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# The Intersection of Politics and Theology: Reading Augustine in Light of Augustine

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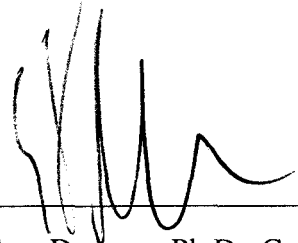
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The Intersection of Politics and Theology:

Reading Augustine in Light of Augustine

Landon P. Wilcox

March 2017



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## **Introduction**

Augustine's *The City of God* is a foundational theological text for the development of Christian thought across time. Over the centuries, political scientists and theologians have been especially interested in this text in a variety of ways, but for the purposes of this discussion, the focus will be on Books I-V and Book XIX. Typically, theologians have been interested in Augustine's rebuttal of pagan claims that are found in the first five books, while political scientists focus most of their attention on Book XIX for its discussion of the highest ends of the state through the means of politics in a context characterized by fallen humanity. Studying the arguments set forth in these two sections independently of one another has proved to produce valuable additions to both theological and political science scholarship; however, by ignoring the other sections, scholars will have a limited understanding of Augustine's view on the highest good. It is essential to read Books I-V and Book XIX in light of one another because Augustine is filling in the gaps in his own arguments; because *The City of God* was a work that was developed over thirteen years, it is absolutely necessary for theologians and political scientists to have read both portions of the text, so they are able to understand the full meaning of Augustine's completed arguments.

## **Placing Augustine in Context**

### **The Establishment of Christianity in the Later Roman Empire**

Before leaping into the complex arguments of *The City of God*, it is important to understand the historical context in which Augustine is developing his rebuttals against the pagans. Before Augustine's lifetime, Constantine the Great ruled the Roman Empire from 306 to 327 CE. In 311, Galerius, the emperor who ruled jointly with Constantine, "issued the Edict of Serdica granting freedom of worship to all Christians" (Grant 230). Ironically, Galerius is

remembered as being “the most enthusiastic persecutor of Christians,” but in the end, he reluctantly accepted that Christianity was an unstoppable force – this persecution had lasted eight years, and the Christians had not admitted defeat (Aland 75). While the first edict was intended to end the persecution of Christians, the persecutions did not fully end until the Edict of Milan was passed in 313 by Constantine. It is important to note that the Edict of Milan went beyond what was achieved through the Edict of Serdica (Aland 76). It granted the Christian Church equal rights with pagan cults, and it assured Christians that they would no longer be persecuted for their belief. Furthermore, all of the property that was confiscated during the persecutions for the last decade would be returned. In his work, Augustine boasts of God’s faithfulness to Constantine, claiming that God gave him “such fullness of earthly gifts as no one would even dare wish for” (160). Unlike the first edict, Constantine’s Edict of Milan made Christianity equal to the pagan cults in the eyes of the state, which ultimately gave Christianity the recognition it needed to later become the established state religion. Theodosius the Great (who is “presented as a model Christian prince in the *City of God* [Volz and Watkins; Brown 291]) passed the Edict of Thessalonica in 380. It was commanded that “all the nations which are governed by [Roman] clemency and moderation should steadfastly adhere to the religion which was taught by Saint Peter to the Romans” (Volz and Watkins). With this edict, and later edicts, Theodosius revoked the right for any other forms of worship within the empire; now, all citizens were required to worship the god of Christianity (Volz and Watkins). These edicts were important for the freedom and authority granted to Augustine when he was installed as the Bishop of Hippo in 396 (Van der Meer 9). Without Constantine bringing about the official end of Christianity’s persecution throughout the empire and Theodosius’ making Christianity the only established religion, it is likely that it would have been impossible for Augustine to have the proper occasion for writing

*The City of God* in the first place. It is important to keep this transition in mind before engaging Augustine's arguments for this reason: now that the Christian god is Rome's official god, the pagans held Christ to be responsible for the security of the empire. Furthermore, the Christian Church also began to function in a civic role that it had not previously had because before the Christian god was the state's god, the Roman Pantheon was understood to be the protectors of Rome that ordered society.

### **Augustine Contra Pelagius**

According to the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Augustine's writings were largely shaped by schisms in Christianity, political and social calamity and three great controversies: Manichaeism, Donatism and Pelagianism, which "can all be understood as conflicts over 'anthropologies'" or views of the natural human disposition (Ferguson 122). The most important controversy, for the sake of this discussion is Pelagianism. Historically, "it was an ascetic movement composed of disparate elements united under the name of the British theologian Pelagius, who taught in Rome in the later 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>" centuries (Livingstone). Those who adhered to what would ultimately become a heretical position "denied [Adam's] transmission of Original Sin" and believed that "the individual is improvable beyond the limits of a fallen condition through education" (Livingstone; Stock 18). In other words, Pelagius "began to teach that it was possible – and therefore mandatory – that human beings strive towards and achieve perfection in the Christian life in the present" (Ferguson 124). In a similar way, so-called pagan philosophers such as Aristotle and Cicero argue that humankind obtains the highest good in the city through the public activity of politics – the highest good for these philosophers is *eudaimonia* or human flourishing. Both the philosophers and Pelagius deny the transmission of original sin insofar as the limits placed upon humankind by sin are disregarded by both – while

Pelagius explicitly denies the effects of sin, the pagans only do so implicitly because they're oblivious to it. Pelagius preached "up human merits to such an extent as to declare that a man has them of his own very self" (Mourant 314-315). Ferguson regards this tradition as the third "lengthy intellectual and ecclesiastical battle in the context of which Augustine's theological ideas were formulated, especially those on predestination, original sin, and grace" (124). In his organized rebuttal of Pelagianism, "he neatly reduces [it] to three grave errors: to think that God redeems according to some scale of human merit; to imagine that some human beings are actually capable of a sinless life; to suppose that the descendants of the first human beings to sin are themselves born innocent" (Wetzel 52). This controversy within Christian Latinity is what prepares Augustine for his rebuttal of the pagans in *The City of God*; it is through humankind's lack of understanding of their own fallen state that Augustine is building his arguments upon.

### **Augustine on Original Sin and the Fall of Humankind**

Augustine's "philosophical understanding of the [human] will is interwoven with his interpretation of" the theological doctrine of original sin (Kretzmann and Stump 6). The "Fall of Man" that is found in the book of Genesis is what "ushered into the world *original sin*, which is not an event but rather a condition. It is the condition imposed by God as punishment on Adam and Eve for disobedience" (Mann 47); their disobedience was manifest in their prideful replacement of "the selfless love of God [by] love of self" (O'Donnell 51). Augustine's understanding of the Fall of Man (i.e. the reformed doctrine of original sin) lines up with the Pauline view of humans being totally depraved. The condition of total depravity is innate because it is inherited through the bloodline of Adam and Eve – which includes every human being – and is characterized by: "dispossession from a naturally perfect environment, the loss of natural immortality and the acquisition of susceptibility to physical pain, fatigue, disease, aging,

and rebellious bodily disorders, especially sexual lust” (Mann 47). One of Augustine’s favored theses that he used to combat Pelagianism, states that “the cause of moral evil, of sin, is the perverse will of the creature. There is no antecedent, efficient cause of this evil will” (Bourke 264-265). To be totally depraved, is to have a will that is immoral or wicked; it is through a totally fallen will that humans engage the world, and because they do not have a good will, their view of the highest good is depraved too. Having established a proper context for the arguments that St. Augustine makes in his work, it is now appropriate to explore Augustine’s response to the pagans and discover why it brings value to the study of *The City of God*, using both theology and political science.

### **Augustine’s Response to the Pagans**

In the first five books of *The City of God*, readers find Augustine beginning his rebuttal against the pagans’ claim that outlawing pagan worship and establishing the Christian god as the sole god of Rome now makes Him responsible for the security of the Empire; furthermore, the pagans argue that the sack of Rome in 410 demonstrates that Rome is now worse off because of the prohibition of pagan worship. Because Rome collapsed while Christ ought to be protecting the nation, it is clear, to the pagans, that the Christian god is weaker than the Roman gods. Augustine fiercely rebuts the pagans’ argument that Rome’s fall calls Christ’s power into question using his theological understanding of history.

Augustine’s first pair of arguments are spread across the first five books of *The City of God*. In Book I, Augustine begins, in the preface, by stating that his purpose is to undertake the defense of the City of God “against those who prefer their own gods to the Founder of” the City of God (3). Following his explanation of the purpose of the work, Augustine introduces the City of Man as a city “ruled by its lust to rule” (3). With this initial characterization of the City of

Man, the reader is now aware of a few things: the aim of the City of Man is domination, it holds other nations in enslavement and it is enslaved to its own lust to rule. All of these things are unjust because they accomplish one end only: raising up the powerful. This view comes as a result of Augustine's understanding of the depraved nature of humankind. Augustine states that those, impiously mad and ungratefully prideful, people that were spared by the invaders were just pretending to be Christians as a means of self-preservation (4). Those who blamed Christ for the sack of Rome deserve any suffering they endured because they are wicked – as a result of their depravity – and all worshipers of the pagan gods are at fault for their own demise because God was justly exacting His punishment of the pagans through the use of the invading force (Augustine 6-7).

Augustine recognizes that both believers and unbelievers suffered as a result of the sack of Rome; in fact, he claims that “God has willed that [the good things of this life, and its ills,] should be common to both” the City of Man and the City of God (10). However, he wants to make it clear that the city of Man and the city of God suffer differently (10, 89). Because the entirety of humankind suffered the Fall of Man, all people are justly subjected to the world's suffering; the only difference between residents of the City of God and those of the City of Man is the way in which they respond to suffering. It is thus that the City of Man, “in the same affliction [...] detests[s] God and blaspheme[s], while the [City of God] pray and praise. So material a difference does it make, not what ills are suffered, but what kind of man suffers them. For, stirred up with the same movement, mud exhales a horrible stench, and ointment emits a fragrant odor” (Augustine 10). The only way that the Roman pagans could change the way in which they respond to suffering is if God grants them election by giving them a new heart. Because He has not, they can only respond as the reprobate can, wickedly; however, even



without their change of heart, God granted them longer life by protecting them with His sovereign mercy (Augustine 34).

In Book IV, Chapter IV, Augustine makes his infamous claim that unjust kingdoms are no different than a band of robbers. He recounts a tale of Alexander the Great meeting a pirate: when Alexander seized the pirate, “he asked the man what he meant by keeping hostile possession of the sea, [and the pirate] answered with bold pride, “What you mean by seizing the whole earth; but because I do it with a petty ship, I am called a robber, while you who do it with a great fleet are styled emperor” (Augustine 101). The pagans would reject this tale because they do not believe that the emperor is equivalent to the pirate; the pirate is clearly unjust because he has no backing from a just nation. The pagans’ view ascribes the enlargement of kingdoms to Jove (Augustine 105-107, 110). This claim is problematic to Augustine because historically, nations that have been raised up would have to have the same cause or else the gods are inconsistent for one of three reasons: either the gods are faithful to different people groups across time, they are weak and can be overcome by the humans they created or the gods have the power to overcome one another (103). Augustine then states, if these gods, whom the Romans worshiped, really had the power to preserve and increase the bounds of Rome, they would have increased the dominion of the Greeks instead because ultimately, the Greeks have always honored the pantheon better than the Romans ever did (121). Because these gods clearly do not have this power, it is by the hand of the true God that the Romans were allowed to rule the lands they did; if the true God was alone worshiped with sincere faith and virtue, the Romans would have a better kingdom and receive the eternal kingdom promised by God to His faithful followers (Augustine 121).

Readers of the first five books will find that in Chapter XXI of Book II, Augustine provides Scipio's definition of a political community. Like the discussion in Book IV, this discussion presumes Augustine's views on the totally depraved state that humans are in. According to Scipio, the political community (i.e. the republic or the commonwealth) or "The people' [are] not every assemblage or mob, but an assemblage associated by a common acknowledgement of law, and by a community of interests" (Augustine 56). In other words, all of the people in the political community have a common sense of right that they share because there is a moral foundation that politics is built upon. In order for humankind to form political associations, there must exist a common moral foundation of some sort, otherwise justice is impossible. Scipio further qualifies the commonwealth by stating that "a republic, or 'weal of the people,' then exists only when it is well and justly governed, whether by a monarch, or an aristocracy, or by the whole people, [but when the governing body is unjust,] the republic is not blemished (as has been proved the day before), but by legitimate deduction from those definitions, it altogether ceases to be" (Augustine 56). Common morality, for Scipio, is necessary for the existence of the commonwealth; if morality is missing, then the commonwealth ceases to exist. If the reader considers Augustine's view of the Fall of Man again in light of this discussion, then Rome, has ceased to exist as a viable commonwealth. At the end of this discussion, Augustine leaves a promissory note stating that he will return to complete the discussion at a later time; he redeems the note in the discussion found in Chapter XXI of Book XIX to answer the question: what does it mean that the commonwealth has ceased to exist?

### **The Two Cities and Their Ends**

Book XIX is of greater importance to political scientists due to the fact that Augustine devalues politics and generates a new understanding of politics as a limited activity that retrains

and maintains order – it does not promote *eudaimonia* or happiness. This set of arguments is generated from the assumption that the ends of the City of Man pale in comparison to the ends of the City of God. For the first six pages of his argument, Augustine provides descriptions of the supreme good in leading philosophies among pagans – all of these sects of philosophy ultimately constitute a significant part of the City of Man – and following the descriptions, he then explicitly states that the supreme good of the City of God is life eternal (605-611). Opposite the City of God’s supreme good is the supreme evil which is death eternal – “to obtain the one and escape the other we must live rightly. And thus it is written, ‘The just lives by faith,’ for [the City of God does] not as yet see [the] good, and must therefore live by faith,” and the only reason humans have the power to live rightly is due to the fact that God is the giver of faith to a select people (Augustine 611; cf Habakkuk 2:4). The City of Man, on the other hand, believes that the supreme good and supreme evil are found in this life and not the next; for the ancients, namely Varro, the highest good was realized through the use of politics to improve the city (605-611).

Augustine rebuts this common line of thinking with the Pauline letter of 1 Corinthians: “The LORD knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are in vain,” and it is by their “stupid pride” that they are blind to the true good (611, 613; 1 Corinthians 3:20). The reason the thoughts of the wise are vain is because they are ignorant of the *true* supreme good – it is through their pride that they receive a false view of the highest good. Wisdom that supports the ends of the City of Man pales in its importance when it comes to the end of the City of God, which of course, is most important to St. Augustine. Furthermore, with all of the wisdom in the world, a person is still subject to the evil of this world – the City of Man is never liberated from evil, and while the City of God makes its pilgrimage in this world, it is subjected to the vices of the flesh, just as the City of Man is (Augustine 612; Galatians 5:17).

Similar to the way in which Augustine rebutted Pelagianism, his discussion about the depraved nature of man indicates that the ends of the City of Man are neither righteous nor correct. In fact, Augustine thinks it ridiculous to entertain the notion that humans can realize the highest good by their own will (Bourke 264-265). He does admit, however, that the philosophies that do accept the miserable state of this world are at least one step closer to the truth because they are not blinded by pride (613-614). While this is a humbler position for the City of Man to take, it is not helpful in distinguishing between those that are truly virtuous in God's eyes and those who are not; true virtue is recognizable because it is seen in someone that has hope in the world to come – it is clear that this individual has hope and is made happy by the hope of their salvation if they feel happy and safe in response to the evils of this world (Augustine 614-615; Romans 8:24). Because the philosophers of the City of Man do not know this hope – as a result of their total depravity – they fabricate the highest good and a notion of happiness upon a virtue that is ultimately deceitful and proud (Augustine 615).

For Augustine, the highest good – which is peace – can only be known and enjoyed by the City of God; he describes the peace as a reward that has been prepared for its members. Because the members of the City of God cannot escape these pains and temptations [of this life], they yearn for the “security where peace is complete;” eternity in the celestial city has no struggle against the vices because it is characterized by its complete incomprehensible felicity that “no adversary shall disturb” (Augustine 619). This security that Augustine is pointing to is the ultimate end of the City of God; peace is the end of the goodness expressed by the saints (620). This final peace is the one that believers wish to declare and look forward to – the word ‘peace’ doesn’t do justice to the “life eternal” that is promised because peace describes things of this world, not what is greater than this world (Augustine 620). Thus, the supreme good – and the

end – of the City of God is “peace in eternal life, or eternal life in peace. For peace is a good so great, that even in this earthly and mortal life there is no word we hear with such pleasure, nothing we desire with such zest, or find to be more thoroughly gratifying” (Augustine 620). To justify this claim, Augustine explains that all humans and beasts want joy and peace: humans and beasts alike pursue peace in all endeavors (621). Those that make war or interrupt peace intentionally do so in order to create a peace that best suits their needs or desires; all beings, in one way or another, aim to satisfy their desires or their needs in an attempt to feel peaceful (Augustine 621-622). For Augustine, peace is an innate desire that all creatures in the world have; however, true peace is beyond comprehension for those that are living in the world because of the Fall.

Following Augustine’s logic, it is clear that the ends of the elect and the reprobate are going to be very different because the reprobate will pursue a lesser, temporal peace. The Fall caused individuals to seek to establish themselves over other humans in order to obtain the individual’s definition of peace (Augustine 622). Augustine states that this pride that people have in ruling others is a perversion of what God intended; all people are equal, under God, and seeking to rule others “abhors, that is to say, the just peace of God, and loves its own unjust peace” (622). This peace is fake and devalued because God, in his divine authorship, commands what true peace is, and what humans have done is pridefully establish their own ideas of what peace is through the use of politics; the peace of the state is temporal, and temporal peace is fleeting when considering eternity. Hence, politics is the means of achieving the peace and highest good of the state; however, this peace is not the means of achieving the highest good of eternal peace, it is a rough means of establishing peace and order amongst the unjust.

It is in Chapter XXI of Book XIX that Augustine returns to the question left unanswered in Book II, Chapter XXI. Following Scipio's line of reasoning in Cicero's dialogue, Augustine argues that the City of Man isn't a commonwealth at all because it lacks the necessary conditions for justice. Scipio states that a commonwealth or a "republic [is] the weal of the people. And if [Scipio's] definition be true, there was never a Roman republic, for the people's weal was never attained among the Romans. For the people, according to this definition, is an assemblage associated by a common acknowledgement of right and by a community of interests" (Augustine 631). While this may seemingly prove that Rome is, in fact, a commonwealth, it does not because of Scipio's view of what right is. Scipio explains at large that a "common acknowledgement of right" is shown through a republic that administers justice; however, where there is no true justice, there can be no right. [...] Thus, where there is not true justice there can be no assemblage of men associated by a common acknowledgement of right, and therefore there can be no people, as defined by Scipio or Cicero; and if no people, then no weal of the people, but only of some promiscuous multitude unworthy of the name of people (Augustine 631-632). Consequently, if the republic is the weal of the people, and there is no people, then it follows that there is no commonwealth where there is no justice (Augustine 632).

It is through the discussion of Book XIX, Chapter XXI that Augustine provides the proper vantage point for reading Books I-V. Because of Augustine's view of the Fall of Man, the fall of cities through the actions of robbers and emperors is justly suffered by both the elect and the reprobate alike on account of the shared condition of sin amongst humankind. Neither the Greeks nor the Romans had true faith in Christ, so neither was rewarded; it is of the opinion of the pagans that nations are raised up on account of the virtues of a nation, but due to the fact that all humans are depraved, there is no such thing as a virtuous human will. Therefore, neither the

practice of Christianity nor its adoption as the official Roman religion has anything to do with the Goth's successful sack of Rome; it is simply another failure of a historical manifestation of the City of Man. Rome's fall is unremarkable considering the way nations are raised up and fall across human history because God "gives earthly kingdoms both to good and bad [...] according to the order of things and times, which is hidden from us," but is ruled over by Himself (Augustine 125). It is simply the way the City of Man has been designed to work. With that said, Augustine's view of Rome's existence, like every other great nation, is simply a gift from the merciful God to the reprobate (126). It is through the lens of Book XIX that the reader can properly read this theological rebuttal because ultimately, the end of every manifestation of the City of Man, along with all of its people, is death and destruction.

Augustine makes it clear that Rome does not possess the necessary conditions for justice; in the same way, neither does the City of Man. Therefore, neither Rome nor the City of Man has the capability to become a commonwealth. After rejecting Scipio's definition of the people and the commonwealth, Augustine offers an alternate definition of a "people". His new definition states that "a people is an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love, then, in order to discover the character of any people, we have only to observe what they love [...] and it will be a superior people in proportion as it is bound together by higher interests, inferior in proportion as it is bound together by lower" (637). The higher and lower interests of the people are derived from what those people love. For Augustine, all higher interests are those that result from obedience to God because those that "do not themselves obey God, as God has commanded them to serve Him, they have no proper authority over the body and the vices" (638). Without this proper authority over the vices, all interests are born from a spirit of depravity, not the spirit of God. According to this new

definition of people, the inhabitants of Rome are a people, and its “weal is without doubt a commonwealth or republic” (637). By redefining people, Augustine is now also redefining what the republic (or commonwealth) is too. Hence, the City of Man, because its weal is the welfare of the commonwealth and not in obedience to God, it is void of true justice (638). It is characterized by its fundamental desire to dominate others, and the root cause of this desire is the Fall of Man and the depraved nature apart from the redemptive grace of God; therefore, it is to be considered a commonwealth, but it is far from being a just and righteous one. Because Rome is not a just or righteous commonwealth, the best it can provide, as an ordered multitude, is temporal peace and physical security.

To wrap up Book XIX, Augustine states that God gracefully gives authority to the souls and reason of believers, so that they may rule over their body and vices; if God is not delivering humans from vices, then their supposed virtues are not true virtues because they are inflated with pride – in fact, prideful virtues are counted as vices to God (638). This is all true because God is the sole provider of the life to human flesh and the blessedness of each life (638). Those who are alienated from God that have the peace of this world cannot enjoy peace in the end; however, it is in the interest of believers that the non-believers enjoy Earthly peace as long as the two cities commingle (638-639). People that are alienated from God are not like the humble person because the humble man submits “himself to God, his body to his soul, and his vices, even they rebel, to his reason, which either defeats or at least resists them; and also that he beg from God grace to do his duty, and the pardon of his sins, and that he render to God thanks for all the blessings he receives” (Augustine 639). These humble servants of God – the City of God – attain freedom from sin while God rules forever and grants them the supreme good of the peace in eternal blessedness; this is the ultimate end of the City of God (Augustine 640). Those that do



not serve God – the City of Man – inherit eternal misery in the “second death;” the soul is eternally separated from its life source and the body is subjected to eternal pains (Augustine 640). The second death is like an eternal war – because it is the opposite of blissful peace – between all opposing things in human nature (Augustine 640). God’s judgement at the end of time passes humans to these ends: the good, the City of God, to the supreme good and the evil, the City of Man, to the supreme evil (Augustine 640). With all this in mind, Augustine’s response to the pagans’ arguments in Books I-V is that they are simply receiving just punishment for their rejection of the god of Christianity. In the end, the City of God receives eternal security and felicity in the presence of God, and the City of Man receives the wrath of God that they incurred through their depravity (640).

### **Conclusion**

As a whole, Augustine’s *City of God* takes up the criticism of the Christian god laid out by the pagans, and through a very thorough collection of arguments he proves that the replacement of the worship of the pagan gods by the god of Christianity did not lead to the sack of Rome and that the fact that Rome collapsed on “God’s watch” cannot reflect poorly on Him. It is through God’s totally omniscience and sovereign choice that He dictates the trajectory of human flourishing. In order to effectively describe the divine order throughout his arguments, he sketches the two cities and their attributes, and he describes the ends they are both pursuing and the means they use to achieve them. Ultimately, both cities aim at the end of peace, but it has been made clear, through understanding his ontological assumptions that are scripturally informed, that the peace of the City of God is the only true peace. It has been ordained by God that attaining this peace is the highest good of humankind, and through its attainment, the City of God finds liberation from the Fall of Man.

Although this study has illuminated the necessity for reading Books I-V and Book XIX in light of one another, it is only a very small glimpse of the multitude of arguments that Augustine dives into amidst his massive twenty-two volume work. Even within the books discussed, there are many more arguments that can be explored; however, the fact of the matter is that it is absolutely necessary to read the entirety of *The City of God* to have a complete understanding of the arguments he makes. In the same way, scholars ought to carry this into all academic pursuits in the humanities because misunderstanding is often a result of not seeing the full picture.

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