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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Media Ecology of Etienne Gilson: Mediation in St. Augustine's *City of God*

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Abstract

Media ecology represents a vibrant, interdisciplinary area of research that considers the relationships among human beings, language, technology, and both real and virtual environments. The following question serves as a hermeneutic entrance for this article: how might Etienne Gilson's approach to mediation invite further discussion about the relationship between media ecology and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CIT)? First, Gilson's approach to mediation is analyzed, which explores how Neo-Thomism functions as a form of media. Second, Gilson's analysis of St. Augustine's *City of God* is explicated, which evaluates how Gilson mediated this significant religious text through CIT. Third, Gilson's mediation of St. Augustine's discussion about love through Aristotle's definition of reciprocity is examined, which situates the synonymous terms in free will. Gilson's mediation emerges as an interpretive process by which communication enables human beings to choose how to establish communities and to engage in acts of reciprocity to seek fulfillment in God.

Introduction

Media ecology represents a vibrant, interdisciplinary area of research that considers the relationships among human beings, language, technology, and both real and virtual environments (Gilchrist, 2016, 2017). Forsberg (2009) explains that religion serves as an important area of focus for media ecologists such as Marshall McLuhan, Jacques Ellul, Walter Ong, Neil Postman, Paul A. Soukup, and Lance Strate. The following question serves as a hermeneutic entrance for this article: how might Etienne Gilson's approach to mediation invite further discussion about the relationship between media ecology and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CIT)? CIT refers to beliefs about existence as part of God's creation as well as acceptance of reason and free will as God's gifts to humankind (St. Pope John Paull II, 1998). Gilson wrote extensively about the Middle Ages' philosophy and theology as a Neo-Thomist, a philosophical and theological CIT movement that emerged in the late-nineteenth century and lasted until the middle of the twentieth century (McCool, 1994). Gilson interpreted St. Augustine's *City of God* through the media of CIT.

This article's aim is to relate Etienne Gilson's contributions to CIT with media ecology. First, Gilson's approach to mediation is analyzed, which explores how Neo-Thomism functions as a form of media. Second, Gilson's analysis of St. Augustine's *City of God* is explicated, which evaluates how Gilson mediated this significant religious text through CIT. Third, Gilson's mediation of St. Augustine's discussion about love through Aristotle's definition of reciprocity is examined, which situates the synonymous terms in free will. Gilson's mediation emerges as an

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interpretive process by which communication enables human beings to choose how to establish communities and to engage in acts of reciprocity to seek fulfillment in God.

Gilson's approach to mediation offers expanded interpretations of CIT through media ecology. In media ecology, the Incarnation represents an act of mediation which involves a medium, a translator of God as Jesus the Word (*Logos*), and a message, the Gospels as words about Jesus the Word (*Logos*). For the remainder of this article, *Logos* refers to Jesus the Word and *logos* means "discourse." Jesus Christ functions as God's medium, God's message to humankind as well as a mediator between God and human beings. From the CIT perspective, human beings have rationality and free will to choose how to mediate their personal relationship with God or whether they want to have a personal relationship with God.

Mediation

This section frames media ecology as the main theoretical lens for understanding Etienne Gilson's approach to mediation. "Media," "mediator," and "mediation" represent terms that share similar meanings. McLuhan (2003) defined media as technology, tools, metaphors, translators, hardware, software, and extensions of the body and consciousness. For McLuhan, contemporary examples of media would include not only the smartphone device and its numerous apps, but also the theories and machines used to imagine and to construct the smartphone device and its apps as well as the languages spoken by human beings to construct and to use the smartphone device and its apps. In this article, media includes theories such as media ecology, Neo-Thomism, CIT, and Aristotelian philosophy. Interpretation functions as mediation because people utilize media to make information from their perceptions about reality meaningful. Gilson's interpretations of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine's writings, especially *City of God*, function as mediations that invite further discussion about how media ecology could expand people's understandings of CIT.

Both CIT, in general, and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) influenced Gilson's understanding of mediation. St. Thomas Aquinas (1981) suggested that the mediator connected people from extreme positions. This definition involves distance, which could include matters of mentality, spatiality, spirituality, and temporality. From St. Thomas Aquinas' perspective, Jesus Christ serves as the mediator who is capable of closing the distance between people and God. Gilson (1988) argued that "Christ the Mediator who became flesh" offered an alternative path "between agonistic systems" (p. 235). For Gilson, Jesus Christ as mediator invited human beings to choose an eternal life of peace over a temporal existence that privileged power and domination through war.

Mediation serves as a "quest" in which "the mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, p. 713). This definition positions mediation as an intellectual and communicative act between a person and God. Mediation involves the interplay of "thought, imagination, emotion, and desire" for the purposes of deepening "our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, p. 713). This subsequent definition announces mediation as a religious process that begins when people choose to open their hearts and minds to God. For theologians within CIT, conversion functions as a conversation where people accept the Word of God and the words of God. The English term "word" derives from the Greek *logos*.

Although a lengthy explication of *logos* falls well beyond this article's scope, some brief definitions should provide clarity. Heidegger (1992) suggested that the Ancient Greeks interpreted *logos* as predictions, speech, and statements which gave rise to logic, the science of *logos* or thinking. McLuhan (2005) claimed that the Ancient Romans translated *logos* as *ratio atque oratio*, meaning "reason and speech" (p. 22). Walker (2000) noted that *logos* (λόγος) contained multiple definitions, such as "speech," "discourse," "reasoning," and "thinking" (p. 26). These philosophical definitions situate *logos* within human communication through thinking, speaking, and writing.

In the New Testament, *logos* acquires a new, theological dimension. *The Gospel According to John* opens with "In the beginning was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God" (*The New American Bible,* 1971). This verse is in an English translation which was derived from both Greek and Latin sources. In Greek, the verse emerges as "*Εν αρχη ην ό Λόγος και ό Λόγος ην προς τον θεον και θεος ην ό Λόγος*" (*A Reader's Greek New Testament*, 2007). In the fourth century, St. Jerome produced the *Vulgate*, a bible featuring a Latin translation of the Old Testament and the New Testament that compiled Greek and Hebrew sources. St. Jerome's translation appeared as "*In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum"* (*Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, 2007). Among these three sources, the terms "Word," "*Verbum,*" and "*Λόγος*" represent synonyms for describing the characteristics of God across the English, Latin, and Greek languages.

The Early Christian Church featured many complex and contentious debates about *logos*. These challenges included defining the faith as well as describing the relationship of God the Father, God the Son, the *Logos*, and the Holy Spirit (Hardy, 1954a). The use of Greek, an ephemeral language, complicated these discussions by inviting multiple interpretations of any given word based upon the term's context. This phenomenon relates to Hans-Georg Gadamer's horizon of language, a description about the confluence of possible meanings for a word when considered by the reader, the text, and the author (Grondin, 2003). Cultural assumptions and the historical moment not only shape the text's author, but also the text's reader. The Early Church Fathers, including St. Athanasius who established the "Nicene Creed," drew from Greek philosophy to comprehend Jesus Christ as the Incarnation of the Word (Hardy, 1954b). These arguments from Christianity's early centuries culminated with the stance that Jesus Christ represented the Word (*Logos*) and Savior as the mediator between God and humankind.

Jesus Christ as mediator remained an important concept within CIT. The mediator is one who brings estranged parties into an agreement (Wilhelm, 1911). From the CIT perspective, the estrangement comes from the story about the Fall, as noted in "Genesis," where Adam and Eve chose to break God's commandments by eating fruit from a forbidden tree. Due to this transgression, God exiled the couple from Paradise into a harsh world where they and their children would experience suffering and death. In "The First Letter to Timothy," St. Paul wrote that there was one God and one mediator of God and human beings, Jesus Christ (*The New American Bible,* 1971). If the Fall led to an estrangement between human beings and God, then Jesus Christ as mediator could unify this division.

St. Augustine (354-430) also contributed to CIT through his writings about Jesus Christ as mediator. St. Augustine (2011) commented that the "Mediator between us and God" had "transient morality and everlasting blessedness, so that, in His transient condition, He might resemble those destined to die, and might translated them from their mortality into His everlasting condition" (p. 377). For St. Augustine, Jesus Christ could serve as the best example of a mediator for humankind because Jesus Christ suffered and died as a person. According to

Christianity, God chose to be born as Jesus from a maiden of humble origins rather than to a woman of nobility. The Incarnation gave Jesus Christ human experiences, such as birth and a lifestyle as the son of a carpenter, which then shaped the Son of God's ministry. Throughout the Gospels, many stories feature Jesus Christ preaching to a multitude comprised of commoners, prostitutes, and tax collectors. St. Augustine emphasized that Jesus Christ suffered and died for the sins of all mankind.

Gilson's Neo-Thomistic Analysis of *City of God*

This section engages Gilson's analysis of St. Augustine's *City of God*. The issue of free will served as an important element in Gilson's approach to *City of God*. Gilson (1988) contended that the citizens' actions revealed the future destination of their souls. Citizens of the heavenly city bent their will toward God, while subjects of the earthly city sought pleasure from finite, earthly goods. Here, Gilson revealed the influence for Aristotle's understanding of will on Neo-Thomism.

Aristotle (1999) claimed that human beings pursue activities to fulfill their roles in society and that they experience happiness in the completion (*telos*) of those tasks. For Aristotle, people naturally sought their ends by inclining their will to perform their roles, such as cobbling shoes, building ships, or making wine. Aristotle (1984a) posited that happiness could be achieved "as a result of excellence and some process of learning of training" (p. 1737). For Aristotle, human beings could cultivate practices that facilitated their movement toward happiness.

For Neo-Thomists such as Gilson, people achieve happiness in God, and they should incline their will to seek God because God represents the *telos* of all humankind. St. Thomas Aquinas (1993) clarified that happiness could originate from either God or a human cause, which would be gained through "learning, as a science; second by practice, as a moral virtue; third by exercise, as a military drill" (p. 55). Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas privileged actions, which involve inclinations of the will, as the main source of identity for human beings rather than physical appearance. These assumptions about *telos* and the exercise of will guided Gilson as he read St. Augustine's *City of God*.

St. Augustine explored theological implications of human existence in *City of God*. Begun in 413 and completed in 426, this text defended Christianity during a historical moment of great turmoil (Dyson, 2011). Specifically, St. Augustine responded to pagans who claimed that the sack of Rome by the Visigoths represented a clear sign that Romans should embrace paganism because the Christian faith was a sham. Bose (2002) acknowledged that St. Augustine incorporated disputations, oral argumentative exercises, to confront heretical opponents. Disputations emerged as *logos* where people professed their positions and attempted to undermine their opponents' arguments. In *City of God*, St. Augustine simultaneously tried to refute rival schools of thought and to spread Christianity (Wills, 1999). The surrender of Rome to Alaric, the leader of the Visigoths, proved especially bitter because the Visigoths practiced Arianism, an expression of heresy that St. Augustine preached against for many decades.

In *City of God*, St. Augustine distinguished between the earthly city and the heavenly city. The former designated a community of human beings while the latter referred to the dwelling place of souls spending eternity with God. St. Augustine (2011) depicted the earthly city's residents as "vessels of wrath" because they were "produced by a nature vitiated by sin" and the heavenly city citizens as "vessels of mercy" who were "produced by grace, which

redeems nature from sin" (p. 637). The earthly city's citizens sinned by directing their intentionality on themselves while souls in the heavenly city enjoyed grace by turning to God.

In *City of God*, the heavenly paradise functions as an ideal state of perfection. St. Augustine (2011) identified Jesus Christ as the founder of this paradise. As the heavenly city's designer, God used perfect materials to construct a flawless dwelling place. Gilson (1991) interpreted souls as "stones, and God is the Architect. Under His direction it grows, towards it tend all the laws of His providence, to assure its advent He made Himself Legislator" (p. 387). Gilson's figurative language creates images of human souls serving the purpose of building blocks. God performed the roles of both creator and governor for this heavenly space.

While God rules the heavenly city, human beings control the earthly city. St. Augustine (2011) described princes of the earthly city as men who lusted after power to dominate other human beings while the citizens of the heavenly city exercised charity toward each other. The princes focused their attention on ingratiating themselves rather than serving their community. Rather than demonstrating charity by ceding power to others, these rulers preferred to seize power for themselves and to dominate others. The princes' actions revealed that they sought to secure a personal, yet temporary, peace. For the souls in the heavenly city, God secured their peaceful bliss for all eternity.

The heavenly city serves as a promise of eternal happiness for human beings who upheld God's commandments in the earthly city. Dyson (2011) explained that God requires future citizens of the heavenly city to dwell in the earthly city as mortals. Before these souls can enter Paradise, they must inhabit physical bodies as mortal men and women during their sojourn on Earth. Gilson (1954) suggested that associates of the two cities mingled on Earth ever since the origin of mankind because Christians dwelt in temporal cities to meet their basic needs. Human beings' actions and their uses of *logos*, rather than their physical appearances, revealed the identities of people who would spend eternity in the heavenly city and those people who would not.

The heavenly city existed both as an eternal dwelling place in Paradise and as a transitory state on Earth. As St. Augustine (2011) professed, "Bound to her by the communion of the sacraments, some who will not be with her to share eternally in the bliss of the saints. Some of these are concealed. Some of them, however, join openly with our enemies" (p. 48). Only God could foresee where each person's soul would spend eternity. When using the term "pilgrim," St. Augustine selected the Latin word *peregrinus*, meaning "foreign," "traveler," or "pilgrim" (Collins, 1985, p. 428). *Peregrinus* had a meaning closer to "a captive sighing for release" rather than as some traveler (Brown, 2000, p. 323). While wandering the earthly city, pilgrims endured suffering until their deaths, which would allow them to enter the heavenly city.

Augustinian Love as Aristotelian Reciprocity

This section examines how Gilson interpreted St. Augustine's use of love through Aristotle's approach to reciprocity. Where human beings directed their love intimated their souls' final resting place. St. Augustine (2011) distinguished the citizens based on their respective loves. While the citizens of the earthly city showed contempt for God by loving themselves, the citizens of the heavenly city loved God above all other things. If the object of a citizen's love could be identified, then one could likely predict where that citizen's soul would dwell (Tell, 2007). Tell indicated how St. Augustine suggested that people chose what they love, which meant that they inclined their will to choose either God or themselves.

Love grounded the union between the human being's body and soul. St. Thomas Aquinas claimed that the soul constituted the form of the human body and functioned as "an essential component of the human substance" (Ashley, 2009, p. 112). Drawing from the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, Gilson recognized that the soul and the body formed a mutually beneficial relationship for the mortal human being. By interpreting *City of God* through a Neo-Thomistic lens, Gilson positioned St. Augustine's use of "love" as Aristotle's approach to "reciprocity." Aristotle (1999) connected reciprocity to just actions. Human beings performed just actions by inclining their will to fulfill their roles. People revealed their character (*ethos*) as virtue upon completing just actions of reciprocity.

Gilson interpreted Augustinian love as Aristotelian reciprocity through his Neo-Thomistic assumptions about reason. Rationality, as *logos*, served as a significant characteristic of human beings. St. Thomas Aquinas argued that people committed actions based upon reason (Maciejewski, 2011). God granted human beings the ability to use reason to guide their choices about how they should respond to existence. St. Thomas Aquinas (1981) asserted that "right reason dictates that one use external goods in a measure proportionate to the body" (p. 1800). Here, St. Thomas Aquinas recognized that human beings did not always make rational decisions because they could make poor choices that might harm themselves or others.

For St. Thomas Aquinas, reason compels human beings to perform actions in accordance with the demands of their social roles. When people choose to complete their social roles, they experience happiness (Maciejewski, 2011; St. Thomas Aquinas, 1981). In a similar manner as St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas rejected the pursuit of bodily pleasures as the natural *telos* of a human life. The form of happiness expressed by Aristotle, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas has long-term implications for people according to their individual talents. Neither the philosopher nor the two saints would support a form of happiness based upon the pursuit of instantaneous gratification. The combination of rationality and ethics provided instruction for human action (MacIntyre, 2008). For both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, God not only served as the highest good for human beings, but also their *telos*. For Gilson, reciprocity enabled people to perform actions for the benefit of their earthly community before they could enter the heavenly community.

By applying Aristotle's understanding of reciprocity to St. Augustine's assumptions about love, Gilson articulated a Neo-Thomistic interpretation for *City of God*. Although future followers of the heavenly city lived among the earthly city's citizens, St. Augustine did not call for strife between the groups. St. Augustine (2011) admonished that both groups should seek accord during their time on Earth because they shared the common trait of mortality. Cooperation, rather than competition, would ensure both groups' social stability.

Reciprocity signified a natural expression of human action because people lived as social creatures. Although St. Augustine shared Aristotle's belief that humans were social beings, he rejected political motivation as Aristotle's ground for reciprocity (Dyson, 2011). Aristotelian political theory concerned temporal issues while Augustinian political theory addressed eternity. St. Augustine identified sin as the cause that led people astray, raising doubts about the effectiveness of any political system (Elshtain, 2003). If, as St. Augustine argued, all human beings inclined their will to choose God rather than temporal pleasures, then people would have no need to establish any political units. Characterizing St. Augustine as some sort of anarchist would be a mistake because he contended that the earthly cities and their various forms of government could promote peace among the citizens of the earthly and heavenly cities.

Reciprocity facilitated the process for human beings to found and govern the earthly cities. The singular need to have temporal goods and services for subsistence unified the Christians with the pagans living in the earthly cities (Gilson, 1954). Language served as the common medium by which pagans and Christians could flourish together across the earthly cities. For Aristotle, people cooperated by means of *logos* to establish the family unit, the *polis* (the city-state), and other political institutions. For St. Augustine, *logos* gained a religious connotation as the Word of God (*Logos*) became flesh through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. In turn, Jesus Christ functioned as the medium that connected all future citizens of the heavenly city on Earth to the current residents of the heavenly city in Paradise. For Gilson, St. Augustine replaced Aristotle's *polis* with the Catholic Church as the most significant institution through which human beings could gather together to incline their will for communal prayer and to give thanksgiving to God.

For St. Augustine, human beings should direct their intentionality on saving their souls, not gratifying their bodies. St. Augustine (2011) accepted temporal life as an inevitable progression toward death that could not be slowed. Because human beings have such short lives, they should seek eternal union with God. Death represents the *telos* of human life for all mankind, including citizens of the earthly and heavenly cities. Those future citizens of the heavenly city would endure a *telos* of everlasting rest in God even as their hearts beat restlessly for God while on Earth.

Pilgrims on Earth encountered tensions from choosing whether to obey God's laws or the laws of human rulers. St. Augustine (2011) announced that the future inhabitants of the heavenly city had peace by maintaining their faith during their pilgrimage, by living righteously, and by "directing towards the attainment of that peace every good act which it performs either for God, or—since the city's life is inevitably a social one—for neighbor" (p. 947). By focusing on the community's good, pilgrims could uphold both sets of laws equally. St. Augustine understood the impact of a flourishing community on the lives of the faithful through his actions as Bishop of Hippo (St. Thomas Aquinas, 1981). Although the Catholic Church provided theology and religious practices, local bishops, such as St. Augustine, would incline their will to adjust those practices to serve their congregations.

St. Augustine describes the memberships of both cities as extensions of the family. As the family functioned as the smallest unit of a community so, too, would groups of families sharing similar values constitute the smallest cities. St. Augustine (2011) defined a city as a gathering of human beings connected by fellowship, preventing any city from being founded by one man. If the family represented a synecdoche of the city, then the family and citizens' actions revealed identity. Aristotle (1984b) defined synecdoche as a part representative of a whole. As an example of the greater whole, the part could then offer further information about reality.

In the reality of mortal life, the earthly city offered both physical and spiritual implications for all humankind. If St. Augustine were correct with his assertions, then human beings built earthly cities for bodily pleasures. Popular literature at the time, including epics, histories, and biographies, provided St. Augustine with abundant source material to critique the foibles of human existence. St. Augustine (2011) claimed that Roman heroes acted to ensure the protection of the earthly city. Some of these characters sacrificed themselves and others in the hope of securing temporal power. They chose to pursue fortune and fame by waging destructive wars to dominate others.

For St. Augustine, the founding of Rome served as a synecdoche to explain the general history of the earthly city. Although Rome began as a small kingdom, the political entity

transitioned into a republic and then into an empire. St. Augustine (2011) categorized Rome as a commonwealth at various historical moments, but he did not endorse any form of government. If human beings ruled all governments of the earthly city and if all human beings suffered some form of corruption, then all forms of government would have some level of corruption. St. Augustine warned that all forms of government were capable of negative actions when their citizens chose to acquire power and to reject charity. Kingdoms operated as great bands of robbers when justice was removed (St. Augustine, 2011). These rulers sinned by extracting wealth from vulnerable people for personal aggrandizement.

These robber kingdoms sought to satisfy their temporal desires by acquiring material goods. St. Augustine (2011) commented that the earthly city's citizens preferred to quench bodily thirsts while the heavenly city's citizens strove for eternal peace. The residents of the earthly city sinned, according to St. Augustine, by privileging the wants of their bodies over the needs of their souls, which failed to harmonize the needs of both. The earthly city's citizens chose to focus on themselves rather than uplifting their hearts to God.

Neo-Thomism served as the intellectual lens through which Gilson mediated Aristotle's philosophical project with St. Augustine's theological approach. In doing so, Gilson interpreted Aristotle's use of reciprocity as St. Augustine's expression for love. For Aristotle, reciprocity operated as mediation among citizens of the *polis*. St. Augustine viewed love as a form of mediation among human beings who formed constituents of both the heavenly and earthly cities. While Aristotle positioned *logos* as the political medium that enabled human beings to construct communities, both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas accepted Jesus Christ, the Incarnation of the *Logos*, as the divine medium and mediator who invited people to seek eternal bliss with God.

Conclusion

In this article, Etienne Gilson's approach to mediation was framed as an interpretive process by which communication enabled human beings to choose how to establish societies, to engage in acts of reciprocity, and to seek fulfillment in God. First, Gilson's understanding of mediation was examined to address how Neo-Thomism functioned as media. Second, Gilson's analysis of St. Augustine's *City of God* was articulated to note how CIT served as an interpretive lens. Third, Gilson's mediation of St. Augustine's use of love through Aristotle's discussion about reciprocity was explored to ground both synonymous metaphors in free will.

Gilson's engagement of mediation opens additional lines of inquiry for CIT through media ecology. As Gilson (1962) contended, "The answer is that philosophy needs to keep its rationality to be of service to theology, just as theology must preserve its own transcendence if it is to make use of philosophy" (p. 101). When science reduced to empiricism replaces philosophy, human beings limit their understanding of existence because they have been persuaded to ignore issues of transcendence, the movement beyond the limits of ordinary perceptible experiences. For media ecology, the Incarnation functions as mediation through the interplay of a medium, a translator of God as Jesus the Word (*Logos*), and a message, the Gospels as words about Jesus the Word (*Logos*). Jesus Christ emerges as God's medium, God's message to humankind, and as God's mediator for all humankind. For CIT, human beings choose how to exercise their reason and free will to mediate with other people and with God.

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