Augustine’s Three Discoveries: Faith, Will and History

Augustine and the City of God

Augustine (354-430) is usually treated, and quite justifiably so, as the first medieval philosopher in European intellectual history. However, we all know that he was neither medieval, nor a philosopher, nor, for that matter, a European. He was born and raised a Roman citizen in North Africa, where he was educated to be a public speaker, to become a professor of rhetoric first in Carthage and then in Rome, who, after a brief stint in the imperial court in Milan, having converted to Christianity, returned to Africa, where he became the bishop of Hippo and spent the rest of his life there, tending to his flock, writing theological treatises, while getting involved in sometimes rather bitter theological debates.

But this brief summary of apparently conflicting, yet equally justified characterizations merely emphasizes Augustine’s significance as a transitional figure in intellectual history, straddling fundamentally different periods, indeed leading humanity from one into another within the time-span of a single human life. Looking at Augustine from this perspective, as one should especially in the context of a large-scale survey of intellectual history, approaching his monumental City of God, I believe we should focus precisely on those aspects of this work that point in the direction of the “new era”.

Therefore, aside from the practical consideration of the impossibility of covering every aspect of this huge and enormously rich work in one sitting, I suggest we focus on those three main aspects of it that express what proved to be the “lasting novelties” of Augustine’s thought: his discoveries of faith, will and history as appropriate subjects of philosophical reflection. To be sure, suggesting that these are Augustine’s discoveries is not the same as saying that no one before him had ever reflected on these issues in a philosophical context; rather, the suggestion is that it is Augustine’s work that places them in the focus of philosophical reflection in a way that is both novel and lasting for centuries, especially in the so-called Middle Ages, but also beyond, indeed, up to the present time.

That one of Augustine’s main concerns in the City of God is religious faith (just as it is in all his works and throughout his life) is obvious from the very polemic that prompted its writing. For the ostensible aim of the work is apologetic: it is designed to refute the charge against Christianity that it undermines the Roman Empire. But this actual, political-ideological aim is quite obviously subordinated from the beginning of the work to a grand design of surveying the role of Christian faith not only in the life of Rome, but generally in the life of humanity.

Thus, the first two parts of the work (spanning books 1-5 and 6-10, respectively) cover criticisms of pagan religion, in its popular mythical form as well as in its moral and political role in the history of Rome (in the first part), and insofar as it is the subject matter of corresponding reflections in “mythical” and “civil” theology (distinguished as such by Varro, considered in books 6 and 7). Finally, Augustine criticizes the “natural theology” of the (Platonist) philosophers (in books 8-10). As Augustine himself summarizes this critical part of the work in the last paragraph of book 10: “The first five books have been written against those who imagine that the gods are to be worshipped
for the sake of the good things of this life, the latter five against those who think that the
cult of the gods should be kept up with a view to the future life after death.” (p. 426)

It is only after this critical survey that, in the third part, spanning books 11-14, Augustine
launches his own positive project, surveying Biblical revelation about creation, its order,
and its unfolding purpose in history, revealing the origins and ends of the two cities: the
earthly city (in the end, the city of the damned) and the City of God (ultimately, the city
of the saints). The fourth part, spanning books 15-18, provides a detailed account of
human history, as the story of the separation of the two cities in humanity, based on their
different ends, leading one part of humanity to salvation and the other to damnation.
Finally, the fifth part, spanning books 19-22, lays out the ultimate ends themselves, the
complete separation of the two cities in the resurrection, leading to eternal damnation for
the wicked and to eternal peace for the blessed.

The concordance of faith and reason

Viewed from the perspective of this “grand scheme”, it should be clear that religious faith
for Augustine is not merely some sort of credulity concerning supernatural things, and
religion is not just a social institution designed to foster good morals and to sustain civil
order. For his criticism of pagan religion shows precisely that the credulity that is the
subject matter of “fabulous theology” is only the breeding ground of superstition, and the
religion that is the subject matter of “civil theology” easily deteriorates into mere mass
manipulation. Indeed, Augustine’s faith is not even the non-mythical and non-
institutionalized faith of the philosophers, based on their own theoretical speculations, for
evén if it may contain a grain of truth, it is so susceptible to error that it can, and in fact
did, easily collapse into one of the other two sorts. For this sort of faith, the subject matter
of Varro’s “natural theology”, is still a mere human institution, not based on the Word of
God, which alone can be the foundation of the true faith that Augustine is after.

Does this mean that Augustine rejects “natural theology” in the sense of purely rational
speculation about things divine, or indeed any sort of rational investigation in matters of
faith? Absolutely not. On the contrary, as it should be clear from his discussion of the
history of philosophy up to his time, culminating in Neo-Platonic philosophy, Augustine
views all rational investigation in philosophy as leading up to the revealed truths of faith,
which are the proper subject matter of what may be called “rational theology”. Thus, to
get a good grasp on Augustine’s conception of the relationship between faith and reason,
which is going to be one of the fundamental themes in medieval philosophy and
theology, the first text we should consider in some detail ought to be Augustine’s “history
of philosophy”, in chapters 2-12 of book 8.

In Augustine’s treatment, the history of philosophy up to his time exhibits a steady
movement from a merely theoretical, mostly materialistic explanation of natural
phenomena to an ever more subtle realization of the nature of the ultimate, non-material
cause of all these phenomena, a realization that is not merely theoretically important, but
one that has vital practical importance, with far-reaching implications as to how we
should live our lives.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that after a brief survey of pre-Socratic philosophy,
Augustine praises Socrates for finally bringing moral issues under philosophical scrutiny.
But after Socrates, the palm goes to Plato and his followers for establishing the system of the major philosophical disciplines and for launching, within that framework, a systematic search for the ultimate Truth in speculative philosophy, and for the ultimate end, the Supreme Good, in practical philosophy. Therefore, for Augustine, Plato’s enterprise amounts to a search for God, namely, “to find in him the cause of existence, the principle of reason, and the rule of life.” Since “those three things … correspond to the three divisions of philosophy: natural, rational and moral”. (8, 4, p. 304) These philosophical disciplines, therefore, are just diverse pathways to the realization (both in the speculative and in the practical sense of the word) of the same ultimate truth and ultimate end that every man naturally desires whether they know it or not. Indeed, Augustine claims that materialist thinkers, such as the Epicureans or the Stoics, were also after the same ultimate truth and ultimate end, however, because of their sense-bound imagination, they just failed to realize what in fact it was that they were looking for, and thus kept looking in all the wrong places. At this point, toward the end of chapter five of book eight (8, 5, pp. 306-307), Augustine provides a brief summary of his argument for God’s existence he had worked out in more detail in his De Libero Arbitrio. However, quite importantly, he provides this piece of reasoning here not in order to prove the existence of God, which he never seriously calls into doubt anyway; rather, he invokes that proof in order to show what it was that the ancient materialists missed in their reasonings that led them astray in their natural philosophy.

By contrast, the Platonic philosophers did not miss this point, namely, that the visible universe exhibits a natural hierarchy of perfection on the top of which one finds the human soul, of which we just know that it cannot be material, given that material objects can only exist in the soul in their immaterial images. However, the soul cannot be the source of all material perfection or even of its own finite and mutable immaterial perfection, whence all these perfections must come from an even superior source, which must ultimately be the immutable, infinite source of all perfection, that is, God.

Clearly, the point of this piece of reasoning, whether it actually works or not, is not to convince atheists, but rather to show that in the last analysis it points to the exact same truth that is held by the Christian faith, based on the revelation of the Scriptures. Indeed, this is precisely why it is perfectly reasonable to hold by faith both those revelations that we can and those that we cannot prove by reason. For if some alleged revelation is utterly unreasonable, coming from an unreliable source, such as the myths of the poets presenting gods as sometimes even inferior to humans, then it is reasonably rejected as being mere fable or superstition. But if some revelation is in perfect accordance with reasonable philosophical conclusions, which at the same show that the source of this revelation must be precisely the source of all truth, then it is perfectly reasonable to accept from it on faith not only what reason can prove, but also what is beyond the capacity of human reason.

In its speculative role, therefore, faith is not contrary, but rather complementary to reason. To be sure, this idea is not entirely original with Augustine. In fact, we can get a hint of it already in Plato’s Phaedo, in the words of Simmias before introducing a major objection to Socrates’ argument for the immortality of the soul: “I feel myself (and I dare say that you have the same feeling) how hard or rather impossible is the attainment of certainty about questions such as these in the present life. And yet I should deem him a
coward who did not prove what is said about them to the uttermost, or whose heart failed him before he had examined them on every side. For he should persevere until he has achieved one of two things: either he should discover, or be taught the truth about them; or, if this be impossible, I would have him take the best and most irrefragable of human theories, and let this be the raft upon which he sails through life - not without risk, as I admit, if he cannot find some word of God which will more surely and safely carry him.”

This is exactly Augustine’s attitude, however, with the enormous difference that he thinks he has already found that word of God that Plato was merely yearning for. And he thinks he can think this quite reasonably, based on the fundamental agreement between the God of Plato and the God of Moses. Thus, Augustine is convinced that so much agreement in their teachings cannot be mere coincidence: that they both teach the same, one based on reason, the other based on revelation, shows that true faith and true reason must agree with each other. For if both proclaim the same truth, then faith cannot contradict reason, for truth cannot contradict truth only falsity can. Thus, whenever a perceived conflict emerges then we made a mistake either in our reasonings or in the interpretation of our principles. Therefore, what we need to do in such a case is recheck our reasonings or revise our interpretation, both in philosophy and in theology, which is a fundamentally rational task in both cases. So, this is the idea that after Augustine fundamentally changed the relationship between faith and reason, i.e., theology and philosophy, at least for the coming centuries of the Middle Ages: the idea of the necessary concordance between true faith and well working human reason. This idea then played itself out in various forms in various rational conflicts throughout the Middle Ages, until it got swept away by the revolt of reason in the Enlightenment, to leave us with the utterly eclectic picture we find ourselves facing today, where we have the whole range of possible attitudes from bigoted fideism to militant atheism. In fact, amidst all the clamor, one rarely meets nowadays a principled assertion of the necessary concordance of faith and reason espoused by Augustine.

But Augustine went even further. For him, the necessary concordance between faith and reason means that faith is needed not only in such things that are beyond reason, but also in things that reason could quite adequately handle, though not without error. For true faith also has an illuminative role. It safeguards reason from its failings, which is especially needed in the corrupt state of human nature after the Fall. So, from this perspective it should be clear that for Augustine faith has not only the theoretical role discussed so far, but through this, as a “channel” of divine illumination, it also has a crucial practical role. Indeed, for Augustine faith is not a pure theoretical affair, and neither is philosophy. As he famously proclaims: Nulla est homini causa philosophandi, nisi ut beatus sit – “The only reason for man to do philosophy is to become happy”. De Civ. 19, 1. But faith is not just the mere theoretical assent to certain truths, but also a fundamental commitment to acting on such truths, that are not only believed to be true, but are also believed to be good to believe. Therefore, if reason illuminated by faith and faith informed by reason proclaim the same truth about an essentially “value-charged” reality, then this truth should serve as the frame of reference for our judgments of value, and correspondingly for our choices and actions.
Augustine’s ontology

This frame of reference is provided for Augustine by the ontological insight that there is an objective hierarchy of being in reality. This hierarchy concerns the arrangement of all beings with respect to the perfection of their natural kind. Individuals of the same kind may be more or less perfect to the extent that they may more or less perfectly realize their nature’s potential in various respects, but they are on the same level in respect of their natural potential. Individuals of different kinds, however, are different in the range of perfections available to them on account of their nature, so these things are different in their essential perfections. Therefore, the ordering principle according to which things of different natures are arranged on this ontological hierarchy is the range of their natural perfections, which enable those higher up on the hierarchy to rule in some way those on the lower levels.

Now, since the opposite of perfection is some defect, or privation, that is, the lack of some perfection, and the lack of something is its non-being, it is clear that only that can be absolutely perfect which has no defect in any respect, which has no non-being in any respect. Furthermore, since what has some defect is certainly worse off than that which is flawless, only that can be absolutely good, which has no defect in any respect. Therefore, only that is absolutely perfect and so, absolutely good, which is absolutely being, which has no defect or privation, i.e., no non-being in any respect. But this absolutely good and perfect being is what Augustine describes in several places as “the God of gods”, who is pure being; “He Who Is”. So, God is that absolutely perfect being who has to be the most. Therefore, it is this being that marks out the top of the ontological hierarchy: that than which no more perfect being can possibly exist.

This being has to be simple. For whatever has parts of any sort can have something in respect of some part which it does not have in respect of some other part, because of the distinctness of the parts. So if God had some parts, he could have some perfection in respect of some part that he does not have in respect of some other part. So, He could possibly not be absolutely perfect in all possible respects, which is absurd. Therefore, God cannot have any parts of any sort, which means God is absolutely simple.

So God, on the top of the ontological hierarchy, is the absolutely simple, perfect, and hence absolutely good being, whose being is unmixed with any sort of non-being, and so whose goodness is untainted by any evil, whose perfection is immune from any imperfection, and whose simplicity excludes any parts, whether in space, or in time, or in any other possible dimension. So God, unlike all things in our experience, does not exist in time, but before all time, in the indivisible present of eternity.

But then, given divine perfection and simplicity, it further follows that anything other than God has to differ from God precisely in not having this absolute perfection. This, however, does not mean that anything that is not God is defective. This only means that it cannot have that absolute perfection which God has, for its perfection is necessarily limited in some respect or other. But limited perfection does not mean the lack of perfection; it only means that there is a certain degree to this perfection. This limited perfection, characteristic of a certain natural kind, however, is defective in a singular entity of that kind if this entity does not have the perfection that it could have and should have, as is allowed and demanded by its nature.
The lack of some perfection allowed and demanded by the nature of the thing, being the lack of the thing’s attainable goodness, is some evil afflicting the thing. But then, since evil is just a lack, a privation of the goodness of the thing allowed and demanded by its nature, and any goodness of the thing is some act of being of the same, it is clear that it is not possible for something to exist which is pure evil, without any goodness whatsoever. So whenever something is judged to be bad or evil, we should always be able to find that particular sort of defect which is the lack of a perfection that the thing could have and should have by its nature, but for some reason does not have.

All things, therefore, are arranged in this universal scheme: on the top of the hierarchy there is God, the absolute being in absolute perfection; at the opposite end there is formless matter, which has the lowest degree of being and perfection. All other things are in between these two poles, arranged according to their essential perfections allowed and demanded by the nobility of their nature, ranging from lifeless material beings to living bodies, to sensitive, and to intelligent, yet still bodily life-forms, and to intelligent non-material life forms, such as separate human souls and angels. The singulars of each nature are on the same level in their essential perfection, but they differ individually with regard to how well they live up to the standard of that nature, set for them by the divine idea by which they were preconceived in eternity.

The main divide in this scheme, then is that between creator and creature. But among creatures, the main dividing line is that between material and immaterial, or bodily and spiritual. Being a composite of a material body and a purely spiritual soul, it is precisely on this borderline that man is constituted. It is this peculiar location of man in this ontological scheme that grounds Augustine’s anthropology, both in respect of the cognitive, theoretical, and of the active, practical aspects of human life.

The problem of evil and the irrationality of created will

This is, therefore, the ontological picture we have to have in mind as we approach Augustine’s treatment of the origins and ends of the two cities in book 11 of the City of God. And so, this is the picture that marks out the two poles for the choices of the will governing a rational life. For the choices of the will are determined either by the proper desire to share in divine perfection or by the inordinate desire for things beneath itself. Accordingly, these choices themselves constitute moral good, which consists in the proper direction of the will, or evil, which consists in the misdirection, i.e., the lack of proper direction of the will.

The starting point of Augustine’s discussion is the necessary goodness of God’s creation. This of course immediately begs the question: whence does evil arise in this creation? In this regard we have to distinguish two sorts of evil, just as Augustine does: namely, natural evil and moral evil. Natural evil is some defect arising with necessity from the contrary actions of things of limited nature. Thus, natural evil is a necessary concomitant of the workings of nature, in which what is good for one cannot always be good for the other, but is always better for the perfection of the whole, whether we realize this or not. (To be sure, this is no comfort to anyone hit by a natural disaster, but the point of a theodicy is not to give comfort, but to show how it is possible for evil to exist in God’s creation.) In any case, it should be clear that God is not to blame for natural evil, for then
He might as well be blamed for creating at all, which is absurd, since creation is the source of any and all creaturely goodness in the first place. Furthermore, a natural agent acting by the necessity of its nature cannot be blamed either; after all, we certainly cannot blame fire for burning, even if it is burning our flesh. Thus, natural evil is evil with no one to blame for.

By contrast, moral evil is another sort of metaphysical evil, namely, the defect of the will of a rational creature, the defectiveness of which does carry moral blame, namely, the blame of the rational creature who allows his or her God-given good will to turn bad.

But how can that happen? For Augustine, the first instance of moral evil in creation is the fall of the devil, which prefigures the fall of man, which in turn prefigures each and every instance of moral sin, especially the first one, in every single human life. (In Augustine’s life, in particular, this “primal sin” was the apparently trivial prank of stealing his neighbor’s pears just “for the heck of it”, famously described along these lines in the Confessions). Thus, the basic “mechanism” of sin is the same in all these cases; therefore, in approaching this issue we should analyze together the parallel passages about the fall of angels in book 12 (cc. 1-10, 22-28), and about the fall of man in books 13 (cc. 1-8) and 14 (cc. 11-15).

The most puzzling questions in this connection are the following:

(1) Why would anyone want to sin? After all, since sin is some evil, and evil is some defect, sin certainly harms the sinner; therefore, not to sin is certainly better than to sin. But then why would anyone not choose what is better over what is worse?

(2) If sin stems from free will, why didn’t God prevent sin from arising, by not giving free will in the first place?

(3) If God foreknows that someone will sin, and whatever God knows is necessarily the case, isn’t sin inevitable?

(4) Why does God put us through all the trials and tribulations of this life? Why doesn’t he create us with an immutably good free will like his own, or that of the good angels, or that of the souls of the saints?

Addressing the question of (1) why anyone would want to sin, we should realize in the first place the paradoxical nature of sinning. For if the will is rational desire, as it is defined by Aristotle, then it seems natural that the will would always choose the best alternative presented as such by reason. So, perhaps, there is something that somehow makes the will “disoriented”, thereby making it miss its goal, namely, choosing the best possible alternative. Apparently, this is precisely the line of reasoning behind two paradigmatic answers to the problem of the origin of moral evil, both of which were explicitly rejected by Augustine.

(a) The “Socratic” answer: what makes the will go wrong is our ignorance, some cognitive failure, on account of which we mistake the apparent good for the real good – so we rationally, but mistakenly, choose the lesser good, or something that is in itself evil.

(b) The “Manichean” answer: according to this conception, although the will in itself is good and striving after the good, sometimes it is simply overwhelmed by some evil,
material principle, so it is some extrinsic compulsion that eventually makes a person do wrong. To be sure, this compulsion may not be extrinsic to the man who has the will, but it is extrinsic to the will or the soul trying to fight this compulsion, such as drug addiction or something like it.

Augustine rejects both of these answers, because these, instead of explaining the origin of moral evil, rather seem to provide excuses for the evil deeds of rational, free agents, whose responsibility is diminished precisely by these factors, namely, ignorance, on the part of our limited cognitive powers, and compulsion, on the part of our limited active powers.

So, Augustine locates moral evil precisely in the will’s free, deliberate act itself, when it does something wrong knowingly, deliberately, and in its full capacity to do otherwise. It is this deliberate, and intentional turning away from what is good and pursuing what is bad that is the archetypal moral evil Augustine is after, first exemplified in the fall of angels, and then in the fall of man.

Since it goes against reason, there is no rational explanation for such an act, for it is inherently irrational. The only thing that somehow accounts for its occurrence is “the root of all evil”, the pride of a free agent of limited perfection, arrogantly affirming the God-given gift of freedom by abusing it.

But then, (2) why did God give the dubious gift of freedom in the first place, if He could foresee that it would be abused by some free creatures? Augustine’s answer to this question is simply that this is just another manifestation of divine goodness: God gives freedom to His creatures without which the perfection of creation would not be complete, even if he foreknows that they will ungratefully abuse His gift.

So, (3) if God foreknew all this, and God’s knowledge is infallible, then isn’t sin inevitable? Indeed, since God’s knowledge and will are the same, did he also want that his free creatures would sin? And if he did want this, isn’t sin even more inevitable? After all, who could resist God’s will?

The simple solution to this problem in the first place (bk. 12, c. 23, p. 503, cf. pp. 190-194, De Lib. Arb. II) is that God’s foreknowledge that I will sin does not necessitate that I will sin. For what is necessary is merely that God knows that I will sin, if and only if I will sin; but from this it does not follow that I will necessarily sin, for God only knows that I will sin if I will in fact sin, and if I will not sin then of course God does not know that I will sin; on the contrary, then he knows that I will not sin. But whether or not I will sin will be determined by whether I choose to do so, and that is again something that God necessarily knows if and only if I will in fact choose to do so. So, divine foreknowledge of my actions does not take away the freedom of those actions, and so it does not take away my responsibility either. For I am always responsible for my actions precisely because and to the extent that they are my actions determined by my free choice.

Therefore, with freedom, sin is definitely not inevitable. On the contrary, sin is precisely a manifestation of some lack of freedom, a lack of the self-determination of the will, for in a sinful act the will irrationally subjects, indeed, enslaves itself to the pursuit of something beneath itself. Nevertheless, with the freedom of an agent of limited
perfection, and the consequent volatility of self-determination, the possibility of sin necessarily arises.

For the only free agent with absolute omniscience and benevolence is God, and only a free agent of this kind can have an absolutely immutable, unfailing good will. Therefore, free agents of limited perfection have mutable wills, which therefore can only be free if they can choose evil. However, the realization of this possibility is entirely dependent on the autonomous abuse of their freedom: when these agents arrogantly assert their freedom against what is shown to them to be the best, when, like spoiled children, they rebel against Goodness itself. (So, to put it simply, moral evil arises as the “temper tantrums” of imperfect free agents.)

But then, even if God’s knowledge and will do not impose any necessity upon the free agent’s actions, it is still reasonable to ask why God wants to put His free creatures through all the trials and tribulations of a sin-ridden world, full of temptations. After all, it is promised that the souls of the saints, and then the resurrected people of God will be free, yet will never sin. So, why couldn’t God create all rational creatures in this blessed state in the first place?

Upon a closer look, this question boils down to the following “problem for God”: how can you make a free agent of limited perfection, and hence of a volatile will, freely and yet unfailingly choose what is the best? Put in this way, the question may seem utterly paradoxical. After all, making someone choose something and the freedom of that choice seem to be utterly incompatible.

But then again, this is precisely the kind of “paradoxical” question that every responsible parent should ask: How do I raise my child to be a responsible adult? -- How do I get him to choose to do what is the best for him and for everybody else? Viewed from this perspective, the apparent paradox in the question vanishes. We should just not interpret “making someone choose something” in terms of coercion, for that takes away the freedom of the choice, but we should rather interpret making someone choose something in terms of getting him to choose something, by having him realize which choice is the best, and helping him to acquire the habit of unfailingly choosing what he realizes is the best.

But how does one do this? Well, certainly not by just telling the child what to do, although the first stage of the child’s development should definitely involve this, for without laying down the norms for him, he will not even have a sense of right and wrong. But it is even more important than this to lead him through all sorts of experiences in which he can learn from his mistakes, and with the appropriate guidance, gets out of them wiser and better. Then, later on, once he understands the nature of parental help, he will not be offended in his perceived autonomy, and will not arrogantly push aside the helping hand. On the contrary, as a young adult, he will understand that the parental help increases his freedom, until, eventually, as a mature adult, he is not even in need of any parental admonition, but he finds his autonomy in firmly fixing his will, through his own willpower, on doing what he ought to do. It is only then, when one’s child reaches this sort of autonomy, that one can say that the parent’s job is finished, for the generation of a human being is completed.
The idea of history as the completion of man’s creation

But then, if this is how the above-mentioned paradox is resolved in the case of the generation of a single human person, then a similar resolution applies to the creation of mankind as well. As Augustine himself states; “The experience of mankind in general, as far as God’s people is concerned, is comparable to the experience of the individual man. There is a process of education, through the epochs of a people’s history, as through the successive stages of a man’s life, designed to raise them from the temporal and the visible to an apprehension of the eternal and the invisible” (*City of God*, Book X:14).

The epochs of history Augustine mentions here are the same as the four stages of the Christian’s life and the four corresponding stages in history that we can find in the *Enchiridion*, Augustine’s *Handbook* for Christians on what it means to realize the image of the Trinity in themselves by exercising the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.

The first stage is the guiltless sinfulness of the soul’s being dominated by the body in the child, from the first temper tantrum to learning the first rules of morality. The corresponding epoch of human history is the period from Adam’s Fall to the first covenant with Abraham, set out in explicit laws by Moses. Then, there follows the guilt-ridden, for morally conscious, yet disobedient, and sinful life of adolescence and early adulthood in man’s life, which in history corresponds to the period of living under the law but not yet under grace, before the Incarnation of Christ. The final, redemptive conversion of the adult is the main turning point, introducing the period of living under grace, just as in the life of humanity Christ’s redemptive act placed humanity under the explicit, visible influence of grace, channeled through the Church. This is what leads to the final stage, in which after all the struggles, failures, and stumbles, through God’s grace, man eventually finds his peace in the beatific vision, and so at the end of history, God’s people, the citizens of the City of God will find their eternal peace in their perfected, resurrected bodies. But those who in their stubborn wickedness were building the earthly city will suffer the eternal damnation that they brought upon themselves by arrogantly rejecting the divine guidance while they still had a chance.

So, if we take this four-fold scheme, combine it with the more detailed seven-fold division outlined at the end of the *City of God*, which makes the more finely distinguished epochs correspond to the seven days of creation, and then we project the resulting divisions onto the timeline of Augustine’s life and the structure of the *Confessions*, we shall be able to see just how tightly these ideas concerning a divine education in both a single person’s life and in the history of mankind are interwoven in Augustine’s thought.

But even without going into further details, the central idea should be clear: history is God’s providential plan for raising His children from the savagery of sinful self-subjection to the desire of things beneath them, to be the humans they were meant to be, when they firmly desire the only truly desirable object above them. But they can become these humans only if they gain their genuine freedom through learning from their own faults. Otherwise they would never freely follow the commandments of Goodness, and hence there would always be the risk of another Fall, just as there was in the beginning. But when the number saints with unfailing good will equals the number of fallen angels, then history reaches its end: for then the City of God is complete.
Augustine’s Three Discoveries (Summary)

1. *The idea of the necessary concordance of faith and reason* (text: book 8, cc. 2-12) – faith is *not contrary*, but rather *complementary* to reason – if both proclaim the same truth, then *faith cannot contradict reason*, for truth cannot contradict truth, only falsity can

2. *The Problem of Evil and the Irrationality of Created Will* (text: book 11, cc. 1-28; book 12, cc. 1-10, 22-28; books 13, cc. 1-8 and 14, cc. 11-15) – natural evil (bk. 11, cc. 22-23) is some defect arising with necessity from the contrary actions of things of limited nature – moral evil consists in the misdirection, i.e. the lack of proper direction, of the will – the only free agent with absolute omniscience and benevolence is God – only a free agent of this kind can have an absolutely immutable, unfailing good will – thus, free agents of limited perfection have mutable wills – such agents can be free only if they *can* choose evil – however, the *realization* of this possibility is entirely dependent on the autonomous abuse of their freedom – “problem for God”: how can you make a free agent of limited perfection, and hence of a *volatile* will, freely and yet *unfailingly* choose what is the best? – answer: through “divine pedagogy”

3. *The Idea of History as the Completion of Man’s Creation* (text: book 22) – history is God’s providential plan for raising His children from the savagery of sinful self-subjection to the desire of things beneath them – they can become the humans they were meant to be only if they gain their genuine freedom through learning from their own faults in history – when the number of saints with unfailing good will equals the number of fallen angels, then history reaches its end: then the City of God is complete