

Love's Labor Leisured: Augustine on Charity, Contemplation, and Politics

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*The thought of many ancient philosophers reflects a tension between the best way of life for the individual and the best way of life for the city. For the individual, classical philosophers tend to privilege the philosophic life or *vita contemplativa* over other ways of life. Augustine of Hippo takes up this question concerning the best way of life in Book XIX of his magnum opus *The City of God*. Therein he considers whether it is better for Christians to lead a life of leisure, action, or a combination of the two. Although Augustine at times recommends a leisured life seeking truth, and at others seems to prefer a mixed way of life that contains both action and contemplation, he also opines that it does not matter which of the three ways of life Christians adopt so long as they place their faith firmly in God and keep charity at the center of their lives.*

*This paper will begin with Plato's Socrates in *The Republic*, and a brief overview of his arguments for the superiority of the philosophic life combined with consideration of motives for public or political service. It will then offer a close reading of Augustine's treatment of the philosophic debate on the best way of life, and his own response to it in *The City of God*. It will explore how Augustine's emphasis on faith, love, and charity allows him to echo, respond to, and qualify the philosophers' claims that the philosophic life is the way of best life. According to Augustine's presentation of action and contemplation in a good human life, ruling should not be scorned but viewed as necessary public service performed with love and charity. Examples from some of Augustine's letters will illustrate how in practice his emphasis on the centrality of love in leisure and in labor allows him to recommend the difficult work of politics to those with aptitude, training, and true piety.*

“For, in the case of what is loved (*quod amatur*),” St. Augustine writes in *On the Good of Widowhood*, “either there is no labor (*non laboratur*), or the labor also is loved (*labor amatur*)” (1887, 26). By associating labor with love, particularly with the love of God and love of neighbor, Augustine avoids the denunciation of labor so often featured in the writings of ancient philosophers, who dismiss the life of labor in favor of the life of leisure—specifically the life of contemplation, which they consider to be the best way of life. This paper examines Augustine's response to the classical philosophical question of the best way of life, primarily in his treatment

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of the subject in Book XIX of *The City of God*. Therein Augustine considers three options for the best way of life: a life of leisure, a life of action, or a combination of the two. Although he at times recommends a leisured life in order to seek truth, and at others seems to prefer a mixed way of life that contains both action and contemplation, he also opines that it does not matter which of the three ways of life Christians adopt so long as they place their faith firmly in God and keep charity at the center of their lives. This paper argues that Augustine's emphasis on faith, love, and charity allows him to echo, respond to, and qualify the philosophers' claims that the philosophic or contemplative life is the best way of life. It further contends that Augustine gestures at a possible third way of life, the *vita caritatis*, in which charity (and with it, faith and hope) is primary and labor and leisure are secondary concerns, achieving their telos through love as "the heart of work" and contemplation. This centrality of love in leisure and labor alike allows Augustine to recommend the difficult work of politics and other forms of public service to those gifted in them, even when they prefer other, more leisurely pursuits. For Augustine, tasks of government should not be scorned but viewed as necessary public service performed with love and charity. Examples from some of Augustine's letters will then illustrate in practice how his emphasis on the centrality of love in leisure and in labor allows him to recommend the difficult work of politics to those with aptitude, training, and true piety. Before turning to Augustine's writings, we first provide a brief, selective overview of the classical Western philosophic tradition on the question of the best way of life.

***Vita Contemplativa*: Historical Background**

Beginning with Pythagoras and the Pre-Socratics, ancient Greek philosophers generally recommend the philosophic or contemplative life (*bios theoretikos*) over the active or practical life (*bios praktikos*) (see Butler 1924, 259-77; Bénatouïl & Bonazzi 2012, 1-14; Mason 1961, 11-

26; Grilli 2002). The individual who perhaps best encapsulates this ancient preference is Plato's Socrates. Socrates chose to accept death rather than give up his gadfly ways or leave philosophic Athens for a foreign city, because he believed that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being" (Plato 1979, 38a, 44). His decision illustrates his commitment to the philosophic life over all other ways of life. In the *Republic*, one of the most important texts in support of the philosophic way of life, Socrates finds a "city in speech" (1968, 369a-b, 45) to satisfy his young interlocutors' request to defend the just way of life as the most choiceworthy for its own sake, always and everywhere, regardless of the consequences (1968, 338c, 15; see also 352a-d; 357a-358d; 362d-363a). In the process of describing this city, Socrates gives an account of the well-ordered, tripartite soul that mirrors the classes of the well-ordered city, in that reason rules over the lower parts, namely spiritedness and the desires (428a-433c; 435a-436a; 439d-442b). This city is ruled by philosopher-kings (472a-773d).

"Unless...philosophers rule as kings," Socrates tells Glaucon, "or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize, and political power and philosophy coincide in the same place...there is no rest from ills for the cities...nor I think for human kind" (473c-d, 153). A true philosopher, according to Socrates, is someone who "is willing to taste every kind of learning with gusto, and who approaches learning with delight, and is insatiable..." (475c, 155). The philosophic nature, characterized by its erotic desire for learning what *is*, not merely what is opined *to be*, is rare and exists in few individuals (485b-c, 490a-b, 491a-b). Corruption of nature and soul happens far more frequently, and very few individuals who possess a philosophic nature are able to escape the corrupting influences of those around them who try to steer them away from philosophy and toward pursuits and goods more highly valued by the multitude (490e, 492b-c). In those extremely rare instances in which a philosopher is able to remain

uncorrupted, Socrates claims this person will choose to mind his own business (496d-e); like Odysseus in the myth of Er, the philosopher will choose a private life (620c-d).

Because Socrates calls for philosopher-kings to rule, however, the true philosopher cannot lead a private life of contemplation in the city in speech; he must rule. In the famous image of the cave in Book VII, Socrates describes how the prisoner, after escaping the darkness of the cave, gazing at the light of the sun, and realizing with happiness that he has finally acquired knowledge of the world, is forced to return back to the darkness and to his fellow prisoners (514a-517c). Like the prisoner in the cave, Socrates claims that true philosophers will not be “willing to mind the business of human beings” because their “souls are always eager to spend their time above” (517c-d, 196). Regardless of what the philosopher prefers, Socrates asserts that he should not be allowed to dwell entirely in the light because, feeling as though he has already reached the “Isles of the Blessed,” he will not be “willing to act” (519c, 198). He tells Glaucon that their job as founders is to “compel the best natures to go to the study which we were saying before is the greatest, to see the good and to go up that ascent; and, when they have gone up and seen sufficiently, not to permit them what is now permitted [i.e., to stay there].” (519c-d, 198).

But given the pain Socrates ascribes to the philosopher’s descent, Glaucon asks him whether forcing philosophers to return to the cave is an injustice that would require them to “live a worse life when a better is possible for them” (519d, 198). Although Socrates suggests that the philosophers’ discovery a life better than the political one makes them ideal rulers and that they will choose to rule because of their debt to the city which has given them their education, (521a, 520a-b), it is not clear that his arguments are persuasive, nor that the city he describes will ever be—or was intended ever to be—anything more than a city in speech. *The Republic* shows that

the philosophic life is the best way of life and that to give it up for political rule requires at least a great deal of persuasion and likely force, as well. It seems much less probable that those most gifted philosophically who lead lives of leisure would agree to participate in the difficult work of government in actual, imperfectly just political societies.

Following the example of Plato's Socrates, Aristotle contends in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the "life of the intellect" is the "most excellent and pleasant," as well as "happiest," life for human beings (2011, 1178a6-8, 226; see also 1095b14-1096a10, 1176b6-1178a8, 1178b18-33, 1179a23-32). Although Plato and Aristotle are perhaps the strongest advocates of the contemplative life, particularly in the *Republic* and *Nicomachean Ethics* (see Adkins 1978; Bartlett & Collins, 1999), the philosophic tradition of valuing the contemplative life and the debate over which way of life is best for human beings continued to be significant into the late classical, Jewish, and early Christian worlds.

Centuries after Plato and Aristotle, philosophers persisted in praising the contemplative life, though they tended to view it not as a purely intellectual pursuit in which one contemplates ideas of the good or of truth, but rather as a life, often solitary, of religious contemplation (see Butler 1924, 262). The Jewish mystic Philo of Alexandria in his treatise *De Vita Contemplativa* describes the ascetic community of Therapeutae, which is devoted to prayer and study of the divine; Philo argues that this secluded Therapeutae is superior to another community, that of the Essenes, which represents the active life (Philo [1941] 1967; see also Bigg 1913, 46-48). After Philo, the Christian writer Clement of Alexandria praises the contemplative life, but he also recommends that Christian works be combined with Christian *gnosis* (see Suelzer 1947, 9; Butler 1924, 263; Bigg 1913, 115-32). His pupil Origen, a more straightforward advocate of the contemplative life as the superior way of life, was the first writer to suggest that Mary and

Martha (Luke 10:38-42) represent the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*, respectively (Butler 1924, 263; Mason 1961, 21-26). Origen's writings set a foundation for subsequent Christian writers who addressed this "two lives" issue, such as Cassian, Julianus Pomerius, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Thomas Aquinas (Mason 1961, 26; see Julianus Pomerius 1947; Aquinas 1914; Butler 1924, esp. 259-77).¹

Despite all that has been written on the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*, Cuthbert Butler claims that "no previous writer has discoursed with such fullness and insight as Augustine on the nature of the Two Lives and the claims of each of them on the individual" (1924, 259). As Origen had done, Augustine draws on the Gospel story of Mary and Martha to argue in his sermons for the superiority of the contemplative life over the active life, or the life of leisure (*vita otiosa*) over the life of labor (*vita laboriosa*) (Sermon 104.4; see also de Trinitate, I.20). While Martha occupied herself with preparing food and "toiling" (*laborantem*) for Christ, "Mary her sister chose rather to be fed by the Lord" and sat at the Lord's feet "keeping still" (*vacans*) (Sermon 103.3, 77). Augustine acknowledges that both sisters' occupations were "good" (*bonum*), but they are not equally as good (Sermon 103.3, 77). Interpreting Christ's statement in Luke 10:42 that "Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her," Augustine explains that Martha had not made a "bad" decision, but that Mary had made a "better one" (Sermon 103.5, 78-79). Martha chose to busy herself with "manifold business (*labor multitudinis*)," that passes away (Sermon 103.3, 77). Her focus on attending to her guest's hunger, thirst, and tiredness, serves that which is necessary in the present life but ignores the fact that "these things come to an end" (Sermon 169.17, 234; see also Sermon 179.4; Sermon 255.2).

¹ The question of the relative merits of philosophic or contemplative and active lives remains an important one for many contemporary philosophic, political, and religious thinkers: see Arendt [1958] 1998; Arendt [1971] 1978; Chase, Clark, and McGhee 2013; Dunne 1993; de Grazia 1960; Hadot 1990, 2004; Lamb 2011; Major, 2013; Merton [1949] 2015; and Smith 2009.

Mary chose to perform the “one thing” (*singulare opus*) that is “necessary” (*necessarium*) (Sermon 103.3, 77; see also Sermon 255.2) because she saw that the “love of unity remains (*remanet caritas unitatis*)”² (Sermon 104.3, 83). Thus, Mary chose better because she sought not to feed the earthly body but the soul (Sermon 103.5). Whereas “Martha was absorbed in the matter of how to feed the Lord,” Augustine states, “Mary was absorbed in the matter of how to be fed by the Lord” (Sermon 104.1, 81; see also Sermon 179.4-6).

Augustine’s commentary suggests that these two sisters, “both well pleasing to the Lord” and both his disciples, represent two different lives: “present life and future life, toilsome and restful, miserable and beatific, temporal and eternal life” (Sermon 104.4, 83; see also Sermon 255.6). Although Augustine denies that the life of labor is one of wickedness and praises Martha’s hospitality (Sermon 169.17; see also Sermon 179.3), he nevertheless suggests that Martha’s work points only to “where we are,” while Mary’s life represents “what we are hoping for” (Sermon 104.4, 83). He recommends that we “lead this one well, in order to have that [second] one to the full” (Sermon 104.4, 83-84). Mary, who represents the life to be hoped for, does not yet possess it—as that life of blessedness can be found only in God’s heavenly kingdom (Sermon 255.5). Because of human beings’ limited natures, one cannot perfectly contemplate God in this life, but if a person follows the example of Mary, one can anticipate the life to come. Still, it seems significant that Augustine uses the word *opus*, to describe Mary’s loving contemplation, and likewise describes our present life primarily as one of labor, which must be well done. We will return to these themes especially regarding Augustine’s treatment of them in his *City of God*.

In addition to the example of Mary and Martha, Augustine also lauds the contemplative life using the examples of Rachel and Leah, and John and Peter. In *Contra Faustum*

² This translation has been altered to fit the more literal meaning.

Manichaeum, Augustine points out that Leah's name means "laboring," whereas Rachel's can be translated as "word by which the principle is seen" (2007, XX.52, 333). Augustine claims that Leah, Jacob's first wife, represents "action...of the human and mortal life, in which we live by faith, doing many laborious things, uncertain about the outcome by which they might benefit those for whom we care" (XX.52, 333).³ Jacob's second wife Rachel, on the other hand, signifies the "hope for the eternal contemplation of God, which includes the certain and delightful understanding of the truth" (XX.52, 333). In order to be able to enjoy the "delight" of Rachel, Jacob first had to "endur[e] (*sustinet*)" the "labor" of Leah; the former cannot be experienced without the latter (XX.52, 334; see XX.47-59).

Turning to the apostles John and Peter, Augustine explains that there are two states of life: "one in labor, the other in repose; one on the way, the other in the fatherland; one in active work, the other in the wages of contemplation; one declines from evil and makes for good, the other has no evil to decline from...; the one is good, but miserable as yet; the other, better and blessed" (1888, *Tract. in Ioan.*, 124.5). Peter represents the former, and John the latter. What is significant about these three pairings is that Augustine never uses a wicked example to describe the active life, and consistently describes human life, here and now, chiefly in active or laborious terms. Mary's example may be better than that of Martha, but Martha is admirable in her efforts to be a hospitable hostess to Christ. Moreover, as Augustine's comments on the examples of Leah and Rachel demonstrate, the active life, characterized by labor in this temporal world, is a necessary path towards the fully contemplative life, which can only be realized in the life to come.

³ Cf. Augustine *CG XIX.5-9*, for Augustine's discussion of the uncertainty of earthly goods, including domestic, social and civic peace, and the welfare and lives of family and friends.

Butler claims that Augustine's interpretation of these biblical pairings, particularly that of Mary and Martha, demonstrates that Augustine "has no hesitation in affirming the superiority of the contemplative life over the active" (1924, 200). Butler writes: "[N]o one seeks the active life for its own sake; it is undertaken and endured as the means of attaining to contemplation" (198-99). "[T]he one life is loved, the other endured" (199, emphasis added; for Butler's full account, see 23-88; 195-210). While there is some textual basis in Augustine's work for this conclusion, it remains in tension with other aspects of his thought, expressed in his emphasis on love of neighbor and his quote from *On the Good of Widowhood* with which this paper began, when something is loved and involves work, that "labor itself is loved." As we develop below, our interpretation is rather that the miseries associated with labor after the fall are to be endured, but much that remains good in work itself is still for Augustine a matter for love: love of God, neighbor, creation, and revelation.

Drawing on Butler's work, Mary Elizabeth Mason agrees that Augustine prefers the contemplative life to the active, but her interpretation is more nuanced than that of Butler.⁴ Mason sees Augustine as arguing in favor of the "relative superiority of contemplative life" (1961, 35, emphasis added; for a full account, see 27-45). "St. Augustine's great synthesizing work," Mason claims, is that he "shows that in God's plan for man, action and contemplation (conceived as two stages of the soul's interior life) are united; that the earthly life is a rehearsal for heaven's; that either leisure, or activities, or a combination of them (modes of living) may furnish the circumstances for our spiritual growth (advance in virtue to love's perfection); and that the truest mysticism can well be practical and motivate external good works" (45). This paper's analysis concurs with Mason's, but goes a step further in that it sees Augustine's focus on Christian faith and charity as more fundamental to his response to the best life than the

⁴ Mason also builds upon Cayré (1954) and his treatment of Augustine's mysticism.

classical debate between action and contemplation. One could even say that Augustine puts forward an alternative “best way of life,” which we might call *vita caritatis*, the life of charity or love of God and neighbor, capable of encompassing a multitude of forms of leisure and labor, of opening contemplation to all people without exception, and of making labor itself lovable. Although Augustine himself does not use the language of “*vita caritatis*,” his insistence that charity must be at the heart of both labor and leisure demonstrates that, for Augustine, the classical preference for the contemplative life over the active life must be reevaluated. Rather than focus on the superiority of one way of life over the other, Augustine instead emphasizes the need for charity in both labor and leisure. In her doctoral dissertation, Hannah Arendt (1996) expresses the concern that Augustine’s understanding of love or charity, *caritas*, instrumentalizes the neighbor and fails to support the dignity of political action in the world. Our reading of Augustine challenges this conclusion, arguing that in this world Augustine’s best life is a mixture of contemplation and work, one founded in and held together by love, propelling one freely to undertake even arduous tasks of public service. To support this claim, we turn to Augustine’s magnum opus *The City of God*, and thence to a selection of his *Letters*.

Augustine’s Book XIX of *The City of God*

In Book XIX of *The City of God*, Augustine begins his inquiry into the famous two cities’ final ends: the universal human *summum bonum*, in the case of the city of God, and *summum malum*, in the case of the earthly city. Because Augustine’s audience comprises both believers and unbelievers, to persuade the latter he engages in a deep dialogue with the philosophers to demonstrate that he relies “not only... upon divine authority, but...[makes] as much use of reason as possible” (*CG* XIX.1, 909). His inquiry into the ultimate good of humans is often, and reasonably, accompanied by the question of the best way of life to follow, in order to reach

happiness and attain the ultimate good. More centrally, the quest for the *summum bonum* rests upon consideration of human nature and the goods that correspond to it (CG XIX.2-3, 914-918).

According to Marcus Varro, a leading Roman scholar lauded by Cicero as well as Augustine, the philosophers have given close to 300 different accounts of the “final good” of human beings. Not all of these can be correct, if indeed any one of them is. Nevertheless, Augustine still supposes there to be some measure and in some cases a good measure of truth in each account: “[T]hough the philosophers have erred in many different ways,” he writes, “nature itself has not permitted them to wander far from the path of truth” (CG XIX.1, 909). The philosophic schools described by Varro, and catalogued in their accounts of the highest good for humans, locate happiness in the primary goods of body, or soul, or both body and soul. They in turn offer diverse accounts of each of these sets of goods, and of the modes of living that are conducive to them. Generally, they see three ways of life: the contemplative or leisured, the active or labored, and the mixed or “combined.” Varro’s own answer is that the highest good consists in virtue together with the other goods essential for virtue, and if possible, also all the true goods distinct from and not needed for virtue (e.g., strength of body, beauty of form). Augustine therefore notes that Varro holds that the mixed way of life (i.e., “the combination of both” other ways of life) is best as a path to human flourishing (CG XIX.3, 918).

Having discussed Varro’s view, Augustine presents his own argument about the best way of life for reaching the *summum bonum*, i.e., eternal peace, in chapter 19 of book XIX. “The dress or manner of life adopted by whoever embraces the faith that leads to God does not matter to the Heavenly City,” writes Augustine, “provided that these things do not contravene the divine precepts” (CG XIX.19, 948). He explains that philosophers who convert to Christianity, though they must leave behind their false doctrines, “are not compelled to change their dress or their

customary mode of life, for these are not an impediment to religion” (CG XIX.19, 948). If neither the superficial change of appearance nor the more substantial change of one’s custom is necessary, then what is required of a Christian who wants to lead the best way of life? Augustine immediately turns to this question, as he directly references the “three kinds of life—the life of leisure ([*genere vitae*] *otioso*), the life of action (*actuoso*), and the combination of both (*composito*)” (CG XIX.19, 948). Rather than name the life he deems best, Augustine states that “a Christian might conduct his life in any of these ways and still attain to everlasting rewards, provided that he does so without prejudice to his faith” (CG XIX.19, 948). Hence, faith is primary for Augustine; one can be a Christian without a change to his or her dress, customs, or way of life—even if one used to be a philosopher—so long as one keeps faith central to his or her life.

Although Augustine at first seems to approve of all of the three possible ways of life equally and without preference, he goes on to clarify his earlier statement by saying that “it is, of course, important also that [one] loves the truth and performs the duties of charity” (CG XIX.19, 948). Here, Augustine implies that there is a fourth way of life possible for Christians, one which can embrace and elevate any of the other three, as unqualifiedly the best for humans: the *vita caritatis*, the life of charity, of love of God and neighbor. “For *no one*,” Augustine continues, “*ought to live a life of leisure in such a way that he takes no thought in that leisure for the welfare of his neighbour*” (CG XIX.19, 948; emphasis added). With this qualification, Augustine both upholds the love of truth that is embodied by the contemplative life of leisure, and recognizes the goods of the active life attained through the performance of the duties of charity. He speaks of moderation; no way of life should be so extreme that it excludes entirely the goods of the others: the life of leisure—that of the liberated prisoner as he gazes at the light of the

sun—should be not so consumed by contemplation that one forgets about the wellbeing of one’s neighbor. This life “ought to consist not in idle activity (*iners vacatio*), but in the opportunity to seek and find the truth” (CG XIX.19, 948). If one succeeds in this opportunity, Augustine says that one has the obligation not to “jealously withhold his discoveries from others” but share them so that “everyone may make progress in this regard” (CG XIX.19, 948). Thus, the pursuit of knowledge of the truth, even if performed by oneself, cannot be a wholly solitary enterprise; Augustine believes that the fruits of contemplation should be shared with one’s neighbors so that they, too, may benefit from them.

The life of action, in turn, should not be “so active as to feel no need for the contemplation of God” (CG XIX.19, 948). One cannot spend all of one’s time laboring, so that one cannot be quiet and still, study and pray; some leisure is necessary for the contemplation of God, which love of God necessitates. Augustine thus moderates the life of action, just as he did the life of leisure. Furthermore, Augustine notes that one ought not become so involved in the private benefits of his own activity that he grows to “love the honour or power (*potentia*) which this kind of life affords, since ‘all things under the sun are vanity’” (CG XIX.19, 948; quoting Eccl. 1:14). Instead, one should “seek to use that same honour or power righteously and beneficially, for the wellbeing of those under us, according to the will of God” (CG XIX.19, 948-49). Again, Augustine emphasizes the other-directedness that he thinks is important for any way of life; by serving others, either through contemplation or works of charity as in the example of Mary and Martha, or rather by the unity of their two examples, one serves God.

Quoting 1 Timothy 3:1 that “He that desireth the episcopate desireth a good work,” (CG XIX.19, 949), Augustine underscores his point that the active life should be about the obligation to do one’s duty toward others and not about one’s personal advancement: “a bishop who takes

delight in ruling rather than in doing good,” observes Augustine, “is no true bishop” (CG XIX.19, 949). While it is an error to take delight in ruling per se, Augustine speaks of one rightly taking “delight” in labor, so long as the labor is an expression of love and of service to others. Likewise, while “no one...is forbidden to seek knowledge of the truth, for it is praiseworthy to spend one’s leisure this way,” Augustine warns that “it is unseemly to covet a high position, even though a people cannot be ruled without it, and even if that position is held, and its duties are performed, in a seemly fashion” (CG XIX.19, 949). To crave a position like that of a bishop, or for that matter a philosopher-king, is akin to taking on business for only one’s private gain. Both the life of leisure and of activity, need to be moderated so that they do not become self-centered, but rather directed to the well-being of others as common goods.

Continuing with his pivotal argument in book XIX, Augustine asserts that “it is the love of truth (*caritatis veritatis*) which seeks a holy leisure (*otium sanctum*), while it is under the impetus of love (*necessitas caritatis*) that we should undertake righteous business (*negotium iustum*)” (CG XIX.19, 949). Thus we see again how, for Augustine, love of charity most deeply defines the best way of life, a life en route to the *summum bonum*. This life participates in the *summum bonum* even here and now, precisely through the “love of God that has been poured into our hearts” (Romans 5:5). Because it is the primacy of charity rather than the choice between philosophy and politics, contemplation and action, that for Augustine marks the best way of life and the surest path toward happiness for oneself and others, humility—that virtue Augustine promises to defend in the preface of *The City of God* (CG, preface, 3)—emerges as essential for the human life on pilgrimage toward eternal peace. Humility prompts each person to think of activity, whether theoretical or practical, as a work of *service*: philosophy must gladly share wisdom and teach; positions of honor and power in the city and world must be seen as

valuable for the good they enable one to do for others and for a whole community—household, city, or world (CG XIX.19, 948; cf. XIX.14 and 16).

Augustine concludes his discussion in *The City of God* concerning the best way of life by stating that if the “burden (*sarcinam*) [of righteous business] is not imposed on us, we should devote our freedom (*vacandum*) to the search for and contemplation of truth” (CG XIX.19, 949). However, “if it is imposed on us, it is to be undertaken because of the impetus of love; and even then the delight in the pursuit of truth should not be entirely forsaken. For if these pleasures were to be taken away from us, our burden might prove too great for us” (CG XIX.19, 949). In short, Augustine thinks that one’s leisure ought to be spent in contemplation of truth, i.e., contemplation of God. However, one’s leisure time might often be cut short because of obligations to others, particularly the obligation to rule, but one must accept and perform these active duties with love as one’s motivation. Still, one must not become so overwhelmed by these actions that one neglects entirely contemplation—both because contemplation is in itself important for faith and charity, for guiding right action, and because of the pleasure it brings.

Augustine’s discussion of the best way of life for human beings agrees with much of what the ancient philosophers and early Christian writers before him claim: the *vita contemplativa* is better than the *vita activa*. However, Augustine does not accept the belief that the *vita contemplativa* is the only good way of life or that one should spend all of his time in contemplation. Indeed, it is noteworthy that in this text, written later than those taken up earlier, he does not use the language of two *lives*, one contemplative and the other active. He speaks here rather of two forms of human *activity*, both involving effort and work in this world. At times he speaks of them as distinct activities, with only one, contemplation, inherently choiceworthy. At other times, he mentions rightful motives for positively desiring works of service to others.

Throughout this discussion, moreover, Augustine pushes back against identifying a life marked primarily by leisure as per se better than one devoted chiefly to external labor. The net effect pushes towards, though it admittedly does not neatly resolve into, a unifying or blurring of leisure and labor. No intellectual task here is without work; no work taken up out of love and performed with love is wholly un-leisurely. Unlike many ancient philosophers, Augustine considers that activity, particularly activity aimed at benefitting others through good works, is not only acceptable if it is strictly speaking necessary. Indeed, contemplation emerges as one form of such human activity. The highest or truest purpose of all activity, for Augustine, is to serve one's neighbors and serve God in charity. Augustine is adamant that those engaged in study actively seek to share with others the truths they discover or contemplate, and that those engaged in just labor do not lose merit or the prospects of full happiness in the life to come.

Public Service in Augustine's Letters

Augustine's teaching about political rule understood as public service in Book XIX is abstract in its generality, but experiences after his conversion to Christianity, explained in his letters and sermons, help to flesh out his approach to rule and to the balance between labor and leisure in human life. During the summer of 408 or 409, a pagan and city official in Numidia wrote to Augustine to try to persuade him to pardon the citizens of Calama for injuring many Christians and violating imperial laws while celebrating a pagan feast. Nectarius emphasizes his love for his fatherland as he requests that Augustine be lenient toward the guilty and spare the innocent (see Letter 90). Augustine begins his response by praising Nectarius's love for his fatherland and stating his wish to have Nectarius become a citizen of the heavenly fatherland (Letter 91.1).⁵ He says that those who belong to the heavenly fatherland face danger and labor on its behalf. Should Nectarius become a citizen of the heavenly fatherland, Augustine says he

⁵ For a helpful related discussion, see Roberts 2016.

would become a better person, “to the extent that the city is better,” because of the services he does on the city’s behalf (Letter 91.1, 365). Furthermore, Augustine adds that if one labors for the heavenly fatherland, then one will “find no end of rejoicing in her eternal peace” (365).

Augustine believes that labor is not “inconvenient” when one performs it out of love, namely love of God (Sermon 70.3, 240). “Everything frightful and savage,” he claims, “is made wonderfully easy and practically nothing at all by love” (240). In two of his sermons, 70 and 70A, Augustine dwells on Matthew 11:28-30: “*Come to me, all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, because I am meek and humble of heart, and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is comfortable, and my burden is light.*” In this passage, Christ beckons for those who feel overburdened by their earthly labors and promises to refresh them and grant them rest. He puts himself forward as an example of humility that he wants Christians to imitate. He offers his own yoke, which unlike earthly burdens, is comfortable and even light. Augustine calls on people to do as Christ commands and not to be proud but humble as they labor, so that their burdens do not press down on proud and swollen necks but remain light and bearable (Sermon 70A.1). Should they labor out of love while on earth, then they will be rewarded with eternal rest in heaven. He believes that every human being labors, even if there are different kinds of work for different individuals: “The poor man labors in work, the rich man labors in thought” (Sermon 70A.1, 243). The type of work does not appear to be as important as how one works, with love or without it.

In 418, Augustine writes a letter to Boniface, a Christian soldier who eventually becomes the general of North Africa. Quoting the Gospel, Augustine tells him to “*Love the Lord God with all your heart and with your whole soul and with your whole strength, and, Love your neighbor as yourself*” (Letter 189.2, 259; quoting Mt 22:37-39, Mk 12:30-31; Lk 10:27). Augustine

advises Boniface to “[m]ake daily progress in this love” by praying and by doing good works so that he may himself be strengthened and perfected by love (259-60). He also warns Boniface against thinking that soldiers cannot please God and points to biblical examples of pious soldiers, such as David and Cornelius (Letter 189.4). Although Augustine opines that abandoning such “worldly activities” to “serve God with the perfect continence of chastity” would grant one a “greater place before God,” Augustine maintains that “we ought not to want to live *ahead of time* with only the saints and the righteous in order that we may receive this reward *at its proper time*” (Letter 189.5, 261; emphasis added). The present time is not appropriate because “in this world it is necessary that the citizens of the kingdom of heaven suffer temptations among those who are in error and are wicked so that they may be exercised and put to the test like gold in a furnace” (Letter 189.5, 261; see Wis. 3:5-6). Thus, because we live in this imperfect world, Augustine supports soldiers as they use their gift of bodily strength to fight enemies in order to provide security (Letter 189.5). It is important that those who have this gift not ignore that ability because Augustine believes that “*each person...has his own gift from God, one this gift, another that*” (Letter 189.5, 261; quoting 1 Cor 7:7). Specifically, Augustine notes that soldiers have the gift to bring peace, the highest good, to peoples, and underscores how important and beneficial this role is. Soldiers can serve their neighbors and God by acting on their gifts and performing this necessary duty (Letter 189.5-6). Augustine closes the letter by telling Boniface that if he finds anything lacking in his life as a soldier he should turn to “action and prayer” so that he may “glorify [God] and humble himself” (Letter 189.8, 262). Both activity and leisure are recommended as ways in which to improve one’s life and serve God.

In a subsequent letter to Boniface dated 427, Augustine recounts a time when he and his friend Alypius persuade Boniface not to give up his worldly activities entirely, in order to join a

monastery and lead a life of “holy leisure (*otium sanctum*)” (Letter 220.3, 73). While Boniface wanted to lead a “*quiet and tranquil life*” in which he would be safe from barbarians’ attacks (Letter 220.3, 73; quoting 1 Tm 2:2), what “held [Boniface] back” were the arguments made by Augustine and Alypius about how the Church would suffer should Boniface no longer be working on her behalf with his work of public defense (Letter 220.3, 73). Augustine admits that foregoing the monastic life in order to continue to labor in the world will not be without its personal sacrifices, but whenever troubles seem great he instructs Boniface to “pray courageously” and ask God to “*Rescue [him] from [his] troubles*” (Letter 220.10, 77; quoting Psalm 25:17). His advice mirrors what he says about the wise judge in book XIX of *The City of God* and points again to the idea that one must follow one’s God-given gifts to serve God and one’s neighbors. Augustine’s teaching about how one ought to live thus varies from person to person, depending on what gifts they have been given and how they can best use them to serve others.

Augustine delivers a message similar to the one he gave to Boniface to Volusian, a pagan intellectual. In a letter (Letter 137) dated either 411 or 412, Augustine responds to the questions Volusian has asked him in a previous letter (Letter 135) about the Incarnation. Augustine begins by apologizing for the delay in his response, particularly since he was the one who encouraged Volusian to ask questions, for he has only recently had the leisure to think upon his questions and write his reply (Letter 137.1). He explains that for those, like himself, who are “ministers of the grace of Christ in according with our ability,” it is not enough to instruct Volusian alone so that he is “set...free” (Letter 137.1, 213). Unlike Boniface, whose gifts were martial and strategic, Augustine recognizes that Volusian is a man of “talent and eloquence” and that he has the ability to persuade others, specifically other pagans like himself (Letter 137.1, 213). Augustine labors

particularly to instruct Volusian, because he believes that Volusian can likewise serve others by using his intellectual⁶ and persuasive gifts to bring them closer to God. He hopes to teach Volusian that the laws of any earthly city cannot match Christ's two commandments to love God and love one's neighbor (Letter 137.16-17; see Mt. 22:37-39).⁷ Faith and harmony, Augustine maintains, are not only compatible with a city, but are its best foundation, and he wants to convince Volusian to use his gifts to share that message with his fellow pagans (Letter 17.18-19; see also Letter 138).

Before giving this advice to Volusian, Augustine first had to learn this lesson himself. Prior to becoming a Christian, Augustine worked as a teacher of rhetoric. Highly intellectually gifted, Augustine and his close group of friends would often engage in philosophical conversations in private. Mason claims that these years as a "contemplative" made Augustine "peculiarly fitted to teach about contemplation" (1961, 28). But after Augustine's conversion, he moved away from a life that was purely contemplative; quoting Psalm 115, he writes in the *Confessions*: "O Lord, I am your servant, I am your servant and the son of your handmaid. You have snapped my chains. I will sacrifice to you the offering of praise" (*Conf.* IX.i.1; quoting Psalm 115:16-17). Once he became Bishop of Hippo, Augustine became heavily involved in his political community and the Church and, consequently, had much less time for leisurely pursuits (see Brown 61, 163-65, 202-03).

About a year after he converted to Christianity in 386 AD, Augustine exchanged a series of letters with his close friend Nebridius; the two had lived together while Augustine worked as a teacher of rhetoric in Milan, though at the time of these exchanges Nebridius had returned to his

⁶ We note again that Augustine does consider intellectual work to be a kind of labor. In a letter to Macedonius, the vicar of Africa, Augustine writes that he is "delighted that the labor of my studies pleased so good and so great a man" (Letter 155.1, 407). Augustine also notes that wisdom is a gift from God (see Letter 155.5).

⁷ See Letter 155.14-17.

home near Carthage and Augustine was living in Cassiciacum (see *Conf.* VI.x.17).⁸ The distance seems to have put a strain on their friendship; when they had lived together in Milan, they would discuss philosophical and theological questions with their friend Alypius (see *Conf.* VI.vi.11, VI.x.17, VI.xvi.26). Through their letters, they try to recreate their previous dialogues, when they were both at “leisure, a leisure as great as you think you have or desire that we have” (Letter 4.1, 23). The letters also indicate, however, that Augustine is now often slow to respond because he is busy with his duties.

“Is it true, my dear Augustine?” Nebridius writes. “Do you devote such energy and patience to the affairs of your fellow citizens, while you do not receive in turn that repose that you desire so much?” (Letter 5.1, 24). Nebridius invites Augustine to his home near Carthage so that he can “rest there” (Letter 5.1, 24). “For I am not afraid of being labeled your seducer by your fellow citizens whom you love too much and by whom you are loved too much” (Letter 5.1, 24). If Augustine were to come to Carthage, it would be like a vacation for him from his work; he could stay in leisure with Nebridius, and they could resume their former dialogues.

Nebridius’s offer is an enticing one; Augustine admits that nothing Nebridius has ever asked of him has “kept him in as much turmoil,” as has this request to live together and be at leisure (Letter 10.1, 33).⁹ Nevertheless, Augustine does not join Nebridius in Carthage. He cannot leave Hippo, because in Hippo “there are those who could not come with [him] and whom [Augustine] think[s] it would be wrong to abandon” (Letter 10.1, 33). Furthermore, after converting to Christianity, Augustine realizes that he cannot spend his time only contemplating philosophical questions on his own or even with a small group of friends; he has a duty toward

⁸ Nebridius was drawn to Manicheanism, but he and his entire household became baptized Christians before he died; Augustine does not state the cause or exact date of his death (see *Conf.* IX.iii.6).

⁹ See the opening to Letter 11, where Augustine tells Nebridius that his friend’s complaint about their not living together “deeply disturbed” him (Letter 11.1, 35). See also Letter 13, in which Augustine describes how things come up that “destroy his leisure” (Letter 13.1, 39).

his neighbors that he cannot ignore, for in this world, the life of pure leisure is “not the lot of human nature” (Letter 10.3, 34). As a consolation, Augustine recommends that Nebridius “raise [his mind] up to God as much as [he] can,” for in so doing they can be connected, by thought, if not by place (Letter 9.1, 31).

Conclusion

Augustine’s refusal to abandon those whom he serves in favor of a purely contemplative life with his friend Nebridius demonstrates his own commitment to a life that combines both labor and leisure. Like Boniface, Augustine has unique gifts bestowed upon him by God. His mastery of language, his ability to persuade others, and his uncommon wisdom make him exceptionally suited to the work he performs. In his active work as Bishop of Hippo, Augustine labors on behalf of his neighbors. In his contemplative work as author of sermons, treatises, and *The City of God*, Augustine, too, serves his fellows because he writes so that they can come to better understand and appreciate the sacred mysteries as far as human reason allows in this world. The love Augustine feels for his neighbors and for God, the Creator of all things, motivates both his action and his contemplation. His is a life devoted to *caritatis*. His is a life that makes good use of God-given gifts.

Those who do not use their gifts to help their neighbors and to promote God’s often fail to recognize that these divine gifts are truly *gifts* and not the result of their own efforts or fortune. Philosophers, such as Seneca, whose pride lead them to deceive others and even themselves, represent “knowledge without charity” (CG XI.20, 385), for they do not see that their intellectual abilities have been granted to them for a higher purpose. In contrast, as an author, Augustine demonstrates that he wishes to share his knowledge in a clear way so that others may benefit from it and come to know God more closely. Augustine admits when he does not know something but offers his conjecture as best as his “own small ability...aided by the co-operation

of the grace of the true God” allows (*CG VII.Preface*, 267; for an example, see *CG XXI.7*, 1058).

Because these gifts are God-given and the present world is necessarily one that requires labor, those who have gifts suited for politics have an obligation to serve. Charity calls these individuals to support their neighbors by working to obtain imperfect but real political goods—of which peace is the most important. In serving their fellows to promote their earthly security and happiness, these individuals labor in love. They labor not for the sake of ruling over their neighbors—and certainly not for the sake of mastery—but for their neighbors themselves, and ultimately for God.

Augustine’s emphasis on the good of one’s neighbors and the love one ought to have for them differs from Socrates’s focus on the good of the *polis*. For Socrates, the philosopher-king rules for the good of the city, which is prior to the good of the individual; the philosopher must put aside his happiness in the sun in order to bring light into the darkness of the cave. For Augustine, the people are what matter, not the cities themselves, for earthly cities all fall away (see *CG I.15*; Sermon 81, Sermon 105). One labors on behalf of the people, so that they may enjoy some respite in this world and prepare for the peace and felicity of the world to come. The reason for one’s charity, from Augustine’s perspective, is not the maintenance of a human city or even a city-in-speech but the striving toward the *summum bonum*. When one labors for one’s neighbors, one labors out of love of God. Thus, as long as charity is the heart of labor and leisure, both are loved.

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