

Excursus: Augustine on Sexuality and Marriage

In what follows, I have depended upon Elizabeth Clark's careful work culling the passages from Augustine's writings that are central to this conversation.ⁱ The curious reader with time on their hands would benefit from reading Augustine's writings directly, to be sure. Clark's work sets the stage well in terms of early influences in Augustine's life and in trying to describe what was at stake in the debates that Augustine undertook with others.

Due to limited space, I have opted not to present a summary of the debates Augustine was having with others. Please consult Elizabeth Clark's scholarship for such accessible explanations.ⁱⁱ Instead, I am trying to fill a gap that I have perceived from the exchanges I have had with theologians and from reading current scholarship communicating Augustine's claims to a modern audience. I am interested in having my reader consider the possible effect that the culmination of his beliefs and claims might have on the way a person thinks about sex and marriage.

As I do with biblical texts and the interpretations that people take from them, I take Augustine's writings quite seriously. I dwell on the claims that he makes and how those are building blocks for a mental framework for assessing or valuing bodies and sex. Just as I denounce moral, ethical, and emotional abuse that can happen based upon applying biblical texts uncritically, I must do the same thing with Augustine's writings, regardless of when they were penned or how much "better" they were than the claims he was denouncing. In what follows, I hope to show you a bit about how to read Augustine and the kinds of dynamics to be aware of that are constantly a part of his rhetoric and his own theological beliefs about sex, sexuality, and marriage.

Some of Augustine's Ideas, Beliefs, and Assertions

Many people will say that Augustine gave us the doctrine of original sin and a great deal to think about in terms of "free will." But few are familiar with the numerous powerful tidbits that add up to or help hold in place his most popular ideas. With the context of sex, sexuality, and marriage in mind, I have pulled out the most relevant beliefs and assertions from his writings that I would like a person to be aware of. What you do with the list is up to you!

First, Augustine's *The Good of Marriage* outlines four reasons that marriage can be considered a good thing. They are the following:

1. It is a good because of the procreation of children.
2. It is a good because of the "natural companionship between the two sexes."
3. It is a good because it allows the couple to turn their evil lust toward the "honorable task of begetting children."
4. The combination of the first three lead to the tempering of the "concupiscence of the flesh," which is to say enjoying sexual passion and/or pleasure. "For a kind of dignity prevails when, as husband and wife they unite in the marriage act, they think of themselves as mother and father." (Chapter 3)

In other words, Augustine's defense of marriage, over and against the ascetic hard-liners, ensures that there is a social and moral distinction between children born in and out of "wedlock," makes it perfectly clear that marriage is for heterosexuals, and underscores that sex itself is sinful but redeemable if it is engaged for procreation. These three primary elements of his beliefs about sex, sin, and marriage are then teased out in the following list, culled from the various writings included in Clark's edited volume.

- Augustine truly believed that the first two people in the Garden of Eden "sinned," and that had they not done so, all of humanity would still be sinless.

- He believed that “Original Sin” caused two *ontological* changes in human existence:
 - The first was that it made humans who had been created with immortality to be born mortal, now. There is a simple challenge to his claim, which is that the story he depends upon, Genesis 3, makes it clear at the end that humans were always mortal, and G-d prevented them from achieving immortality by sending them away from the Garden. In other words, Augustine was a close reader of scripture until it no longer suited him to be.ⁱⁱⁱ
 - It also caused us to be born sinful, which, in Augustine’s ways of understanding this topic, meant that we would be dominated by sexual lust all our lives. From Augustine’s perspective, this is a change from how humans were (allegedly) initially created: without sin and free of sexual passion or lust.
- He believed that sex was always intended only for procreation. Had the first two humans not sinned in the Garden, then sex would have remained something that people only engaged in for procreative purposes and humans would have been happy with using it only for this purpose.^{iv}
- He believed that males are reasonable and are to rule over females, and females are carnal and created to be ruled over. He maintains these beliefs about men and women throughout his writings, which is also something we might expect from someone who consistently offers positivistic readings of scripture (read with the grain) as he did.
- He consistently moralizes sex, which means that he makes most of his comments about sex in terms of what is allowed or permitted.
- Children are the “only worthy fruit ... of sexual intercourse.”
- At that point in time, he endorsed the idea that marriage could be granted by consent instead of by sexual intercourse, since this would be a loftier way of handling oneself.
- Chastity, which is refraining from having sex, is two “souls rightly joined together.”^v
- Procreative sex is the only kind that belongs in a marriage, and sexual intercourse itself only belongs within a marriage.
- When pushed on his preference for celibacy he acknowledged that if people would stop reproducing and fill the City of G-d it would hasten the end of time.
- Procreative sex is “without fault”; sex of a procreative form but undertaken for the sake of pleasure is a *venial sin*; sex that cannot lead to procreation is a *mortal sin*. The sinful forms are ultimately “covered” by the marriage, but humanity would be better off if those non-procreative forms did not need to be covered.^{vi}
- He asserts that all of this self-control is about heavenly reward and eternal life; he mocks the person who would claim that righteous living is for the betterment of our lives here on earth.
- From chapter 6 of *The Good of Marriage*: sex that is not specifically with the intent to fertilize an egg he calls adultery, or fornication, or “the more immoderate demand of the carnal debt,” but, as noted above, it can be excused because of marriage.
- He often talks about the debt that a married person owes to their spouse, the services due, the “carnal debt,” or “the very debt which married persons owe each other.”
- A woman is more shameful for allowing her husband to have non-procreative sex with her than if she tells him to go get that form from another woman, a sex-worker or otherwise.

It’s Not Just What You Say, But How You Say It

One of the things that both Paul and Augustine do repeatedly in their writings is to belittle the beliefs of others by their negative and dismissive characterizations, mocking them and, at times, misrepresenting the full context of those others' beliefs. Regardless of unfair representation, it is the mockery and the assertiveness on the part of both Paul and Augustine that their ideas are correct and irrefutably so that is worth noting. Here is an example from Augustine's, *On Contenance* 5.14:

This is that most foul madness of the Manichaeans, whose diabolical machinations are very easily overcome by the unquestionable truth which confesses the incontaminable and incorruptible nature of G-d. On the other hand, what depth of wicked contamination and corruption may we not rightly impute to those by whom G-d, who is supremely and incomparably good, is believed to be contaminable and corruptible?

I could have collected multiple pages of such slander and mischaracterization for your perusal. It is not that he has an occasional less than polite comment. His commentaries are full of vituperative characterizations of others. Whether or not he is correct theologically speaking is almost irrelevant, except that you cannot separate his theological claims from the way he presents them. (The same is true for the tone and nature of Paul's writings in the Newer Testament.^{vii})

I am aware that it does no good to expect an ancient writer to have the sensibilities that we have today, on almost any topic that you could choose. If Augustine's claims and assertions were not a part of the woof and warp of the Church's stance on sex, sexuality, and marriage then I would not be bringing this collection of warnings before you. As it happens, though, I see Augustine's threads wrapped around the hearts and minds of people all around me, many of whom did not even grow up in Christian homes.

To that end, I have opted to share the annotation key that I created for my reading of Augustine's writings (as collected by Elizabeth Clark), though it became crucial once I got to *The Good of Marriage*. This chart contains, in the left-hand column, the symbols I created and used in the margins and then, in the right-hand column, an explanation of what kind of content each symbol was used to flag or designate.

<Table 4.1 near here>

The other piece of this picture, then, is for you to know how often and consistently I used all but two of these annotations (MI and R/X). Consider these numbers: for approximately 40 lines quoted from just the first two chapters of *The Good of Marriage*, i.e., just the tip of the iceberg of the relevant writings, I annotated Augustine's ideas 25 times with something from my list above.

Here is a specific example for your consideration. I am quoting the third of the four "goods" of marriage,^{viii} and will follow with an explanation of the annotations that I used for it.

Marriage has also this good, that carnal or youthful incontinence [NegB, Disc], even if it is bad [NegS], is turned to the honorable task of begetting children [SIFP, HTN], so that marital intercourse makes something good out of the evil of lust [NegS, NegB].

This is how to make sense of these annotations:

Augustine is calling having a sex drive something "carnal," which in technical terms it is. But he is using it with negative connotations. It is literally something natural to a human body (for those who are not asexual), but he refers to it negatively. This is a NegB, a negative message about bodies.

In that same first sentence, he implies that young people have not yet learned how to control their sex drives, Disc, and uses the term "incontinence" to label not being able to squash

one's own desire for sex. He implies that it is a negative and undisciplined thing that a person might want to act upon their sexual desires. This is another instance of NegB. The Disc in this case is heavily laden with J, but that is the case for Disc in general, so I did not include "J" in the annotation of the passage.

All of the negativity he has thrown out there is then covered over by the claim that procreating is an honorable thing. This, then, reaffirms the claim that sex is for procreation, SIFP. It is also working with the assumption that the people engaged in sex will be a heterosexual couple, HTN.

He calls lust something evil. Again, this is a part of human experience. Judging some element of the bodily human experience as inherently evil does not play out well, NegB. We are not talking about anything beyond simply having a lustful thought or desire. He is also referring to the specific passion of "lust," which, in the way Augustine uses the term is only about a sexual lust, NegS.

In that second sentence he reaffirms that sexual intercourse is properly only engaged in within a marriage when he refers to procreative sex as "marital intercourse." He asserts his preference as a fact.

Thus, all of his assumptions behind just these two sentences, taken together, add up to several instances of negative claims about human bodies, sex, or sexuality, affirming that sex is for procreation, and that only heterosexual couples are even imagined to be engaging in this sex to begin with. That is what it looks like to unpack just two sentences. He wrote thousands of sentences on these topics with the same kind of certainty, negative valuation of bodies and sex, and clarity in his own mind that sex was appropriate only for the sake of procreation. His certainty and claims informed what the men in the Church embraced and passed down through the generations.

I see the effects of Augustine's beliefs in every classroom that touches upon the topics of sex or marriage in relation to the Bible. I watch students shifting in their chairs with discomfort every time I speak of sex outside of a marriage in a positive way. It will not be all of the students in the classroom who unconsciously react to my comments, but those who do you can guarantee grew up with the social scripts that say something along the lines of, "G-d created sex for marriage."

That countless adults, of all ages, will espouse that only sex within marriage is sex that G-d approves of is a reality that ought not to be swept under the carpet. It is a struggle to get most people who grew up within a Christian, or Christian-influenced, context to even consider separating sex from marriage. Will you pause on this tidbit for a moment? That billions of people cannot conceive of discussing "appropriate" sex apart from conversations about marriage is noteworthy. What Paul and Augustine said on these topics are the primary sources for this unfortunate reality.

¹ Elizabeth Clark, ed. *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

ⁱⁱ Clark, *St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality*.

² *On Genesis, Against the Manichees*, Book 2.19.29.

³ *On Genesis, Against the Manichees*, Book 1.19.30.

⁵ Chapter 3, *The Good of Marriage*.

⁶ Chapters 6 & 10, *The Good of Marriage*.

⁷ Please see *Before Reading Paul, Read This!* (Bird, forthcoming)

⁹ Chapter 3, *The Good of Marriage*.