

---

# FOUCAULT & AUGUSTINE

## RECONSIDERING POWER & LOVE

---



Outline of Chapters 1-3 Prepared for  
FOUNDATIONS OF MORAL THEOLOGY

Duquesne University  
James P. Bailey Ph.d.  
November 8, 2004

## WHO'S WHO

Schuld does assume that we know who Foucault and Augustine are. For convenience here are a brief biographical sketch of each.

### MICHEL FOUCAULT

Foucault was born in 1926 in Poitiers, France to moderately wealthy parents. He grew up in Poitiers in the shadow of World War II. At the conclusion of the war he went to Paris in 1946 and studied at École Normale Supérieure earning his license in Philosophy in 1948 and another in Psychology in 1949 and his agrégation in Philosophy in 1952. The École Normale Supérieure is an extremely prestigious school established under Napoleonic charter. The school also educated such famous thinkers as Bergson, Sartre, and Derrida. While at school Foucault joined the French communist party, they were very influential after the war because communists were the main leaders in the French resistance movement fighting both the Nazis and the Vichy collaborators. By 1953 Foucault left the party.

After graduation throughout the fifties, Foucault held various teaching posts and cultural attaché assignments all over Europe. He returned to Paris in 1960 to teach, completing his Doctorat ès lettres in 1961 for *Madness and Civilization*, with a secondary thesis of an introduction and translation of Kant's *Anthropology*. These and his publication of *Birth of a Clinic* in 1962 established his reputation as a philosopher. Over the next several years he published a book and a number of journal articles on literary criticism. These are not widely read.

In 1966 Foucault moved to Tunisia and publishes his best seller *The Order of Things*. This is Foucault's history of systems of thought. His next book, *Archeology of Knowledge*, is a study of how he created his previous work. Foucault considers all his

books up to this time as a study in epistemology.

In 1969 Foucault was elected to the College de France at the age of 43. This prestigious posting is a member for life with no responsibilities other than short public lectures of your work in progress. He travels to Brazil, the US and Japan giving lectures as well. In 1975 he publishes *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality* Vol1 in 1976. These are his most famous and studied works. He becomes very interested in power and supports dissident movements in the Soviet Union, Poland and Iran. He completed volume two of *History of Sexuality* in 1983 and volume three right before his death due to aids in 1984.

Foucault is an enigmatic figure. He has clearly leftist views in his writings, but is roundly criticized by Sartre and other leaders of France's far left for being a collaborator with the establishment of sorts. He is a public homosexual and is held out as a positive example of such, but his work contains virtually none of their political agenda. In fact he criticizes making sexual identity a key to understanding a person.

## AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

Augustine was born in 354 AD into the Latin culture of North Africa. The region was culturally Roman, but still a "backwater" area of the empire. Augustine stove to be a part of the Latin culture of his day throughout his entire life, but he was continually looked down on because of his origins. He was educated in North Africa and took up with a mistress for ten years with whom he had a son.

Augustine accepted the dualistic theology of Manichism that was current in North Africa at the time. He taught for many years in North Africa before moving on to Rome. By the fourth century Rome was only a shadow of its former glory and no longer any center of real power in the empire. His Manichee contacts secured him a teaching post in Milan. His mother also

arranged a society marriage for him so he gave up his mistress of ten years. But since the wedding was two years off, he took up with another mistress in the mean time. He ended up not going through with the wedding. In Milan he met Bishop Ambrose who ultimately converted Augustine and baptized him.

Shortly after his mother died and he returned to North Africa where two years later he was ordained a priest for the Church in Hippo. He became the chief apologist against the Manichees. He became bishop of Hippo on the death of Valerius in 395. Augustine was one of the chief apologists against the Donatist party in North Africa as well. The Donatist's demanded that those who collaborated with the persecution with the church only be received back through a second baptism. Unable to work out of compromise Augustine sought help from civil authorities to forcibly take back the Donatist church property. He pursued the later Pelagian heresy with similar vigor. This is understandable since Pelagius's teaching was created to contradict Augustine's views on original sin and the operation of grace.

Augustine was a prolific writer and a large volume of his work is preserved. These fall into a variety of categories:

- **Biographical works**—*Confessions* is the most prominent example penned ten years after his conversion with *Retractions* written just before his death.
- **Letters**—some 270 letters to and from Augustine are preserved in various collections. These run the full gamut of religious and theological issues of the day.
- **Philosophical Treatises**—these are mainly from early in his life as a teacher in Milan. They range from a defense of absolutes to matters of rhetoric, grammar and immortality. These demonstrate his affinity for Plato. Augustine addresses some of these earlier works in *Retractions* to note his revised views. The *City of God* and *Trinity*

are examples from after his conversion.

- **Religious-Theological Treatises**—these run the full gamut from general doctrinal works to polemics against various heresies current in his time through works addressing ethical concerns of the day.
- **Exegetical works**—a number of Augustine's exegetical sermons are also preserved. His style includes contemporary spiritual commentary that is not always tightly tied to the natural meaning of the texts in question. He has a clear interest in application in his exegetical works.

Augustine died in 430 AD while the Saxon hordes were virtually at the gates of his city.



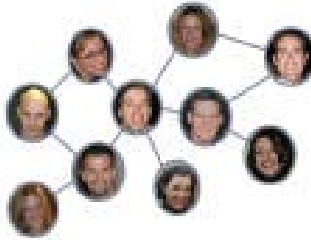
## INTRODUCTION

One wonders what a postmodern atheist could possibly have in common with a 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian. But Schuld finds four basic similarities in the thoughts of Foucault and Augustine on power and love that justifies uniting their thoughts in this treatise. These four elements are a systemization of both thinkers by Schuld that does not necessarily appear in either original author as a system.

- A sense of subversive hope
- A criticism of the reigning power structure

- Seeing power & love in relationships
- Augustine lives in the time that Foucault uses as his historical comparison

Further justification for comparing the work of Foucault to that of Augustine comes from Foucault himself. Foucault encourages the use of his philosophical frameworks in other fields of endeavor or comparison. The similarities of Foucault's thought to Augustine have as outlined above in combination with this invitation made the exercise worthwhile.



## I DYNAMIC FRAGILITY: AN ANALYSIS OF POWER AND LOVE

The primary criticism of Foucault is the pessimism of our social condition and the relationships of power over our lives. These power structures make us essentially slaves to these various relationships. Augustine's view of social relationships in power is similar to Foucault's. At the same time, Augustine has a more positive outlook in tension with this negative one. Also Augustine takes a big picture view of the power relationship, while Foucault concentrates on the close up level.

Balancing these two views of society in tension makes it possible to see Foucault's perspective as simply a small piece of

the larger reality. Foucault notes that his view on the issue of power relationship is a microcosm of the big picture in his own work. By examining the relationship of power and love in the light of Augustine's perspective, Foucault's position is not incompatible with Christian thought and can actually illuminate the issues.

## HARMONY AND RUPTURE: A THEOLOGY OF RELATIONAL DEPENDENCE

For Augustine these relationships of power cast throughout society have a heavenly model in the New Jerusalem. Relationships there are healthy and perfect and what should be emulated by the society on earth. But the actual relationships on earth are often not in accord but in discord. While the harmony of community is the model of power relationships the rupture of tension is more common in this life.

Since Augustine sees this theological ideal as the pattern for us to follow, he differs significantly from Foucault's pessimism at the current system. Without reference to the perfect faith community Foucault can only see the negative that exists here. Augustine sees the negative, but he concentrates on the larger society picture, the "ocean" in his terms, rather than the tributaries that feed it. Thus the detailed observations that Foucault makes on the individual level can inform the Christian using the Augustinian model of the heavenly Jerusalem on how to effect the macro changes.

## POWER'S SOCIAL OMNIPRESENCE

One of the most far-reaching observations that Foucault makes on social power relationships is their omnipresence. These relationships of power exist for everyone at every time in every place. Further this power cannot exist as a separate entity. The power only exists in the context of the relationship and is part and parcel of the relationship itself. There is no

separate object called power. Augustine would agree that power is omnipresent in society and that these power relationships cannot be separated from the individuals involved.

Both Foucault and Augustine share three basic observations on the omnipresence of power:

- **Power intimately penetrates individuals**—Power is not some kind of external energy or force that can be controlled or moved. Power connects in relationships to a person.
- **Power relationships are interconnected**—the forces of power that move in our lives are interconnected to drive people in similar or contradictory ways. These multiple power relationships interact with each other in producing a persons behavior.
- **Power connections traverse both the public and private domains**—The force that moves a society to behave in a particular way is made up of a myriad of large and small power relationships directing that course. These relationships exist in both the public and private sphere.

There are both internal and external dimensions to this power that contribute to the behavior of individuals in society. These power relationships that are omnipresent don't necessarily control the behavior, but they do have an influence. At the same time power cannot be separated completely as an object from the two people in the relationship.

## POWER'S SOCIAL MECHANICS

Schuld identifies four aspects of the mechanics of how power operates in relationships that he contends are common to both Augustine and Foucault. These four are not found systematically identified in either of their writings, but Schuld holds that they are completely consistent with both thinkers views on power. Both thinkers approach these four threads from different perspectives that are mutually illuminating in Schuld's estimation.

- **Power is dynamically shared and socially dispersed**—power is not an object that can be acquired or even studied separately. Power can only exist as a dynamic shared object with this intimate relationship to the people involved.
- **Power is interdependent and not in any one person's command**—the dispersed and shared nature of power means that it cannot be controlled or commanded by any one person. Power exists between two people at minimum and is thus interdependent, not in control of any one person.
- **Power shapes and reshapes participants in the relationship**—power in relationships affect people and thus the relationship of power as well. This is a cycle that feeds back and forth and all around the relationships in a person's life.
- **Power shapes and defines both people and communities**—the effect of power relationships shape the larger communities as well as the individuals. The relationships of power move as currents through society and cause social change.

## AMBIGUOUS RELATIONS AND INTRANSIGENT DANGERS

Both Augustine and Foucault see power as an ambiguous force, there is no intrinsic problem with power in a relationship or a love of having power. The desire for power and the use of power can be from positive motivations or negative ones. For Augustine the dynamic force of love permeates the use of power in both the heavenly and earthly realm for the good. Foucault uses the relationships of teacher to student and lovers for each other as the best positive examples of how power relationships build for the good. For both thinkers the misuse of power comes in trying to subjugate one person to another, rather than helping the pair to grow.



## II VERTIGO AND COMPLICITY: UNRAVELING THE COMPLEXITIES OF SOCIAL EVIL

For both Augustine and Foucault social evil is built on these multiple pervasive networks of power relationships. By analogy, these relationships form a complex machine that cannot be easily understood or even seen as a whole. Schuld likens the experience of trying to see the whole of the machine to the experience of vertigo. Schuld imagines that the machine is so complex that even the “inventor” does not fully comprehend its operation.

Because of the weaknesses of this big picture approach, Foucault and Augustine rely on close up observations of key concepts and central images in combination to describe social evil. While neither thinker isolates these separate concepts and images, or attempts to systematize them, Schuld sees some value in performing this function. Schuld isolates each metaphor and examines the implications of each on the problem of social evil. Schuld does cluster these metaphors in two general areas, the impersonal overwhelming character of social evil and the functioning in fallible individuals and communities. This allows the ad hoc combinations of these metaphors to be

better understood in both Augustine and Foucault.

## THE NAMELESSNESS OF SOCIAL EVIL

Foucault and Augustine share an image of social evil that is large, pervasive and hard to pin down on any one person. While people participate in the actions of this evil, they often do so in small seemingly innocuous ways. Foucault likens social evil to a vast network of interlocking gears where the person may not be aware of even being part of the machine of evil.

This image would be foreign to Augustine but he describes the same phenomenon in different ways. He describes the network of actions that result in sin and the network of negative results that spill out from that as original sin. These multiple threads coming into and leaving the individual sins are every bit as complex as the social evil machine envisioned by Foucault.

Both Augustine and Foucault highlight the anonymity of social evil using Martial images. Augustine sees history since the fall as the battle of good and evil in society. Foucault sees the same anonymous battle playing out in social evil. We become stuck “in the trenches” not really seeing or controlling what is happening around us. For both thinkers, warfare and battle are a good analogy for these networks of evil that one cannot readily identify, much less outwardly control.

## ANONYMITY, AUTHORSHIP, AND RESPONSIBILITY

This dispersed network description of social evil by both authors becomes a focal point for critics. By placing social evil without any solid reference to individual actions this seems to exonerate any personal moral responsibility. For critics, Augustine’s description of how original sin operates depersonalizes sin and makes any moral responsibility by an

individual nearly impossible. Others complain that Foucault's model makes bad intention on the part of an individual impossible. That the external forces of the machine would tend to remove their accountability from personal actions.

However, for both Augustine and Foucault, the participation of individuals in these small acts is still a moral choice. The dilution of the act by being part of a sea of similar actions and connected to others past and future, does not remove the individual responsibility. Recognizing this situation merely places those actions in the proper context. In some ways, putting the action in this larger context makes the moral judgement against them easier.

## THE ENIGMATIC CLOSENESS OF SOCIAL EVIL

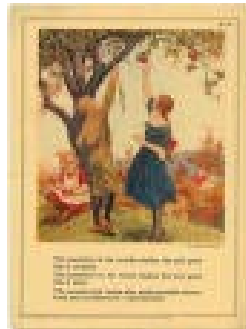
Both Augustine and Foucault prefer to examine social evil up close. They don't look for the "big picture," or what is happening in the larger society "out there." They zoom right in on what a single person encounters in their own daily life. In doing so they both gravitate towards the body and bodily actions that are easily identified or seen. In this regard, Foucault gravitates to medical terminology and metaphors of the body. He sees in the methods of medical science ways of changing and manipulating the body that are basically hidden from public view. These methods of action he can then use to describe how power relationships operate. These relationships make notable changes in a person, but often operate in hidden ways.

Foucault sees this network of social evil as multiple threads of power that come to a person's life. Blocking social evil then is not a massive task, but one of pushing back on the small threads in one's own life. He sees asceticism as the tool for this task. These self-forming activities hone a sense of service that disrupts the flow of power from social evil.

## METAPHORS OF PERMEATION

For Augustine, looking at social evil up close takes a different tack with different results. Where Foucault finds the biological sciences a rich image field, Augustine draws from the language of longings, love, frailty and struggle. This he draws from his own personal experience and describes them in his “Confessions.” Augustine finds hope, rest and comfort in the relationship of love in the face of social evil. His concentration is on the healing relationship and tears that come from that realization of evil. This comes from his perspective, writing from personal experience.

Foucault looks at the situation from the outside and studies the micro relationships and results of this evil. His concentration is on understanding the mechanics of the transport of evil and the results of that evil.



### III DESIRES, HABITS, AND GOVERNANCE: A CASE STUDY OF PERFORMATIVE VULNERABILITIES

Desire and habits form the basis for much inter and intra personal relationships for Augustine. They function together to shape the needs and the environment for social evil to operate.

Self-control is surrendered to the twins of desire and habits. Augustine still sees these two problems at operation even after conversion. He sees in these two principles the basis of operation for original sin and the content of our inheritance from the sin of Adam.

While these two aspects are intimately interrelated in the thought of Augustine, Schuld examines each in turn.

## THE POWER OF DESIRING AND SOCIAL CONFIGURATION

Illicit sexual desire plays a major role in Augustine's understanding of turning towards sin. He sees the acting out of these desires as a betrayal with the body. But he uses the same language of sexual betrayal to describe the seduction of his mind to literature and philosophy. He sees the same desires are work and the same betrayal of God taking place. In some ways a betrayal of the mind is worse than the betrayal in the body alone, but when both are operative the betrayal is complete.

In the context of these types of betrayal he sees God as the tireless parent that is waiting up for the wandering child. The parable of the prodigal son is near and dear to his heart.

In examining societal views on sexuality, Foucault is quick to point out that this focus of early Christianity on sexual sin as the worst kind of desire was unhealthy. But Schuld believes that Foucault would appreciate this closer reading of Augustine's application of these desires beyond the purely physical realm.

Schuld identifies four points that both Augustine and Foucault would agree on regarding sexual desire and human frailty. They provide a context for using these experiences in understanding the actions of social evil.

- **The Problem of Dualism**—Calling sexual desire the primary locus for these social disruptions puts too much emphasis on the body. This tends to associate the negative urge with the physical and even too narrow a bodily focus at that.
- **Fencing in the body with rules**—An overemphasis on the physical sins, like sexuality, one is tempted to solve these issues by simple laws forbidding certain actions. This sets up a false dichotomy and struggle between desire and power. That desire is merely something to be controlled by an exercise of power.
- **A blinding to the full generative power of desire**—While locating the power of original sin in sexual desire is tempting to easily explain the propagation of original sin with the race, Schuld sees this as missing Augustine's main point. Rooting original sin in the physical strips these images of their power as spiritual and intellectual metaphors that both Augustine and Foucault find helpful.
- **Missing the magnitude & richness of competing loves**—Sexual lusts are powerful forces, but they are but one of many devotions and loyalties that can divide a person. Ultimately, Augustine and Foucault would place a greater significance on the struggles for the heart than the body.

## THE POWER OF HABITUATION AND SOCIAL CONFIGURATION

Habits form in concert with our negative desires to harden patterns of behavior making it difficult to overcome. A habit of negative desire requires more than a simple decision of will to break. For Augustine the powerful combination of habit and desire can place one in tension between the good that one wants to achieve and the evil of that habit-forming desire.

Augustine sees the internal struggle in a war metaphor. The

struggle rages for control over the your own actions. He wonders how such trivial small acts can have such a powerful hold over a person.

Foucault is looking outside the person to the social vulnerabilities. He sees how habits are easily seen and used by others against us. They become points of vulnerability in a political manipulation sense. This power over others through their habits Foucault calls “maximum coercive control.”

The habits of a person are multitude and form an interconnected network. Thus changing one habit can impact other areas of one's life. Conversely changing a single habit without changing other areas of one's life that support the habit is difficult.

Both see habits as encrusted and deeply embedded into our lives. Augustine sees God's grace as the route out of this dilemma Foucault does not. But both do see the method of undoing the habits as one small link at a time. Habits are built and torn down in small increments. Both also recognize the free choice in building these habits. There can be outside forces involved, but there is always and element of free will as well.

STEVE PULUKA

steve@puluka.com  
<http://www.puluka.com>