

## John Dickson (Studio)

I suspect in the 5 years I've been doing this podcast, I haven't referenced anyone more than Aurelius Augustinus - Augustine of Hippo or Saint Augustine.

There's hardly a subject this 5th-century intellectual giant didn't write about or help shape. His shadow looms not just over western *Christianity* but the whole of western thought. I mean, he even invented the genre of intellectual autobiography!!

In ways that are almost undetectable today, this Roman African's thinking has seeped into our thinking about freedom, sexuality, love, sin, humility, grace .... The list goes on.

Not everyone loves him, though.

His views have sparked intense opposition ... from theologians, humanists, and feminists, for example.

But that's to be expected, I guess, when you leave over 5 million of your words lying around waiting to be analysed by countless academics over the last 1700 years.

But I love him. I am hugely influenced by him. And I think Augustine embodies the mission and posture of the Undeceptions project. He was all about trying to make sense of God and the world in a society that was still highly sceptical of Christianity. And he did it with an attitude of curiosity. He once described himself as "a man who writes as he progresses, and who progresses as he writes." Always learning. Willing to question - even himself. I mean, he wrote a whole book of 'Retractions' later in life, critiquing his own views!!

The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy puts his contributions this way:

“Philosophers continue to be fascinated by [Augustine’s] often innovative ideas on language, on skepticism and knowledge, on will and the emotions, on freedom and determinism and on the structure of the human mind and, last but not least, by his way of *doing* philosophy, which is - though of course committed to the truth of biblical revelation - surprisingly undogmatic and **marked by a spirit of relentless inquiry.**”

Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy, by the way, is not normally very gushy about Christian things!!

So, after 145 episodes - is that the right number?? - , we’re exploring Augustine of Hippo, the patron saint of the show!

I’m John Dickson, and this is Undeceptions.

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We’re so grateful again that this season of Undeceptions is sponsored by our friends at Zondervan Academic. You can get discounts on their special MasterLectures video courses and free chapters of many of the books we talk about here on the pod by going to [zondervanacademic.com/undeceptions](https://zondervanacademic.com/undeceptions).

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**Kate Cooper:** I would say if, you know, if you were looking for a line about Augustine and his influence on Christianity, I think you could say he's the most ... He's the most influential Christian writer for the Latin speaking West between St. Paul and Martin Luther. Yeah. Okay. You know, he's, he's literally, he's one of Augustine for, for Western Christianity. Augustine is one of the big three.

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## John Dickson (Studio)

That's one of today's guests, Kate Cooper. She is Professor of History at Royal Holloway, University of London, and author of *Queens of a Fallen World: The Lost Women of Augustine's Confessions*.

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**Kate Cooper:** He's an early Christian bishop, -he lived just after the conversion of Constantine to Christianity, where Christianity becomes, as it were, an official religion, and going from being a religion of outsiders to very much a religion of insiders. And he's really the figure in Latin Western Christianity who figures out, What do we do about the fact that Christians have power now? We're not living up to it. We don't know what we're doing clearly. Why did God put us in this position? And, you know, it's terrifying. And I think one of the reasons Augustine has such staying power as a thinker is he's writing in the years between roughly 400 and 430, so end of the Roman Empire, early Middle Ages. He's writing as the Roman Empire is falling apart. The only thing left standing seems to be the church. And he's trying to figure out, are we up to this? Is the church able to carry the weight that it's going to have to carry?

In the Latin West, the political situation is constantly churning. There's constant invasions, constant regime change, and the church is constantly being invited [00:03:00] essentially to wash away its promises in order to please the new guy. So how does the church find a way to stand firm - in a sense, stand and deliver on its promises - to a community that has survived all of this terrifying change.

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## John Dickson (Studio)

The Roman Empire had thought of itself as invincible. In the epic poem, the *Aeneid*, Virgil described Rome as "*Imperium sine fine*" - an empire without end.

Augustine is living right at the time when this Roman belief was under threat. Everything was at stake. The Empire was crumbling around him. The unfathomable had happened. Within his lifetime, in AD 410, the city of Rome was sacked.

Part of his work wrestled with that fact.

But first, Augustine had to wrestle his own pursuits and passions.

His book, *The Confessions*, is a deeply personal and self-reflective work ... that was the first of its kind.

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## READING

*“To praise Thee is the wish of every person who is but a part of Thy creation. Thou dost bestir them so that they take delight in praising Thee: for Thou hast made us for Thyself and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.”*

*Augustine’s Confessions, Book 1*

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**John Dickson:** Is it the first psychological autobiography?

**Kate Cooper:** It's certainly the first psychological autobiography. There are autobiographical writings previously, but there's not one where somebody tells the story of their own life from childhood and really tries to analyze themselves in that way. So, um, so the confessions is It's an absolute landmark for historians of the family. It's incredible in that it talks about the relationships between men and women, between slaves and free people, [00:45:30] between teachers and their pupils, all of these daily life questions and all of these questions about how Christianity influenced people's ideas about how they should live. So it's just extraordinary.

**John Dickson:** Do we know when he wrote that?

**Kate Cooper:** No we don't. Alright. We know that he wrote it after he became a bishop. Yeah. Okay. But before the city of God? Almost certainly, because the City of God, it's um, it's published in the 420s, but he's writing it in the teens and 20s, um, and people [ tend to assign a sort of vague date of around 400 to the Confessions, but we just really don't know.

**John Dickson:** Do you know why he wrote it? Or have you got a hunch of why he wrote it? Why this incredibly introspective, and yet Theological and philosophical biography. Was he just aware that people wanted to know about him, or was he trying to do something more profound?

**Kate Cooper:** It's a great question. In a way, I think we have to ask ourselves, almost, what would inspire somebody to start talking about themselves in such an open and profound way? Um, we have to ask ourselves whether there's a little bit of a self-fashioning going on. You know, it's possible that he wants us to see himself in one way rather than another.

Uh, he's in, he's almost certainly involved in church controversy by the time he, He writes it and so it might partly be, uh, almost a kind of plea for understanding that he wants his listeners to realize that he's in good faith, that he's, he's really trying to expose himself and be honest and he's trying to earn their trust.

I think that's probably where I would fall is that. Somewhere in there, either because he's trying to earn the trust of his colleagues or his congregation, or because he feels like it will be helpful to, to his, um, to his readers, to understand that he as a Christian leader isn't better than them. I think that might be, you know, if it's not a

**John Dickson:** self aggrandizing biography, like there are other examples of this throughout Roman history?

**Kate Cooper:** Augustine's Confessions is just a story of tears. It's incredible how he's very funny. But he's constantly talking about things that upset him, things where he was disappointed, things where he was

disappointed with himself. So in that sense, it's almost like he's creating himself almost as a kind of anti hero.

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

An anti-hero from the beginning ... Here's Augustine reflected upon himself as a baby:

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### **READING**

*For even at the very first I knew how to suck, to lie quiet when I was full, and to cry when in pain - nothing more.*

...

*Then, little by little, I realised where I was and wished to tell my wishes to those who might satisfy them, but I could not! For my wants were inside me, and they were outside, and they could not by any power of theirs come into my soul.*

*And so I would fling my arms and legs about and cry, making the few and feeble gestures that I could, though indeed the signs were not much like what I inwardly desired and when I was not satisfied - either from not being understood or because what I got was not good for me - I grew indignant that my elders were not subject to me and that those on whom I actually had no claim did not wait on me as slaves - and I avenged myself on them by crying.*

*Augustine's Confessions, Book 1*

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**Kate Cooper:** And of course the hero of the story is God. You know, the

second here of the I'm a jerk, God is gracious. Yeah, no, exactly, that's what he's trying to say. You know, I mean, I would have said, I'm a mess, God is gracious.

**John Dickson** Something a lot of people don't understand about Augustine, we think of him as a Latin writer. Therefore, we sort of imagine that he grew up in an ivory tower in the city of Rome.

**Kate Cooper:** Yeah. Totally wrong. He grew up in North Africa in what's now the eastern end of modern Algeria. He grew up in a village market town known for its lion market. And there's a little market there and they are, they are caged and led on wagons down to the port to be shipped off to Rome or Carthage for the gladiatorial games. So it's just, you know, it's a weird and fascinating landscape. It's a very fertile area. Um, Augustine is just on the edge between the Tell, which is the part of northern Algeria, which is sort of wheat fields, which is really important economically in the Roman Empire. He, he's on the edge between the wheat fields and one of the mountain chains. And so it's this, this edge between super Roman civilization in these towns and cities and then just the vast expanse of the agricultural Roman Empire. Crucially, he's from a family that seems to be a mix of Roman and Berber background. Um, and so there's a sense that they're on the make, they're trying, and this is, interestingly, this is true of a lot of families in these African towns in the 4th century.

There's a real expansion of opportunity through the Roman Imperial Administration, that if you can Um, if you can get great grades at school, you can get a job as a clerk in the Roman bureaucracy. An imperial system where ambitious families are trying to get their kids into education so they can work their way up the food chain.

**John Dickson:** And Augustine's a smart kid?

**Kate Cooper:** Augustine. We believe Augustine was the smartest guy recorded in, in the whole century. You know, he's just an incredibly bright boy. Uh, he's taught rhetoric and oratory. In, um, at Madaurus, which was the famous university in the region, uh, and he, it's, it's a region

that's known for producing some of the best professors of rhetoric out across the Roman Empire

**Kate Cooper:** Augustine's family, if you look at his profile, they clearly tap him very early as somebody who has the potential to go to Italy, which he does, and make it in the Italian system.

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

Augustine's relationship with his mother, Monica permeates the whole of his Confessions. We would know nothing about her except for this record.

Augustine describes Monica as an intensely faithful Christian (quite unlike his dad!). She is relentless in her love for her boy — often weeping in her prayers over his early escapades.

Monica is venerated as a saint in the Catholic Church. The city of Santa Monica in Los Angeles is also named after her.

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### **READING**

*And now thou didst "stretch forth thy hand from above" and didst draw up my soul out of that profound darkness because my mother, thy faithful one, wept to thee on my behalf more than mothers are accustomed to weep for the bodily deaths of their children. For by the light of the faith and spirit which she received from thee, she saw that I was dead. And thou didst hear her, O Lord, thou didst hear her and despised not her tears when, pouring down, they watered the earth under her eyes in every place where she prayed. Thou didst truly hear her.*

*Augustine's Confessions, Book 3*



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## John Dickson (Studio)

Augustine's father, Patricius, was a hot-tempered womaniser.

Augustine seems to have inherited some of that!!

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## READING

*I came to Carthage, where a caldron of unholy loves was seething and bubbling all around me. I was not in love as yet, but I was in love with love ...*

*... To love and to be loved was sweet to me, and all the more when I gained the enjoyment of the body of the person I loved. Thus I polluted the spring of friendship with the filth of instinctual desire and I dimmed its luster with the slime of lust.*

*Augustine's Confessions, Book 3*

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**Kate Cooper:** Very early on, He tells us in the confessions that he was a That he was sexually passionate and he wanted to get married. And his mother said, no, you can't marry yet. We're ambitious. If you wait, you'll get a better offer and you'll get a better dowry.

So, what happens is that the mother, again, reading between the lines in the confessions, seems to arrange for him to have a concubine, which in the Roman system is essentially a paid lover who will often keep house for you and play the role of a wife, but it's specifically not a marriage contract.

It's specifically a contract where there is a kind of trade off of some sort of economic benefit. Sometimes the concubine is actually a slave from the household who will get slightly better working conditions if she takes this role. Sometimes it's a working class girl from the village and, you know, and you go to the parents and say, Hey, you know, can we employ your daughter? And we, you know, and here's what we're offering.

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

Augustine never names his concubine, perhaps out of his own shame, perhaps to protect her name. But he describes her as the only “only woman he ever loved”. Scholars like Kate have given her the name “Una”, Latin for ‘someone’. Augustine stays with her for 15 years. Together, they have a son, Adeodatus.

Around this same time - as a young adult - Augustine started dabbling in a religious cult known as manichaeism, much to the despair of his Christian mother. In those days, he thought his mother’s faith was lowbrow, simplistic, and just untrue.

Manichaeism was much sexier - although that’s not the right word because Manichaeism shunned the pleasure and the body and the creation itself. It was a bizarre blend of elements of Christianity as well as classical philosophy and mysticism.

Manichaeism’s idea of a great battle between equal forces of good and evil, spirit and body, made more sense than the too-earthly Christian Bible - which he had read but which seemed to him to lack the ‘loftiness’ he was looking for.

As his studies continued, his doubts with Manichaeism and classical philosophy began to mount. He also became disillusioned with the Manichean leaders, who were hypocritical and who disapproved of his constant questioning!!!

But, all the while, Augustine was making a name for himself in academic circles ... in the glorious city of Milan, which by this time - the late 300s - was actually the imperial city, where the whole imperial court resided.

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**John Dickson:** Uh, fast forward. 10 or 20 years. And all of a sudden Augustine is in his early thirties. He's in Milan and he's got a chair of rhetoric in the city that hosts the imperial court.

**Kate Cooper:** And he's giving panegyric speeches before the emperor. At this point, the families at court are looking at him and saying, this guy's got a future. If this guy can get funding and Augustine actually says in the confessions, if I could marry well enough, I knew I could become a governor of a Roman province, which is a title that will get you into the Senate and he's still with Una when he comes to Milan.

She's followed him from Carthage, uh, first to Rome and then to Milan. He's at this great moment of ambition and his mother arrives in the winter of 385 to 386. And, um. All of a sudden there's the idea that now's the time. Augustine's, you know, he's ripe, let's get him married. Um, and so there he is in Milan and he has the opportunity to get married and before he knows it he has a specific offer from a family who have a ten year old daughter who's an heiress on a large scale and Augustine says yes. At this point, you know, the, uh, the portcullis comes down because one of the conditions that the family imposes is that he send Una back to Africa. And so there he is. He and Una, he, they've got a teenage son. They've been living together for over a decade. Um, and he says that they were living a life of what he calls domestic bliss.

And famously, he tells us in the Confessions that when she's sent away, she vows to never know another man. Uh, which means that she has really shown him the, the faith that is characteristic of what [00:25:00] becomes his idea of Christian marriage.

Uh, but so off she goes. Augustine is left realizing that she's just a better person than he is. So that, I think, was a big, big blow, not only to his ego, but to his self worth, to his understanding of himself as a person.

This is where we get into what is both the most interesting but also the least documented part of Augustine's life. And that's the period after Una is sent back to Africa. Because his fiancée, the heiress, is only ten, Augustine has to wait for two years before he can marry her.

So that puts him in a situation that is It turns out simply untenable, psychologically. Um, and again, he talks about this in the Confessions, that he's, he has to wait. He, um, he's already made it very clear to Wes that he's a, a person who has a lot of control, control problems with his sexual urges. And, so what does he do? He takes a second concubine.

So the parents in law think, fine, he's a red blooded male, at least he's taking a stable relationship, so he's not going to be going to prostitutes and bringing the disease into the house. So that's, that's their thinking. Somewhere in there, Augustine starts to notice that this is all not quite what he would like to think of himself.

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## READING

“Meanwhile, the number of my sins was growing. The woman I’d been accustomed to sleeping with was torn from my side, because she was supposed to be an obstacle to my marriage. My heart, which had fused with hers, was mutilated by the wound, and I limped along trailing blood. She went back to Africa, vowing to you that she would never know another man, and leaving with me the illegitimate son she’d given birth to. I was wretched, but I couldn’t even manage to emulate a woman. Instead, I itched at delay, as it was two years before I could have the girl I was arranging to marry. I was no lover of marriage but instead a slave to my lust, so I secured another woman - but not a wife, to be sure. It was as if I wanted my soul’s disease to be maintained unimpaired, or maybe even augmented, and conveyed into the realm of lawful wedlock,

and I needed a sustained relationship to serve as a sort of escort on this journey. But that wound of mine made by hacking off the woman I'd had before wasn't healing; on the contrary, after excruciating inflammation and pain came putrefaction and a growing numbness and hopelessness."

"You're the one to be praised, you're the one to be glorified, fountain of mercies! I was growing more wretched, and you were growing nearer. Your right hand was almost - almost! - there to pluck me out of the slime and wash me clean, but I didn't know that."

*Augustine's Confessions, Book 6*

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

While he's in Milan, Augustine hears about the incredible sermons given by the Bishop of Milan, a man called Ambrose. He's a figure that becomes extremely powerful in Augustine's life. Ambrose deserves his own episode one day, because many scholars reckon Ambrose - as a former Roman governor turned Christian bishop - had as big an impact on the Church in the Roman world as Emperor Constantine did at the beginning of the 300s.

Ambrose was an intellectual, trained in rhetoric just like Augustine, and came from a very influential Roman family. His reputation as a public speaker beyond compare was what first drew the vain Augustine to him.

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### **READING**

For although I did not trouble to take what Ambrose said to heart, but only to listen to the manner in which he said it ... nevertheless his meaning, which I tried to ignore, found its way into my mind together with his words, which I admired so much. I could not keep the two apart, and

while I was all ears to seize upon his eloquence, I also began to sense the truth of what he said, though only gradually.

*Confessions Book 5.*

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**Kate Cooper:** And he is a spectacular preacher. The other thing he's doing, though, is he's come across an idea from the Greek East of Christian virginity and that Christian virgins are people who have a special relationship with God because they have a kind of purity in their connection to God that they're not accountable.

He's thinking particularly of young women because everybody knows that once women are in family relationships they have all sorts of obligations to the men around them. So if you get a woman who's vowed to virginity, okay, she might be accountable to her mother, but pretty much it's going to be God and the church all the way. And she's not going to be going to the priest and saying, well, I'd love to, but my husband won't let me. So we love virgins, Ambrose loves virgins. And he starts to preach the idea, um, that not only women, but also men should pursue the path of virginity, ideally, or at least sexual asceticism. So at the time that Augustine is having this crisis about what a bad man he is and how his badness is fundamentally because he can't control his sexual impulses. And he's, but not only has he betrayed Una with with the young woman that he's going to marry but he's even double betrayed her with the second concubine and it's just a train wreck. There he is listening to Ambrose of Milan preaching these incredible, terrifying sometimes, sermons about hellfire and virginity.

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## **READING**

And what is virginal chastity but purity free from stain? And whom can we judge to be its author but the immaculate Son of God, Whose flesh saw no corruption, Whose Godhead experienced no infection? Consider,

then, how great are the merits of virginity. Christ was before the Virgin, Christ was of the Virgin. Begotten indeed of the Father before the ages, but born of the Virgin for the ages.

*Ambrose 'Concerning Virginity', Book 1,*

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**Kate Cooper:** So Augustine basically starts to [00:31:00] to, in a sense, interpret his problem as being a problem about sex and temptation.

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

I just wanted to chime in here and note that it wasn't *just* Ambrose's teachings on sex that attracted Augustine. (Though, apparently Ambrose was so persuasive in his arguments about the virtues of abstinence that noble families worried their daughters might chose a life of virginity over marriage after hearing him preach, and they hesitated to send them to church)

But Ambrose's preaching addressed many of the concerns Augustine had had with Manicheism, too. He also showed Augustine that there *were* people within the Christian faith who had applied intellectual rigour to their belief. Ambrose was known for his knowledge of the latest Greek writings - Christian and pagan. He even incorporated some of the more recent philosophical thoughts into his preaching. Augustine was impressed.

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**John Dickson:** Now this is all before he is a confessing Christian. Tell us the story, the famous story, of his coming to have this revelation Um, and thinking of himself as a full Christian.

**Kate Cooper:** So, he He's, um, he's in Milan with his friend, Alypius, and they meet a pair of young men who start talking to them about the

ascetic movement and about the life of Antony who was, uh, a, uh, a desert father from Egypt whose life had recently been translated into Latin. And they get very excited about this idea of the desert fathers. And Augustine talks about how he was, he was with Alypius, and he was so upset about the fact that his own life was going in this direction that was just so upsetting to him they're in a small house in a garden and, um, and over the garden wall, he hears some children playing a game where. The, um, the, the sort of sing song of the game is take it and read. So he has seen this book of Paul's letters in the house, and he decides to go back in and pick up the book and read.

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## READING

... suddenly I heard the voice of a boy or a girl I know not which--coming from the neighboring house, chanting over and over again, "Pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it." Immediately I ceased weeping and began most earnestly to think whether it was usual for children in some kind of game to sing such a song, but I could not remember ever having heard the like. So, damming the torrent of my tears, I got to my feet, for I could not but think that this was a divine command to open the Bible and read the first passage I should light upon...

*Augustine's Confessions, Book 8*

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**Kate Cooper:** And at that point, he picks, he opens, he opens, he opens the book. And, and there, famously, there is in the ancient world, Uh, practice called Sortes Biblicae, where you open a book and you point to a passage and you see what it says, and it's kind of almost a form of divination. Um, so that's clearly what Augustine was doing in this case.

And when he, when he gets to the passage, it's Paul's passage from Romans about, uh, not, not in reveling and drunkenness. And he's, he,



Augustine realizes Oh, this is what God wants for me. He wants me to follow this life of asceticism that I've, that I've heard about in the life of Antony. So he makes this marvelous connection between the letters of Paul, the life of Antony, and God's will.

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## READING

So I quickly returned to the bench where Alypius was sitting, for there I had put down the apostle's book when I had left there. I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: "Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof" (Ro 13.13). I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.

*Confessions, Book 8*

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**Kate Cooper:** And he sort of sees this whole chain of communication coming to him. Um, and it's as if God has finally spoken to him. He's been praying for a sign. And he feels like he's finally got his sign. Um, and something I find really interesting about what happens next is he goes and he tells Alypius, his friend, he tells his mother, who's also nearby, who hasn't been part of the story, but she's clearly on the scene.

It's almost as if he knows that his mother played an incredibly important role in bringing him to Christ, but somehow he needs it to be something that came to him by another route. It's like he's trying to integrate that intellectual life. That he's been living, um, and also a life among men, you know, Alypius and the young men he met and the writings of the life of Antony.

There's, there's a sense that he's trying to bring together the world of his childhood and his mother's Christianity. with this sort of heady world of intellectual Christianity that he started to get access to through Ambrose's preaching. So there's a sort of, the two things come together for him.

And he says that he's had this moment, and the scales fell away, everything looked different, and the first thing he thinks is, I know I can't get married to that girl.

Interestingly, he doesn't, he doesn't phrase it as being about sex. He phrases it as being about, he knows there's something wrong with that marriage. You know, and, and in fact, uh, again, we have this, this question of, of ambition, but so he decides, initially he sees it as following, following the life of philosophy, and he and Alypius organize themselves to go and live with a group of friends for a few months up in the mountains and, and read philosophy and really try to think about what it is to live a righteous life.

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

After Augustine becomes a Christian, he's baptised by Ambrose, and then turns from his purely academic life to establish a community of prayer and study in his hometown, Thagaste, in present-day Algeria.

But locals weren't going to have a bar of this. Someone so talented shouldn't be hidden away in prayer and study. So, just 4 years after his conversion, Augustine was pressed by North Africans in 391 to become a priest. Five years later he was elevated to become the bishop of the important port city of Hippo.

From this post, he defended Christianity against paganism and heresies, gave sage advice to Roman officials overwhelmed by rampant slave-trading and violent raids by Saharan warriors, and laid down his 5

million written words like a master foundation, a bedrock of western civilization.

Sounds like an exaggeration, right?

Stay with us.

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## **BREAK 1**

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## **READING**

### ***“The Second Founder of the Faith”***

*Converted 1,600 years ago, St Augustine still shapes church thought*

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

That’s the headline of a full page article in Time Magazine on 29 September 1986, celebrating the 1600th anniversary of the conversion of Augustine. Here’s a bit more from the article:

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## **READING**

The sudden conversion was fateful not only for St Augustine, who forsook his ambitions and his women to undertake an early form of monastic life, but for the subsequent development of the West. Pope John Paul II, in an anniversary pronouncement, terms Augustine the

“common father of our Christian civilisation”. Only a handful of thinkers have had equivalent influence over such a span of years.

During his 35 years as bishop, he not only supervised a turbulent diocese but spent long hours judging disputes, preached daily (500 sermons survive) and managed to write 100 treatises and hundreds of letters on doctrine. Five million of his words are indexed in computers at West Germany’s Wurzburg University.

Those words affected almost every aspect of the faith. Long before Calvin, Augustine championed predestination; before Luther, he taught salvation by God’s mysterious grace, not by good works.

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

Mining Augustine’s enormous corpus of writing is not something we can really do in a single episode. But I asked my next guest, theologian Han-Luen Kantzer Komline - to help us grasp the big picture of Augustinian thought.

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**John Dickson:** So can you give us an idea of the main theme and whether you reckon there’s an overarching theme to this big brain we call [00:00:30] Saint Augustine.

**Han-Luen Kantzer Komline:** Ooh, I love that question. So for Augustine, I would say four key themes for him would be trinity, humility, um, grace, and love. So I think if we have a sense of what those four themes mean to him. And how they connect to each other, we can create a kind of quadrilateral or window into his larger thinking.

That gives us a perspective on the whole.

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## John Dickson (Studio)

By the way, Han-Luen is the Marvin and Jerene DeWitt Professor of Theology and Church History at Western Theological Seminary in Michigan. She is particularly interested in Augustine, and her book *Augustine on the Will: A Theological Account* was published by Oxford University Press in 2020.

We're going to have to do a whole episode on the first of those themes, the Trinity. But Augustine once told a story about walking along the seaside while he was meditating on the Trinity. He watched a boy filling a hole in the sand with seawater, and he asked the kid what on earth he was doing. The boy said, he wanted to empty the whole sea into the hole. Augustine pointed out that that was impossible. The quick witted boy replied that understanding the Trinity that Augustine was always going on about was even less possible.

Augustine accepted the challenge and wrote arguably the most important work on the Trinity for the next thousand or more years, in which he described the Trinity as pure love: The Father is the Lover, the Son is the Beloved, and the Holy Spirit is the very Love that binds them together. He said much more than that, of course. But, for Augustine, this means everything is ultimately about 'love'!

Beyond *On the Trinity* and the *Confessions*, which we've already mentioned, the other crucially important work of Augustine is *The City of God*.

I asked Kate Cooper to do the impossible, and summarise that work.

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**Kate Cooper:** Okay, so the City of God, I'm really going to try to compress this, it's hard. Um, he, he starts getting letters from highly literate layman saying, What is this Christian thing? Explain to me in terms that are philosophically valid. Some people think that the sack of

Roman 410 is a sign that the Christian God really doesn't love the Roman Empire and we just need to go back to the old gods. And so Augustine is having to take the question of why God would allow a group of people to have political power, even though they're clearly not up to the job, you know, and, and it's that, that failure of the imperial church to bring prosperity and peace that he's really struggling with in that text. Um, and his fundamental idea is that the city of God is not the city here on earth. The city of God is also not something hovering in heaven right now watching us. The city of God is the perfect reality that will happen at the completion of history at the end of time. And none of us knows what role we are playing in the city of God.

We don't know as we live out our lives bound in time here on earth what it means to take the action we're taking, because we can't see the outcome. And even if we, even if we were a perfectly moral person, because we're bound by time and we don't know what the other sequence of things that are going to happen until the end of time, we don't know the significance of our actions.

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

You can get a little bit more on The City of God in our Episode 80 with Christopher Watkin, titled *Critical Theory*. Head to the show notes for more.

There were two big theological threats to orthodox Christianity in Augustine's time, and Augustine stomped on them both—intellectually speaking.

One was Donatism, a group of puritanical Christians led by Donatus who said that anyone who denied Christ during the persecutions at the beginning of the century was not a valid Christian, no matter how much repenting they did. Therefore, any churches founded by any of those repentant traitors were false churches—the Donatists thought there were a lot of false churches. Some think of Augustine as dogmatic and

puritanical. But, in fact, he rescued the Church from this spiritual elitism, reminding everyone that divine love, not human faithfulness, is the central reality of Christianity.

Then there was Pelagianism – another overly rigorous version of Christianity.

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**John Dickson:** Can you give us the 30 second explainer on Pelagianism? And then tell us a little more about Augustine's view of the will. Now, I know you've written a book on this, but if you can do it in like 60 seconds. My audience would love you.

**Han-Luen Kantzer Komline:** Okay. ...-um, in a nutshell, Pelagius had a very different theological sensibility than Augustine. He was someone who really emphasized human potential. This is like all the slogans I heard growing up in the 80s, like, like, you, like, you can, you can, you can do it, you can achieve it, like, if you can dream it, you can, you can accomplish it, reach for the stars, all of this stuff, that was Pelagius.

He would, he has written some things, for example, his letter to Demetrius, which could be, read today at a graduation ceremony by a motivational speaker. I mean, he's basically all about not underestimating our natural abilities as God created us. And then, Augustine, in contrast to that, really emphasizes our neediness and our dependence on God's grace to do anything good.

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## READING

Whenever I give moral instruction, I first try to demonstrate the inherent power and quality of human nature. I try to show the wonderful virtues

which all human beings can acquire. Most people look at the virtues in others, and imagine that such virtues are far beyond their reach. Yet God has implanted in every person the capacity to attain the very highest level of virtue.

The reason is that, in moral capacities, God has created us all the same: we are each capable of achieving the same degree of moral goodness. Once people perceive this truth, they are filled with hope, knowing that in the fullness of time they can share the moral virtue of Christ himself.

*A letter from Pelagius to Demetrias, 385AD.*

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## **John Dickson (Studio)**

This was one of the most important debates in the history of Christianity.

Pelagius reckoned we humans are innately good and have the power within us to fully obey God. “I’m good through and through, and only getting better!” That was kind of their mantra.

But Augustine argued - from the Bible and experience - that we are fallen creatures. Our inherited nature is a strange mix of good and bad. We are free to act as we choose but not wholly free to act for the good 100% of the time. His fancy phrase for this was, *liberum arbitrium captivatum*, “*free will in captivity*”. That is, our will might be free but it is also weakened by our nature.

You can test out Augustine’s idea very easily. Try, for the next 24 hours, to do, say, and think only good things! Starting ... now! Let me know how you go!!

In his *Confessions*, Augustine tells a personal story about stealing pears, which is really a story about human nature.



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## READING

We carried off a huge load of pears, not to eat ourselves, but to dump out to the hogs, after barely tasting some of them ourselves. Doing this pleased us all the more because it was forbidden. Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart—which thou didst pity even in that bottomless pit. Behold, now let my heart confess to thee what it was seeking there, when I was being gratuitously wanton, having no inducement to evil but the evil itself.

It was foul, and I loved it. I loved my own undoing. I loved my error—not that for which I erred but the error itself. A depraved soul, falling away from security in thee to destruction in itself, seeking nothing from the shameful deed but shame itself.

*Augustine's Confessions, Book 2*

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### John Dickson (Studio)

This sort of passage is often quoted to make the point that Augustine was a total downer, a grumpy pessimist about humanity. The great 20th century political philosopher John Rawls gave Augustine the dubious honour: “one of the two dark minds in Western thought”. (Check out the show notes for the other ‘dark mind’.

Does Augustine deserve this title?

Spoiler! Not if you actually read him.

We'll see what my expert guest has to say about it, after this ...

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## **BREAK 2**

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### **CLIP**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoJY6R-QcpM>

*The Loveables in the Kingdom of Self-Esteem.*

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

That's a reading from a librarian in the city of Rancho Cordova in California. She's reading a kids book called *The Loveables in the Kingdom of Self-Esteem* by Diane Loomans. Any kid who reads this book hears this message: you are *very* special.

It came out of the self-esteem craze of the 1980s and 90s. The thinking was based on questionable research (see the show notes) that suggested a high self-esteem (that is, liking yourself and holding a positive view of your actions and capacity) correlated to being a well-adjusted, clean, sober person with no criminal record and probably higher education.

If you have low self-esteem, you're more likely to be in jail. There were a bunch of scholarly papers around the same time, and schools across America in particular adopted self-esteem programs to instill greater confidence in our kids. You know: every child gets a prize!!

Pelagius would have been happy with it all.

The only problem is: It's mostly junk. Newer studies explore the problems inherent in self-esteem culture.

Augustine was probably right all along ... again.

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**Han-Luen:** Like you could hear Pelagius view and think, oh, that's so encouraging. He thinks we have so much potential. This is wonderful. But on the other side, I love Peter Brown's line about how Pelagius message was simple, But terrifying. Perfection is possible, possible, and therefore obligatory. That is a lot of weight to put on human shoulders, that you alone can do anything you want to do. He like practically says that in so many words, and I think deep down we all know that's false, that we cannot do anything we want to do, and so it can be deeply discouraging to feel that that's an obligation we have.

So, I think there's another side that sees Augustine, another way of framing this, where Augustine's alleged pessimism about the human condition is actually something really hopeful because it corresponds to a really broad view of God's grace and, um, Corresponds to an acknowledgment of our neediness as human beings and that that's okay.

**John Dickson** - I mean, I've often felt that there'd be no more depressing idea to believe than that I am good through and through and only getting better. Because I don't know how I'd cope with all the counter evidence. You know, like by 9am, I know I'm a jerk.

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

This reminds me of something British intellectual Francis Spufford wrote about his conversion from atheism to Christianity. When he was a sceptic, he mocked the Christian notion of guilt. He grew to love it, though.

He writes: "I've found that admitting there's some black in the colour-chart of my psyche doesn't invite the blot of dark to swell, or give a partial truth more gloomy power over me than it should have, but the

opposite. Admitting there's some black in the mixture makes it matter less. It makes it easier to pay attention to the mixedness of the rest. It helps you stop wasting your time on denial, and therefore helps you stop ricocheting between unrealistic self-praise and unrealistic self-blame. It helps you be kind to yourself."

Here's Spufford himself giving a talk at St Paul's Cathedral in London.

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## CLIP

Francis Spufford

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ci\\_zMyEr5Q&t=1642s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ci_zMyEr5Q&t=1642s)

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**John Dickson:** Francis Spufford, I don't know if you know that name. He's a British author and he wrote a book called Unapologetic and he was a complete atheistic British skeptic. And he says, One of the things that brought him to Christianity was, um, the realization that we're all fallen because he thought, as soon as I believe I'm fallen, I can be gentle on myself. And that sort of ties in with what you were saying.

Like there is a kind of gentleness about Augustine's view that is, you can see how it would be oppressive, but actually in his framework, it isn't.

**Han-Luen Kantzer Komline:** Yeah, I think that's great, and I think one reason why people often don't see that side as much is because it tends to come through, especially in his sermons, where he's preaching to people, exhorting them, and just really in touch with how hard it is out there on the ground. to be a human being and to get better and he doesn't throw in the towel.

He doesn't say, well, you know, we're sinful, so just be complacent and do whatever you want to do and it's all fine. He urges people to really

give it their best shot to keep growing, but also acknowledges that it's really slow and arduous and there is going to be progress and there's going to be regress and that this is normal and that they can rely on God's grace to sustain them through that.

**Kate Cooper:** Okay, I think to say that Augustine is depressing is to say that you haven't read Augustine because if you do read Augustine you'll find that every time he says something that's just painful and devastating. He's also saying something crazy, something fascinating, something funny, something wondrous.

**John Dickson:** But is he more about human guilt than he is, you know, love and joy?

**Kate Cooper:** Oh, I think that's a terrible misunderstanding. I think he's, he's very concerned about our our failings as human beings and our limitations as human beings. He really thinks that it's dangerous to think that you can do more than you can do. That that's the point where people make bad and dangerous mistakes. If you think, Oh, I'm the good guy and he's the bad guy, or she doesn't deserve my help. That's when you make terrible mistakes. So he wants us to be humble.

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

He really does want us to be humble!

In one of his many letters, he wrote: *"This way is first humility, second humility, third humility and no matter how often you keep asking me I will say the same over and over again."*

This was a massive departure from the culture of Rome he grew up with, where 'pride' was a virtue, and humility was a weakness. But Augustine reckoned, we can only see glory - the glory of God, and our own glory - when we acknowledge our fallenness.

## **John Dickson (Studio)**

Another big criticism of Augustine is that he was a raging misogynist. So I put that to Kate Cooper – who has studied precisely this question – and her answers were fascinating, but you'll need to be a PLUS subscriber to get that extended episode. Head to [undeceptions.com/plus](https://undeceptions.com/plus) to sign up. Sorry to be tease!

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**John Dickson:** Um, have you got a favorite piece of writing from St. Augustine?

**Han-Luen Kantzer Komline:** yeah, yeah. Um, but I would actually recommend this short little book called, um, On Instructing Beginners in the Faith.

**Han-Luen Kantzer Komline:** And I just love that. He sort of gives, it's like a crystallization of [00:29:30] his understanding of what's most important in Christian belief. And also there are some really wonderful reflections on just how to engage with others in an encouraging way in a Christian context. So some real pastoral wisdom there as well. And it's very short, available in paperback. So

**John Dickson:** Brilliant.

**Han-Luen Kantzer Komline:** great one.

**John Dickson:** Um, finally what do you think a sceptic, um, might find enriching if they dipped into Augustine?

**Han-Luen Kantzer Komline:** Mm. For the skeptic, I would recommend Confessions because it's interesting to trace the path that led Augustine to Christian theology and just to hear a lot of questions that he had about Christianity. Skeptical questions that he himself had. I think it's important for skeptics to know that the kinds of questions they ask are important and good to explore and also shared by, you know, many Christians have thought through these questions too, and they're good questions.

So for Augustine, for example, when he first encountered the Bible in the Old Testament, he was really turned off. He thought, what is going on here? Like, yeah, low brow, like this, this text is not polished stylistically, and God seems to be endorsing violence, there's all kinds of Things that seem unfitting for the object of worship that are attributed to God in this text.

So this was a, an issue that he had and, and worked through. So I think that, um, for skeptics, I would, I would recommend that. And also, I do think Augustine, so Augustine is someone who's been there, who can connect with folks like that. And then even in his thinking going forward as a Christian, he bears Those kinds of questions in mind.

So he'll say sometimes, you know, in a sermon or writing, well, maybe someone might ask this. He's always thinking not only about his own perspective, but what a critic might say. So I think that gives his thought a kind of rigor that's appealing to people who think it's important to ask hard questions.

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Let's press pause - I've got a five minute Jesus for you

Jesus was somewhat pessimistic about human nature. To his own followers, he said things like: If you then, **who are evil**, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matt 7:11)

The word "evil" is jarring to modern ears. We usually reserve it for the Hitlers of the world. But it is pretty common in Jesus's teaching, where it basically means *immoral* or *wicked*. And he uses it of *everyone*, whether his opponents or his closest followers.

This quotation comes from the famous Sermon on the Mount, which opens with the words: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matt 5:3.

Evil ... bankrupt.

The loftiest ethic ever uttered begins with a call for us all to acknowledge our fallenness, our lack of moral credit.

Jesus didn't say we are hopeless failures destined only to be immoral, but he did insist that recognising our flawed humanity is the first step toward seeing his "kingdom." This is because, as Augustine would emphasize again and again, this kingdom is all about God's grace toward us not our capacity to be good.

I had an interesting conversation about all this with a thoughtful journalist from the ABC, Australia's national broadcaster. He said he liked *some* of the ethical teachings of Jesus—the bits about love and peace—but he was wary of any talk of human guilt and divine mercy. He worried this would crush the human spirit, especially in children (he and his wife were about to have their first child). Kids would grow up, he feared, in a cloud of guilt that obscured their abilities and intrinsic value. He preferred the notion that we all have within us everything we need to live honourable lives. He wasn't a Christian, but he was sounding like Pelagius.

I explained that I reckon things are the other way around. Imagine growing up in a family where the expectation is that you are good through and through. You will make the "first 15" (a rugby union reference), always stay out of trouble, get straight As at school, and quickly repair any personal failures. I suggested that *this* was the real recipe for crushing a child's spirit. This performance-based mentality, where worth is tied to achievement, can't prepare us for the inevitable failures of life. Much better, it seems to me, is to raise our children in the full knowledge of both their gifts *and* their flaws – all in the knowledge that they are loved regardless of their performance.

That's a lot more like what Jesus taught—and what Augustine championed a few centuries later.

The longer I live, the more attached I am to the biblical truth that I am fallen. I don't like my foibles and frailties. I'm not excusing them. But I love the way the Bible prepares me not to be shocked at my own inability to live up to my own standards, let alone God's. The Bible prepares me



not to be shocked that other people – even seemingly good people – will let me down. So, my trust isn't in my flawed self, or in any other human leader ... but in the mercy of God, who entered this corrupted and corrupting world of ours, lived the perfect life none of us could live, then gave up that perfect life on my behalf on the cross ... so I could know forgiveness and restoration ... and eventually share in his resurrection.

There is rest in this knowledge—knowledge of our fallenness and knowledge of God's graciousness—and I think that's what Augustine meant when he famously said, in the opening lines of his famous Confessions, "Thou, Lord, hast made us for Thyself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee."

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### **John Dickson (Studio)**

If you want to find out more about anything you heard on today's episode, Researcher AI has some great show notes for you - all the links to the books and shows and people we mention, and some deep dives into the more complicated stuff, and there's a transcript of the full episode, too. Head to [undeceptions.com](https://undeceptions.com) to find them – they're way too long to put in the notes in your podcast app!

AND, if you're thinking about buying a book that we've mentioned here, you'd be helping the Undeceptions project by buying it via the links in the show notes. We've started getting a very small commission from Amazon sales that come through our site. Every cent counts!

If you have questions about this episode, or any of our other episodes, you can send it my way! Send us an audio or text message via the links in show notes and I'll try and answer it in this season's Q&A episode.

See ya.

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### **CREDITS**

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne and directed by “Una” Hadley.

Alasdair Belling is a writer and researcher.

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