

Augustine's cities: living according to god vs. living according to man



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In *The City of God*, Augustine goes to great lengths to explain the distinction between living according to God and living according to man using an analogy of two cities. With this distinction, he shows that living according to God is superior because it offers the promise of salvation and true happiness after death, something that cannot be attained according to Augustine if one decides to turn away from God and live according to man. He makes this argument by defining the three parts of the human being and explaining their role in a person's decision to serve God or the self. He also uses his interpretation of original sin as evidence for the repercussions of turning away from God.

Augustine begins by defining the composition of a human being. According to Augustine, every man is made up of two parts, the flesh and the spirit. The flesh consists of both the soul and the physical body, while the spirit is the rational part of the human being that has the free will to serve either the flesh or God. Augustine does not believe that the soul is inherently better than the body, stating that "it is not only because of the flesh that the soul is moved by desires and fears, by joy and sorrow, but that it can also be agitated by these same emotions welling up within the soul itself" (303). This means that the soul is affected by emotions and is corruptible in the same way that the body can be controlled by its appetites and desires. Because the soul is just as fallible and imperfect as the body, Augustine does not believe it to be superior. All three parts - the soul, body, and spirit - comprise a human being, and no part alone can make up a man in the absence of the others.

With the two parts of the human being established, namely the flesh and the spirit, Augustine creates an analogy of two cities, each representing one way a man can live. The first is to live in the City of Man, which is to live “according to the flesh” (295). This way of life results when man lives for the sake of himself, rather than God. He has turned away from God, thinking it is better for him to concern himself only with the needs and desires of the flesh, resulting in failure to serve God. Augustine views this as an arrogant, self-centered way to live, because he believes it happens when a man thinks he can live a more fulfilling and pleasurable life without God. He condemns the decision to live in this manner, saying “there is a wickedness by which a man who is self-satisfied as if he were the light turns himself away from that true Light which, had man loved it, would have made him a sharer in the light” (311). This suggests that Augustine equates living according to man with completely turning away from God due, to the belief that the human being is complete without Him. He criticizes the man who chooses this way of life as being blind to God's salvation and wisdom, which he may have participated in had he accepted God into his life.

The City of God, in contrast with the City of Man, is a state in which man lives according to God. This way of life arises when man embraces and serves God, even to the negation of self. By that, Augustine means that man chooses the subjection of the body and worldly desires in order to orient himself toward God. This is done in the hopes that denying oneself in this life will lead to everlasting peace in the next life. In this metaphorical city, the spirit looks above the flesh to exist for the purpose of serving God and controls the pleasures of the flesh in order to honor Him.

The two cities represent two different loves, one that loves the self and one that loves God. The City of Man is a "selfish love" (321) in which man rejects the necessity of God for attaining true happiness and salvation and instead believes that happiness is achievable through human wisdom alone.

Conversely, the City of God recognizes that God is the highest form of truth and knowledge; it is only through Him that humankind has any hope of eternal peace and sanctity.

Although Augustine recognizes that man has been given the ability to choose whether or not the spirit should serve God, it is clear that he thinks that human beings can only live righteously by living according to God. He reasons that only through a life of service to Him may one attain access to His kingdom and eternal beatitude after death. Even the most virtuous and "wise men in the city of man live according to man" (322), meaning that although they may live respectable lives they will still be condemned to damnation after death since they will fail to receive salvation from God.

Not only will living in service of God allow for peace after death, but it also eases the minds of His followers while alive because it gives them hope in a greater existence after death. Augustine claims that human beings, "now compelled to feel the misery of so many grievous ills on earth, can, by the hope of heaven, be made both happy and secure" (442). This means that although life can be unpleasant, even miserable at times, there is always hope for serenity in heaven if one lives in service of God. Those who choose to believe that the greatest happiness is found during a worldly existence and selfishly indulge in bodily pleasures are excluded from both the peace of

mind that comes with the hope of an eternal existence and subsequently “ will not attain the kingdom of God” (297) after death.

Denying God's ultimate power in favor of living according to man is exactly what happened in the case of Adam and Eve, which Augustine deems the original sin. Eve turned away from God's might when she decided to eat the forbidden fruit, and Augustine believes that this act was committed because Eve thought she knew better than God. Her actions were disobedient and represented the misconception that human beings can be more knowledgeable than God and self-sufficient without Him. Augustine uses this example to show how not living in service of God results in severe negative consequences. After all, Adam and Eve, like all other human beings who choose to live according to man, had made themselves each a “ deserter of eternal life” and “ doomed to eternal death - from which nothing could save [them] but grace” (313). To choose to live according to man, therefore, is to choose to be exiled from heaven and God's salvation.

Although human beings may seem to be naturally sinful creatures who cannot resist the urge to fulfill bodily pleasures while choosing to neglect their duties to God, Augustine argues that this is not the case. If the human body were inherently sinful then that would imply that the Creator made human beings fundamentally bad. Since Augustine believes that all things made by God must be good, the flesh cannot be blamed for the sins of human beings. That is why the original sin of Adam and Eve was not caused by “ a corruption of the body” (299), but instead was their choice to disobey God's commandment. Because of that their bodily desires alone were not to blame for their sin; rather, it was a flaw in their spirit. Because the spirit has <https://assignbuster.com/augustines-cities-living-according-to-god-vs-living-according-to-man/>

free will, it is up to each person to decide whether to live according to man or according to Him. Adam and Eve's failure to obey God was caused by the spirit turning away from Him in an act of pride.

Augustine proposes two ways a human being can live: according to man or according to God. To illustrate this point he creates two cities, each of which embodies the characteristics of one way of life. In the City of Man, people have turned away from God and selfishly believe life is sufficient without Him. Conversely, in the City of God everyone recognizes the might of God and serves Him devoutly in hopes of achieving eternal beatitude after death. Augustine warns that the fate of those living in the City of Man is eternal damnation because they have not earned God's graces and thus will not be saved. However, when the spirit embraces God and desires only to serve Him, one may live with the promise of a blissful existence in heaven and freedom from earthly misery after death.