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Augustine and the Pursuit of Knowledge during a Crisis

1. Introduction

During a pandemic, it may seem important – or even morally obligatory – to know all that we can about the ongoing crisis. The writings of philosopher and theologian Augustine of Hippo, however, imply that most people do not have such a moral obligation. He argues instead that it is morally wrong for us to spend a disproportionate amount of time pursuing knowledge, since it distracts us from what we ought to be doing. This does not mean that we should embrace total ignorance but rather that we need to assess how much knowledge we need to help those we ought to love, and not pursue more.

In this article, I first explain Augustine's theory that we ought to love things proportionally to their value – that we ought to love humans more than non-living physical objects, for instance. Next, I discuss how our desire for knowledge fits into this theory. I argue that Augustine's claims are even more relevant during contemporary crises: in a crisis, we may feel additional pressure to pursue knowledge, and it has become easier than ever to acquire such knowledge today. Applying Augustine's argument, I argue that we ought to pursue knowledge when it helps us act well toward ourselves and those we ought to love; we do not have an obligation to know more. Finally, I briefly argue that other major normative ethical theories can reach the same conclusion, though perhaps not as directly. This claim – that we ought not pursue knowledge when it means neglecting those for whom we should care – is an important one to take into account when each of us considers what our response to a crisis should be.

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2. Augustine on the order of our loves

In Book X of his *Confessions*, the early medieval philosopher and theologian, Augustine of Hippo, describes what he calls the lust of curiosity: a desire for knowledge which does not lead us to a greater love of God or humans, but is instead a "vain inquisitiveness dignified with the title of knowledge and science" that distracts us with that which is less worthy of our attention. He gives a wide assortment of examples: trying to catch a glimpse of a gruesome corpse, "outrageous sights […] staged in public shows", studying nature when there is no advantage to it, pursuing religious experiences for the sheer thrill, watching a lizard catch flies, and listening to gossip. (Augustine 2008, X.54-57) These examples are of knowledge that is not inherently wrong to pursue – but if it is pursued out of a curiosity which leads us away from higher loves, he argues that its pursuit should be either reordered to these higher ends or abandoned.

Augustine reaches this conclusion because he has created a simple and elegant ethical theory built on an understanding of love. "Love and do what you will", he writes (1888, 7.8). Love is not a mere feeling of attraction, for Augustine:

> For a human being to love something is more than to be drawn to it by a natural appetite, as is the case with animals. Human beings are able to value things, that is, to set or recognize a value in them […] and things can be valued either in themselves, or as a means to something else, or as both. But to "love" something, as Augustine puts it in one of the *83 Questions* (35.I), is "nothing other than to seek it for its own sake": to treat it, that is, as an end in itself (Rist 1997, 174).[1]

If we love something, we desire it to be the best it can be; this means, for instance, working to bring about the well-being of the persons we love. For Augustine, "love of neighbour includes love of his body, that is, corporal works of mercy, as well as concern for his soul." (Rist 1997, 159) Corporal works of mercy are acts that assist others in physical ways – feeding the hun-

[1] Augustine also develops the idea that we can also value something's utility, to the point that we casually use the term "love" to describe our appreciation for it. (Kent 2006, 213) Love, for Augustine, can therefore mean either to enjoy a being – to "rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake" – or to use it – to employ it to obtain an appropriate object of one's desires (Augustine 1887, I.4).

gry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned (Matthew 25:35-36); for Augustine, these are all acts of love.

We must prioritize our loves in order to love things appropriately. Augustine tells us that intrinsically valuable things possess value to different degrees: "there are four kinds of things that are to be loved, – first, that which is above us; second, ourselves; third, that which is on a level with us; fourth, that which is beneath us" (1887, I.22). Kent elaborates that "living beings are always worth more than inanimate objects; among living beings, those with reason and free choice are worth more than animals; and God's worth is infinite" (2006, 213). A virtuous person – one with ordered loves – loves objects that deserve love, and loves them proportionally with their value rather than their usefulness or desirability to us (Kent 2006, 214). Augustine tells us,

> Now he is a man of just and holy life who forms an unprejudiced estimate of things, and keeps his affections also under strict control, so that he neither loves what he ought not to love, nor fails to love what he ought to love, nor loves that more which ought to be loved less, nor loves that equally which ought to be loved either less or more, nor loves that less or more which ought to be loved equally (1887, I.28).

If we love what ought to be loved as it ought to be loved, then we are acting well. Augustine states that "the right will is […] well-directed love, and the wrong will is ill-directed love." (1871, XIV.7) It is not wrong to love mere physical objects or experiences – but we must make sure that we love them less than we love more valuable beings such as human persons. We do wrong, for instance, if we love a stamp collection or a pet fish more than our children, and neglect the latter for the benefit of the former. This is not because a stamp collection is not good, but just that we are not prioritizing our love for it and other things properly. Augustine explains:

> When the miser prefers his gold to justice, it is through no fault of the gold, but of the man; and so with every created thing. For though it be good, it may be loved with an evil as well as with a good love: it is loved rightly when it is loved ordinately; evilly, when inordinately (1871, XV.22).

We may love inanimate things, but we should love living things more; we may love non-human living things, but we should love other humans and ourselves more; we may love ourselves, but we should love God more.

While Augustine insists that all humans are equally worthy of love, he argues that we do not thereby need to treat each person equally. Rather, just as we ought to order our loves by loving God most, then humans, and finally inanimate things, we ought also to prioritize our care for certain humans:

> … since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special regard to those who, by the accidents of time, or place, or circumstance, are brought into closer connection with you. For, suppose that you had a great deal of some commodity, and felt bound to give it away to somebody who had none, and that it could not be given to more than one person; if two persons presented themselves, neither of whom had either from need or relationship a greater claim upon you than the other, you could do nothing fairer than choose by lot to which you would give what could not be given to both. Just so among men: since you cannot consult for the good of them all, you must take the matter as decided for you by a sort of lot, according as each man happens for the time being to be more closely connected with you (Augustine 1887, I.28).

In other words, we owe a special regard to family members, neighbors, coworkers, and those who have close connections to us in other ways. If we have more than we need to help these who are close to us, and have already acted to bring about their well-being, then it is good to give to others who are more distantly connected. This does not mean loving our family or friends more than others simply because they are *our* family or friends – this kind of affection is a mere biological urge (Kent 2006, 214). We ought always to love them proportionally to their intrinsic value, though given their proximity to us we ought to do more to promote their well-being than we ought to do for far-off strangers.

One may surmise that Augustine's theism, which permeates his philosophy, makes his ethical claims irrelevant today, or at least irrelevant to non-theists. However, that is not the case: Augustine thinks that while the full happiness due to virtue will not come to one who does not know and love God, one can still act virtuously in many respects whether or not one believes in God. He writes of the pagan Romans that "a few were possessed of that virtue which leads men to pursue after glory, honour, and power by the true way, – that is, by virtue itself" (1871, V.12). Dietrich von Hildebrand, in detailing an Augustinian-influenced ethical system in the last century, writes "It is true that a man who does not know God can perceive certain morally relevant values, and that he may even give them a true value-response" (2019,

147). One who does not believe in God (or even an immortal human soul) may still perceive that humans are intrinsically valuable beings worthy of love, and order her loves accordingly—loving non-living physical things or experiences less than the living beings that surround her, and working to bring about her own well-being and the well-being of the humans around her. In this article, I will restrict my discussion to the values of the human person and the physical things and experiences we have, in order to keep this argument relevant to as broad an audience as possible.

3. How knowledge fits into the order of our loves

Given that we ought to love things proportionally to their instrinsic value, when should we pursue knowledge? Augustine believes that seeking knowledge is often good. His own writings are often a detailed description of his search for truth – for instance, the tenth and eleventh books of his *Confessions*, in which he attempts to gain knowledge of human memory, our connection to God, and time itself (Augustine 2008, X-XI). In this case, he justifies it as a spiritual endeavor, properly ordered because marveling at the complexity of God's creation is an expression of his love for God which he prioritizes over all other loves. Love of God is only one possible way to justify the pursuit of knowledge, however. Like his ethical theory, Augustine's claims about knowledge can be examined independently of his theological presuppositions (Bubacz 1981).

Let's look, then, at other valuable beings that we ought to love. Since humans are intrinsically valuable, knowledge that helps us provide for human needs or maintain human health is good to pursue for these reasons – or even knowledge that we believe may help us to do so in the future. Empirical knowledge of the kind that we find in the hard sciences is not the same as true wisdom, but Augustine recognizes nonetheless that it is knowledge (King 2014, 159).Scientific speculation can therefore be engaged in with the view that it will assist intrinsically valuable things either directly or indirectly in the future – but Augustine condemns the study of nature as vain inquisitiveness "when there is no advantage in knowing and the investigators simply desire knowledge for its own sake" (Augustine 2008, X.55). This pursuit of knowledge "for its own sake" needs to be distinguished from studying the sciences or the liberal arts in order to develop our minds, the way that physical exercise develops our bodies (Newman 1873,

VII.6). Pursuit of knowledge for self-improvement, recreation, or relaxation, as long as it does not interfere with other more important ways of caring for oneself and others, can fit into the proper order of our loves.

Augustine's condemnation of vain inquisitiveness refers to a knowledge that is not used for one's own or others' well-being, but is instead pursued because one finds some kind of pleasure in the experience – not physical pleasure, or the pleasure of being admired, but a kind of pleasure nonetheless. We enjoy the experience of gossiping, or watching a train wreck, or watching a lizard catch flies, even when it does not contribute to our well-being or the well-being of others. When we prioritize the pursuit of such knowledge over caring for ourselves and other persons, we act wrongly, and should either re-order our loves by pursuing knowledge for the sake of higher goals, or we should abandon our pursuit of such knowledge.

It is somewhat surprising that Augustine identifies gossip – "people telling idle tales" – as a source of knowledge (Augustine 2008, X.57). In fact, Augustine is the first Western philosopher who seems "to defend the thesis that we can know something on everyday human testimony" (Siebert 2018, 217). Augustine's understanding of knowledge from testimony seems to have developed over time. Initially, Augustine claimed that even the greatest authority cannot give knowledge to one who believes with unshaken faith (Siebert 2018, 223). Later, however, Augustine does grant that knowledge can come from testimony, though not absolutely certain knowledge:

> The cases of testimonial knowledge we have seen him recognize leave room for theoretical doubt […], but have enough certainty that ordinarily it is not reasonable to be in any doubt (Siebert 2018, 230).

Our daily lives frequently require us to believe things on the basis of testimony, Augustine notes (McMyler 2011, 18). Sieber points out that "In later works, Augustine "reserves '*scientia*' for the firm knowledge of the mind, and calls knowledge from testimony '*notitia*'" (2018, 232). *Notitia* means

> (1) acquaintance or familiarity with a person, and (2) acquaintance in a more general or transferred sense: awareness or notice of some truth. […] Augustine takes *notitia* to be factive in the sense that, necessarily, if you have *notitia* that *p*, then *p* is true (*trin*. 15.10.17, 15.12.22) (Siebert 2018, 233).

Augustine therefore accepts the possibility of gaining knowledge from testimony, which can be understood as "a source affirming or stating something

in an attempt to transfer information to one or more persons" (King, Ballantyne 2009, 195).

But what exactly is the information that is transferred? The concept of information is a fundamental one in understanding the world we live in, but is underexplored (Floridi 2002, 141). It may be the "hardest and most central question" explored by the philosophy of information (Floridi 2004, 560). Floridi gives three primary ways to interpret the term "information":

> information as reality (for example, as patterns of physical signals, which are neither true or false), also known as ecological information; information about reality (semantic information, alethically qualifiable); and information for reality (instruction, like genetic information) (Floridi 2004, 560).

For the purposes of this article, we can restrict ourselves to the discussion of information about reality: I will assume that information can be analyzed as "well-formed, meaningful, and truthful data" (Floridi 2004, 563). In Floridi's theory, truth and falsity are applied to symbols, "the only class of sign that can be semantic" (Guarda *et al*. 2018, 193).

Information, in the sense of semantic information about reality, corresponds roughly to Augustine's "signs", in his division of the world into "things" and "signs". Augustine claims that strictly speaking, we do not learn things from signs, but we "must know the thing signified before we can understand the significance of the sign" (Cary 2008, 42). Signs remind us of things, but are not themselves these things; they can, however, point us towards that which is signified, showing us new aspects of it. The idea that we can use information (understood in the sense of information about reality) to gain knowledge is not unique to Augustine's theory, and continues to be defended in the philosophy of information. The knowledge construction conception of information literacy "explains information literacy as the ability to create new knowledge in an area of interest, out of varying information acquired from different information sources. Information is now seen as an object of reflection." (Tomic 2010)[2]

Lest we think that only knowledge in one person can beget testimonial knowledge in another, Augustine argues that the testifier does not need to know something in order to give another this knowledge. (King, Ballantyne 2009, 204). One person can recite true premises and a valid conclusion with-

[2] See Bruce (1997) for the theory that Tomic (2010) is discussing.

out believing or even understanding them, and a second person can gain knowledge of the conclusion by listening to the argument. Moreover, Augustine does not restrict his sources to direct, face-to-face encounters with other human persons, but includes written words, hand signals, nods, and so on (King, Ballantyne 2009, 196). Plausibly, a person could know the Pythagorean theorem because she has read a mathematics textbook. It seems reasonable to assume that Augustine would today include graphs, diagrams, spreadsheets, and ontologies as sources of knowledge: since they include interpretable signs, these can all be information. Vain inquisitiveness, for Augustine, therefore includes seeking and reflecting on information when it is unhelpful and distracts us from those we ought to love.

4. Knowledge during a crisis

The era in which we live is fundamentally dependent on information and communication technologies; Floridi calls this age "hyperhistory", in contrast with prehistory and history (2014, 96). Nevertheless, we are all working with the same finite resources that humans in past ages had: limited time, attention, memory, and sympathy. Augustine's condemnation of the disordered pursuit of knowledge was intended to address the weakness of excessive curiosity common to all humans, but we are perhaps in a situation that leaves us more prone to this kind of excess today. All we need is a smartphone and a data plan to watch other people's lives on social media or reality television, indulge our curiosity with clickbait, and inform ourselves in real time of events going on across the globe. More than ever, we can sympathize with Augustine when he describes his difficulty focusing and how his "heart becomes the receptacle of distractions of this nature and the container for a mass of empty thoughts" (Augustine 2008, X.57). He maintains that we ought to use information in such a way that they reflect properly ordered loves. In other words, we need to make sure that we keep ourselves and our families, neighbors, coworkers, and others around us healthy and happy. Indulging our desire to know is wrong, according to Augustine, if it means distracting us from furthering our own or others' well-being.

This argument of Augustine's is of particular importance during a crisis because potential threats may give us additional incentive to pursue unnecessary knowledge. During a pandemic, war, environmental emergency, or

other major crisis, policies are often implemented which compromise some of our interests in order to diminish the effects of the crisis. In many of these cases, people are asked to sacrifice some things they value (people may lose jobs or financial stability; our resources such as taxes or health care may be used in unusual ways; freedoms that we are accustomed to may be suspended). On the other hand, if such policies are not implemented, we may fear other dangers (risks to our health due to unchecked disease spreading, violent death during political upheaval, or risks to our children and grandchildren due to environmental catastrophes). Because new policies or their absences will affect us in such major ways during a crisis, it is in our communal best interest to have well-crafted policies that distribute burdens justly and with foresight, or at the very least to avoid burdensome but useless policies. When we are faced with dangers on both sides – danger from inaction and danger from rash actions taken to deal with a crisis – it is natural for us to wish to know what these dangers are and how best to avoid them.

We may even feel a moral obligation to do exactly this. Others may expect us to be familiar with global events. Following the news may seem to be a social duty. Is it, however? Do we need to be aware of the most recent statistics about the crisis? Should we be familiar with the tragic stories of those harmed by the crisis throughout our country, or across the globe? Should we have an informed opinion on every matter up for debate? Should we try to discern the best policies for our government to adopt – or even other governments? Augustine would answer each of these questions by examining whether pursuit of this knowledge is an act of properly ordered love: would knowing this contribute to the well-being of humans and other intrinsically valuable beings around us?

In some cases, the answer will be an emphatic "yes". Some people *do* need to make policy decisions, make them confidently, and live with the inevitably tragic results. Our politicians and others in authority are not in an enviable position during crises: no one response is clearly best; every plan involves some compromise with human suffering. And having to balance conflicting needs is not the only difficulty for authorities during a crisis. Just to make an educated guess about the best policies to adopt during the Covid-19 pandemic, one would need to know not only about the brand-new virus causing the pandemic, but about the economy, which is in constant flux, one's health care system and how it could be adapted, and the possible reactions of one's fellow citizens to various policies. Other crises take place in other contexts,

and would require a completely new framework within which we could understand the situation – understanding one's national health care system will not help us understand the crisis of global climate change, for instance. Ultimately, in order to respond to a crisis, one will need to make a decision that is at least partly arbitrary. This does not mean that people with public responsibilities need to make blind choices, however. In these situations, they, as well as scientists, philosophers, and experts in public affairs are indeed required to research aspects of the crisis and propose solutions. Public figures will need to be guided by expert authorities, who can help to point out the ramifications of each decision and suggest possible ways to bring about the best possible results. People in these roles can indeed reflect a proper ordering of their love when they spend their time and effort researching a crisis; neglecting to do so would even be a failure to love.

However, most of us are not in these positions, and therefore do not have the same responsibility that our public leaders and their guides do. We do need to know enough about current crises that we do not significantly endanger ourselves or others by our behavior. Ought we also to demand of ourselves a confident and well-reasoned response to a public dilemma, or even just a detailed awareness of the problem? Probably not: pursuing the knowledge required can be a misuse of our time and energy, it can lower our willingness to help others, it can inspire fear rather than love, and it can harm us. I will elaborate on each of these claims.

While we may be tempted to research current events or stay focused on the news during a crisis, it may be more important to spend one's time and effort helping those around us. We may need to bring stability and optimism to our immediate family, for instance, or to continue to work at an essential job. Properly ordering my love also means caring for myself. Demanding of ourselves that we have answers to every question about an ongoing crisis is prioritizing our desire for knowledge over what we could do to maintain our health and happiness (and indeed, our sanity). Expecting ourselves to thoroughly understand the problems presented by a crisis is placing a difficult and usually unnecessary burden on ourselves that takes our time and attention away from what we could be doing.

As well as being a distraction from more important acts of love, focusing on information about a crisis may make it less likely for us to act out of love for others. Exposure to overwhelming amounts of information in mass media has been shown to decrease the frequency of our altruistic actions;

this effect has been called a "narcotizing dysfunction" (Lazarsfeld, Merton 1948) Media reports of tragic incidents which we are unable to prevent seems most problematic in this regard; knowing these stories may not help us prevent such tragedies in the future, and may simply overwhelm us. Recent research also shows that news media has shifted to present more negative and polarizing news events. (VanderWeele, Brooks 2020) Negative news stories present a set of problems all their own. People who have witnessed negative actions are more likely to engage in negative actions themselves, actions which harm themselves and others both directly and indirectly (VanderWeele, Brooks 2020).

Promulgation of information intended to inspire fear in its audience is also problematic. Augustine can help explain why fear-mongering in the media is unethical: love is better than fear at motivating appropriate actions. Northcott argues that in American politics, Bush's 'war on terror', Gore's warnings about global warming, and other approaches to crises are representative of a politicization of fear (2007, 534). He points out that Augustine "suggests that a commonwealth is a multitude of people who are bound together by their 'common objects of love,'" and that fear plays only a subsidiary role in dissuading the wrongdoer (2007, 535). If, in order to motivate people to act appropriately, political leaders use only fear to motivate us instead of love, they promote a system of ineffective coercive punishment (2007, 536). Focusing instead on love can help us identify the "positive projects of mercy and communitarian virtue" that we need to overcome crises (2007, 538). Not all sources of information during a crisis are politically engineered to inspire fear, but Northcott's reasoning can be extended to claim that any fear-mongering sources of information are unethical: we need to focus on the values intrinsic to things and the love that we ought to have for them rather than on fear. In the Covid-19 world, this would mean encouraging hygiene and safety for well-being of humans – especially the elderly and those at risk – rather than out of fear of ourselves being infected or dying. While the same actions could be pursued with both motivations (one could wear a mask out of love or out of fear), the loving action helps us focus on the intrinsically valuable beings that surround us.

Not only could pursuing knowledge about a crisis distract us or make us less likely to act out of love, it may even damage us. People who watched fourteen minutes of negative news bulletins became more anxious and sad, as well as more likely to believe that their unrelated personal worries are

larger and more catastrophic (Johnston, Davey 1997). Such catastrophizing of worries can cause further harm, since expecting positive events in one's life is associated with better physical and mental health (Bösze *et al*. 2020). Bringing oneself back to a more positive mood after watching televised news broadcasts may take self-awareness and effort, such as a period of guided relaxation – even being distracted by a fifteen-minute lecture after watching a fifteen minute television broadcast did not bring people's increased anxiety and total mood disturbance back to their pre-watching state (Szabo, Hopkinson 2007). Consuming news media (and especially negative news) can be harmful to our own well-being: if we want to properly order our loves, we will need to make sure that we are engaging in such behavior only when it benefits us or others we ought to love, offsetting any harm it does.

Augustine's argument is not one that advocates for total ignorance, however. Our love for our family and neighbors should still lead us to learn how best we should act during a crisis, to know our legal obligations, and to participate in political life. Some of us will need to engage in further research, in order to propose and debate potential policy measures, but many others need not do so.

It is worth mentioning at this point that we ought to be cautious in finding sources of information. Augustine does not consider information obtained through testimony to give us knowledge unless it would be absurd not to believe the testifier: "This seems to mean, not that [Augustine] cannot entertain skeptical hypotheses with regard to it, which he easily could, but that for practical purposes it would be absurd or irrational to doubt; it is morally certain" (Siebert 2018, 234). Zagzebski gives us criteria for when it is rational to believe another: "the epistemic authority of another person is justified for me by my conscientious judgment that I am more likely to form a true belief and avoid a false belief if I believe what the authority tells me than if I try to figure out what to believe myself" (2016, 21). We can call someone with this kind of epistemic authority an expert. Johnson explains that experts are people who can do things that others cannot; they are able to sift through irrelevant information in order to identify what is important, and they can recognize familiar patterns in the problems with which they are confronted (1983). During a crisis in which we do not have the time and energy to ourselves become experts on the subject at hand, receiving information from someone who already possesses these skills will allow us to gain the knowledge we need without unnecessarily distracting us from what we ought to be doing.

But where can we find such experts? While limits of space prevent me from exploring this question at any length, I will note several points that others have made. First, we need to be cautious: there is an immense amount of misinformation and fake news available (Lazer *et al*. 2018). Social media is also often a biased or misleading source of information (Guarda *et al*. 2018). This is partly because it is difficult to assess whether one's connections on social media are indeed experts (Ryan 2011). Collier's quality of "intellectual authority" may be closer to the quality of the testifier who Augustine finds absurd not to believe: Collier argues that some arguments display superior rationality and force of persuasion, and argues that these are best identified when we can eliminate the bias of institutional authority, perhaps by using a blind review system to identify research worth publishing without paying attention to whose research it is (1992). While Collier is discussing rational rather than empirical arguments, the same method could help us to identify experts making empirical claims: look for sources that cite blind-reviewed research. Walton argues that scientific findings can indeed "have standing as evidence or as conclusions of an important kind of reasoned argument" (2010, 30). Those responsible for creating policy during a crisis must be especially cautious to consider a number of different perpectives in determining the best actions to take:

> Given that there is not always a policy consensus in public health it is essential that policymakers cast their nets broadly to obtain a spectrum of advice. Knowledge brokers, NGOs, over-looked universities and research institutions, and a search of the literature (including the use of academic measures such as citation rates and/or matrices like the h-index) may provide alternative sources (Haynes *et al.* 2012, Implications for Policymakers).

Of course this is only possible once research in an area is published; we must also be willing to look to news sources, eyewitnesses, and other testifiers during a crisis.

Even when we have identified an expert, we do not gain absolute certainty through their testimony. Walton explains that we need a balanced approach to accepting authority:

> We need to accept what we hear from the experts provisionally, on a presumptive but critical basis. We need to critically question what the experts tell us, but generally to presume that if our critical questions are answered

> properly, that what the experts say is acceptable – not unconditionally true or verified beyond question, but plausibly true and acceptable (tentatively) – as a basis for reasoned action and commitment (subject to correction if new, relevant information should come in) (2010, 31).

What Walton suggests – accepting that the testimony of experts is a reasonable grounds for action, though not infallible – seems consistent with Augustine. Siebert explains that Augustine's cases of testimonial knowledge "have only what scholastic philosophers called 'moral certainty', that is, sufficient certainty (of an epistemic kind) with regard to *p* to be rational in premising one's thoughts and actions on *p*. In contemporary terms testimonial knowledge, on Augustine's view, is subject to 'pragmatic encroachment'". (Siebert 2018, 230-231). The question of how often and how thoroughly we need to reassess the information given us by experts is similar to the question of how much research we need to do initially: it depends on how much good this knowledge will allow us to do for those for whom we ought to care. If I am only guiding my own actions, I need reassess less frequently than if I am guiding my family as well, or my business, or my country.

During a crisis, we may feel an obligation to "get to the bottom of things" and thoroughly understand what is happening. According to Augustine, however, this sense of obligation is in many cases mistaken: most people do not need to attempt to solve the dilemmas produced by major crises. Our actions ought to express our love for ourselves and other the intrinsically valuable beings around us. Engaging in intensive research, then, is unethical if the process of researching distracts us from caring from those we ought to love. It can also be wrong to expose ourselves to information if it makes it less likely for us to act well toward others in the future, if it inspires fear rather than love to motivate us, and if it increases our depression and anxiety without bringing about a proportional increase in the well-being of anyone that we ought to care for. Freeing ourselves from this false sense of moral obligation – this belief that we ought to have answers to all of our questions about an ongoing crisis – also means freeing ourselves from the overwhelming reports of tragedies which we are powerless to prevent, the confusion of fake news, and the never-ending burden of sifting through new scientific, political, and ethical claims.

5. Compatibility with other normative ethical systems

I have argued that Augustine is correct to think that "curious quests for superfluous knowledge" (2008, X.60) are indeed unethical, given his own theory of ordered loves. But Augustine's ethical theory is not the only one compatible with this conclusion. Chappell, when asking whether Augustine has "an ethics of consequences, or of principles, or of virtue, or of divine command, or of natural law – or what?" responds:

> All of these, and none of them. Every notion just listed matters for Augustine's ethics. That does not make him fit our categories; which are, after all, our categories. It is hardly surprising if they do not neatly fit Augustine – or anyone else from outside our own little corner of history. I suspect Augustine would be astonished that anyone should try to do ethics without all of these notions (2012, 199).

In the discussion at hand – the ethics of pursuing unhelpful information during a pandemic – it seems that Augustine would be able to ally himself with several major ethical theories today. I do not here argue that Augustine's ethical theory is compatible with any of the ethical theories popular today; the scope of my discussion is simply a comparison of Augustine's conclusion with the conclusions that follow from other theories.[3] I will argue that utilitarians, Kantians, and Aristotelian virtue ethicists can reach the same conclusion that Augustine does in this matter: we do not all have an obligation to pursue as much knowledge as we can during a crisis, and in some cases pursuing knowledge may be unethical.

On the surface, it may seem that a utilitarian ethical approach requires us to engage in intensive research, especially when we are dealing with new and unusual situations in a crisis. Classic utilitarians believe that an action is right if it brings about the greatest amount of utility—which, for hedonistic utilitarians, is understood to be pleasure. To discover the best outcome of any of our possible acts during a crisis seems to require us to know about the crisis in great detail. However, it is also possible to engage in an ineffective and labor-intensive search for truth without a net gain of utility.

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[3] A discussion of the differences between Augustine's theory and utilitarianism can be found in (Kirwan 1999); a comparison of Augustine and Kant can be found in (George 2020); discussion of Augustine's understanding of virtue can be found in (Wetzel 1992) with Aristotle in particular mentioned in (Wetzel 1992, 50).

> Fact-finding and evaluating the different reasons for action consume time and effort and these are costs which even under conditions of infallibility will often outweigh the marginal benefits which in many cases ensue from engaging in a complete assessment of the situation on its merits" (Raz 1999, 60).

It is not just difficult to assess every ramification of an act before we perform it, it also decreases the amount of possible utility we can bring about because of the effort we have put into making calculations. The fact that we have an unlimited amount of information on hand today only makes this point stronger: researching all the possible outcomes of all our possible actions would prevent us completely from acting, and hence, from maximizing utility. Instead, we need to stop researching at a certain point in order to be able to engage in other acts.

Arguably, a Kantian, too, would agree with Augustine's conclusions about seeking knowledge. Kant argues that we can know an act is permissible if we are able to universalize the maxim with which we are acting. If it would not be possible for everyone to act in the way that we are considering acting, either because this thwarts the aims of our act or because it contradicts something else in our will, we have a duty not to perform this act. Can we universalize a maxim that allows us to pursue knowledge whenever we have a desire to do so? We can see an analogous situation in what Korsgaard calls a "standard puzzle case" for Kant:

> It may seem as if wanting to be a doctor is an adequate reason for becoming a doctor, for there's nothing wrong with being a doctor – in fact, really, it's rather admirable – and if you ask yourself if it could be a law that everyone who wants to be doctor should become one, it seems, superficially, fine. But then the objector comes along and says, but look, suppose everyone actually wanted to be a doctor and nobody wanted to be anything else. The whole economic system would go to pieces, and then you couldn't be a doctor, so your maxim would have contradicted itself! So does this show that it is wrong to be a doctor simply because you want to?
>
> What it shows is that the mere desire to enter a certain profession is only a provisionally universal reason for doing so. There's a background condition for the rightness of being a doctor because you want to, which is that society has some need for people to enter this profession. In effect the case does show that it's wrong to be a doctor merely because you want to – the maxim needs revision, for it is not absolutely universal unless it mentions as part of

> your reason for becoming a doctor that there is a social need. Someone who decides to become a doctor in the full light of reflection also takes that into account (Korsgaard 1999, 25).

In the same way, if we were to try to justify intensive research by universalizing a maxim such as "engage in research if you want to do so," we will run into problems if too many people should decide to do so to the neglect of other tasks like providing electricity and internet access. We could resolve this in the same way that Korsgaard does by arguing that only "engage in research if you want to and if there is a social need for such research" can be universalized. Korsgaard's Kantian response is exactly the same as Augustine's, then: we can engage in research when we are using it to benefit us or others – in other words, when there is a social need.

Like a utilitarian or Kantian, an Aristotelian could reach this conclusion as well. Aristotle argues that virtue lies in the mean between two extremes of excess or defect in our acts, a mean which is reasonable to choose (Aristotle 2001, II.6.1106b36-1107a8). If, on one extreme, we immersed ourselves in research to the point that we could correctly answer all the questions we have about a crisis but were unable to perform our daily work or interact with our family or friends, this would not demonstrate virtue. We could perhaps act in such a way that we would ourselves not make the crisis worse (for instance, by taking proper health precautions so as not to further a pandemic) and to convince a few people to do the same. However, most of us are not in a position to use extensive knowledge in a helpful way for others, creating law, or publishing research. It would not be rational for us to put this much effort into an attempt to learn the truth in areas that will ultimately help us very little. On the other hand, if we were to shun knowledge and embrace ignorance, this too fails to show virtue. If we stubbornly refuse to learn anything about current crises, we may not ourselves act in ways that would be rational to support the common good – for instance, wearing masks, avoiding dangerous areas, or recycling our waste.

Pursuing information about crises is therefore a case of diminishing returns: it can help us and others up to a point, but beyond that point it becomes more of a hindrance than a help. The virtuous choice is to use reason to determine how much we should pursue and when it would be best for us to give up. Our current situation may in fact push us towards both extremes: simply because there is so much information available, it is easy to move to the extreme of

too much knowledge. Given the ubiquity of this information and the focus of social media and other media on these crises, we can often be pressured to continue the pursuit of this information far beyond the point that it helps us, and to the point that it harms us. However, it is also easy to surround ourselves with people who simply repeat our own erroneous beliefs. Given the polarization and politicization of debates, we can be pressured to give up on the search for truth too early. Augustine, it seems, can agree with Aristotle that virtue (at least with respect to pursuing knowledge) is in the mean.

6. Conclusion

Augustine's conclusion is that we do not always need to know whether a given statement is correct; we do not always need an informed opinion or premises to prove some conclusion; we can admit that we are not omniscient and move on with our lives, prioritizing our relationship our children, parents, coworkers, roommates, and even prioritizing ourselves. Sometimes it is wrong to try to answer every question that occurs to us, even during a crisis: doing so can distract us from those we ought to love, can make it less likely for us to act well towards others, and can even harm us, making us more anxious and depressed.

While this may not seem an overwhelmingly important argument, especially when we are dealing with national or global emergencies, Augustine's claim that it is sometimes better not to pursue knowledge can free many of us from the belief that we ought to subject ourselves to the overwhelming information overload, fear, and political polarization that surround us. Properly ordering our loves and giving time and attention to those relationships that are closer to us means that many are not morally compelled to seek solutions to each new crisis. It means that when I am asked, "Don't you agree that we should implement this policy?". I can honestly and without guilt answer, "I don't know". It means we can avoid watching the news and the depression and anxiety that follow from that, and spend our time taking care of vulnerable people around us—actions that not only help them but help us. It means that even during a crisis, we can and ought to spend time with our families and friends. And perhaps trying to protect and love the valuable beings around us can help us to bring a crisis to an end.

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