A Barnyard Cockfight
of the Fourth Century

It may come as a surprise to some readers to learn that perhaps the first great mind to ponder the possible meaning of the cockfight was St. Augustine (354–430), one of the leading Christian thinkers of all time. To be sure, the cockfight he described was a “natural” one, occurring in the barnyard rather than one arranged or coordinated by men. Nevertheless, the probing questions he asked, “Why do cocks fight?” and, equally important, “Why are men so fascinated by cockfights?” remain critical.

St. Augustine’s ruminations on the cockfight occurred in one of his philosophical dialogues entitled De Ordine, which can be dated in the year 386. The dialogue consists of two separate books, each of which has a passage referring to cockfights. Both passages are presented below.

To appreciate St. Augustine’s discussion of the cockfight, one must realize that De Ordine (“About Order”) was primarily concerned with the vexing problem of theodicy. In other words, how can man reconcile the existence of evil in the world with the idea of a beneficent or good deity. If God is good, how could He have created evil or cruelty? Finding a satisfactory answer to this perplexing paradox is not easy, but the gist of it seems to be that there is order throughout creation, and that includes evil components of creation. Moreover, it is precisely the existence of evil or ugliness which confirms the existence of good or beauty. In the absence of evil, there could be no good; in the absence of ugliness, there could be no beauty. In folkloristic parlance, one might say that “It is the exception which proves the rule.”

In any event, in the present context, it is worth remarking that cockfighting is discussed in tandem with prostitution and “ugly” animal sexual parts by St. Augustine. His own personal struggle against the temptations of the flesh and sin in general are graphically described in his celebrated Confessions (390). For more about his life, see Gerald Bonner, St. Augustine of Hippo, Life and Controversies (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), and Peter R. L. Brown, Augustine of Hippo: A Biography (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

St. Augustine

Thereupon I also arose. And when our daily prayers to God had been said, we began to go to the baths; for that place was comfortable and suitable for our disputation, whenever we could not be in the field on account of inclement weather. Suddenly we noticed barnyard cocks beginning a bitter fight just in front of the door. We chose to watch. For what do the eyes of lovers [of truth and beauty] not encompass; where do they not search through to see beautiful reason signaling something thence?—reason which rules and governs all things, the knowing and the unknowing things, and which attracts her eager followers in every way and wherever she commands that she be sought. Whence indeed and where can she not give a signal?—as was to be seen in those fowls: the lowered heads stretched forward, neck-plumage distended, the lusty thrusts, and such wary parryings; and in every motion of the irrational animals, nothing unseemly—precisely because another Reason from on high rules over all things. Finally, the very law of the victor: the proud crowing, the almost perfectly orbed arrangement of the members, as if in haughtiness of supremacy. But the sign of the vanquished: hackles plucked from the neck; in carriage and in cry, all bedraggled—and for that very reason, somehow or other, beautiful and in harmony with nature’s laws.

We asked many questions: Why do all cocks behave this way? Why do they fight for the sake of supremacy of the hens subject to them? Why did the very beauty of the fight draw us aside from this higher study for a while, and onto the pleasure of the spectacle? What is there in us that searches out many things beyond the reach of the senses? And on the other hand, what is it that is grasped by the beckoning of the senses themselves?

We were saying to ourselves: Where does law not reign? Where is the right of commanding not due to a superior being? Where is there not the shadow of consistency? Where is there not imitation of that beauty most true? Where is there no limit? And thus admonished that there should be a limit to our watching the chickens, we went whither we had purposed to go; and there, as best we could, we garnered into this part of the notebook all the points of our nocturnal discussion—carefully indeed, for the points were recent; and at any rate, how could such striking things escape the memory of three diligent inquirers? In order to spare my strength, nothing more was done by me that day, except that it was my custom to go over half a book of Virgil with them before the evening meal. And we were everywhere giving careful attention to moderation, which no one fail to approve. But to observe it when one is pursuing something eagerly, is extremely difficult and rare.

...
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But let us get back to order, for Licentius may at any moment be returned to us. For the present, I ask you this question: Does it seem to you that the unwise man acts according to order, no matter what he does? But mark what snares the question contains. If you say that he acts according to order, then, if even the unwise man always acts according to order, what will become of that definition: Order is that by which God governs all things that are? And if there is no order in the things that are done by the unwise man, then there will be something which order does not embrace. But you are not willing to accept either alternative. See to it, I beg you, lest in your defense of order you throw everything into disorder.

At this point Trygetius answers again, for the other boy was still absent: “It is easy,” he says, “to reply to this dilemma of yours. For the moment, however, I cannot call to mind an analogy by which my opinion ought, I know, to be declared and illustrated. I shall simply state my impression; for you will do what you did a little while ago. Certainly that mention of the darkness has brought us a great deal of light on what has been put forward very obscurely by me. Indeed the entire life of the unwise, although it is by no means consistent and by no means well regulated by themselves, is nevertheless necessarily included in the order of things by divine Providence; and certain places having been arranged, so to speak, by that ineffable and eternal law, it is by no means permitted to be where it ought not to be. Thus it happens that whoever narrow-mindedly considers this life by itself alone, is repelled by its enormous foulness, and turns away in sheer disgust. But if he raises the eyes of the mind and broadens his field of vision and surveys all things as a whole, then he will find nothing unarranged, unclassed, or unassigned to its own place.”

What great and wonderful responses does not God Himself—and, as I am more and more led to believe, also that unfathomable order of things—send to me through you! Verily, you speak things of such import that I cannot understand either how you discern them or how they can be spoken unless they are discerned. And for that reason I believe that they are both true and from on high. Now you were looking for just one or two illustrations for that opinion of yours. To me there occur already countless illustrations which bring me to complete agreement. What more hideous than a hangman? What more cruel and ferocious than his character? And yet he holds a necessary post in the very midst of laws, and he is incorporated into the order of a well-regulated state: himself criminal in character, he is nevertheless, by others’ arrangement, the penalty of evil-doers. What can be mentioned more sordid, more bereft of decency or more full of turpitude than prostitutes, procurers, and the other
pests of that sort? Remove prostitutes from human affairs, and you will unsettle everything on account of lusts; place them in the position of matrons, and you will dishonor these latter by disgrace and ignominy. And therefore this class of people is by its own mode of life most unchaste in its morals; and by the law of order, it is most vile in social condition.

And is it not true that in the bodies of animals there are certain members which you could not bear to look at, if you should view them by themselves alone? But the order of nature has designed that because they are needful they shall not be lacking, and because they are uncomely they shall not be prominent. And these ugly members, by keeping their proper places, have provided a better position for the more comely ones. What more agreeable to us—because it was quite an appropriate sight for field and farmyard—than that contest and conflict of the barnyard cock, which we have related in the preceding book? But what have we ever seen more abject than the deformity of the vanquished one? And yet, by that very deformity was the more perfect beauty of the contest in evidence.

So it is, I think, with all things; but they have to be seen.