

**“The Contemporary Augustine:
A Debate between Two Theologian-
Economists.”¹**

By Teunis Brand & Joost Hengstmengel

For some, Augustine was a bishop from a time long past. For others as psychologist and as economist, he was an avant garde discussant in contemporary debates. Paul van Geest, professor of Church History at the University of Tilburg as well as professor of theology and economic thought at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam, and Wilco de Vries, a Ph.D. candidate at Duke University Divinity School, belong to the last category. *Sophie* brought them together for a dialogue about the continuing relevance of Augustine’s thought. Teunis and Joost began their debate with the question: How did you guys come in contact with Augustine? (Roel Kuiper is professor in “Christian identity” at the Theological University, Kampen | Utrecht, the Netherlands.)

Van Geest: I am now 56 years old. That may not be old, but it is long enough to enable me to look back on part of my life. I am from the generation that has experienced a Catholic youth. I also attended a genuine Jesuit college. By that time there were only a small number of Jesuits. The rector was a classic Jesuit who brought me into contact with Augustine. He had us translate pieces from Latin in *The Confessions*, not the most difficult but definitely the most pregnant. That had a double purpose: We learned some Latin and we were introduced to Augustine, the searcher of souls.

¹ Original title: “Augustinus als tijdgenoot: Een gesprek tussen twee theoloog-economen.”

As a young man, Augustine entertained certain questions, which the Jesuits wanted us to air as well. Why am I here on earth? What must make me feel guilty? For what should I be grateful? These issues formed a mindset during my youth that has never left me. I started to study the Dutch language and, after that, theology. While studying Dutch literature you soon notice that Augustine was a tremendous source in medieval literature for all sorts of catechetical tracts. Then I went to study theology in Rome. And, of course, one cannot deal with sin, original sin, free will, nature or grace without being facing Augustine.

Public and Private Interest

De Vries: I grew up in a Reformed or Gereformeerd² community. There were books by Augustine on my father's bookshelf. Quite different from your situation, I had little interaction with him at middle school. When I started studying economy in Rotterdam there was an economic crisis. I then began research into the relationship between public and private interests, especially about the question how this was historically conceived. I did research in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, among others in Adam Smith. In that context, you run into Augustine, for his ideas about self-love are an important source for how theologians and economists during those centuries thought about that relationship.

² "*Gereformeerd*" refers to the Reformed denomination that seceded from the *Hervormde* or former state church. Abraham Kuyper had a hand in its organization.

Upon completion of my studies in economics, I proceeded to study theology. It was there I came into contact with Maarten Wisse. He had just written the book *Trinitarian Theology beyond Participation: Augustine's De Trinitate and Contemporary Theology*. I did a one-on-one course with him and literally crawled through that book with him. That was very educational. Subsequently, I studied at the American Duke University, where Paul Griffith lectured on Augustine. That is when my real love was kindled. And now I am writing a dissertation about Augustine's perspectives on self-love, love of neighbour and love of God.

Augustine's Unimpeded Actuality

Van Geest: Of course, you cannot not really avoid Augustine. He continues to be of interest. For example, he was very fundamental in the manner in which we think about freedom in all possible aspects. He is actually the first to have thought systematically about the meaning of our free will by means of the world in which we live, that is changeable and fleeting. Somewhere he states that our free will is determined by our physicality. Secondly, in his Trinitarian theology he has reflected on the interaction of human potentials. According to Augustine, the divine Trinity is not that difficult to understand. Well, it *is* for people who reflect logically, for three can never be one. But, he states somewhere in *De Trinitate*, we humans have three faculties--memory, the will and reason. They are three different faculties that are at the same time tied to each other. I do not want something I do not

remember. I do not want something about which it is known, when I reflect logically, that it is not good for me. And then you have the famous story about theft of pears (*The Confessions*, Book 2), in which he says that it is ridiculous that I do something that I know it is not good. At this point, you see, we have dark main springs, namely two wills. Augustine is the first to have reflected on this subject systematically and that is literally fodder for psychologists.

Augustine's thought about happiness also remains relevant. For some, happiness is found in the material: a large house, car or wealth.

Augustine would say that these things are fleeting; they can change, a truth I find highly actual and that I also teach to my economic students in Rotterdam. Then you often fear that this passes them by. You don't find happiness there. However, I do not give them a ready-made answer from Augustine as to what does constitute happiness, but that it is not found only in the material, something that you can explain beautifully in our time from the work of Augustine. To have three fun evenings with friends brings more happiness than riding in an expensive car to make others jealous. Those are the points I think about; we can do something with them. The taxpayer does not pay me because I studied Augustine; I also return something to them: his ideas.

Hermeneutical Jargon

De Vries: Augustine needs to be studied in the tension of history and actuality. He lived at a

different time, even while the past is always with us. That is what Hans-Georg Gadamer, a German philosopher and author of *Waarheid en Methode* calls a “working history.” I find that so fascinating with Augustine. A reader of his *Confessions* reads a historical document on the one hand, but you can recognize yourself in it on the other. In his “On the Road with Saint Augustine,” James Smith reflects along the lines of Augustine on friendship, freedom and desire. These are always actual topics with which Augustine can help you along.

Van Geest: You correctly point to the hermeneutics of Gadamer. If you include yourself within his framework of interpretation and in the community of communication to which Augustine also belonged, then the borders between present and past become very fluid. From that perspective, Augustine can become a contemporary who speaks to you. Actually, that is a citation from Benedict XVI. He said at one time during an interview, “I experience Augustine as my contemporary who speaks to me.” Then I thought to myself that I sometimes also experience the same when I read him. Actually, though, you can never fully trust him. For example, you need to ask why he did not write about the death of his son in *The Confessions*, while he did about the death of his mother. He undoubtedly had a pedagogical reason for this. Nevertheless, he speaks timelessly to me; I can work with his advice without using overly complicated hermeneutical language. That is not the case with other church

fathers. With Ambrose, for example, it is much more complicated due to his allegorical speech.

The Theology of Love

De Vries: Augustine appeals to me also because he writes so much about love. Who does not want to love or be loved? He is and remains the theologian of love.

Van Geest: Indeed. In two words he says somewhere “*Amari et amare,*” thus to be loved and to love, in that sequence. That, in fact, is the basis for his entire doctrine of grace, which is simultaneously a psychology, for you cannot love if you yourself are not loved. If my parents had not loved me, it would have been more difficult for me to cherish my children. You pass on what you have received. It is on that basis that he developed his entire theology of grace. Today, for example, we cannot approve the bonus culture. You do stuff not only on your own strength and you are not brilliant by nature. You’ve had a good education, thanks to your parents, and you are born in the right country. Thus, thinking in terms of meritocracy and bonus culture is from the evil one, something that we also learn from Augustine.

De Vries: What I so appreciate in *The Confessions* is that Augustine begins with God and being loved and then ends with a vision of God in heaven. When he writes about his past in books 1-9, he begins and ends with his mother Monica. This literary style whereby an author begins and ends with the same topic shows that

Augustine regarded his life as a gift. It is God who creates and recreates and does so through mother Monica. That's why he pays so much attention to his mother in *The Confessions*.

Augustine is carried. I find that so fascinating: an intellectual great who starts his autobiography with being carried by grace.

Van Geest: With Augustine one can trace everything down to certain basic principles. The principle that I often explain to economists in Rotterdam is the distinction between “uti” and “frui.” In his *De Doctrina Christiana* and in *The City of God* Augustine deals with things and objects that you can use. That is “uti.” You can sit on a chair; you can use it. You do not need to respect the rights of a chair, for a chair has no soul. But with nature it is different. As to nature he says—they had a kind of intuition for nature in the early Church—that you cannot just use nature without repercussions. It is living which means you must treat it with greater respect than dead things. Augustine is and remains the theologian of love. You can use animals, but you must also care for them. In other words, you must make sure that an animal is given his rights. And then you move on slowly to enjoyment, the “frui.” It is the same with people. You may never use them. A person must be enjoyed because he is an individual.

And then comes the basic question: What do you need from me to make you a better, happier, more liberated person? Here you are on the side of the *frui* and in the perspective of enjoyment because of God. If you are aware that the Creator

God has made you as a part of His creation, then you are likely to adopt a very different perspective than if you think you are the centre of the world and need to maintain yourself at the expense of all others. We apply the latter in Rotterdam to the Machiavellian perspective: I have to hold on to power and to this end I may deceive people, I may lie, I may pretend being friendly, all in order to protect my power. That is Machiavellian.

On the other side of the coin we are developing the Augustinian perspective. There the question is: How far can love play a role in economic transactions and relationships? Here the focus is on allowing others to receive their due through your economic acts or, at least, to be friendly, obliging or kind, to place others in the centre. This does not imply it be done at your own expense, but definitely, as economists express it, that the goal must be a win-win situation-- $1+1=3$. This can be traced back to Augustine much more readily than to Machiavelli. After all, the latter wrote a manual about how you can remain in power for the sake of power and thus for yourself. (It is shocking that this principle was first published by the Vatican, but that's beside the point.) A reformation was definitely needed. Good and false self-love.

Good and False Self-love

De Vries: Actually, Augustine is not familiar with a concept that is comparable to ours about self-interest. He does speak much about self-love

and between those two there is, viewed historically, a direct relationship. With Augustine, self-love has a stoic dimension. According to stoic development theory (*oikeiosis*), everyone is born with a desire for self-preservation. But when you develop yourself, if done properly, you will understand what is really good for you, namely reason, your soul, et cetera. Augustine, under the influence of Plotinus, interprets that to learn the value of your soul before God. Then you realize you stand under God and are called to learn to know God. Genuine self-love is for Augustine to love yourself in God.

But he also knows of a sort of negative self-love. This refers to your preferring yourself above God and your neighbour. This self-love that is prominent especially in the *City of God*, a central theme in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, also begins to penetrate economic theory formation. Bernard Mandeville's idea of private vices and public benefit (*uit—The Fable of the Bees*, 1714, ed.), for example, is really a secularized variant of that negative self-love. One could say, as critics actually do, that within Gereformeerd thought only the negative self-love plays a role. Humans love themselves too much.

With Augustine there is also a positive variant of self-love: to see yourself as a gift and to actualize yourself through grace as a human person as God intends. What you are saying about $1+1=3$, Paul, is an illustration of positive self-love. With Augustine, the human person is made for a specific purpose. What you are now

developing in Rotterdam is actually a kind of ethical economy focused on the good. This is not about self-love as a kind of self-promotion as was emphasized in earlier days, but a positive in the Augustinian sense. How can I create a win-win situation in my economic transactions so that I reach my destination through loving the other? That is, I believe what Augustine means by positive self-love: Achieving your destination in loving God and your neighbour. With negative self-love, the traditional point of departure, everything is turned upside down.

Van Geest: You can also apply this to business and management. If I have employees and they are doing well, then they are happy. You used to see that in family businesses in the past. There would be a certain family at the head, but they invested not only in the salaries of the employees but also in their local sports team. Why would they do that? The thought was that if those employees have a good life in their free time, that will in fact promote both their wellbeing and the continuity of the business. Thus win-win is good for me as well as for the other; that goes together intrinsically. But if they had thought that they must enrich ourselves over the backs of the employees, then the cohesion in the business would be disrupted. In Augustinian thought that would be from the evil one.

De Vries: But this has long been the implicit point of departure in economic thought.

Van Geest: Yes, greed is good, according to Gordon Gekko in the film “Wall Street,” but

apparently that is not the case. Augustine says in *The City of God* that if you are very wealthy, eventually you will end up in isolation, for you no longer trust anyone; you become apprehensive. That's what happened to Howard Hughes, at one time the wealthiest person on earth. He became apprehensive because he was always isolated and no longer trusted anyone. He completely lost his way. How can I act economically to create a win-win situation so that I reach my destination by loving others? If you always keep in mind the interest of the other without ignoring your own but also without making your own central, then you are in the sphere of Augustine's $1+1=3$. Then you do justice to the God-ordained order of things. That is the central focus.

Personal Points to Be Learned

De Vries: That makes me think about what I have learned from *De Doctrina Christiana*, At the beginning of this book Augustine avers that you can only possess knowledge by giving it away. That hit my button. How as teacher do you really come to understand the material? By giving it away. Augustine says, if you don't give it away, then you actually try to keep a public good for yourself, which is a contradiction in terms, for you cannot keep a public good for yourself. When something is true or good or beautiful, then by definition it can be shared. Others can possess it as well without diminishing yours. What's more, you actually become more of a partner through what you give away. The

paradox of “giving is growing” is fundamental for being a teacher, and in fact for all roles in life.

Van Geest: There was something there that hit me like a bomb not only as a scholar but me as Paul. At a certain point, in *De Beata Vita* Augustine appears to embrace a kind of self-help manual about the happy life, the principle of *ne quid nimis* (nothing too much), the stoic principle of moderation. Do everything in moderation! The way in which you do everything in proper moderation in your life, there you find an inner balance. There is a time, according to the Preacher, to sleep, to eat, to be awake, to pray, to weep, to converse with friends and to be alone.

I discovered this at a time I was working and studying unbelievably hard in order to be able to publish as a scholar. That, of course, was important in my career as professor. But then it hit me like a bomb when I struggled against that insight from the Latin text of Augustine. I thought that to be an advice that I myself cannot really take to heart. Can I write about that as a scholar? Then something changed and I thought if my wife says we must eat or go shopping, I should do that even though I may then lose all my brilliant thoughts. Otherwise I did not keep the correct balance between the monk-scholar and the social-loving husband and father. If that balance is lacking and we become immoderate, then we become excessive and can be sure that you will never remain moderate internally. That insight never left me, which, I think, is the reason I am still happily married. Thanks to Augustine.

Old and New Slavery

Van Geest: Geniuses are in a sense timeless. Some texts are naturally complicated, but the basic principles of Augustine are like a mirror. That is precisely what I do with others. For that you do not at all need much hermeneutical jargon. Of course, I do not say to those managers whom I represent things like “Hey, guys, if you had lived in Augustine’s time, he would have said this and that to you.” That would go too far. But you *can* hold his basic principles before them, something I try as much as possible without moralizing and then they can do with it as they please. That is my tactic.

De Vries: I also think—and this I learned from Gadamer—Augustine has not seen all there is to see. For example, he writes very beautifully that slavery is a product of the fall into sin, but he does not give a single thought to abolishing the entire institution. Today we are able to find reasons for its abolishment in those concepts of creation, fall, and public interest. A certain timelessness is hidden in Augustine’s thought; sometimes he does not see it all. Of course the same holds true for us: we don’t always see it all either. Others will correct us. This is the nice thing about Augustine: You can take a journey of discovery. He can always surprise and teach you something, even if you don’t agree with him.

Van Geest: Your example of slavery is interesting. James O’Donnell, who wrote a commentary on *The Confessions*, said that it is not at all impossible that there were also slaves

doing domestic work in Augustine's monastery. That was a reality for him; he was too much part of his time to challenge the institution. It is something like our inability to separate ourselves from our time sufficiently to say that the big data by which everything becomes transparent leads to big brother watching you. We are not capable of taking a distance to say that it is immoral. That was kind of similar most likely with Augustine when it came to slavery. However, in that context he *does* say that freed slaves have the same rights as free men. From that perspective one can regard him a free thinker within his context.

A Lesson in Humility

De Vries: Augustine was concerned about people who were forced into slavery. How deeply are we involved in the battle against slave-like practices in order to keep our modern economy afloat? Our computers and telephones with which we communicate contain parts that are produced under slave-like circumstances. Moral superiority does not benefit us. Augustine teaches us that when you have seen more, you need to love more. And, of course, remain humble.

Van Geest: Of course, cleverness can get you far. You can see that in world history at large as well as in the local football club. But if you as leader develop the *habitus* or life style with the guiding question what kind of conditions you must create to help others come to their rights, then you yourself begin to live a much happier life in your own little world. That, by the way, is also a criteria that Augustine posits in his rule,

the *Praeceptum*, namely do everything in moderation! To the extent you do everything in an appropriate measure, you find an inner balance. The leader of the monastery community must create at least marginal conditions on basis of which every individual comes to maturity.

What is nicer than to have a professor or lecturer in your own small world who has only one single question? It might be what kind of marginal conditions I create both in my lecturing and in my giving guidance in my dissertation so that the student really benefits? This is in place of “O, I have to give that lecture and that bothers me, for I really want to write that grand moving Nobel prize book.” If that’s the life style you develop, then you are on the wrong side in the competition. It is not about you; it is about you as creator of marginal conditions in order to help an individual and community to achieve an orderly and satisfying life. If you succeed here, then as leader you create a difference and make people thankful. But does leadership have to do with power, pride and baboon-like behaviour? That generally is the reality, but I nevertheless find it realistic to continue to uphold the image of Augustine, even though you are aware that this ideal will never become the reality. Augustine himself knew that.

De Vries: He was indeed very aware of that. But if you think of the virtue of humility as respecting your borders, I suspect every manager would understand that. We really have a burn-out culture—and why? One of the reasons is that we constantly cross our borders. I suspect that many

managers are conscious of the fact that there are limits to what you can accomplish. In a certain way, humility means respecting those borders. Pride, on the other hand, amounts to wanting to accomplish too much: *I want it all and I want it now*. You need to respect the borders of your various relationships in order to bloom as parent, partner, employee or employer. Augustine teaches this in his idea of *ordo amaris*, the order of love.

Van Geest: I want to add to this that it is never a matter of just black or white. Of course, you have eros—I want to be read; I want to do something that shows me up; I want to be the architect who plans a nice building or the PhD student who writes that book. You want to add something and that has to do with the power to create. But, says Augustine, that must be embedded in the *caritas*, in love for God and neighbour. You don't need to suppress the eros. You do it because your product can improve the world. That must be your disposition in its deepest sense. The eros of the urge to create must be embedded in love and not the other way around, for then it goes in the direction of *superbia* or pride.

Augustine as Political Philosopher

A leader must always be humble. He should not be asking how long I can remain in power, but, rather, how do I create the basic conditions by which those entrusted to my care can lead an orderly and satisfactory life. They will still not be perfectly happy, but at least it is a good foundation. The leader who wants to be a leader

for his own sake, will develop dictatorial characteristics. And from dictatorship and tyranny, according to Augustine—how realistic do you want it stated?—you get war. From a proud leader who will not allow disagreement, it is a small step to war. That is a very central principle in the political philosophy of Augustine, I have to resist devoting a column to the fact that Putin is one of so many examples that tyranny and dictatorship always lead to war.

Much has been written about the political philosophy of Augustine. The bottom line is that in the dimension of time and space, you should believe no one who promises to make you perfectly happy. When politicians promise you golden mountains, then one thing is sure: They will not fulfill those promises. In time and space everything is transitory and so unpredictable that you are happy one moment but the next moment you lose all your possessions. Thus do not assume that politics can bring you happiness via any kind of plan, like a caring state. Impossible. That is a basic point in Augustine's political philosophy.

De Vries: Somewhere in *The City of God*, Augustine writes that the Roman Peace Gate, that stood open in times of peace, perhaps stood open a mere six years during all that history of 800 years. That is an illustration of how the *libido dominandi*, the lust to dominate, always leads to the urge to expand, to war and misery. In this respect, humility leads to cooperation and to the acceptance of borders. That is indeed realistic:

can you accept the borders of your country or not?

Van Geest: The entire *City of God* is indeed written against the background of the dissolution of the Roman Empire. In the year 410 AD, the entire Roman Empire collapsed like a deck of cards or with the speed of an avalanche. Simply nothing was left of it. The crisis of 2008 was nothing compared to it, for we kept living in houses, but in Rome even these had disappeared. The Romans accused the Christians, who in the meantime had gained more power than ever before, that it was their fault, because they had preferred a loser on the cross. If you are rich, how can you possibly remain in power if you prefer a criminal on the cross? That must lead to a mistake somewhere along the line. The problem of a weak leader is that he plunges an entire business into misery. That's what the Romans accused Christian of. Augustine reacted vigorously and said that if only you were all born as Christians, if the times were only Christian, then we would have absorbed the spirit of Christ, the spirit of the virtue of humility. Humility, i. e., the ability to relativize your own ambitions in the light of your ultimate goal to see others happy, is the medicine that Christendom in principle can offer the world.

