and not some other purpose, or no purpose at all. [220]

[220]Ayer, *The Meaning of Life*, 8.

Ayer concedes that there is purpose in history if we take an Augustinian approach. Augustine's approach satisfies the problem of the ultimate context and allows for meaning to be bestowed by someone. Ayer's objection, however, is that even if there is a purpose bestowed by a superior being the problem of meaning remains unresolved. Ayer reiterates the argument that "as far as we are concerned, the course of events still remains entirely arbitrary." The course of events remains arbitrary, says Ayer, because "the purpose is not ours." This is the same critique raised against the teleological approach.

Ayer's argument, I believe, entails the following propositions: 1) An end that is imposed by one person on a second person is an arbitrary end from the perspective of that second person. 2) A non-arbitrary end is a end chosen by the individual himself or herself. 3) An arbitrary end, when imposed on someone else, does not serve as a meaningful end. 4) If a superior being imposes an end on history it is not an arbitrary end from the perspective of that superior being. 5) If a superior being imposes an end on history it is arbitrary from the perspective of the person who does not choose that same end. 6) If there is an end imposed on history, those individuals who prefer a different end or no end at all are left with no personal meaning for their existence.

In response, I need to point out that Ayer's argument raises problems for the subjective approach to meaning. Popper, for example, concludes his book *The Open Society and its Enemies* by saying that history badly needs a justification. According to Popper, if there is a justification to be given it must be given not by the process of history itself nor by any deity but by historical agents. If, however, we consider Ayer's argument that life and history is only justified when the purpose is ours, by which

clearly he means every individual's own purpose, then it is questionable whether Popper's subjective approach can do the job. Popper writes,

> History has no meaning, I contend. But this contention does not imply that all we can do about it is to look aghast at the history of political power, or that we must look on it as a cruel joke. For we can interpret it, with an eye to those problems of power politics whose solution we choose to attempt in our time. We can interpret the history of power politics from the point of view of our fight for the open society, for a rule of reason, for justice, freedom, equality, and for the control of international crime. Although history has no ends, we can impose these ends of ours upon it; and although history has no meaning, we can give it a meaning. [221]

Popper appears to be arguing that history can be justified if and only if certain moral ends are valued above other ends. If these ends are not chosen then 'history will be a cruel joke.' Freedom, justice and equality must be valued above political power and ambition. Popper is even willing to say that these ends must be 'imposed' on history which, of course, may involve imposing them on individuals. The implication of Popper's claim, contrary to his conclusion, is that the individual act of bestowing meaning is not sufficient to establish a meaningful history. Only certain ends and choices, which correspond to certain values, are capable of making history meaningful. Martin Luther King's fight for the open society gives meaning to history whereas Hitler's or Napoleon's fight for supremacy do not.

The question of values and morality is certainly important for what constitutes a significant end. This applies equally to history as it does to personal existence. I do not want at this point to delve into Ayer's and Popper's moral philosophy but it seems problematic to understand how a purely subjective approach to meaning can require certain values to be chosen as ends in order that life and history become meaningful.

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[221] Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 2, 278.

More importantly, if a meaningful end can only be meaningful when it is not in any way imposed on someone, as Ayer seems to suggest, then human beings should seek only to make their own personal lives meaningful and forget about historical meaning. Certainly, if human beings must make history meaningful, either the majority of people must impose an end on the minority, or vice versa. In the final analysis there is always someone imposing values and ends on someone else.

Ayer's definition of what constitutes an arbitrary end, however, is problematic. For example, suppose a judge sentences a criminal to life imprisonment for a murder that he has committed. The penalty is imposed on the criminal by someone other than the criminal himself. In this context, one person imposes an end on another person; but it does not follow that the penalty is arbitrary. Even if the criminal testifies that left to himself he would never have chosen such an end, it still does not follow that because he rejects the punishment it is therefore an arbitrary punishment. Granted, some punishments can be arbitrary, but imposing an end on someone else does not necessarily make that end arbitrary; otherwise all punishments are arbitrary. Likewise when Augustine argues that a superior being will impose a day of judgment at the end of history it is precisely in the sense of a judge imposing a penalty or reward that he has in mind.

It might be argued, however, that even though a legitimate penalty is not arbitrary, an imposed end does not provide meaning from the perspective of the criminal. To which one can only reply that a criminal may indeed resist finding any personal meaning in the punishment. On the other hand if one fails to see the proper meaning in the purpose of that punishment it is not necessarily because the punishment

itself is pointless and without some obvious and objective purpose. The problem, in this context, rests with the individual who fails to see the relevancy of the punishment.

All this, of course, assumes one major premise in Augustine's theory: morality is not an arbitrary or insignificant factor when considering the meaning of life and the meaning of history. Augustine's vision of history is without doubt intensely moral. The end of history involves a division between those who did good and those who did evil. The common thread from the beginning to the end of this historical narrative is the moral factor. The goal of history is not some detached and completely irrelevant point oddly ending the story but rather an end that gives meaning to the process of history by connecting the human striving for happiness, which for Augustine is understood in moral terms, and the moral behavior of individuals and nations. Butterfield traces this vision back to Hebrew thought: "the ancient Hebrews are remarkable for the way in which they carried to its logical conclusion the belief that there is morality in the process and the course of history. They recognized that if morality existed at all it was there all the time and was the most important element in human conduct; also that life, experience, and history were to be interpreted in terms of it."[222] To justify history is to provide a moral meaning, and the subjective approach of Popper is no different at this point.

Meaning and Destiny in Existential Context

The next question to consider is what justifies us in choosing a moral meaning above other possible meanings? A quick response to this question is that the moral dimension of life is universal in scope so that every person has some interest in the

[222] Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 68.

moral outcome of life. To answer this question more carefully, however, I will consider the existential context, by which I mean the circumstances and issues surrounding our striving to find a concrete meaning for personal existence. Albert Camus, for example, writes "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."[223] After analyzing meaning in this context I will show how it relates to Augustine's position on historical meaning and human destiny.

Generally, when we want the meaning of a particular word we go to the dictionary and find out its usage(s) and reference(s). The meaning of history and the meaning of life are obviously questions of a different order. Imagine a scenario involving a good friend who says that he is going to end his life because it has no meaning. As one philosopher puts it, his problem is not one that *Webster's Dictionary* can solve.[224] This problem of meaning is rooted in human experience. I say human experience because the problem of meaning applies primarily to human beings. Animals, of course, show evidence of wanting to escape their predators and so continue their existence but humans who reflect on the question of meaning appear to want not simply the opportunity to stay alive but some justification for prolonging their existence.

The philosophical problem of meaning, as it relates to human life, is best approached by considering the existential context which generally prompts us to ask the question, 'Is life and history meaningful?' In doing so one discovers that the problem of meaning is usually related to some very specific issues: 1) The existence or non-

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[223] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (New York: Random House Inc., 1955), 3.

[224] William H. Halverson, *A Concise Introduction to Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House Inc., 1976), 415.

existence of God. This is often a question about the ultimate context of existence. 2) The experience of human injustice; this particular feature of human existence often causes us to raise the question of meaning. 3) The problem of human suffering raises the question of meaning even if it is not a result of human injustice. 4) The problem of an elusive happiness. By an elusive happiness I mean the lack of personal fulfillment and satisfaction one gets from life. Thus we find J.B. Bury claiming that true progress must include the general happiness of humanity. 5) The finality of death. These are essentially the main circumstances that are associated with the problem of meaning. It is precisely these themes that one finds addressed throughout Augustine's *City of God*.

If, as has been argued thus far, life and history are meaningful if and only if there is an ultimate context and a final goal, then that goal can be meaningful for human beings if it provides a significant solution to these particular problems that prompt the search for meaning. If we consider, for example, the problem of evil, not as an ontological problem but as a problem of history, then if history is to be meaningful the goal must address the problem of evil. It is Augustine's position that the problem of human injustice will be fully addressed and solved eschatologically. Writes Augustine: "it will be then made clear that true and complete happiness belongs to all the good, and only to them, while all the wicked, and only the wicked, are destined for deserved and supreme unhappiness."[225] Clearly for Augustine the end is not irrelevant or arbitrary if the meaning of history is closely tied with issues of morality and justice.

One additional way to highlight Augustine's position on destiny is by comparing it to Marx's position. Marx is also intensely moral about historical life; especially about the evils of capitalism and the good of communism. For Marx the goal of history

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[225] Augustine, *City of God*, 20.1.

is a classless society. The key problem within the process of history is a relational problem between two groups, the proletariat and the owners. This tension between classes, according to Marx, will cease to be an issue in the historical future because the economic conditions which alone gave rise to this tension will disappear, leaving the problem of class inequality a thing of the past.[226] Marx, just like Augustine, recognizes that history will be meaningful if the problem of historical injustice is addressed. There is little doubt that the problem of injustice in history is one of the main reasons for raising the question of meaning. If there were no human injustice in this world the existential problem of meaning would be less of an issue.

From Augustine's point of view, a Marxist view of destiny fails to solve the problem of historical injustice. The historical goal in Marx's philosophy does not in fact address the misery, inequalities, and injustices that were done in the past; the goal of history simply ushers into existence a new form of organization which makes future repetitions of those past injustices unrepeatable. Only those who exist in the latter part of history benefit from the just society. The injustice that came prior to this final age is never addressed. Past crimes merely serve as a stepping stone to a more perfect society. History ushers in new conditions for humanity but these new conditions do not really vindicate the past. This is true of all theories of progress; those living in the end alone reap the benefits from the historical struggle. It is arguable that these theories of progress do not solve the existential problem of injustice which gives rise to the problem of meaning in the first place. Whereas, for Augustine, the meaning of history and life are not left for those living at the end of history: all injustice, regardless of time and place, must and will be addressed.

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[226] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penquin Books, 1984), 102-105.

Furthermore, it is arguable that not only does the Marxist view of destiny leave the problem of meaning for those living in the past unresolved, but it leaves the problem of meaning for those in the future unresolved as well. That is, even if we assume that there will be such a future where no human injustice will occur and every person will be politically and economically equal, we are still left with the problem of death. And if death continues as a reality then the problem of suffering remains as well. If death and suffering continue then the problem of happiness is likely to remain as well. Hence the problem of meaning, although slightly improved when human injustice ceases, remains unresolved.

For Augustine unless the eschatological goal addresses the issues of injustice, death and happiness, the problem of meaning is not resolved for the human person. For this reason Augustine claims that the goal must provide a basis for a permanent hope. Augustine argues this point:

> Even the righteous man himself will not live the life he wishes unless he reaches that state where he is wholly exempt from death, deception and distress, and has the assurance that he will for ever be exempt. This is what our nature craves, and it will never be fully and finally happy unless it attains what it craves. In our present state, what human being can live the life he wishes, when the actual living is not in his control? He wishes to live; he is compelled to die. In what sense does he live as he wishes when he does not live as long as he wishes? Even if he should wish to die, how can he live as he wishes, when he does not wish to live? And if the reason why he wishes to die is not that he does not wish to live, but so that he may have a better life after death, then he does not yet live as he wishes, but will do so when by dying he has reached the object of his wish.
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> Come then, let us behold him living as he wishes, since he has put the screw on himself and ordered himself not to wish for what is beyond his power, but to wish for what he can get; in the words of Terence, "Since what you wish is not within your power, direct your wish to what you can achieve." Now is this man happy, just because he is patient in his misery? Of course not! If a man does not love the happy life he certainly does not

> possess it, he must needs love it more dearly than all other things, since everything else that he loves must be loved for the sake of the happy life. Again if it is loved as much as it deserves to be loved (and a man can not be happy unless he loves that life as it deserves) the man who so loves it must inevitably wish it to be eternal. Therefore life will only be truly happy when it is eternal. [227]

Augustine argues that the mere prolongation of life is not sufficient to create a meaningful existence. The prolongation of life addresses the problem of death but it does not solve the problem of meaning or happiness. As pointed out in the preceding chapter, life throughout infinite cycles does not necessary lead to a meaningful existence. Something more than simply an unending life is required. Suicides are often committed precisely because some find life unbearable. Hence immortality is not in itself a sufficient condition for ultimate meaning or happiness; although, according to Augustine, it is a necessary condition.

On the other hand a destiny that in some significant way fulfills the origin, growth, hopes, loves, beliefs, and dreams of human beings is meaningful. It is a certain kind of immortality that is needed to endow life and history with meaning. For Augustine the theistic notion of destiny addresses the craving for a permanent life, it addresses the problem of happiness by anticipating a vision of God, a day of rewards and punishments which addresses the problem of injustice, and a perfectibility which addresses the problem of personal suffering.

A Tale of Two Cities

The meaning of history, for Augustine, involves both a moral and a religious meaning. This vision of history is especially evident in Augustine's presentation of the

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[227] Augustine, *City of God*, 14.25.

two cities. In this section I will briefly describe what Augustine understands these two cities to represent and then show how they contribute to Augustine's understanding of the meaning of life and history.

To begin with, humanity, for Augustine, is originally conceived as a biological and spiritual unity and only later in time divides into two opposing communities. The significance of this scheme for Augustine is that human nature, as is true of all that exists, must be conceived as originally good. It is inconceivable, for Augustine, that humanity's origins should begin morally defective. If human nature begins morally flawed then there can be no accountability or responsibility for those moral defects. There can be no responsibility if there is no original ability. Even worse for Augustine is the conclusion that God himself, the creator of all that has being, must be held accountable for the evil that is now evident in human nature.

Having rejecting Manichean dualism, and yet unable to deny the reality of evil in human life, Augustine argues that since evil has no ontologically independent existence it must have had some beginning in time, not as an object but as a perversion of something originally good. In human beings this perversion originates in the will. Augustine writes: "God created man aright, for God is the author of natures, though he is certainly not responsible for their defects. But man was willingly perverted and justly condemned, and so begot perverted and condemned offspring."[228]

By the time Augustine wrote the *City of God* his argument against Manichean dualism had to be limited in application. It could only be applied to the original state of angels and to the first parents of humanity and subsequently to no one else. The

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[228] Ibid., 13.14.

Pelagian argument claims that in order for human beings to be held responsible for evil the will must be free at all times. The Pelagians affirmed that human nature is capable of fulfilling the moral and spiritual obligations independent of all divine aid. Against the Pelagians Augustine argues that human nature has become vitiated and therefore in need of divine grace. He writes: "the choice of the will, then, is genuinely free only when it is not subservient to faults and sins. God gave it that true freedom, and now that it has been lost, through its own fault, it can be restored only by him who had the power to give it at the beginning."[229] Members of the city of God are not born into the city by natural birth but by divine grace. Hence we have here an unmistakable claim that something transcendent is at work in history.

The subsequent growth of the two cities is determined by love, which for Augustine is the primary motivational force behind human activity and personality: "in one city love of God has been given first place, in the other love of self."[230] The object of love in both cities determines the orientation, allegiance, and ultimately the final destiny of that city. For Augustine these two interacting and competing cities in the world produce history.

Identifying the two cities with their respective loves makes it difficult to distinguish its citizenry by any obvious external features. Augustine writes: "whereby can those two cities be distinguished? Can we anywise now separate them from each other? They are mingled, and from the very beginning of mankind mingled they run unto the end of the world."[231] The two cities are described as having a continuity from

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[229] Ibid., 14.11.

[230] Ibid., 14.1.

[231] Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, trans. A Cleveland Coxe, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), Psalm 65.2.

the origins of humanity to the end; but the lineage can never be fully traced. Each city is made up of members from every nation, tribe, and language: the city transcends the geographical, national, and political boundaries. Augustine is seeking, of course, to establish two cities that includes every member of the human race. These are the only two universal cities; members of the human race belong to one or the other: "although there are many great peoples throughout the world, living under different customs in religion and morality and distinguished by a complex variety of languages, arms, and dress, it is still true that there have come into being only two main divisions, as we may call them, in human society."[232]

The church, for Augustine, embodies the majority of present members belonging to the city of God; but not all who are members of the church necessarily belong to the city of God. There is only one way for the individual to know which city he or she belongs to: "let each one question himself as to what he loveth: and he shall find of which he is a citizen."[233] Augustine defines these two cities primarily by the orientation and values of the respective members. Regarding the city of God Augustine writes, "we must lead a right life to reach the goal of a life of felicity; and this right kind of life exhibits all those emotions in the right way, and a misdirected life in a misdirected way."[234] Even though the cities are commingled and never historically distinct societies, nevertheless, there are certain characteristics that distinguish, if only from a moral and spiritual point of view, one city from the other.

In respect to this orientation Augustine states that one city is seeking to build a meaningful existence on earth while another community lives and aims at an existence

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[232] Augustine, *City of God*, 14.1.
[233] Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, Psalm 65.2.
[234] Augustine, *City of God*, 14.9.

that transcends this world. "The earthly city," Augustine writes, "is not just a pilgrim in this world, but rests satisfied with its temporal peace and felicity. . . . The earthly city is dedicated here, where it is founded, since it has here the end of its purpose and aspiration. . . . This city has its beginning and end on this earth, where there is no hope of anything beyond what can be seen in this world."[235] Far from denying that the earthly city is altogether devoid of meaning, Augustine states that the earthly city creates for itself its own meaning and aims at building a temporal city.

Augustine points to the origin and rise of the city of Rome as an illustration of the earthly city. He considers the historical reasons for Rome's rise to power. To explain how such a kingdom was attained Augustine focuses his attention primarily on the character and motivation of the Romans; his thesis is primarily based on what Roman historians wrote. He writes,

> According to the witness of the historians, the ancient Romans . . . were passionately devoted to glory; it was for this that they desired to live, for this they did not hesitate to die. This unbounded passion for glory, above all else, checked their other appetites. They felt that it would be shameful for their country to be enslaved, but glorious for her to have dominion and empire; and so they set their hearts first on making her free, then on making her sovereign.[236]

The Romans, says Augustine, desired above all other things an earthly city and an earthly glory. Human behavior, according to Augustine, is only understood when one considers its orientation and the end which is ultimately loved. The end, of course, must be attractive to the agents or else it will not command the necessary attention. Moreover the end must not only be attractive but also achievable; at least in principle. Since that earthly city was in fact both attractive and within human reach, the Romans

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[235] Ibid., 15.17.
[236] Ibid., 15.12.

set out to secure that end. However, in order for them to achieve this end, certain means had to be aligned with that end. The greater the end the more demanding and difficult it is to achieve. For Augustine the Romans sacrificed everything in their power to attain that city; their behavior was admirable.

> They took no account of their own material interests compared with the common good, that is the commonwealth and the public purse; they resisted the temptations of avarice; they acted for their country's well being with disinterested concern; they were guilty of no offense against the law; they succumbed to no sensual indulgence. By such immaculate conduct they labored towards honors, power and glory, by what they took to be the true way. And they were honored in almost all nations; they imposed their laws on many peoples; and today they enjoy renown in the history and literature of nearly all races. They have no reason to complain of the justice of God, the supreme and true. They have received their reward in full.[237]

A proper understanding of history, requires a consideration of the humans involved both in terms of their own character and the objects of their love. For Augustine the values the Romans espouse, although not disvalues, are values inferior to other values requiring a higher allegiance. In the end the Roman's choice of values perverted a certain moral order.

Augustine has another purpose in highlighting the examples of Roman devotion to the earthly city. He wants to suggest the reasonableness of imitating and, if necessary, surpassing the devotion given to the earthly city; after all the heavenly city far surpasses the value and glory of the earthly city. Augustine writes,

> It was that Empire, so far-spread and so long-lasting, and given luster and glory by the heroic quality of its great men, that gave to them the return they looked for as a recompense for their resolution, while it sets before us Christians examples whose message we cannot but heed. If we do not display, in the service of the most glorious City of God, the qualities of which the Romans, after their fashion, gave us something of a model, in

[237] Ibid., 5.15.

> their pursuit of the glory of their earthly city, then we ought to feel the prick of shame.[238]

Augustine's discussion about the earthly city has implications about the place of the State in the overall meaning of history. The comments made here relate only so far as the State deals with questions of ultimate meaning. The State is not identical to the earthly city since members of both communities must live together under the State. Nevertheless it is primarily the political state that Augustine has in mind when discussing the achievements of Rome. The State is not to be identified as the ultimate hope for this world. It is not in politics that human beings are to find their ultimate meaning: for this reason the meaning of history is not equated with the rise and fall of empires. It is in light of this fact that Augustine says, "as for this mortal life, which ends after a few days' course, what does it matter under whose rule a man lives, being so soon to die, provided that the rulers do not force him to impious and wicked acts."[239] Empires will come and go but the meaning of history is not intertwined with the success of any political power. For Augustine the city of God neither has as its ultimate allegiance the State nor anything else that is temporal. R.A. Markus comments on Augustine's position regarding the earthly city: "like the ancients, Augustine believed that the life of the wise man is a social life; what must be rejected, he thought, is the claim that felicity can be found in it, that the polis can be the means of securing perfection. More fundamentally, what is being repudiated is the idea of a final end within the range of human achievement."[240]

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[238] Ibid., 5.18.

[239] Ibid., 5.17.

[240] R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (London: Cambridge University Press: 1970), 85.

For Augustine members of the city of God value an end which, although connected to historical life, transcends historical life. Those who love this end must orient their affections and lives towards achieving that end just as the members of the earthly city aim at achieving their end. Perhaps Kai Neilson's analysis of meaning can help clarify what the significance of the two cities is in relation to the meaning of life and history. He makes the following observation: "when we ask, 'What is the meaning of life?' or 'What is the purpose of human existence?' we are normally asking . . . questions of the following types: 'What should we seek?', "What ends - if any - are worthy of attainment?"[241] Neilson's observation is precisely what the two cities represent in Augustine's philosophy.

The two cities represent two permanent communities that will last till the end of history. The earthly city represents those whose meaning, orientation, and affections are this-worldly: whether or not they achieve their ambitions in time is not the point, the point is simply that their ambitions are projected within the confines of earthly time. The second community finds that it is only by assuming a transcendental approach to reality that their experiences, aspirations, and their understanding of life becomes meaningful. P.R.L. Brown sums up Augustine's position:

> The most obvious feature of man's life in this *saeculum* is that it is doomed to remain incomplete. No human potentiality can ever reach its fulfillment in it; no human tension can ever be fully resolved. The fulfillment of the human personality lies beyond it; it is infinitely postponed to the end of time, to the Last Day and the glorious resurrection. Whoever thinks otherwise, says Augustine: 'understands neither what he seeks, nor what he is who seeks it.'
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> For Augustine, human perfection demands so much, just because human experience covers so very wide an area, a far wider area than in

[241] Kai Nelson, "Linquistic Philosophy and the Meaning of Life" *Cross Currents* (Summer 1964): 321.

> most ethical thinkers of the ancient world. It includes the physical body: this dying, unruly thing cannot be rejected, it must be brought into its proper place and so renewed. It includes the whole intense world of personal relationships: it can only be realized, therefore, in a life of fellowship, in a *vita socialis sanctoroum*. It is inconceivable that such claims can be met in this world; only a morally obtuse man, or a doctrinaire, could so limit the area of human experience as to pretend that its fulfillment was possible in this life. Thus, in opening his Nineteenth Book of the *City of God* by enumerating and rejecting the 288 possible ethical theories known to Marcus Varro as 'all those theories by which men have tried hard to build up happiness for themselves actually within the misery of this life', Augustine marks the end of classical thought. For an ancient Greek, ethics had consisted of telling a man, not what he ought to do, but what he could do, and, hence, what he could achieve. Augustine, in the *City of God*, told him for what he must live in hope. It is a profound change. In substituting for the classical ideal of an available self-perfection, the idea of a man, placed as a stranger in an uncomprehending land, a man whose virtue lies in a tension towards something else, in hope, in faith, in an ardent yearning for a country that is always distant, but made ever-present by the quality of his love, that 'groans' for it, Augustine could well be called the first Romantic.[242]

The importance of the doctrine of the two cities highlights the fact that for Augustine humanity has a central role to play. Clearly the two cities suggest that Augustine is not promoting the view that human beings count for nothing in making history. According to his analysis one can not understand Rome apart from her love of glory, her lust for power, her aim to enjoy a lasting reputation in this world. Likewise one can not understand the city of God apart from what motivates its members to live for that eternal city. For Augustine a person will not stumble accidentally into the city of God anymore than the Romans secured an empire by accident. Those who are members of the heavenly city have the city of God as an end and so their lives are different in focus, in orientation, in affection, and in values.

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[242] P.R.L. Brown, "St. Augustine," *Trends in Medieval Political Thought*, ed. Beryl Smalley (Oxford: Basil Blackwood and Mott. Ltd., 1965), 12.

Meaning and Method

Finally I need to say a few words regarding Augustine's epistemological grounds for the certainty of this historical meaning and historical destiny. C.S. Lewis raises some significant philosophical objections to historical meaning and epistemological claims.[243] I will deal with his objections as they apply broadly to what Lewis calls historicism and then situate Augustine's position.

Lewis defines a historicist as one who claims that by the use of one's natural or rational abilities one can discern an inner or ultimate meaning to the historical process. A historicist, in Lewis' sense, includes anyone who "tries to get from historical premises conclusions that are more than historical; conclusions metaphysical or theological."[244] Whether it be someone like Carlyle who refers to history as a 'book of revelations' or Novalis who calls history an evangel, or Hegel who sees in history the progressive self-manifestation of absolute spirit, or evolutionism, when it ceases to be simply a theorem in biology and becomes a principle for interpreting the total historical process, or a village woman who says that her wicked father-in-law's paralytic stroke is a 'judgment on him': these are all fine specimens of what Lewis calls Historicism.

Lewis' article is solely interested with the question of method and the grounds upon which someone can claim that history is meaningful. His own thesis is straightforward; historicism, from a philosophical point of view, is not only a waste of time, it is a dangerous illusion. Lewis notes that the idea of history is understood in at least six different ways.

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[243] C.S. Lewis, "Historicism" *Christian Reflections* (London: Geoffrey Bless, 1967).
[244] Ibid., 101.

> It may mean the total content of time: past, present, and future. It may mean the content of the past only, but still the total content of the past, the past as it really was in all its teeming riches. Thirdly, it may mean so much of the past as is discoverable from surviving evidence. Fourthly, it may mean so much as has been actually discovered by historians working. . . . Fifthly, it may mean that portion, and that version, of the matter so discovered which has been worked up by great historical writers. (This is perhaps the most popular sense: history usually means what you read when you are reading Gibbon.) Sixthly, it may mean that vague, composite picture of the past which floats, rather hazily, in the mind of the ordinary educated man.[245]

Lewis analyzes historicism by attempting to determine in which of these senses the historicist claims to find a meaning in history. According to Lewis the historicist who claims to find meaning in history and support the theory by the use of historical data cannot claim to know history in the first sense because the total content of time is obviously not available to the historicist. The second sense of history requires that the historicist have a total knowledge of the past; again it is obvious that the historicist does not have such knowledge. In the third sense of history the historicist must claim to find meaning in the confines of available evidence. That is, history not in its totality but as it relates to surviving evidence such as is written in manuscripts and found by archeologists. The fourth and fifth sense of history can also be added to the pool from which the historicist finds the meaning of history. The point to be made here is that the historicist must claim that although the data is never fully available, nevertheless the significant data has been captured by historians and therefore the meaning of history can be pieced together from the existing data.

Lewis argues that if it is primarily in this sense that historicists claim to find the meaning of history then there are at least two assumptions: the first assumption is that

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[245] Ibid., 105.

the historicist who claims to have found the meaning of history in the historical texts and surviving evidence must assume that future events are totally irrelevant to understanding the meaning of history; nothing of any importance can ever occur that can radically change one's understanding of the significance of history. Regarding this assumption Lewis writes, "it would surely be one of the luckiest things in the world if the content of time up to the moment at which the Historicist is writing happened to contain all that he required for reaching the significance of total history."[246] As a well known story-teller Lewis goes on to make the following objection:

> A story is precisely the sort of thing that cannot be understood till you have heard the whole of it. Or, if there are stories (bad stories) whose later chapters add nothing essential to their significance, and whose significance is therefore contained in something less than the whole, at least you cannot tell whether any given story belongs to that class until you have at least once read it to the end. Then, on a second reading, you may omit the dead wood in the closing chapters. . . . But we have not yet read history to the end. There might be no dead wood. If it is a story written by the finger of God, there probably isn't. And if not, how can we suppose that we have seen 'the point' already? [247]

Lewis, of course, is correct in pointing out that if our view of a meaningful history depends exclusively on what happened in the past one must assume that nothing in the future will radically affect the course of history or our understanding of it. It is as if, says Lewis, a teenager were to decide what the meaning of his life is after living thirteen years.

Lewis' argument, however, also assumes that one cannot even reasonably anticipate what a meaningful end must be in order for history to be meaningful. Augustine, as I have suggested, seems to argue that there are certain elements that are

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[246] Ibid., 106.
[247] Ibid., 106.

reasonable to anticipate if the end is to make this a meaningful history and existence. The same point applies to Bertrand Russell and others who anticipate oblivion and therefore know what end makes history meaningless. There might be no end to history at which point history will have no ultimate meaning; but if there is a goal it is reasonable to expect that it must involve most, if not all, those characteristics Augustine delineates such as justice, happiness, and immortality. These cravings are determined by our existential context.

Another critique of Lewis' argument is that it is not in fact impossible to think that an event, or a sequence of events, can take place in the past such that if the event is taken to be true it would help determine the meaning of history. For example, if one grants Augustine's belief in the Incarnation then this unique event is obviously significant in the overall understanding of history. Karl Lowith appeals to O. Cullmann's illustration to make this point:

> To illustrate the relation between the 'realized eschatology' and its future reality, we refer to O. Cullmann's comparison of the final *eschaton* with V-Day. In the course of a war the decisive battle may have been fought long before the real end of the war. Only those who realize the decisiveness of the critical battle will also be certain that victory is from now on assured. The many will only believe it when V-Day is proclaimed. Thus Calvary and the Resurrection, the decisive events in the history of salvation, assure the believer of the Day of the Lord in the ultimate future. On the levels of both secular and sacred history the hope in the future is grounded in the faith in an actual event which has come to pass. The tension between the crucial battle and the final V-Day extends over the whole interim period as the last, and yet not ultimate, phase of the war, for the ultimate issue is peace. The outcome of the crucial battle suggests that the end is already near, and yet it is still indefinitely remote, for one cannot safely foretell what exertions the enemy might be able to make to defer his final defeat.[248]

[248] Lowith, *Meaning in History*, 188-189.

The second assumption of the historicist, according to Lewis, is that although the total data of the past is unavailable, all the necessary data needed to understand the meaning of history is available. Lewis finds this assumption equally suspect. Granting the fact that we do not have the total data of the past Lewis challenges his readers to compare the data that we have with the data that we do not have. (Obviously we have to use our imagination at this point). He reminds his readers that "a single second of lived time contains more than can be recorded. And every second of past time has been like that for every man that ever lived. The past . . . in its reality. was a roaring cataract of billions upon billions of such moments."[249] In comparison with the missing innumerable pieces of the historical puzzle we have only a handful of facts. How then, asks Lewis, can we venture to say that the ultimate meaning of history is evident from these few remaining fragments. And how can we be certain that these texts have discovered the central motif of history? Lewis responds,

> First, we had to abandon the parts of that story which are still in the future. Now it appears we have not even got the text of those parts which we call 'past'. We have only selections; and selections which, as regards quantity, stand to the original text rather as one word would stand to all the books in the British Museum. We are asked to believe that from selections on that scale men (not miraculously inspired) can arrive at the meaning or plan or purport of the original. This is credible only if it can be shown that the selections make up in quality for what they lack in quantity. The quality will certainly have to be remarkably good if it is going to do that.[250]

For Lewis there is no good reason to believe that the quality of the existing data is sufficiently good to prove what the historicist wants to show. Lewis claims that the texts that are available contain only what was important to the historical authors writing at that time. One must assume that all the significant details relating to the ultimate

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[249] Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 107.
[250] Ibid., 108.

meaning have been captured in the historical texts. And yet one must grant that plenty of manuscripts have been lost and perhaps with these manuscripts certain crucial information has been lost also. Lewis then asks some rhetorical questions: 'how is it that only the important and necessary manuscripts have survived?' and 'Is this not the flukiest thing you have ever heard?' The strength of Lewis' questions is that he enables us to see the kinds of assumptions a historicist must presuppose in order to argue that we can have knowledge of the meaning of history.

Since, according to Lewis, the historicist's assumptions are unplausible, the historicist must be referring to history in the sixth sense. That is, in a "vague, composite picture of the past which floats, rather hazily, in the mind of the ordinary educated man." In other words it is history in the most obscure sense possible. Lewis goes on to conclude that "it is not at all surprising, of course, that those who stare at it too long should see patterns. We see pictures in the fire. The more indeterminate the object, the more it excites our mythopoeic or 'esemplastic' faculties. To the naked eye there is a face in the moon; it vanishes when you use a telescope."[251] For Lewis, in light of all these points, it is better to confess ignorance about the meaning of history and simply leave the matter unsolved.

Lewis does not think it inappropriate to call Augustine a historicist, although he notes that "he became one in order to refute Pagan historicism."[252] Augustine does at times appear to claim knowledge of the inner meaning of events. One example of Augustine's historicism is evident when he inquires into "why God was willing that the Roman Empire should extend so widely and last so long."[253] He was, as Lewis points

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[251] Ibid., 104.
[252] Ibid.
[253] See Preface to Book 5 of Augustine, *City of God*.

out, on equal turf with the Pagans since both Augustine and the Pagans appeal to moral factors to explain historical events. M.C. D'Arcy, however, defends Augustine and makes the following objections to Lewis:

> Mr C.S. Lewis is so concerned to unmask the errors of historicism that he tells us little of the meaning he attaches to history. The historian must not look for an 'inner meaning' and he must not go beyond the conclusion of his premises. This might be interpreted in a positivist sense and exclude the introduction of moral and religious judgments. If they are excluded then he removes from human action what makes it truly human. If they are not excluded then it is difficult to draw the line between history and historicism.

Elsewhere D'Arcy writes,

> Religion and religious movements are part of history, and their tenets have certainly affected human motives. Moreover, if, perhaps on other grounds, we are convinced of the truth of some religious doctrines, for example, the providence of God, are we to deny ourselves this knowledge when we approach history? [254]

There is obviously more than one approach to history amongst theists. It must be noted, however, that after Augustine gives his interpretation regarding the rise of Rome, he qualifies his interpretation by saying, "but it may be that there is another more hidden cause on account of the diverse merits of mankind, which are better known to God than to us."[255] In other words, he invites his readers to take his interpretation of events with a grain of salt. Certainly Augustine did think that the moral dimension is relevant to understanding history. In this point D'Arcy is closer to Augustine than Lewis. On the other hand, there are no moral principles known to Augustine that could explain the details of history. History is morally ambiguous; in

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[254] M.C. D'Arcy, *The Meaning and Matter of History: A Christian View* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1959), 161-162.

[255] Augustine, *City of God*, 5.19.

fact this moral ambiguity in history is partly why Augustine argues that ultimately the meaning of events cannot be known rationally or empirically.

The Mystery of History

Augustine's major emphasis throughout the *City of God* is on the overwhelming mystery of historical events. In this sense he is not far from echoing Lewis' position. He writes, "the providence of the Creator and Governor of the universe is a profound mystery, and his judgments are inscrutable, and his ways cannot be traced."[256] Elsewhere he states,

> We do not know by what judgment God causes these situations, or else allows them to happen; for in him there is the highest power, the highest wisdom, the highest justice, and in him there is no weakness, no unreason, no injustice. . . . However, when we reach that judgment of God . . . then it will become plain that God's judgments are perfectly just, not only all the judgments that will then be passed, but also all the judgments passed from the beginning, and all which are to be pronounced hereafter until that judgment day. At that day too, it will become evident by what just decision of God it comes about that at this present time so many, in fact almost all, of the just judgments of God are hidden from moral perception and understanding. However, in this matter one thing is not hidden from the faith of the devout; and that is, that what is hidden is just.[257]

Augustine's emphasis on mystery cannot be downplayed for it is virtually a continual statement in the *City of God*. The point is that the relationship between historical events and the plan that they are in accordance with is clearly hidden from human understanding. This is precisely what Hegel found unattractive about Augustine's approach, even though he does not mention him by name. Hegel complains that, "it is this very plan which is supposed to be concealed from our view: which it is

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[256] Ibid., 1.28.
[257] Ibid., 20.2.

deemed presumption, even to wish to recognize."[258] I agree with Karl Lowith who argues that Augustine's position on history has more in common with the skeptic than it does with many historicists. Lowith writes: "the skeptic and the believer have a common cause against the easy reading of history and its meaning."[259]

But if all is mystery how can there be any empirical, historical, or philosophical evidence on which to base one's claim that there is an ultimate meaning? Augustine, of course, does not take the position that people should simply act *as if* there is meaning in history. He claims instead that there really is a meaning in history. Augustine's epistemological ground for making the claim that the meaning of history and the content of historical destiny are certain and knowable is based on a belief in revelation: "the City of God of which we are treating is vouched for by those Scriptures. . . . From such testimonies as these . . . we have learnt that there is a City of God."[260]

Prophecy and the Meaning of History

According to Augustine had the meaning and destiny of history not been revealed these themes could never be established with any certainty. Augustine argues, however, that historical purpose is partially evident in fulfilled prophecy. After all, the best way to know that someone did something on purpose is if they announce it beforehand. J.L. Mackie concedes that such an approach counts as a reasonable way to prove the miraculous in history. He writes,

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[258] G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1956), 13.

[259] Lowith *Meaning in History*, v.

[260] Augustine, *City of God*, 11.1.

> Prophecy could be regarded as a form of miracle for which there could in principle be good evidence. If someone is reliably recorded as having prophesied at T1 an event at T2 which could not be predicted at T1 on any natural grounds, and the event occurs at T2, then at any later time T3 we can assess the evidence for the claims both that the prophecy was made at T1 and that its accuracy cannot be explained either causally (for example, on the ground that it brought about its own fulfillment) or as accidental, and hence that it was probably miraculous.[261]

This is precisely the strategy Augustine adopts in his polemics against Faustus.

> In view of the manifest accomplishment of so many remarkable predictions, no candid person would despise either the things which were thought worthy of being predicted in those early times with so much solemnity, or those who made the predictions. To none can we trust more safely, as regards either events long past or those still future, than to men whose words are supported by the evidence of so many notable predictions having been fulfilled.[262]

Augustine, of course, must show where these prophecies are found both in their prediction and in their fulfillment. An apologetic appeal to prophecy requires some agreement as to what constitutes a prophecy and what constitutes a fulfillment. To this end Augustine tries to establish some reasonable principles of verification. Augustine, for example, distinguishes between prophecy and prediction. All prophecies predict but not all predictions are prophecies. To predict an eclipse, as Thales is said to have done, is not a prophecy. A true prophecy requires the element of the miraculous. Moreover a prophecy must consist of something clearly stated in history. Prophecies are to be disqualified if they can be shown to have been written after the predicted event had taken place. From Augustine's point of view prophecies can only be taken seriously if there is a sure way of determining both the time of the prediction as well as its

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[261] J.L Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 23.

[262] Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean*, trans. Rev. R. Stothert, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. IV, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 13.14.

fulfillment. Another requirement is that prophecies be not so general, vague, or ambiguous that any of numerous interpretations may fit. Furthermore, fulfillment of prophecies can not be a result of a lucky guess. These are the kind of rules and principles that Augustine and someone like Mackie would agree upon as a reasonable way to discuss the issue of a valid prophecy. I will not pursue this line of thought any further. My main point is that Augustine thinks that the fulfillment of prophecy constitutes objective evidence for events fulfilling a purpose in history.

Conclusion

What I have attempted in this chapter is to present a viable approach to meaning in history. Ultimate meaning in history, according to some of these philosophers, demands an ultimate context where existence itself can have a meaning and a purpose. Secondly, if there is any meaning then it must be bestowed by some person who has the necessary control. The third point is that history is meaningful if and only if there is a final and unique goal. The fourth point is that in order for the goal to be meaningful and not arbitrary it must be morally relevant to our existential context. Finally, if there is a meaning to existence and history it must be an end worthy of pursuit. These are the points that Augustine affirms regarding the meaning of history and the meaning of personal existence. It is in weighing all these philosophical and theological contexts of discussion that Augustine's vision of a meaningful history is to be both defended and understood.

CONCLUSION

In the first chapter I trace Augustine's attempt to provide a coherent linear alternative to the theory of infinite cycles. This is Augustine's first step in undermining exact recurrence. For if there is a viable coherent alternative to viewing the whole of reality, other than as a merry-go-round, then history and existence can be interpreted as possibly 'going somewhere' definite.

In the second chapter I trace Augustine's second step in undermining exact recurrence. The focus is on the consequences of cyclical theory. According to Augustine, exact recurrence destroys the fundamental elements of human personality by reducing existence to an inevitable process determined by impersonal and inflexible laws. If, as some have claimed, the initial attraction to the eternal return is that it provides an orderly and rational account of the changing universe then, as Augustine points out, it does so only at the expense of destroying meaning for life and history. In the final analysis the doctrine of exact recurrence tells us nothing about the significance of human history and offers nothing of comfort for personal existence: it is a metaphysic without hope.

In contrast, the third chapter presents a metaphysic of hope. Augustine's final step is to argue that ultimate meaning is in the end only possible if a righteous and loving supreme being is in control of life and history, guiding the whole complex of existence, with a hidden and mysterious providence, towards an end that glorifies God and fulfills the genuine hopes and aspirations of human beings who anticipate the moral justification of existence and long to enter into a relationship with this divine being.

The *City of God* assumes that this quest for a final and ultimate meaning for life and history is a basic quest of the human spirit. At one level of Augustine's analysis of the human person and the human community he equates love and meaning. That which a person or community loves becomes for them the meaning and purpose for living. The two cities are therefore ultimately distinguished by the objects of their love. Love, for Augustine, is a fundamental element of human personality. If there is a fulfillment and final meaning for the city of God it is only in the fulfillment of its love. In the end, Augustine's philosophy of life is a metaphysic of hope. It is a posture of faith: an assurance of things hoped for and a conviction about things still unseen.

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