

AUGUSTINE

on Obsession

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Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.

1 Peter 2:11

1. A Portrait of Obsession

In the 1998 movie *A Simple Plan*, midwestern U.S. couple Hank and Sarah try to control events after Hank's discovery of a downed plane buried in a snow-covered forest, and the duffel bag within it full of four million dollars in hundred-dollar notes. It turns out that what can least be controlled is their own response. Hank's ominous opening soliloquy signals their descent:

When I was still just a kid, I remember my father telling me what he thought that it took for a man to be happy. Simple things, really. A wife he loves; a decent job; friends and neighbors who like and respect him. For a while there, without hardly even realizing it, I had all that. I was a happy man.

But as much as being about Hank, the movie charts his wife Sarah's journey, and her loss of that simple happiness. Actress Bridget Fonda describes the way a stranger's money causes Sarah to spiral out of control:

1. *A Simple Plan*, Mutual Film Company/Paramount 1998; DVD imprint, Magna Pacific/Becker Entertainment.

She's basically put her wish list on hold, and was very happy, and things were good. They're going to have a baby, they're going to have a life together and she *loves* her husband, and it doesn't get any better than that — until you're faced with the possibility that it *might* get better than that. And then once you embrace that . . . it creeps in, and you can't help it — your mind starts to get *mesmerized* by the idea of it, and before you know it, it's yours, and in your head you've already spent it, and so then what do you do? You do anything to hang onto it, because to have it — something that's not even yours to begin with — to have it taken away is like having part of yourself cut out, because already in your mind you've spent it on your child's education, on a vacation, on a better house with a bigger yard, and you have these dreams for this little baby. . . .²

In *A Simple Plan*, Hank and Sarah are, in the first instance, exemplars of greed. But as Fonda depicts this greed, it is mesmeric, invasive, and ingrown. Its fantasy visions become indivisible from the self — vital, it seems, for life to continue. Sarah is in the vortex of something more than just greed, and her experience points beyond greed to the experience we'll be calling *obsession*.

An older encyclopedist, James Hastings, sums up the sudden and disturbing and very arbitrary nature of our obsessions when he says that:

An obsession is a dissociated idea, or group of ideas, which suddenly enters consciousness, disturbing the ordinary course of ideation, but not involving the personality of the individual — that is to say, the subject of the obsession regards it as an unreality, and as apart from his ordinary ideation. . . . The number of obsessions is endless, there being almost as many forms as there are of thought. Some are harmless and meaningless, as, *e.g.*, the desire to repeat certain words or phrases, to count objects of no interest, or to touch certain articles. Others are fateful, as the desire to kill, to commit suicide, or to steal.³

But his definition of *obsession* appears under his entry for “insanity.” A modern psychologist might find several reasons to quibble, because Hastings mentions what today would be called “obsessive-compulsive dis-

2. DVD feature interview.

3. James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 7 (Hymns-Liberty) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), p. 243.

order” (OCD), and perhaps some psychotic disorders. However, Hastings is correct to highlight the great number of obsessions available to us, and alongside the kleptomania and the repetitive obsessions, we could easily and recognizably include Sarah's obsession with a better life built on money that isn't hers.

Hastings could also have listed a character in P. G. Wodehouse, Corky's uncle, who owned a business dealing in jute (a kind of vegetable fiber from which hessian or burlap is made):

Corky's uncle, you see, didn't want him to be an artist. He didn't think he had any talent in that direction. He was always urging him to chuck Art and go into the jute business and start at the bottom and work his way up. Jute had apparently become a sort of obsession with him. He seemed to attach almost a spiritual importance to it. (*My Man Jeeves*)

We could list billionaire Howard Hughes, whose legendary obsession with hygiene extended to scrubbing telephones and preventing others from touching the knobs on his television. Basketball player Michael Jordan has been described as “one of the most competitive human beings ever seen,” turning anything that can be competitive into a competition that he must win.⁴ Perhaps Shirley MacLaine's description of her five-year-old rat terrier as her “soul mate” might be listed among the obsessions. Her soul mate is also, we are assured, the coauthor of her biography. MacLaine first met the dog in Egypt in a past life, when she was a “minor princess” and the dog was a canine god. (We know this because the dog wrote that part of the book.)⁵

An older man's obsession with his vintage cars; a youth's obsession with his computer game; a young girl's obsession to be listed among a small knot of friends; a middle-aged man's obsession with his secretary; a sports fan's obsession with a grand final win. Even something as innocent as sunbathing can, we are told, become an obsession. So-called “tanorexics” have been identified, who display addictive tendencies similar to alcoholics or compulsive gamblers, with one dermatologist seeing patients who have had melanomas cut out but still cannot quit. “They're out of

4. BBC World Service, “Beyond Sport (Part 1),” *Documentary Archive*: 2006, 12' 30”.

5. [Author unnamed], “Terms of Enjoyment,” *Reader's Digest* October 2005; online: <http://www.rd.com/content/openContent.do?contentId=28679&pageIndex=0> (accessed 19/9/2006).

control, and they're not just being naughty; they've got a problem and they need professional help."⁶

The objectives of these obsessions might span the moral spectrum from innocent to deeply worrying, but they are all at the extreme end of the intensity spectrum. These are whole-body desires that wage war against our very selves.

Usage of the English term "obsession" can be found five centuries ago, as when those in a castle sent word to advise that they were "obsessed," which is to say *under siege*, by an enemy. The word eventually became a description of what evil spirits do: just as enemies obsess castles, evil spirits "obsess" people, laying siege to them and enticing them to act in various compulsive ways. Since then the word has come to describe a mind plagued by a fixed idea or an unwanted or unhelpful desire. It refers to those episodes in life where we were deep in the grip of some "passion" that we often look back upon with a rueful shake of our heads and say, "I don't know what I was thinking of." We were "under siege."

The biblical languages have no direct equivalent for the term "obsession," and translators only reach for it occasionally. Paul's "raging fury" (ἐμμίσουμαι, Acts 26:11); or the false teacher's "morbid craving" for controversy (νοσέω, 1 Tim. 6:4); or the weak woman's being "weighed down" with sins (σωρεύω, 2 Tim. 3:6) are each called "obsessions" in various different translations.⁷

But before any consideration can be made of the texture of biblical "obsession," we must ask whether it is simply mistaken to group so many experiences together under this concept of "obsession." People like to think that "anger" is a little more circumscribed, and that it is relatively straightforward whether we or others are angry (although Lactantius teaches us that our anger probably isn't as straightforward as we like to imagine). But as a category, "obsession" is more problematic. Long ago, astronomers used the mistaken category of "superlunary objects," or those that were outside the orbit of the moon. But the category was not just too broad to be of any use — it failed as a term of description because "objects outside the orbit of the moon" is not a class with any seri-

6. Dr. Tony White, senior lecturer in the Department of Dermatology at Sydney University, interviewed by Amy Lawson, "Sun Addicts Need AA-Type Program," *The Sunday Age* 2 October 2005, p. 5.

7. Respectively, New International Version, New King James Version, and New Jerusalem Bible.

ous or useful reality to it.⁸ Do we risk the same problem with the term "obsession"?

I have chosen to keep "obsession" under scrutiny, because when we try to discard it we find that there remain these *interests and attachments, whether good or bad, that somehow "get beyond us," where we are then out of control*. That phenomenon, like anything else in the world, is worth subjecting to the analysis of Christian thought; but more pressingly, the phenomenon is painful and pervasive, and desperately invites the consolations of theology. **What makes us obsess like this, and how can we stop?**

2. Absolutizing the Dark Side of Desire

It would be hard work to map the semantic connections between the NT Greek and modern English for strong, obsessional desire. One useful way forward is to examine the Bible's use of the term ἐπιθυμία (generally glossed as "passion," or "desire"). Of course there are more terms for "strong desire" than this, with one team of lexicographers finding over twenty words inhabiting the conceptual field of "strong desire." But to examine just ἐπιθυμία is to act like an archaeologist, who sinks a narrow shaft deep into a broad dig-site. We could later go on to dig elsewhere, but in this important shaft we will find major biblical texts that help us to understand desire, and in turn, obsession.

We will also find misreadings of these texts that have produced a distorted and sub-Christian account of desire. I call this distortion the "absolutizing of the dark side of desire." We may catch a glimpse of the distorted account if we glance at 1 Peter 2:11 and ask, is *every* desire that bubbles up from your human flesh opposed to your soul? Whoever answers "yes" has made the dark side of human desire become an absolute description of all human desire.

It is not hard to see why readers of the Bible have made this mistake. Humanity has its perennially favorite desires, ἐπιθυμιαί, such as for money, sex, food, or power. The NT epistles in particular have a bit to say about these, and as a result, NT desire is often guilty by association through col-

8. I owe this observation, made in another context (of the term "emotion"), to Paul E. Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 14-17 & passim.

location with some negative adjective or verb. It is a word that attracts several negative qualifiers: “deceitful,” “lustful,” “worldly,” “corrupt,” “debauched,” “ungodly.” Desire’s work in the human body is portrayed as misleading us, tempting us, enslaving and opposing us. It is devilish, deranged, and self-focused, and puts us under judgment. Such a high volume of negative references, and the fact that it often appears in conversations about human flesh, often leads to the conclusion that the human body and its desires are both straightforwardly evil.

Such a conclusion often made strong headway in the ancient Hellenistic world. In this milieu, desires of flesh waging war against the soul could be understood as an evil body attacking, oppressing, and restraining a good and pure spirit. Not all ancient perceptions of the body and its desires were as bleak as that; nevertheless, Margaret Miles can find a desert father who declares of his own body, “I am killing it because it is killing me.”⁹

By the time of the third century, the respectable Christian sect called Manicheism was able to gather people around such bleak views of the body. Manichees were dualists who thought that everything originated from “two masses of good and evil.”¹⁰ These two masses are infinite, “the evil in a lesser and the good in a greater degree.”¹¹ We may take a little comfort that the good material outweighs the bad; but not much comfort, because the conflict between the evil substance and the good substance rages within each person, to the point that souls could themselves become materially and substantially corrupted¹² until we escape our bodies.

The Manichees “absolutized” the dark side of desire. Bodily desire is corrupt, because the body itself is corrupt. It is an account that would have explained obsession very straightforwardly: obsession is simply an inevitable result of being in a body, and the only way to escape it is for our spirits to escape our bodies. But although the Manichees could offer this explanation of sorts for desire and obsession, there is no *consolation* at all to be found here.

9. Margaret R. Miles, *Augustine on the Body*, vol. 31 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), p. 131, citing Heraclides, *Paradeisos I*.

10. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin, *Penguin Classics* edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 106 (V.11).

11. Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 104 (V.10).

12. Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 135 (VII.2).

EXCURSUS

A Brief Biography of Augustine

The man we may thank for driving this sub-Christian view of ourselves from the field is Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa during the late fourth and early fifth centuries.¹³ He has been described as “far and away the best — if not the very first — psychologist in the ancient world.”¹⁴ (If theologians judge “psychology” as untheological, and unworthy of the attention of some, warrant for their judgments can only be found in the twentieth century. “Soul science” had a long and distinguished theological history prior to that.¹⁵)

There is so much to identify with in Augustine. In his *Confessions* we meet him as a lower middle-class boy growing up on the edge of the civilized world. His pagan father, Patricius, wants him educated for success, with his emotionally intense mother, Monica, wanting him to follow Jesus and to marry a nice Christian girl. In a story that many young adults will still relate to, he travels far from home and abandons all self-control during his “college” years. He fathers a son to his live-in-lover, then breaks up with her for another — his mother badgering him all the while to follow Jesus and to marry a nice Christian girl. Meanwhile Augustine sharpens his rhetoric, searches for truth, stays up late with friends, and gets lost in careerism. But then he hears a preacher, Ambrose of Milan, who has the truth for which he yearns; and in a rapidly escalating series of events, Monica’s prayers are answered, and Augustine turns to Christ.

He was a thinker, a writer, and a reader, and his first impulse was to start something like the L’Abri fellowship with a few friends, in a country

13. For a helpful summary of Augustine’s biography (taken mainly from the *Confessions*), see the blog by Michael A. G. Haykin, *Eminent Christians: 12. Augustine of Hippo* (online: <http://mghistor.blogspot.com/2006/09/eminant-christians-augustine-of-hippo.html>, accessed 19/09/2006). The definitive biography is Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography (A New Edition with an Epilogue)* (London: Faber, 2000).

14. Albert C. Outler, ed., *Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion*, vol. 7, Library of Christian Classics (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 15; online: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/confessions-bod.html> (accessed 13/5/2006).

15. For a fascinating account of the way a thick “Christian psychology” was supplanted by thin secularist versions (such as behaviorism), see Thomas Dixon, “Theology, Anti-Theology and Atheology: From Christian Passions to Secular Emotions,” *Modern Theology* 15, no. 3 (1999).

villa not far from the northern Italian Alps, near the town of Cassiciacum. Yet this cozy plan is soon overtaken by events, and within a few years he finds himself pressed into service first as priest, then as bishop, to the slightly desperate little church of Hippo Regius on the North African coast. After all the cosmopolitan glamour of his travels, he finds himself in this little ministry only about two hundred kilometers from his hometown.

Although he began his life in the stately Indian summer of the old Roman Empire, he straddles the fault line of his age, the September 11 of the ancient world: the sack of Rome in AD 410. The attackers do not really do much damage, and really only want some ransom money; but the psychological effect is devastating, for Rome is supposedly “the eternal city” that has stretched back over a thousand years. In response Augustine begins to write the *City of God*, a multivolume epic that contrasts Rome’s passing shabbiness to the truly eternal city of God, to which God is shepherding his people — and any Romans who want to come, too. The book consolidates his role as one of Christianity’s most gleeful apologists.

But his workday life in ministry sees obsession from all angles. Augustine’s ongoing attempts to curb the voracity of one Antoninus, the young bishop of Fussala on the rural outskirts of Hippo, highlights Augustine’s integrity and care in response to damage caused by the obsession of another. In Peter Brown’s summary,

The upshot of repeated attempts to investigate and discipline Antoninus was that, in the hot late summer of 422, Augustine found himself stranded for weeks on end in the middle of a countryside where everyone spoke only Punic. He visited the village of Fussala, where the inhabitants pointed out to him the holes in the houses from which Antoninus had pillaged the stones in order to build a splendid new episcopal palace. He was finally left, sitting alone one morning in a village church after the entire congregation had walked out in disgust — even . . . the nuns — leaving him and his colleagues to wonder how, by what series of misjudgments exploited by an able rogue, they had brought “so much sadness upon the country people.”¹⁶

Augustine was also involved in ongoing attempts to stop the illegal enslavement of North African Romans, in a quest for justice that sought even to protect the slavers, who also bore God’s image, from being summarily

16. Brown, *Augustine* (new ed.), p. 469, citing Augustine’s letter.

executed.¹⁷ These vignettes, when placed alongside his extant sermons numbering in the hundreds, show that the Augustine who matters most to us was not the pretentious young philosopher of Cassiciacum, but a daily-grind pastor and preacher.

The theological battles he fights derive from the same kind of love for neighbor that had sent him to Fussala. Straight after his conversion, he can no longer abide the bleak folly and stupidity of the Manichees, who simply ignore God’s declaration of Genesis 1:31, that the human body is *good*.

A long time after that and quite late in his life we find the same love for his neighbor driving Augustine into battle against the sternly moral Pelagians, who claim that God would not command what we cannot do, and that a man armed with God’s word in the Bible, and with the power of an obedient will, possesses all that is needed to please God. By this stage, Augustine has seen enough obsessions to know that the body may be good, but it is also *unremittently fallen*, and that any attempt to imagine a morally self-sufficient Christian is simply to claim that Christ died for no good reason. Pelagian optimism must be making the claim that “Christ died in vain” (Gal. 2:21).

His pastoral engagements are therefore played out against a sweeping backdrop of high-stakes battle against two deeply different anthropological malfunctions, seen first in the bleak Manichees and then in the smug Pelagians. It is this “story arc” to Augustine’s life that forges one of the first and very best psychologists, who is in a good position to deliver theology’s true consolation to obsession.

3. Augustine’s Account of Obsession

Augustine spends a lot of time explaining desire.¹⁸ We have proper longings for God the Father, for each other, and for all the goods of a good earth. But these proper longings are distorted and disordered into improper longings, many of which we call “obsessions.” But the good news is that even with disordered desires, we can yet be redeemed by Christ, and then gently reordered by the power of the Spirit.

17. Brown, *Augustine*, pp. 466, 470-71.

18. I am grateful to my former doctoral supervisor, the Revd. Dr. Michael Banner, for his many insights into Augustine’s account of obsession.

What the NT called ἐπιθυμία, Augustine called “concupiscence” (Latin *libido*). Theological history has seen the term “concupiscence” harden into a rather impersonal and technical term. But it did not begin there for Augustine.

He noticed the way an infant is “pale with envy” at his sibling on the breast. The infant “object[s] to a rival’s finding life in this nourishment, even when the milk flows in such abundance from its source.”¹⁹ Everyone objects at this point, with the Pelagians, that we shouldn’t bring babies into it or that this behavior is a natural drive. But those objections seriously miss the point. Augustine tolerates such behaviors and knows that children will grow out of them. But it will grow *into* other powerful desires, and he can detect no turning point or dividing line when people cross from some innocent natural contentment into some corrupted adult concupiscence. Rather, the essence of concupiscence colors every human from the day of their birth, and all their relationships every day thereafter.

It surprises many to discover that sexual desire was *not* Augustine’s paradigm case for concupiscence. Indeed, he does not find it surprising or even particularly interesting that people like sex (and in his overall corpus, discussions of sex are scattered and often short). Rather, the case that truly mystifies him is the episode from his childhood when he and his friends stole a farmer’s pears:

[O]f what I stole I already had plenty, and much better at that, and I had no wish to enjoy [them.] . . . We took away an enormous quantity of pears, not to eat them ourselves, but simply to throw them to the pigs.²⁰

This was friendship of a most unfriendly sort, bewitching my mind in an inexplicable way. For the sake of a laugh, a little sport, I was glad to do harm and anxious to damage another; and that without thought of profit for myself or retaliation for injuries received! And all because we are ashamed to hold back when others say “Come on! Let’s do it!”²¹

Detractors may again sigh, “Oh Augustine — you were only boys.” But again, the objector misses the point: this boy’s extreme longing to belong has distorted his capacity to evaluate what is before him, such as the dam-

19. Augustine, *Conf.*, p. 28 (I.7).

20. Augustine, *Conf.*, p. 47 (II.4).

21. Augustine, *Conf.*, p. 52 (II.9).

age to the farmer. This wearisome aspect of human life, where entrancement with some passing good blinds us to something greater, plagues us from the momentary obsessions of our childhood to the very destructive obsessions of adulthood.

We are each situated within an ordered ecology of interdependent goods, and humans are the kind of beings who respond to those goods with the various desires, interests, cares, concerns, and attractions that Augustine is content simply to call “love.” Various “aspects” of love can be identified (since the term covers many kinds of response to the plethora of goods that surround people); and people’s basic propensity to respond in love to the goods of creation is central to being human.

Indeed, Augustine thinks it is obvious that each person incarnates an inalienable, irreducible, and essential impulse to love. Our capacities to exist, to know, and to love are the most properly basic attributes of humanity;²² but whereas philosophy then as now concentrates upon the first two of these attributes, Augustine thinks that attention to the third has been neglected. Humanity’s deep care about right and wrong, as well as people’s insistence upon various acts, both signal the fundamental human capacity to love.

But these various possibilities for love also form the seeds of obsession at the core of our soul. One of Augustine’s reflections on ἐπιθυμία begins quite obliquely, and looks at first like an early treatise on perception.²³ He marvels at the way his senses could gather sights and sounds and store them in the “vast cave” of his memory. Even one so beautiful as God could make his home there, in his mind. Yet this “fleshly” system, although wonderfully good, is also riddled with possibilities for subversion.

- Firstly, *our senses* can become trapped in what they sense. Many of us will recognize this lifelong task of Augustine’s: “I struggle daily against greed for food and drink.” “I must therefore hold back my appetite with neither too firm nor too slack a rein.”²⁴ Likewise fragrances, music, and sensual sensations all have their place; yet he was not happy about the way all of these could claim and mesmerize him.
- Secondly, he thinks *scientific inquisitiveness* can go too far. He becomes

22. Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 488 (XI.28).

23. Augustine, *Conf.*, Book X.

24. Augustine, *Conf.*, p. 237 (X.31).

unduly engrossed in the sight of a dog chasing a hare, or of a lizard eating a fly. Modern readers may think Augustine is silly to chide himself for such interests, and even he knows that they can result in proper praise to God for the creation.²⁵ But he senses a weakness here: that such a distraction can become a fixation, then an obsession.

- Because we are like this, “there is a third kind of temptation which, I fear, has not passed from me. Can it ever pass from me in all this life? It is the desire to be feared or loved by other men, simply for the pleasure that it gives me, though in such pleasure there is no true joy.”²⁶ Like many of us, he is easily ensnared into *social obsessions*, and his autobiography is loaded with examples. “I was preparing a speech in praise of the Emperor, intending that it should include a great many lies which would certainly be applauded by an audience who knew well enough how far from the truth they were.” “My ambitions had placed a load of misery on my shoulders and the further I carried it the heavier it became” — and then, to his shock, he passes a drunken beggar who is freer and happier than he.²⁷

Obsessions begin with substances and experiences, with knowledge and its acquisition, and with social acceptance and social power. The problem is not that these are bad; on the contrary, according to Genesis 1:31, God made everything “very good” in its own place. But everything is almost *too* good; and we are surrounded by it, and so have all been, or are, obsessed by some aspect of this abundant goodness.

Augustine suggests that if we are honest with ourselves, there is a seamlessness between the kind of momentary “obsessions” that lure him throughout the day — the food, the lizard, the praise of other men — and the obsessions that ended up enslaving us (of which in his case, sex is an example). If we allow Augustine’s way of thinking to guide us, we begin to see how innocent enthusiasms can segue, for example, into relentless careerism and then appalling destruction. Instead then of mocking Augustine for being over-rigorous about his fascination in the lizard, we might notice the way another generation of scientists’ initial fascination with the atom gave way to industrious experimentation and theory formation upon it, and finally to its

25. Augustine, *Conf.*, p. 243 (X.35).

26. Augustine, *Conf.*, p. 244 (X.36).

27. Augustine, *Conf.*, p. 118 (VI.6).

destructive uses in atomic warfare that many scientists went on to condemn. The same story repeats itself today, as when an interest in the human embryo and an intention to heal men and women in the pain of infertility becomes the generation of tens of thousands of extra embryos, and then a justification for destructive research upon them, cloning of them, and the mating of non-human animal material with them. An initial and very proper fascination seamlessly drifts into what has clearly become a form of obsession for dozens of scientists around the world — an obsession, we might surmise, that is not untouched by “the desire to be feared or loved by” other scientists and politicians, “simply for the pleasure that it gives.”

It turns out that Augustine has been doing a threefold analysis of obsession based upon John’s threefold description of our human response to the world (1 John 2:16):

the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions

— or, as a more racy translation puts it,

a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions.

These powerful cravings are what theology calls *concupiscence*: those strong and overwhelming mixtures of mental and emotional longing that waylay us. (Augustine says that the craving for *money*, as seen in *A Simple Plan*, is explained by the way it enables us to buy into each of these three first cravings.) Augustine can therefore make this powerful mature statement, which occurs just after he mentions sexual lust (the *first* mention of it, we should note, fourteen whole books into the *City of God*). In this quotation, the word “lust” is exactly the same as the word “concupiscence” (*libido*):

[L]ust is the general name for desire of every kind. . . . [T]here is the lust for vengeance, called anger. Again, there is the lust for money, called avarice; the lust for victory at any price, called obstinacy; the lust for glory, called vanity. There are many different kinds of lust, of which not a few have names peculiar to themselves, while others have not. Who, for example, could easily give a name to the lust for mastery, though the evidence of civil wars shows how great a sway it has over the minds of tyrants?²⁸

28. Augustine, *City of God*, pp. 613-14 (XIV.15, final paragraph).

His reference to tyrants and their “lust for mastery” (*libido dominandi*) signals the weight of his objection to Rome, its greatness, and its violence-riddled *Pax Romana*: all of these are concupiscent boys stealing and flinging pears, only writ large. Sexual obsession, while important, is a relatively minor player in this overall story of obsession. Augustine’s point is like that of the encyclopedist Hastings: that if we are to live well, we must begin by noticing the vast breadth of good things that we become obsessed about.

Knowing this Augustinian account of desire, we may therefore note with interest the New Jerusalem Bible translation of 1 Peter 2:11, “to keep yourselves free from the disordered natural inclinations that attack the soul.”

4. What Obsession Really Blinds Us To

To be in the grip of an obsession is to feel energized, intense, and alive. Whether we are on a sexual conquest, hunting for bargains, or seeking revenge, we are as focused as a hawk upon its prey. For the philosopher Charles Taylor,

This perversity can be described as a drive to make ourselves the centre of our world, to relate everything to ourselves, to dominate and possess the things which surround us. This is both cause and consequence of a kind of slavery, a condition in which we are in turn dominated, captured by our own obsessions and fascination with the sensible.²⁹

The obsessed person’s sight bores into some tiny corner of God’s good world at the expense of all else (and so another term for it seems to be “idolatry,” Col. 3:5). In a world abundantly given to be received with thanks (cf. 1 Tim. 4:4-5), the obsessed acts as if the object of their attention is all there is, and as if there can never be enough of it. Augustine noticed this irony: the infant objects to a rival finding life in the nourishment of his mother’s breast, even when the milk flows in such abundance from that place. Obsession blinds us to abundance, and leaves us thinking that the object of our obsession is scarce.

Anne Manne writes with incredulity of a woman who moans “I have to work.” But, writes Manne, “I looked about me. We were sitting in an

29. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 138-39.

air-conditioned 300-square-metre, multi-bedroom ranch house with several bathrooms. Among the vehicles in the multi-car garage was a 4WD worth \$50,000.” The house was huge, like much of modern suburbia. “The Great Australian Dream had been transformed into an empty crypt of consumption.”³⁰

The connections between obsession and the myth of scarcity in God’s abundant world are beyond our scope, but to pursue them would first reveal the extent to which so many supposed problems are leveraged on the myth and fear of scarcity, and then the new solutions that become apparent when we discover that our real “problem” is the abundance of what is good.

5. Toward a Quiet Life: “Obsession” Body and Soul

We must return to find theology’s consolation to obsession. Is there hope for us? How can we stop?

We saw the way ἐπιθυμία seems so negatively regarded in the Bible. But looking more closely, we find several moments where desire is morally unobjectionable, and indeed in the LXX ἐπιθυμία is used across the moral spectrum, more often positively than negatively. God exhorts his people to eat all the meat they want. Solomon builds whatever he wants. God meets the desires of the king and his people. Even the man whose “quiver is full” can be translated as “having fulfilled desires.” The wicked have their boastful cravings, but the righteous, the poor, and the afflicted all have their proper longings too. In the Proverbs, everyone craves — sluggards and young men, the wicked and the righteous — although all crave for different objects; and “desire fulfilled,” or “a good desire” according to the LXX, is considered a “tree of life” (13:12).

We also see several NT appearances of strong desire as a form of moral excellence. Disciples, prophets, and angels long to see divine truth; apostles long to see Christ, or to see their people, or for their people to progress in faith; young men rightly long to care for God’s people.

Also, a most surprising twist becomes apparent. In the Septuagint’s translation of Numbers 11:4 we find ἐπιθυμία used twice in a double-

30. Anne Manne, “Sell Your Soul and Spend, Spend, Spend: The Cost of Living in a Material World,” *SMH* 14 April 2003.

barreled phrase, an emphatic conjoining of the noun and cognate verb, to describe the strong craving for meat in the desert that resulted in an infamous episode in Israel's history, one of its most spectacular passion-related failures, at a site marked and labeled thereafter as the "The Tombs of Craving." This event is remembered throughout both Testaments in the language of ἐπιθυμία, and becomes the archetypal example of human desire expressed in contempt of God.

But in what may be the entirely unanticipated punch line to this story, Jesus uses ἐπιθυμία in almost the same double-barreled phrase to tell of how ardently he longs to eat the Passover with his disciples (Luke 22:25). Not only can desires be very good; somehow, in Jesus we see the eclipse of obsessive and shortsighted craving with a righteous craving that is every bit as intense.

We are forced to ask: Can such a righteous craving be ours? Can we be free, like him, to crave well? Our own existential conundrum is that since these are our *desires* at work, the very machinery used for self-evaluation and then change is hopelessly compromised. Augustine can only find consolation in God: "Can anything restore me to hope except your mercy?"³¹ What is theology's consolation for obsession?

a) In Christ

It is easy to be reminded of a certain madman who lived among some tombs. "Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones" (Mark 5:5). At first glance, he is not relevant to our enquiry. His was a special case: a legion of spirits possessed him. This was a special event: Jesus' victory was a sign for that time and place in salvation history. The evil spirits "obsessed" him, to be sure; but is that sufficient reason to keep thinking of him?

In one of theology's most magnificent passages, Augustine points to the advent of a Mediator, someone human enough to know our craving way of death, but godlike enough to walk rightly and to desire well.³² The work of Jesus upon this legion-possessed man prefigures his work upon other men and women in the gospel. We think the man is unlike us, be-

31. Augustine, *Conf.*, p. 244 (X.36).

32. Augustine, *Conf.*, p. 251 (X.43).

cause he cuts himself under the power of another, whereas our obsessions, we like to think, are somehow under *our* control — or, if we are Pelagians, they "should be." But precisely here the gospel declares and reveals the opposite to us: we are obsessed, besieged, by a power greater than us, that in the Bible is personified as "sin." All of our more obvious human obsessions are simply extensions of our incapacity to bring order to our emotions, our thoughts, and our will — or as the Bible would denote the intersection of these three, to our *heart*.

Yet just as in the gospel, it seems that Jesus has actually sought out this man, crossing the lake to hear his shrieking, alien cries, and to make him whole. Jesus Christ is the Mediator who knows how to die for the "powerless," for the "ungodly," at the "right time" (Rom. 5:6), the time they need it most. Jesus Christ is the Mediator who knows how "to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb. 7:25). The power of Jesus Christ is made clearest in human weakness, when he says, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor. 12:9). Jesus recreates a legion-obsessed man into a new creation, just as "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17).

In the well-known and slightly mawkish fridge magnet, a photograph of footprints on an evening beach is overlaid with the questions of a traveler to his or her traveling companion, "Why was there sometimes only one set of footprints? Where did you go, Lord?" A slightly surprised Jesus responds, "They were *my* footprints, because I was carrying you." This is the first and greatest consolation for obsession that theology has for us: that even at our worst, our most inhuman, and our most deranged, when we are least like him but most need him, he will "carry" each of us. He will "carry" us in the sense of not holding our obsessional sin against us, even then enabling for us real friendship with himself and his Father.

Therefore there is perhaps only one thing sadder than an unbelieving world full of those who cry out and "cut themselves," living out their various obsessions, but without running toward Jesus as did the legion-possessed man. It is the evangelical Christian who gladly tells others of this gospel, yet cannot believe it is for him when he is trapped yet again in front of the blue light of Internet porn; or for her when she obsesses yet again about the thinness of some other woman's body; or for him when he rants inwardly at the adulation and success of his clergy peer; or for her when she longs desperately for the love of a man; or for him when he frets con-

stantly over his ominous growing illness; or for her when the interminable wait for the phone to ring or the grandchildren to visit seems so bitterly and endlessly lonely.

Jesus Christ dies for us, prays for us, is graceful toward us, and is even re-creating us, at our most powerless, ungodly, obsessive, weak, and disordered worst. His gospel is not for those who speak it best, but for those who need it most. "Rightly do I place in him," says Augustine, "my firm hope that you will cure all my ills, through him who sits at your right hand and pleads for us; otherwise I should despair. For my ills are many and great . . . but your medicine is greater indeed."³³ In Christ we are permitted the almost unbelievable expectation that soon, perhaps very soon, we, too, may also sit quietly, like the man obsessed by devils no more, "clothed and in his right mind" (Mark 5:15).

b) Love "Poured In"

To be in Christ opens the way for the Spirit to be poured out in our aid. Augustine was fascinated by the way the working Spirit radically reorients our affections.

[W]e are assisted by divine aid towards the achievement of righteousness, — not merely because God has given us a law full of good and holy precepts, but because our very will, without which we cannot do any good thing, is assisted and elevated by the importation of the Spirit of grace. . . .³⁴

[By the Spirit] there is formed in [a person's] mind a **delight** in, and a love of, that supreme and unchangeable good which is God, even now while he is still "walking by faith" and not yet "by sight"; in order that . . . he may conceive an **ardent desire** to cleave to his Maker, and may **burn** to enter upon the participation in that true light, that it may go well with him from Him to whom he owes his existence.³⁵

33. Augustine, *Conf.*, p. 251 (X.43).

34. Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter* ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert E. Wallis, NPNF 1, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987; originally published New York, 1887), p. 91 (\$20).

35. Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, p. 84 (\$5), emphasis added.

Here is the language of a new "obsession": an "ardent desire" not unlike Jesus at that Passover, and a "burning" to participate in intimate relationship with the same maker as wishes it to go well with us.

Augustine looked to Romans 5:5 as a key text here, where "the love of God" is "poured into our hearts" by the Spirit. Here, he thought, is the key to the divine reordering of human affections: that the Spirit pours *a love for God* into the human heart. Augustine takes the genitive in ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ ("the love of God") as grammatically "objective": human love toward God is made the referent. This reading of the verse is fundamental to Augustine's account of how the Spirit reorders our affections, yet most now agree that Augustine misread the verse.³⁶ Does this exegetical problem constitute a fatal blow to his account of how the Spirit reorders the affections?

Not at all. The verse functions as a slogan for what can be easily derived from elsewhere in the Bible.³⁷ Augustine celebrates the God of Psalm 36, the lavishly proactive lover of humanity who pours his own boundless love out upon his people, and where a string of metaphors, including feasting at God's banquet and drinking at his fountain, picture people in helpless response.³⁸ The Spirit works in us a joining of loves — a fitting response to the God whose ardent love Isaiah describes in a most startling simile, using the language of a wedding night: that just "as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you" (Isa. 62:5).³⁹ The Spirit reorders our affections to respond in joy to his divine and holy affection.

36. Despite ἐκκέχυται, Augustine's exegesis is hard to defend in context, since the point of the text is to give assurance of hope despite tribulation. Therefore the majority reading is of a "subjective" genitive, with God's own love toward people on view. For a straightforward exposition along these lines, see, e.g., C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (I-VIII)* 2 vols., vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p. 262, n. 2. But on Romans 15:30, Cranfield can argue *against* a subjective genitive (the Spirit's love toward humanity), and for a genitive of origin (C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans [IX-XVI]*, 2 vols., vol. 2 [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979], p. 776, n. 2). There is nothing to be gained by mounting a technical challenge of Augustine's theologically astute "eisegesis" of Romans 5:5.

37. E.g., Rom. 15:30; Gal. 5:22; Col. 1:8; or 2 Tim. 1:7.

38. Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, *passim*.

39. I owe this insight into Isaiah 62–63, and its relevance to my argument, to Rev. Dr. Richard Gibson. We should also remember the New Testament's equally audacious representation of the Lord Christ as a bridegroom who joyously awaits his wedding day to his bride, the church (Rev. 19:7–8; 21:5, 9; cf. Eph. 5:23–24, 29, 32).

c) Love Commended

But what can be said for those who have not yet experienced this reordering? Augustine speaks of our "flight" to God: a movement of dependence and humility, spoken in prayer.⁴⁰ Augustine does not wish this "flight" to be misunderstood as being particularly difficult. The *Confessions* show it worked out in one man's life, and although there is mystery about what triggers the flight and how it can proceed in obsessive, distracted humans, whoever takes and reads the *Confessions* can find themselves doing as Augustine did and praying as he prays. Augustine also points to the experience of the sports stadium. He reminds the (apparently young male) listeners of what comes over them there. Simply by watching their friends, and attending to the action, a deep love for the sportsmen and the sport grows. Though mysterious, this process is also quite accessible.⁴¹

Hence there is no embarrassment for Augustine in *commending* and even in gently *commanding* love. In this context the specification of "love" is narrowed to denote its proper object, the "perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God and of one another in God."⁴² Augustine suggests that we aim toward these new loves, as opposed to our obsessional loves. Love can be commended in this way on the understanding that the mysterious changes are themselves divinely gifted. By enjoining his hearers to engage in love for God and for others, Augustine understands people simply to be finding the correct response to the reality already before them, but from which they have been distracted by their obsessions.

He even suggests that we should aim at loving this love itself: "It is by love that other things come to be rightly loved; then how must itself be loved!"⁴³ Although Augustine is riskily abstract here, his commendation remains more apposite than ever. To a culture like ours, given to anomie

40. Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, 105-6 (§51).

41. Brown, *Augustine* (new ed.), pp. 448-49.

42. Or near equivalent — twice in *City of God* XIX.13 and once in XIX.17. Cf. Oliver M. T. O'Donovan, "Augustinian Ethics," in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. James F. Childress and John Macquarrie (London: SCM, 1986); and Oliver M. T. O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 25.

43. Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. H. Browne, *NPNF 1*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986; originally published New York, 1888), p. 501 (VII.1).

and despair, Augustine might say that although our life in the world is like a desert wandering, love "is the fountain which God has been pleased to place here" to sustain our journey.⁴⁴

6. The Consolation of New Treasures

C. S. Lewis has an Augustinian view of the way all of our obsessions are mere glimpses of our proper home.

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.⁴⁵

Augustine points us to the proper object of our love, so that old treasures we obsessed about can fall away as boring, or find their proper place. The treasure of heaven becomes the treasure of our hearts, as we willingly sell everything else to possess that pearl (Matt. 6:19-21; Luke 12:31-34; Matt. 13:45-46).

Until then, we are consoled at first when we rest safely in Christ, even in the grip of our obsessing weakness; then, under the gentle power of the Spirit, flying to God in prayer, and aiming for new loves. We find ourselves responding to his own passionate love, and are then stirred to a new love for others and a proper love of the created order.

Perhaps Augustine's psychology is at its greatest in his famous statement to God: "you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts" — our obsessive hearts, we might say — "find no peace until they rest in you."⁴⁶

44. Augustine, *Homilies*, p. 501 (VII.1).

45. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 1976), p. 16.

46. Augustine, *Conf.*, p. 21 (I.1).

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