

Once upon a Time ...

There Will Be a Convivial Desire

A Tale in Three Parts about the Possibility
of Convivial Desire, Inspired (at the Beginning)
by Saint Augustine's *De Trinitate*

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First Tableau: Three Discourses of Desire

Saint Augustine, in his treatise *On the Trinity* (XIII.iii.6), tells the following story. At one time, a comic actor regularly traveled through the provinces of the Roman Empire. In each town, after finishing his performance, he announced to his audience, "Tonight I will reveal to you what you all desire. Let it be known, come in great numbers." And in the evening, indeed, a huge crowd of people came to hear him. "I know what you all want," the actor declared in a confident tone, as if he were drawing his knowledge from a sacred source, as mysterious as it was unquestionable. "You all want to buy cheap and sell dear." At these words, the entire crowd, delighted and dazzled by such penetrating insight, exclaimed: "Yes, that's right, that's exactly how it is. He has seen right through us."

But at the same time, in the same cities or elsewhere, another actor using the same procedure gave a different answer. "I know what you all want," he said to the crowd in a tone of voice as confident and inspired as his competitor's. "You all want to be praised and esteemed. You want to be loved, honored, and revered." At these words, the en-

tire crowd, equally delighted and dazzled by his penetrating insight, exclaimed: “Yes, that’s right, that’s exactly how it is. He has seen right through us.”

A third actor, who looked like a prophet, had something else to say:

“I have heard what the histrionics who roam your province tell you, deceiving you with their fine words and cunning arguments. Knowing that you all aspire to happiness—indeed, what else can one wish for?—they try to make you believe that you can achieve it by cheating your fellow man to buy the best deal possible and sell for more than you should. Or that you could find happiness by trying to win the good graces of the many through servile and degrading maneuvers. But who does not see that these answers are absurd and fallacious? If you deceive others, you will be deceived by them. And there is nothing more unstable and uncertain than popular favor. Praised and adored one day, you will be despised and reviled by all the next. No, truly, I say to you, the only way to be happy in an absolutely lasting and certain way is to place all your hopes and all your love in an all-powerful god.”

In reality—and Augustine was the first to agree, estimating that there were more than two hundred different schools and definitions of happiness in antiquity—there was nothing new about these discourses. They had been around for a long time. What Augustine could not foresee, however, was their posterity. Over the course of the centuries, the followers of the first discourse, the discourse of economy and need, were to be found first among merchants and bankers, of course, and then among craftsmen and industrialists, and gradually spread to entire countries and states. Thanks to the refinements of economics, it is now robots with algorithms that buy at the lowest price and sell at the highest. They no longer buy goods or services, but money or promises of money, and they do so in a nanosecond, beyond all power of human reason or computation.

The descendants of the proponents of the second discourse, that of the desire for recognition, were recruited first and foremost among the warriors and aristocrats, ready to risk their lives for a noble cause—*God and kingdom*—or, more recklessly, quarrel over a simple point of honor.

Seeking glory—vainglory, their critics said—even in the cannon's mouth or in the slightest duel, triggered by a yes or a no, they claimed a monopoly on honor and recognition. Today, with this monopoly finally broken, everyone wants to be recognized. Everyone wants to be proud of their religion, their culture, their values, their sexuality, their gender, their country, their work, their unique personality. Everyone wants to be loved, respected, and valued. This discourse of desire and recognition is propagated by many philosophers, anthropologists, and psychoanalysts.

For centuries, and even millennia, however, merchants and warriors, champions of need as well as heroes of desire have affirmed at least in words the superiority in principle of the third discourse, the discourse of the gods and of love: the discourse of religion. In the realm of ideas, warriors and merchants gave way to priests, pontiffs, and prophets, even if the military and economic leaders still held sway over their religious counterparts when it came to wealth or the means of coercion. It was in the name of the gods that warriors fought, evoking the precepts of religion, even if they were often motivated only by the pleasure of fighting or the hope of finding glory or, more prosaically, the wealth that came from plunder. It was by giving the representatives of the gods enough to build churches, temples, mosques, pagodas, or cathedrals that merchants and bankers, for their part, hoped to find salvation for their souls.

For a good part of the twentieth century, it was believed that the discourse of religion was destined to die out little by little. That it would in any case desert the public square and exist only in private cults. Yet, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it rose from its ashes, more alive than ever. Religious wars, thought to be from another time, are now back in the spotlight. And humanity wonders why.

Second Tableau: The End of Time?

Imagine, if you will, that we are now in the year 2030. Humanity is on the verge of despair. Countries that were once rich have fallen into

misery and chaos. Others that were poor have become richer at first and then seen their development come to a halt. In any case, there are no longer enough sources of energy, oil, coal, and uranium and not enough raw materials to support sustainable growth. In many parts of the world, the air has become unbreathable at least every other day. Unemployment is rising disproportionately everywhere, because not only is there no need to hire in times of stagnation or recession, but many tasks can now be done better and more cheaply by robots—even tasks that were once considered skilled, middle-class tasks. While the rest of the world is in misery, a few million rich people, growing ever richer, live in tax havens, protected by high walls, barbed wire, dogs, and henchmen. They have to protect themselves against both the anger and hatred of all the social strata that have been demoted, and against the despair of the poor and climate refugees. The latter now number in the tens of millions or more since the melting of the ice pack has accelerated in the Arctic and Antarctic and the sea level has risen by almost one meter. With no one knowing what tomorrow will bring, more and more people are joining organized crime. Corruption reigns supreme everywhere.

Religions, for their part, are trying to preserve what they can of the sense of the common good, and attempting to defend the elementary rules of public and private morality. But they have difficulty convincing people because those who suffer from misery and fear are less and less sensitive to the promise of a paradise after death. If anything, they would prefer to enter a tax haven on Earth, and as soon as possible. Religions, which are supposed to preach peace, moderation, and love, are themselves dragged into this vortex and in turn become factors and amplifiers of the wars that set whole regions ablaze: Allah against God or YHWH, and vice versa. Buddha against Islam. Sunni Islam against Shiite Islam, in their many variants. And vice versa.

Faced with this disaster, voices are being raised all over the world and experiments are being devised to try to avert the catastrophe. Many avenues are being explored. In reality, everyone can see what should be done—at least in principle. First of all, we need to tackle the fantastic rise in inequality that has exploded all over the planet at an ever-increasing rate over the last fifty years. It is this inequality that fu-

els corruption and encourages organized crime. And, conversely, inequality feeds on it. How else could the richest people continue to earn 10–15 percent returns on their investments in sluggish or no-growth economies each year? But the end of growth is not the end of progress. It is only the end of the regular increase in the monetary purchasing power of market goods and services. It is possible to live better, infinitely better, in peace and security, without growth in monetary purchasing power, provided that it is better distributed and that the creativity of all is encouraged. Only then will it be possible to deal with global warming, the scarcity of energy and mineral resources, and the various forms of pollution and thus the wars and crimes that result from all these perturbations.

In 2030, everyone was firmly convinced of this. However, there was no sign of any progress or any possibility of a happy outcome to the world's dramatic disorders. No one knew what answer to give to a problem that everyone sensed was crucial but that no one could really name: the problem of the nature of human desire. What fuels it? Can it be controlled? Can it be or become convivial? Is it not, on the contrary, always doomed to excess, to boundlessness, to hubris? How can we reproach the richest people for wanting to become ever richer if we want the same things as they do? In whose name would we criticize the desire for recognition of great artists, exceptional sportsmen, writers, or brilliant scientists when we admire them and, in the field that we cherish, they serve as a model? We would like to be like them. And why should we denounce the religion or values of others when we know and understand them as poorly as they know and understand ours? Are they waging war on us? But can we be sure that we did not start it ourselves? No one knows when the war started or whether anything will ever stop it. It is true that all religions and all moralities have tried, but none has truly succeeded so far.

Third Tableau: The Symposium of Desire

Yet, the 857 speakers from all over the world who attended the so-called *Last Chance Congress* in the UN building, which at this point had been closed for five years, concluded that we have no choice. We must now solve the riddle of riddles once and for all and finally find out why, despite all their desire for peace and brotherhood, human beings always end up regressing into hatred and conflict. Where is the crack in their desire that sooner or later makes it turn against itself? If we do not learn to answer this question as soon as possible, humanity will perish. Morally, and perhaps even physically.

By a unanimous decision, the congress decided to convene nine representatives of each of the three discourses of desire that the congressmen had identified as the most relevant and plausible: the discourse of need and economy, the discourse of desire and recognition, and the discourse of gods and love.

The conditions imposed on the twenty-seven advocates were drastic. They were forced to live in Spartan accommodation and eat frugally, and they were forbidden to leave the house in which they were confined. They would only regain their freedom on the day when they unanimously agreed among themselves. If they could not agree, they could vote for one of the two other conceptions of desire. The one with the most votes would be declared the winner, and an attempt would be made to organize human coexistence on that basis.

As one might expect, for more than three months there was nothing but mockery, admonition, and quips exchanged between our twenty-seven heralds, each one pointing out the logical weaknesses and inconsistencies of the others or showing to what extent reality belied their initial hypotheses and conclusions. Day after day, unusual alliances were formed with a reversed front to defeat a common adversary, then undone the next day, only to be reversed the day after. Everyone, even within their own camp, was accused of bland idealism, narrow-minded materialism, silliness, misplaced empiricism, improbable transcendentalism, unjustifiable apriorism, unbearable cynicism, grotesque angelism, and so on. Never before had so much intelligence and sub-

tlety been deployed to demonstrate the foolishness of others. The entire history of philosophy, social sciences, and religions was thus mobilized in a sort of endless agonistic joust. Everyone enjoyed it at first.

But no progress was made, and little by little the participants began to tire of these sterile exchanges. The hope of victory became more and more improbable, while the differences between them, which at first had seemed so immense, so irreconcilable, became more and more tenuous. On the one hundred and third day, an economist, a philosopher, and a religious figure who had raised the possibility while sipping insipid tea, proposed that a three-member commission take stock and outline a possible motion for a synthesis. Their proposal was greeted with general relief, and they were immediately elected to the committee. So many arguments had been exchanged during these three months, so many in-depth discussions had taken place, that they were only half surprised to come to an agreement in a few days on three sets of proposals, which can be summarized as follows:

- First of all, there is no absolute choice to make between the three opposing conceptions of desire. Each one encompasses and interprets the other two, and each one is interpreted and encompassed by them. Beyond the narrow sphere of need, it is the desire to be recognized and the desire to fulfill one's religious obligations (or demand for meaning) that fuels the desire for possession. Likewise, one cannot be recognized without receiving a quantity of goods that crystallizes this recognition, and one is never recognized, in the end, except in proportion to what one has given or what one could give. Finally, obedience to the gods and to ultimate values only makes sense if it allows each person to obtain the quantity of goods necessary for his or her existence and to enjoy the recognition of his or her uniqueness.
- Moreover, the modalities of desire vary according to the individual. This is why there can be no general theory of desire that is valid a priori for everyone. But what we absolutely need is not a general theory of desire but a clear distinction between legitimate and illegitimate desires. Not all desires are admissible, and those humans

who fall prey to them must learn to not yield to the deleterious part of their desire. Legitimate are those desires whose expression allows humans to live and cooperate in opposition without slaughtering each other.

- Legitimate, then, is the desire for possession that does not turn into a *pleonexia*, a desire to have more and more. Legitimate is the desire for recognition that does not turn into *hubris*, into a desire to escape the human condition and common humanity. The love of the gods is legitimate as long it is not transformed into hatred of men and the world.

Standing in front of the other twenty-four delegates once again, the economist, the philosopher, and the religious man presented these three sets of proposals, explaining how and why they had arrived at them. They were unanimously accepted. And it was also unanimously decided to call the doctrine that made it possible to bring these three proposals together in a coherent way *convivialism*, the art of living together.

The three proposals were not made public immediately. It was considered preferable to write a whole series of preambles and explanations beforehand, if only to show that they had worked well. So it was not until ten days later that white smoke rose from the main chimney of the house. It meant:

“We have a doctrine. A doctrine that can be shared by all human beings of good will. We know which way to go. Everyone can join in according to their own history and their own beliefs, as long as they are aware that the future of humanity and the survival of the planet are at stake and that there is no more pressing need than to learn to coexist by opposing each other without slaughtering each other.”

The news spread like wildfire throughout the world. Soon everyone was eager to adopt the symbol of the new world view and work towards its realization. Many of the very wealthy, who had been waiting for this very moment, soon joined in. Just as quickly, yielding to corruption seemed dishonorable. It took a little longer for the soldiers of the warring armies

and the members of the criminal gangs to begin to abandon them; but once the movement had begun, it gained increasing momentum and nothing could stop it. There was so much else to do: to invent a world of convivial prosperity without systematic GDP growth and to heal all the world's ills inherited from past centuries. Finally, it goes without saying that throughout the world, men and women of all colors and religions married or partnered. And they had many children. But not too many.

