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HISTORICAL RESEARCH AS A SOCRATIC DIALOGUE WITH THE PRESENT: INTERPRETING AUGUSTINE'S TREATMENT OF PORPHYRY IN *CIU.* 10

La investigación histórica como diálogo socrático con el presente: interpretando el tratamiento de Porfirio por parte de Agustín en *CIU.* 10

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Abstract

This research aims to identify Augustine's deeper motivations in his refutation of the Neo-Platonist Porphyry in the *City of God* X. One of the facets of the inquiry is to clarify the role of Porphyry in Augustine's political theory and in his perspective of the Roman Empire. This essay focuses on the method I employed which led to certain discoveries during these investigations. The method is described in terms of a "Socratic dialogue", as an *Auseinandersetzung* between past and modern/recent history. The particular application of this method entails recognizing and objectifying certain attitudes in present society as well as those in contemporary scholarship, which can subliminally color one's perspective in historical research. This variation of a "Socratic dialogue," as applied to my research, confronts the conception of "empire" or "empire mentality"; striving for social change in terms of "revolution," justifying (or rebelling against) oppressive measures or the oppressors. The rigid questioning of these issues takes place in a debate between the "Voice of the Present" (the attitudes identified above) and the "Voice of the Past" (the 4th and 5th century context in the Roman Empire in Augustine's lifetime). The goal of this method is twofold: to highlight the sometimes thwarting effects of the historian's personal context

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on their historical interpretation, and secondly, to open new avenues in interpretation, namely, in my case, enabling the placing of Augustine's refutation of Porphyry into a more plausible, credible historical context.

Keywords

Augustine; Porphyry; *City of God*; Socratic Dialogue; Modern Historiography**;** Patristics.

Resumen

Esta investigación tiene como objetivo identificar las motivaciones más profundas de Agustín en su refutación del neoplatónico Porfirio en *Ciudad de Dios* X. Una de las facetas de la investigación es aclarar el papel de Porfirio en la teoría política de Agustín y su perspectiva del Imperio Romano. Este ensayo se centra en el método que empleé y que me llevó a ciertos "descubrimientos" durante mis investigaciones sobre Agustín. Describo el método en términos de un "diálogo socrático" como una *Auseinandersetzung* entre la historia pasada y la moderna/reciente. Mi aplicación particular de este método implica reconocer y objetivar ciertas actitudes de la sociedad actual, así como las de la erudición contemporánea, que pueden colorear subliminalmente mi propia perspectiva en la investigación histórica. La variación de un "diálogo socrático", aplicada a la investigación, se enfrenta a la concepción de "imperio" o "mentalidad de imperio"; a la lucha por el cambio social en términos de revolución; a la justificación de las medidas opresivas o de los opresores (o a la rebelión contra ellos). El cuestionamiento rígido de estos temas tiene lugar en un debate entre la "Voz del Presente" (las actitudes identificadas anteriormente) y la "Voz del Pasado" (el contexto de los siglos IV y V en el Imperio Romano en el tiempo de vida de Agustín). El objetivo del método es doble: en primer lugar, poner de manifiesto los efectos del contexto personal del historiador que pueden impedir su interpretación histórica y, en segundo lugar, abrir nuevas vías de interpretación, a saber, en mi caso, permitir situar la refutación de Agustín a Porfirio en un contexto histórico más plausible y creíble.

Palabras clave

Agustín; Porfirio; *Ciudad de Dios*; Diálogo socrático; Historiografía reciente; Patrística.

I. Introduction: The Socratic Method or Dialogue

1.1. Defining the Problem

An historian's job is to pursue and excavate truth. To relay a certain historical reality, one must articulate theories as precisely as possible, for example, through the perspectives of a certain personage, and contextualize them in a broader setting. This requires putting aside our modern lenses, to which we are sometimes stubbornly attached. How does an historian become conscious of his/her own preconceptions which may be blocking insight into a historical reality? How can we clear away these preconceptions in order to produce a reliable account of a bygone phenomenon which is much different than our own, without projecting our own predilections onto our research subjects? The crux of the matter is how do we become

aware that we are even doing this? I contend that the customary critical reasoning method (abduction/deduction and induction, etc.) involved in academic historical research often falls short of meeting these requirements. Therefore, I propose an exercise which could aid historians obtain greater objectivity.

1.2. The Socratic Method

In many ways the "critical reasoning method" (ἔλεγχος *élenchos*) of the legendary Socrates is not too remote from the basic tools of the literary historian. However, defining the method actually employed by Socrates in Plato's dialogues is a complicated task. Reconstructions of such done in the past are always debatable, and in whatever case, such an endeavor falls outside the aims of this paper. Of interest here is the modern reception of the Socratic method and its liberal implementation in various other fields, besides philosophy. Some academics have utilized the nomenclature "Socratic method" or "Socratic dialogue" to justify an extended approach beyond (yet in accordance with) the conventional criteria of their field and in so doing have endowed it with contours. There are numerous examples of this, such as in the fields of pedagogy, law, psychoanalysis, and scientific research in general.[2] As of yet, I have not found the utilization of this method in historical research. To describe how this method operated in my own study, I will first summarize the major, general points which have been distilled from Plato's dialogues and then highlight the ones which I have put into practice with my historical research on Augustine's treatment of Porphyry in *City of God* (*ciu.)*, Book X.

1.3. Major Points of the Socratic Method

Definitions of the Socratic method are derived from Plato's dialogues and from the following general scenario: Socrates is engaged in conversation with personages who are often politicians, orators or philosophers of various backgrounds. He instigates a few seemingly simple questions, such as how do we define justice, piety or courage? His interlocutors are taken aback at the facility of these inquiries and offer a definition. Socrates' second phase of questioning involves delving deeper into the underlying premises of their responses, which turn out to rest upon on certain assumptions. The third phase of questioning involves attempting to reconcile the responses in the second phase with the initial ones. The conclusion usually drawn is that these two are not reconcilable. The fourth phase confronts the consequences: the first answer therefore cannot be true, unless the opinion which led to the answer in the second phase is correct. As such, the position of the interlocutor is often revealed to be contradictory, his attempt to provide an adequate definition has failed. The interlocutor, baffled, tries again, and revises his definition.[3]

2 Socratic dialogues or dialogues written in the Platonic spirit since Plato: i.e., Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Demetrius of Phaleron, "Phaidondas" (Diogenes Laertius 5: 75-85). The Socratic method was also analyzed and utilized by Enlightenment as well as modern philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Nelson, Gadamer, *etc*. The modern examples here are not comprehensive: in Education: Mintz (2006, 476-493); Legal education: Friedland (1996); Psychoanalysis: Lear (2005, 442-463); Scientific research: Gronke (2004).

3 Gronke (2004).

The purpose of the *elenchos* is not so much to conclude that the failed definition is useless; the interlocutor must recognize the mismatch between the definition and one's own conceptions and assumptions. The first definition, assumed to be "fact," is now recognized as deficient or false. Yet the Socratic method does not necessarily aim to investigate the premises for their correctness, rather for their effects. An additional correlative conclusion is that we ultimately cannot really know what a conception like "justice" is. "Justice" cannot be completely known within discursive discourse, thus it cannot be properly defined; therefore, the simple question is surprisingly aporetic. The irony which results from Socrates' dialogues is that we nonetheless continue to use the term "justice" (as many other terms in the questioning) on a daily basis. Socrates' overall goal was to pass from opinion to knowledge, establishing the parameters of opinion. In the end, a transactional learning takes place between participants. Plato's poetic metaphor of the role of Socrates as midwife refers to the process of disclosure or "birth of true knowledge," a result of these intense dialogues-likened to the labor of childbirth.

1.4. My Version of the Socratic Method Applied to Historical Research

The aspects identified above are those which I have applied in a general way to my research: they involve attempting to question conceptions or point-of-views which are believed to be self-evident. The interrogation enables the interlocutors to become conscious of their sometimes hidden prejudices, judgements or even a political agenda which might color the historian's research inquires or the results.

Historians have two basic realities to contend with: the first is the past which the researcher is seeking to interpret, define or objectify through a particular source or author; the second is the personal reality of the individual historian which also encompasses their collective reality (whether it be local or global) and often provides the initial framework for historical inquiry. Investigations are thus frequently personally motivated, holding some kind of importance for the individual historian, which is, in itself, without fault.[4] However, some of the major factors in faulty historical research involve subjectivity and bias. The purpose of my particular version of –or improvision on– the Socratic method is to become more capable of decoupling these two realities in order to gain creative, interpretative space in the historical one, and autonomy and liberty in the present one. To do this, an historian must reify elements of his/her personal reality and be able to juxtapose them with the ancient one. This is why the section below sketching major developments in the history of science is crucial. These attitudes and tendencies inevitably affect all researchers in some way. They, in particular, play an essential role in the dialogue or proposed debate between the present and the past in section 3.

4 As Gadamer and others pointed out, the reified historical reality already contains complex elements from the individual historian.

2. General Overview of Science and History in the Modern Period

2.1. Challenging Authority

This section will highlight mentalities which developed in the early modern period and still prevail in contemporary academic research. Their roots lie in the scientific revolutions of the 17th-18th centuries, which sharpened the definition of scientific knowledge: "factual truths" must be objectified in empirical perception, accompanied by well-founded propositions which subsequently undergo discretion by peer experts.[5] Knowledge must be purified of subjective influences, a priori judgments, assumptions or prejudices. Arising from this was the gradual yet wholesale dismissal of metaphysical causes to explain natural phenomena, a development which represented one of the foremost collective rejections of religious doctrinal authority. At the same time, religious beliefs were pushed to the realm of the popular, subjective, emotional or irrational. The new criteria were predominantly instigated in the study of physics, yet they quickly became the norm for other disciplines, such as the social sciences.

Scientific studies rigorously broke through "taboo" barriers maintained by religious authorities, epitomized by Darwin's theory of evolution, and particularly by Darwinists, who denounced the notion of God as the fundamental cause of documented mutations in nature. Questioning society's political and religious authorities readily became *salonfähig* in Enlightenment philosophy.[6] Parallel upheavals against traditional authority took place in politics and governments, such as the revolutions against monarchical rule, the latter of which was often legitimized and undergirded with religious rhetoric.[7] During the early modern period in Europe, new constitutions bridled the power of sovereigns, thereby expanding citizens' rights and liberties to enable influence in policy-forming.

These major revolutions, whether scientific, social, academic, political or religious, steered a diverging course from medieval predecessors. For our purposes here, we can pinpoint two general tendencies: first, the complete rejection of "otherworldliness" which characterized medieval science and scholasticism; and secondly, the questioning and subsequent diminishing of power of traditional institutional authorities, or their spokesmen, at the very least, knocking them from their pedestals. In the field of ancient history, a seminal role in this respect is attributed to Edward Gibbon's groundbreaking work *The History of the Rise and Decline of the Roman Empire* (1776-1789). Gibbon attributed the fall of the Roman Empire to a progressive decline hastened by the growth of Christianity. The latter's alleged alienation from the world brought about the neglect of civic and political virtues required for effective empire governance. Moreover, Gibbon tended to portray paganism as tolerant, Christianity as intolerant. Although Gibbon's study has been criticized or revised by many since its publication, his perspectives still linger in current historical interpretation.[8]

5 As articulated by Isaac Newton in *Principia*.
6 See Rist's critique of philosophy since the Enlightenment: (2014, 209-364).
7 Plumb (2004, 19-61).
8 See Drake (1996, 7-9); Plumb (2004, 126-130, 145).

Following America's war of independence against England and the French Revolution in the 18th century, laws in Western Europe were ratified to ensure the freedom to practice one's own choice of faith. Persecution on the basis of heresy of theological doctrine was abolished. This development had radical consequences for the study of patristic literature, the majority of which had a heresiological character.

2.2. Twentieth Century Developments and Augustine

Of crucial importance here is how historians, in the midst of these social, political and philosophical upheavals, came to regard early Christianity and church fathers as Augustine. This author had been an authoritative church figure in his own lifetime, often referred to as the second Paul or Jesus, and had been sanctified by the Roman Catholic church. Within the budding academic disciplines revolving around Christian theology and biblical reception in the 19th century, his honorable position became a target of defiance. It was not just his vision of the heavenly city being attainable only in the afterlife (his "earthly city" judged as "demonized"), but, among other things, his free associative manner of exegesis (e.g., of the creation story of Genesis, his borrowings from Neo-Platonism), which had come to be seen as largely "unbiblical".

Augustine soon became the culprit for every thinkable impending ailment in Western society: for the hatred of the human body and sexuality and for the inferior position of women in marriage. He supported sexual repression, he sided with oppressive authorities and had a foremost role in criminalizing groups holding different religious beliefs.[9] It is also "thanks" to Augustine that the Roman Catholic church is so staunchly patriarchal.

Skepticism of claims made by all ancient authors grew; yet fierce scrutiny, especially towards Augustine and the church fathers, became the norm. As a result, the spotlight in studies of early Christianity turned to groups or individuals who had been renounced by the early Church. A most salient example of this are Christian Gnostics or Docetists, known to us through the writings of second century theologians, such as Irenaeus, Justin, Clemens, *etc*. These sources are now labelled as "proto-orthodox", or spokesmen of "mainstream" or "conventional" Christianity, who accused their opponents of interpreting the bible in a far-fetched manner.[10] The bulk of the works of their Docetist or Gnostic opponents were up until the 20th century non-extant; it is not known how they became lost. The discoveries of Nag Hammadi Codices, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and many Manichaean texts enabled a re-evaluation of patristic sources, such that the opponents' theological content could be more or less gleaned from the polemical context and reconstructed.

These 20th century developments produced many felicitous results. New academic studies were launched which attempted to fully do justice to the perspective of the "losers" in early Christian debates. These have developed into exciting new disciplines in their own right, such as studies on Gnosticism, Manichaeism and Porphyry –the focus of my research on Augustine– who was not only a well-known Neo-Platonist, but an outspoken critic of Christian faith. Subsequently, our historical horizon of early

9 I.e., Rist (2007, 288-293); van Bavel (1989, 49-66); Hanby (2003, 6-7, 70); Drake (1996, 7-9).
10 Zwollo (2021c).

Christianity has broadened considerably. Old stereotypes have been questioned, for example, the notion of "orthodoxy" as having been the dominant majority in Christian antiquity.

A less felicitous result of these developments is described with vigor by A. McGrath (2009, 7-18, 8):

> "Never has there been such interest in the idea of heresy. Ancient heresies, seen by earlier generations as obscure and dangerous ideas, have now been sprinkled with stardust. For many religiously alienated individuals, heresies are now to be seen as bold and brave statements of spiritual freedom. ...they are the plucky losers in past battles for orthodoxy, defeated by the brute power of the religious establishment. And since history is written by the winners, heresies have unfairly lost out, their spiritual and intellectual virtues stifled by their enemies. The rehabilitation of heretical ideas is now seen as a necessary correction of past injustices, allowing the rebirth of suppressed versions of Christianity more attuned to contemporary cult." (quoting Peter Gay:) "The deep-seated postmodern suspicion of the corrupting influence of power permeates, often subliminally, contemporary discussions of heresy."

McGrath points to the influential research of Walter Bauer (1877–1960),[11] whose thesis suggested that "heresy" in early Christianity was essentially an "orthodoxy" in itself, which had been suppressed by those with power and influence in the Roman Christian world. In other words, the theology which we refer to today as "orthodox" (such as Augustine's Christology) was all about gaining ascendancy through dubious means and the deliberate invention of ideas to secure the power base of the Christian church in the Roman Empire.

Shelton**,** too, articulates similar criticism of present-day scholarship: "The agenda of the contemporary Bauer approach seems unwilling to allow genuinely theological debates within the early church, preferring matters to be eclipsed by political and socio-geographical techniques of suppression."[12]

The prevailing suspicion regarding early Christian heresiologists, as criticized by McGrath, Shelton and Hartog (2015), is no less applicable to Porphyrian studies. Porphyry was, of course, not a Christian, thus technically speaking, not a heretic. In the eyes of some, this pagan opponent was the target of unjust head-bashing by church fathers and, above all, by Augustine.[13] Porphyry is often defended in light of Augustine's "political agenda" which supposedly justified his misquoting Porphyry in *ciu.* Book X. It is often suggested that Augustine's reliability, that is, the reliability of his whole discourse, should be disqualified.[14]

However, the ambition to rehabilitate former ancient doctrines does not necessitate such narrow reductionism. Many historians recognize that defending heresies in the above manner often contradicts the historical record. Nevertheless, these attitudes still exist in scholarship.[15]

11 See Hartog's volume 2015. For a recent rebuttal or nuancing of Bauer's theses, see Alexander and Smither (2015, 166-192).
12 Shelton (2015, 204).
13 Johnson (2013, 142, 25, 30, 66-7, 141, 268-9, 300).
14 Shelton (2015, 201-202).
15 See Shelton (2015, 204-211); Hartog (2015, 238).

Yet another early 20th century development in Western Europe and the U.S. directly affects my research on Augustine's treatment of Porphyry. While authorities of all kinds were collapsing and being reallocated functions with a more democratic character, the de-colonization of Western super powers in Asia, Africa and Latin America was taking place. This led to an intensification of the already growing awareness that imperialism or occupation of other nations employing persecution and oppressive methods, ultimately incurred incalculable detriment to exchanges between the Western powers and native populations. In the field of social sciences, we see a shift and a steady growth of studies towards retrieving the untold histories of those formerly oppressed by the phenomenon of "empire" ("postcolonial theory"). The focus is now on the often unnamed heroes of indigenous populations under occupation, such as African tribes who were enslaved by European empires and deported to the Americas, and women who had made significant contributions in local and global affairs, which historical records failed to report.

Endeavors in the field of history to account for the damaging repercussions of the empire mentality are of immense importance for reforming Western democracies today. Yet when struggling to grasp and reconstruct the 4th and 5th centuries of the Roman Empire, an historian may find him/herself on a conceptual slippery slope with regard to neatly setting aside contemporary concerns. The present-day focus on empire, empire mentality and anti-authoritarianism, in combination with the general attitude of the Bauer approach to heresiologists, created a stumbling block for my attempt to contextualize Augustine's treatment of Porphyry. The scrutinizing eye of the Socratic dialogue became instrumental for evaluating my assumptions.

3. Debate: The Voice of the Present vs. The Voice of the Past

Was Augustine really a relentless "heretic hunter", a defender of cruel anti-heretical and pagan policies? Or was he a crafty debater who deliberately distorted the ideas of his opponents in order to fly the flag of triumph for himself? Should his opponents be considered the real protagonists? How should Augustine's claims about Porphyry be taken into account within the framework of his polemic aimed to discredit this philosopher?

To answer these questions, a clear view of the political climate in which Augustine carried out his episcopal duties is required. The central problem here involves those factors specified in section 1.1: the personal interests of an historian which interfere with an objective rendition of an historical situation. Below I will demonstrate how I acquired a plausible representation of the Christian political atmosphere in Augustine's day, by the application of my method. My method consists of an improvisation on the general elements of the Socratic method, which were described in sections 1.2-4.

Applying these elements to my research, I constructed an imaginary dialogue between two conflicting voices involved in my investigations. The "Voice of the Past" consists of the historical material ("facts") gathered from my research on Augustine in the context of his refutation of Porphyry. To recapitulate, my inquiry involved establishing the factors which motivated Augustine's refutation of this philosopher in *ciu*. In the dialogue below, I focus on political issues, that is, Augustine's attitude towards the Roman Empire, which underlay his rebuke of this Neo-Platonist. Theological factors likewise play an essential role here. The "Voice of the Present" personifies the factors of influence in the historian's present reality, which I

described in section 1 and in the last paragraph of section 2.2. This particular character is especially intent on challenging Augustine's authoritative position.

The dialogue is presided by "Socrates," the referee, who casts the questions before the two voices. The two initial questions are: the definition of "empire" and identifying the oppressed and the oppressor here within. The dialogue gradually proceeds to showing how the conflicting voices regarding empire and the identity of the oppressors penetrate into Augustine's view of empire and further into his regard of Porphyry. This eventually creates an impasse to which the "Midwife" proclaims the solution. The solution is then implemented, which allows a more plausible historical interpretation of Augustine's motivations for his refutation of Porphyry.

3.1. Socrates' First Question: What is "Empire"?

Responses:

Voice of the Present: General definitions of what politically and geographically constitutes an empire vary. The contemporary view of "empire" is highly contingent upon experiences of such in the recent past. Countries which are hostile, inclined to expansion by coercion and exploitation of the occupied citizens' labor and resources, are almost universally decried.[16] Political structures, as those of colonial empires of the 16th-20th centuries, are counterproductive to establishing world peace. Often the initial conquest involved genocide, which resulted in impeding long-term peace negotiations between the conqueror and the conquered. Although most of the once colonized territories became independent states in the latter half of the 20th century, the detrimental effects of the conqueror's antipathetic mode of governing can still be felt. According to some, the "empire mentality" prevails in the post-colonial period in the form of a widespread, underlying institutional white supremacy, which persists in violating internationally recognized human rights. At present, when one attaches the term "empire" to political states which are officially non-imperialistic (such as the E.U. or the U.S.A.), it is almost always intended pejoratively.

Voice of the Past: In antiquity, empire rulership was for many millennia the most applauded amassment of power. The Bronze and Iron Ages were dominated by war: empires usually incorporated smaller kingdoms to combine resources for reinforcing defenses against invaders. An empire often ensured stability and infrastructure advancing mobility, communication and trade. Ancient empires were not always autocratic. Even the Delian League (478 BCE) and the Athenian Empire (454-404 BCE), which prided themselves on their superior self-government by rule of citizenry (democracy), were imperialistic and founded colonies in foreign territories. The Roman Empire initiated its territorial expansion in the Republican era, in which a decentralized division of power with regular elections and changeover of officials was conventional. Once the empire became wracked by persistent civil wars, peace was restored by one sovereign, one Caesar, who formed a dynasty of successors. During the reign of Diocletian in the late 3rd century CE, the empire had become unmanageable, subsequently justifying the instigation of a tetrarchy.

16 Cf.: Charter of the United Nations (1948), e.g., Chapter I, Article 2, 4; Chapter VII.

Sole sovereignty was restored with Constantine (323), his dynasty enduring until 362. Its longevity was associated with political stability and prosperity. Afterwards, a tetrarchy was reinstated which endured until the end of the 4th century, when General Theodosius battled his way through a series of civil wars, ultimately proclaiming singular sovereignty.

In spite of controversial consuls during the Roman Republic (Julius Caesar and his various opponents) and allegedly corrupt emperors (Nero, Caracalla, *etc.*), the history of the Roman Empire is generally clothed in an aura of awe. Modern historians of ancient Rome remain fascinated by the political mechanisms which enabled its administrators to maintain unity for so many centuries. Empires built in the 16th and 17th centuries were equally allured by their Roman predecessor and modelled themselves on its governance and legislation. Even later, after the abolishment of monarchies in the modern era, the new polities looked to ancient Roman political organization, in particular from the Republican period, for articulating their constitutions. The most famous examples include the 18th century union of thirteen colonies on the North American continent, as well as 20th century European dictators who brought on disaster and later fell into discredit.

Socrates: Now for a synopsis: the term "empire," according to the Voice of the Present, has negligible positive associations, linked with the abuse of power and war crimes committed by Western political entities, which have not been wholly remitted. From the point of view of the Voice of the Past, the term "empire" is likely too antiquated to impose a clear cut value judgement on it. These general definitions of empire from the past and the present are evidently irreconcilable. To excavate the underlying premises, let us now sharpen the inquiry.

3.2. Socrates' Second Question: Who are the Protagonists and the Antagonists of "Empire"?

Responses:

Present: The murder of George Floyd by a police officer in the U.S. in 2020 set off a wave of protests worldwide, in particular by former oppressed peoples and their supporters, not just against police brutality but against the mentality behind it, deemed as institutional white supremacy. These recent events are aggregates of an ongoing re-evaluation of Western society's venerated heroes. The antagonists and protagonists of "empire," even if the roles may sometimes overlap, are nonetheless clear: respectively, white European males, and indigenous peoples whose economies and defense forces were/are decidedly weaker.

Past: Considering the relative neutrality of the conception of empire in antiquity, this question will be troublesome. However, it is opportune to bring Augustine into the picture, whose conception of the Roman Empire is aligned to his doctrine of evil. Augustine reflected upon the history of ancient Rome (*ciu.* I-VI) and explained how gross overestimation or self-celebration (*superbia*) consistently manifested in Rome's rise to "greatness."[17] Its remarkable geographic vastness was obtained by launching unprovoked

17 Zwollo (2021b); Clark (2020); Lee-Dupont (2016, 87-93).

attacks on peaceable neighbors, plundering their settlements, torturing or enslaving them. Romans took pride in these victories and glorified –sometimes even deified– the responsible rulers.[18]

He argued that when traditional Roman religion had been the official cult, it never instrumentally engendered sustainable justice and peace (*ciu.* XIX.21, 24). Its main defect was the cult of entities venerated. These were not divinities who would inspire truth and goodness, but nefarious demons who seduced members of the ruling elite into a burning desire for glory and the lust of dominion. Thus, the principle strategy to attain 'magnificence' was the crafty use of violence to amass power (V.21). Regarding pre-Christian Roman emperors, Augustine commented that there had been in fact some good ones, such as Vespasian senior and junior. But others, such as Nero and Domitian, were ruthless tyrants (V.22, 24-26).

Present: It is exciting to read Augustine's critique of empire, there are echoes of Marxism in it.[19] Are the emperors the antagonists in his view?

Past: Not exactly. Augustine created a watershed between pre-Christian and Christian rulership (V.24). In his view, Christian emperors governed justly, without being overwhelmed by their pride. They punished threats to the state, not with personal animosity, but with fairness. Additionally, they compensated severe measures with mercy and generosity.[20] Out of their love for eternal blessedness, they did not fail to offer God sacrifices for their sins, in humility, compassion and prayer. A Christian ruler kept his *libido dominandi* and *cupiditas gloriae* under rein (V.21).

Present: Augustine's all too delightful praise of Christian emperors as protagonists is a spiteful upshot. When compared to pre-Christian emperors, they were in many ways indistinguishable from the third century "soldier emperors." They had inherited all the tools of power and violent crimes of their non-Christian predecessors. You should not forget that it was Constantine who first imposed laws to reduce pagan influence in Roman society. Theodosius also nailed down discriminatory laws, declaring the Nicaean creed as criteria for the state religion, followed by persecution measures geared to all whose faith fell outside these prescriptions. The policies of Christian emperors resemble those during the reign of Diocletian (and other late 3rd century emperors who persecuted Christians) all over again; the difference being that they targeted pagans.

Past: Your final statements are only partially true. Indeed, Augustine explicitly extended praise to emperors Constantine (*ciu*. V.25) and Theodosius (V.26); Theodosius, in particular, for his clear anti-pagan/heretical legislation. Although we would not applaud such policies today, these were useful then for the sake of finalizing the tenets of the new state religion which would, in their minds, strengthen the empire's stability and unity. Augustine obviously perceived that Christian emperors were struggling no less than their non-Christian predecessors with state governance (*Ep*. 138.3.6). This is evident in his account of Theodosius' public act of contrition, following his reprisal to a mob in Thessalonica, after which he ordered the protesters to be slaughtered (*ciu*. V.26). Thus, Augustine attested to a different attitude in Christian

18 *Ciu.* e.g., III.10, 20; IV.6; V.12; *Ep*. 138.16; Hammer (2021, 81-101).
19 MacIntyre (2019); Rist on Machiavelli's appreciation of Augustine's *libido dominandi* (2014, 167-172); Amugen (2014).
20 Drake (1996, 22).

emperors, who were repentant of their misdeeds, more merciful, tolerant, less cruel and brutal than their non-Christian forerunners. He believed the Christian state, in contrast to the pre-Christian state, to be grounded in morality, and that consequently, a higher moral life would be attainable, involving voluntary poverty, self-control, good will, justice, unanimity and virtuousness.[21]

We could certainly ascertain that, for Augustine, Christian Roman emperors were the protagonists, pre-Christian rulers, the antagonists. Keep in mind however that Augustine regarded any worldly government as pertaining to "the earthly city," which, by definition, would always be susceptible to corruption and injustice, permanent features of the postlapsarian world (*ciu*. XIX.24). Hence, he promoted a highly pragmatic view of secular political power. As for Christian era laws being coercive, they did not impose conversion onto non-Christians. Heretics were another matter. They were ordered to abandon their separatist, elitist congregations and join the main church for the purpose of dispelling frictions and violence.[22]

Present: Yet Augustine is essentially uncritical of the mistakes his protagonists made, his perception is undeniably idealized. He does not even mention the atrocities or the cruel punishments which Constantine imposed.[23] In many ways, ancient Christian laws were actually worse and less tolerant than pre-Christian ones.

Past: Constantine's anti-pagan legislation was gradual and relatively mild compared to the persecution campaign against Christians at the end of the 3rd century. Constantine's initial edicts involved the abolishing of public (blood) sacrificial rituals. These practices were in fact the heart of civic festivities, yet they had become controversial. Constantine did not prohibit the religion altogether. Moreover, it was the traditional responsibility of the emperor (Christian or non-Christian) to protect right worship.[24] Christians populated the empire in great numbers, thus the edicts of the emperor (himself a Christian) were, in that light, not out of line. Of course, this all appears intolerant to us today. Yet it is untenable to deem the pre-Christian empire and its official religion as "more tolerant" than the Christian rulership.[25] Moreover, Theodosius' more stringent edicts from the 390's at least allowed much time for their actual implementation, so that "heretics" could adapt to the new circumstances.

Present: Yet Augustine *did* fight on the side of the "oppressor." He identified the evils of empire but failed to call for an end to it. Even worse, his advice to his readers to focus on the destination of their pilgrimage to the heavenly city in the afterlife was a means to implant passivity towards the emperor's corrupt power and his repression of anyone professing beliefs counter to the official ones. His doctrine of grace and the human will promote political quietism as well. In that sense, Augustine was a war criminal –an accomplice.

Past: Augustine did urge Christians to show obedience to their government and be exemplary citizens. Yet in his mind, whether the government was Christian or pagan, was essentially irrelevant.[26] God's providence had established the government and its sovereign: a conviction which dominated throughout

21 *Ep*. 138.9-10, 17.
22 Drake (1996, 28-29).
23 For counterarguments, see Drake (1996, 5, 19-25).
24 Drake (1996, 31-33).
25 Hammer (2021); Drake (1996); Young (2000, 648-649).
26 *Ciu.* III.15-16, IV.5; Chambers (2013, 24).

all of antiquity.[27] True, Augustine did not dispute the empire as a form of government, nor did he consider himself a thinker in the tradition of political philosophy.[28] However, he cannot be deemed a "war criminal." He condoned resistance to tyrannical regimes and was an avid peace maker (*ciu*. XIX). He also contested Roman penitential norms, such as the death penalty and the use of torture for punishing opponents.[29] His exhortation to a life of prayer and contemplation did not imply that Christians should turn their backs on the world, on the contrary.

Socrates: This *Auseinandersetzung* is getting nowhere: both voices are running in different directions. One of the stumbling blocks here is the fact that both pre-Christian and Christian rulers utilized and influenced the official state religion to promote unity and peace, which is generally regarded today as a failed strategy. We can now conclude that the wholly negative interpretative framework of "empire" and the dichotomy protagonists/antagonists (the underlying premise), although beneficial to current historical studies, is obviously an inadequate explanatory model for explaining "empire" in antiquity.

This leads to the next task, the main task of the research in question: where does Augustine's refutation of Porphyry, Augustine's opponent in *ciu*. X, fit into this highly variegated and incoherent picture of the 4th and 5th century Roman Empire? How does it correlate to Augustine's view of the empire, especially considering Augustine's ardent sympathy for Plato and Platonism in general? No dialogue is necessary; the Voice of the Present will predictably heroize Porphyry. Thus, we should now call upon the Midwife.

Midwife: Defending Porphyry as a "protagonist" within Augustine's view of "empire" as depicted by the Voice of the Past would certainly be forcing a square peg into a round hole. To reap more successful results with the next enterprise, I propose that the interlocutor of the Past discard the paradigm of the Present and pursue an entirely different inroad: Augustine's negative stance towards Porphyry interpreted as a *positive* phenomenon. It should include Augustine's constructive contribution to his support of the Christian Empire.

Present: But a positive stance would be going too far, it would be rejected for being uncritical, conservative and a defense of orthodoxy, all of which is neither objective.

Midwife: Yes, but here is the clue: Augustine allied himself with a "Christian Revolution" which had begun in the Constantinian era.[30]

Present: But how can we identify Augustine as an advocate of a "revolution" when he did not even plea for abolishing the empire and initiating a wholly new form of government?

27 *Ciu*. V.21; 1Peter 2:13-14, 17; Rom. 13.1-2; Wisdom 8:2; Young (2000, 638-40, 652-654).
28 Augustine on commonwealth *res publica* (*ciu*. XIX.21, XI.21).
29 Dupont (2018, 29); van Geest (2014, 154-155); *Ep*. 134.2-4.
30 E.g., Plumb (2004, 71, 74).

Past: *Ciu*. is in fact full of answers to this question. A revolution was necessary because the pre-Christian state religion had outlived its credibility. It had been criticized long before Augustine, even by non-Christians. One of the best examples is Plato (4th c. BCE), the philosophical authority *par excellence*, who questioned the ethical value of mythological depictions of the gods, invented by poets.[31] In Plato's conception, the godhead was immaterial, transcendent and wholly good; not anthropomorphic, as in stories in Greek mythology. He recognized that the conventional representations of these entities provided no moral examples to emulate and were thus inappropriate, not only for understanding the divine or becoming godlike, but also for educating citizens in an ideal republic. As Augustine shows in *ciu.* II.14 (and VIII.5,13,14,18, 21), Plato's critique was just as relevant in his day, perhaps even more so, considering the radically ethical orientation of Christ's message, which had been embraced by the majority.

As already noted, the state religion had always been utilized by the ruling elite to promote community and integration of the empire. Now in Augustine's time, with the persisting instability, and especially after the sack of Rome in 410, unity was sorely needed. In the eyes of 4th-5th century Christians, the ancient Roman pantheon and its polytheism was too fragmented to prevent division and civil war (*Ep*. 138.2.10). The divine unity of the Christian trinitarian Godhead was seen as a more effective instrument. Thus *ciu.* shows us Augustine assuming the role of the spokesman who, by means of biblical interpretation, laid out what the Christian revolution without violence and cruelty entailed.

3.3. Porphyry and "Empire"

The rigorous *Auseinandersetzung* in my variation of the Socratic method ultimately led to overcoming the interference of the Voice of the Present and bringing forth a new avenue of interpretation for the Voice of the Past. This resulted in a plausible explanation of Augustine as a supporter of ancient variants of 'revolution', 'anti-empire' and, as we shall see later, of 'democratization'. These are modern designations adequately placed in an historical context. I will proceed now with the task of situating Porphyry's place in Augustine's "revolutionary mission" and present in brief a few conclusions. But to do this, I first need to provide a short overview of the main ideas in his refutation in *ciu.* Book X.

In chapter 1 of this book, the subject of theurgy was introduced: the practices of certain Platonists who invoked spirits or *daimônes* to obtain an experience of the divine. Augustine essentially conflated their theurgy with ordinary black magic. From chapter 9 until the end of the book, Augustine described the shadow side of Platonism, hammering down exclusively on Porphyry and his followers, and basically on two main topics: Porphyry's scholarly studies on demonology and his insufficient critique of theurgy. Porphyry had also been a well-known critic of the Christian faith.[32]

Augustine's critique of Porphyry revolved around *superbia,* which, as we recall, was in his opinion the major vice of the pre-Christian empire. Augustine accused Porphyry of pride, firstly, due to his blindness

31 Plato, *The Republic,* e.g., II.377b-379; III.376-398.

32 Two of the many points which Augustine addressed were Porphyry's denial of the divinity of Christ (*ciu*. XIX.22-23) and his ridiculing the resurrection (XXII.25).

which kept him from perceiving numerous contradictions in his teachings.[33] Because *superbia* was the hallmark of the devil, Augustine saw Porphyry's concessions to theurgy as influenced by evil demons. One of Porphyry's most serious instances of arrogance and contradiction was his declaration in his studies on various religions, which evidently included Christianity. He claimed, Augustine reports, that no one religion could be a *via universalis* for salvation (*ciu*. X.32). Subsequently, Augustine reproached Porphyry for failing to grasp that Christ, in fact, offered the universal way. What Augustine's repudiation of Porphyry's denial of an existing universal way of salvation boils down to is a defense of the "democratization of redemption" which Christ offers, as I will now elucidate.

Philosophers, with their education and varied opinions, were not always capable of grasping singular truth (*ciu*. XIX, 1-3). The Platonist idea of redemption (liberation from the material world and all the evil in it) consisted of the gradual attainment of knowledge of divine realms which was acquired through one's own efforts.[34] The crux here is that only philosophers achieved this liberation. In order to become a philosopher, one had to inevitably be an aristocrat, to afford the luxury and leisure of prolonged study.

Porphyry was, more so than Platonists before him, an advocate of the ancient Greek cultural and literary heritage, and he sought to maintain its elevated status. He encouraged paying tribute to the gods and valued the antiquity of ancient cults. During his lifetime, at the latter half of the 3rd century, the Christian populace in the Roman Empire was increasing, many of whom were uneducated or belonged to the lower economic classes. Although born a Syrian, Porphyry had assimilated a "Greek" identity, which was seen as the mark of intellectual superiority. As Schott points out, Porphyry's studies on world religions were strongly biased: he examined other faiths through the lenses of Greek cultural supremacy, which, as such, qualified him a cultural elitist, indistinguishable from the ruling upper class who had fueled the propaganda of the greatness of the empire.[35]

How can Porphyry be further integrated into Augustine's conception of "empire"? Augustine argued that the traditional Greek and Roman gods stimulated selfishness, egoism, the lust for dominion and warmongering. Thus, the Roman state, even since its earliest origins, had always been on the wrong track. Augustine saw this further manifesting in his own lifetime, by the wars and injustices which still tainted Roman society. The social and political crises in Augustine's day were, in the eyes of Christians, the ongoing repercussions from bad religion (black magic) from the pre-Christian era, when corrupt elite had instigated demonic rites in order to conceal their crimes and legitimize their power.[36] Thus in Augustine's mind, Porphyry had ignored his teacher's critique of Greek mythological theology. His promotion of the elitist, Greek intellectual heritage and mythology, made him an ally of political corruption, the "empire mentality," imperialism, chauvinism and unfounded greatness and glory. Furthermore, his studies promoted paranormal activities engaging unsavory spirits/"gods," nota bene, the perpetrators of *superbia* and war crimes. All in all, Porphyry, with his unfounded criticisms of Christian tenets, represented for Augustine in one person all that was wrong in the pre-Christian empire and thus everything the Christian revolution sought to mitigate.

33 Zwollo (2021).
34 *Ciu.* X.27-29; *trin.* IV.15.20.
35 Schott (2008, 52-78).
36 Hammer (2021, 81-101).

4. Epilogue

My method–my variation of the Socratic dialogue demonstrated above–aimed to clearly establish where exactly the boundaries lay between contemporary political interests, which sometimes carry over into scholarship, and the context of the Roman Empire in which Augustine's refutation of Porphyry is situated.

The two main debate questions –establishing a definition of empire and determining who the antagonist was– clearly brought out the friction between the perspectives of the Past and the Present. The debate between the two voices resulted in a dialectic resolution furnished by the "Midwife," who "gave birth" to a new interpretative framework: the perspective of Augustine's involvement with the "Christian Revolution." This new point of departure afforded more feasible explanations for Augustine's motivations in his extensive and harsh refutation of Porphyry. Additionally, my Socratic method, as displayed here, enabled the diverse elements from *ciu*. and ancient Roman history to fall into place, thus dissolving a number of anachronisms.

This exercise involving the Voices of the Past and Present is easily applicable to other historical studies and could serve as a model for other possible inquiries such as (only to name a few): what is progress? Virtue? Citizenry? Tolerance? Rationality? A particularly fruitful pursuit presently taking place in Augustinian scholarship comes to mind here. It involves employing Augustine's political views, which are fundamentally theological, for analyzing contemporary secular, liberal, democratic and republican societies. Topics often discussed here are, for example, his notions of *libido dominandi*, the earthly city, and the separation of government and church affairs.

In order to participate in these discussions, scholars must reconstruct Augustine's political theory, drawing upon predominantly book 19 of *ciu*.[37] The reconstructions are not always satisfying, often for the same reasons which motivated this exercise: the original historical context of "political Augustinianism" can easily become undermined for the sake of defending modern political convictions. This too has provoked many lively debates. Interesting enough, ecclesiology is not excluded from this arena, it has even become a central focus for what is called "Augustinian communitarianism."[38] Thus, here too, the Socratic method proposed above can be useful.

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37 Lamb (2020) gives an extensive overview of how politicians, philosophers and theologians in the past and present have utilized Augustine to underpin their political views. He addresses the question as to whether Augustine's view of mankind-his socio-political theory is pessimistic or optimistic and inclines towards the latter.

38 Lamb (2022, 97).

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