



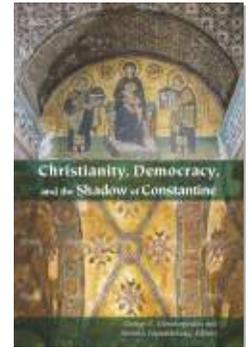
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STRANGE FRUIT

AUGUSTINE, LIBERALISM, AND THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Eric Gregory

A notable feature of contemporary Anglo-American theology is the welcome revival of engagement with Orthodoxy. But it is a less prominent feature of the resurgent interest in “political theology.” This neglect is unfortunate. There are historical and historiographical reasons for a preoccupation with the Latin West, especially given the vexed relation of Augustinianism to democratic constitutional traditions mediated by followers of Augustine and his critics. When Orthodoxy does appear, familiar charges of caesaropapism or otherworldliness are seldom far behind. Augustinians sometimes sponsor such readings, painting Constantinianism with a Eusebian face in order to relieve themselves of theocratic misunderstanding or to contrast their concern for the dynamism of history with the ahistorical speculations of Greek metaphysics. Like many in the Orthodox tradition, modern Augustinians have worked hard to reject the caricature of “the individual striving for a mystical, nonhistorical, world-denying union with God.”¹ Both traditions remain subject to similar challenges in a secular age.

For example, the sometimes-cramped alternatives in political theory marginalize their shared concern with relating the incarnational and eschatological dimensions of the church’s witness to a cosmic redemption of history. Such redemption must take account of the dramatic ruptures that follow any Christian understanding of sin and the conditions of politics. But, as one recent Orthodox theologian has argued, a redemptive vision “cannot be dissociated from the dialectic between the present and future, between affirmation and denial of the world, between participation in poli-

tics (the life of the city) and the transcendence of politics.”² That basic, shared concern is what I want to pursue in order to think about the theological significance of democratic political *action in time*, though not in any explicit comparative fashion.

In the background, recall familiar tensions between supposedly world-affirming incarnational Constantinians and world-denying cruciform sectarians. These tensions, which frame much of contemporary political theology, map onto what Luke Bretherton helpfully describes as “Constantinian triumphalism” and “Donatist separatism.”³ Often constructed as ideal types for broader polemical purposes, these temptations nonetheless give rise to temporal forgetfulness in thinking about political life. Liberal realists tend to emphasize eschatological deferral in ways that separate civic life from ethical and spiritual value. Antiliberals tend to emphasize an apocalyptic ecclesiology that imagines the Church as the only site of formation in virtue and participation in eternity. To speak theologically, both neglect the porous fluidity of one world and one history groaning toward fulfillment in Christ. This fulfillment imagines an immanent teleology that draws together creation and redemption without conflating the two.

The topic of this essay is not Augustine as such. Our topic is time, or less ambitiously, an invitation to think about time, a venerable Augustinian and Platonic theme. It is one that has received less theological attention than we might expect, particularly given the “strange fruit” of the *spatial* separation of church and state that Augustine’s modern interpreters have supposedly found in his pregnant biblical imagery of “two loves” and “two cities” in this time between the times. Oliver O’Donovan has complicated this post-Hobbesian separation of religion and politics by rediscovering a vision of “politics not as a self-enclosed field of human endeavour but as the theatre of the divine self-disclosure.”⁴ On these terms, the emergence of democracy can be linked to divine purposes in history. O’Donovan’s own juridical conception of government does constrain our expectations of political institutions. Such institutions are taken to be indirect witnesses to divine providence in humble recognition of their distinctive temporal purposes. The state, on O’Donovan’s view, is not an end in itself. It exists in the service of the historical mission of the Church. Nonetheless, for O’Donovan, the state “remains under the direction of the First Person of the Trinity; it is not filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.”⁵ The state, under the authority of God, has its historical role in preserving the common good and securing conditions for the preaching of the gospel.

Its political prominence—and its representative claim on our identity—fades in the face of the gathered Christian community. And yet, even O'Donovan's distinction and emphasis on the ambiguities of history open “an account of secular authority which presumes neither that the Christ-event never occurred nor that the sovereignty of Christ is now transparent and uncontested.”⁶

Analogizing political history and salvation history offers a more direct theological route for evaluating democratic action than more familiar terms like realism and idealism or optimism and pessimism. These latter categories can be helpful for heuristic purposes. But they are not native to Christian theology and risk abstraction. No politics can save us, Augustinians consistently remind us, but can politics teach us anything about the nature of salvation in time? Will meaning in history always only be a retrospective? Is politics always only remedial beating back of sinful desire? I am here provoked by what my colleague Jeffrey Stout has called a pressing question for modern Christian theology: “Is it not possible to discern the workings of the Holy Spirit, and thus some reflection of God's redemptive activity, in modern democratic aspirations?”⁷ If all historical events are marked by God's entry into time, might political history also bear witness not only to the first person of the Trinity but also to Christ and the Spirit that testifies to Christ? To put it more concretely, by way of example, might we imagine the civil rights movement or the struggle against apartheid as Christian events for both church and society, a partial embodiment of that kingdom from “every nation, tribe, people, and language” (Revelation 7:9)? Would this reading of history reflect a dangerous desire to baptize the secular, a promiscuous sacramentalism confusing God's providence with salvation? How can we distinguish pneumatological enthusiasm from authentic Christian faith in the wondrous yet fugitive mixing of time with eternity? My remarks have three parts, tracking roughly from Augustine's piety to its modern appropriations and moral sentiment in a democratic culture anxious about politics itself.

Piety and Augustinian Politics

James O'Donnell tells us that “Augustine was lucky that he never had to read anything like Augustine.”⁸ We should respect the distance of this Berber from the margins of empire, famous for his own difficulties with time. I want to think about what his strangeness might mean for us,

whether you adore or despise Augustine, in part because he gave Christianity a voice that echoes with us today. Augustine's enchantment not only declared things in this world to be sacred. He experienced the world as sacred, participating in the goodness of his crucified deity. For Augustine, unlike fallen angels, those pure intellects without bodies that fall completely, we embodied and historical creatures ascend and descend with restless desire for wholeness that he thought was part of human nature. Such wholeness will always be incomplete, groaning in the "not yet" of history. Yet there is no neutrality. All of life, and so all of time and all of politics, are bound up with our fellowship in God.

Augustine was neither a democrat nor what we might call an ardent political activist. Democratic participation, for the most part, is a distinctively modern phenomenon made possible by cultural developments unknown to the ancients. Indeed, Augustine is not the first name on a list for those known for democratic virtues of self-restraint, respect for diversity, concern for social justice, and openness to deliberation. He was a culture warrior, preoccupied with psychic distortions wrought by what he took to be counterfeit mythologies of glory and false claims to achieved justice. His polemics left him vulnerable to caricature and his own rhetorical excess. For Augustine, however, it was pagan culture that did not have the resources to adequately name its own self-deception, its desire to revel only in its own glory, to worship itself.

His *City of God* responds to the anxieties of pagans and Christians made distraught by the fall of Rome. There are few analogies in modern history to this distress and moral panic. I tell my students to picture 9/11 multiplied by ten thousand. Augustine's great work is his reflection on this shattered world. As with 9/11, many sought scapegoats to blame. Pagans blamed the Christians for worshipping the wrong gods (namely, the one God that they were too uptight about) and failing to keep up the proper civic practices because of their meek religion of the Sermon on the Mount. In response, Augustine claimed that the pagans had turned imperial ambition into a religion. Christians could make the same mistake after Rome's apparent conversion to God's purposes. This mistake reflects the great temptation of politics identified by Augustine as idolatry. It is a profound biblical theme, taken up by Israel's prophets, and powerfully echoed in democratic culture by Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address. Yet, despite his suspicion of Rome's pretension, Augustine could still see that its imperfect peace revealed a natural law in the order of nature. Robbers

themselves maintain “some shadow of peace.”⁹ And, by God’s providence, “even the heavenly city . . . while in its state of pilgrimage, avails itself of the peace of earth.”¹⁰ History has its ironies, as Reinhold Niebuhr tells us. But it is not tragic. Temporal peace is known both by comparison and contrast with this eternal peace.

In diagnosing this exilic yearning, Augustine is thought to “secularize” politics, stretching history with eschatological tension, hoping for a far-off country and the resurrection of the dead. Here we find something like an apophatic political theology, veiled in the ambiguity of pilgrimage and sin-stained temporality. Politics, like our experience of grace, operates more in the modality of healing than elevation. It tempers imperfection rather than tutors perfection. This is the realist’s persistent wisdom. But political activity also speaks to some end, albeit chastened by the future rather than the present dimensions of salvation.

A common distinction among Augustinians finds a sociality that is natural and a politics that is sinful. In fact, this is sometimes thought to distinguish Augustinians from other Christian political traditions, notably heirs of Thomas Aquinas. For Augustinians, politics is that part of providential history divided by time after Babel. According to Romans 13, and given our misdirected loves, the purpose of politics is to restrain the wicked with a measure of “earthly” justice and peace for the time being. Redemption waits for the fullness of time. It is historical, but it is not dependent upon the process of time.

So Augustinians wait for the kingdom. They do not build the kingdom. Augustine, however, did not sit quietly with a clenched fist watching his clock with despair. This reputation risks banality. His unmasking of Rome’s idolatry suggests a powerful historical consciousness that human forms change. Nothing is permanent. He was a busy leader, judging and governing a community through political controversy and economic hard times. In fact, we find him writing letters to public officials encouraging them to use their offices, with humility and lamenting necessity, for the promotion of Christian reconciliation. This suggests that not all earthly politics is prodigal. To be sure, Augustine’s premodern experience with law and economics placed severe constraints on his political imagination, confirming the darker moments of his theology. It would be left to later Christian thought to develop notions of structural reform that might make possible goods we otherwise could not enjoy. Such reformers would seek to modify

our political situation, even if we cannot radically change the structures of human desire. I happen to think Augustine could distinguish the failing empire from the republic, Theodosius from Nero, and Regulus from other pagans. He knew the slave trade and torture were wicked practices. In a different age, he might have launched efforts to abolish them. He did not.

Modern Appropriations

Later reformers did take inspiration from Augustine, mining the anthropology and eschatology of Book 19 of the *City of God* for democratic purposes of a low-flying variety. They took their counsel from Augustine's vision of the limits of politics and the fragile possibilities of just action. In the twentieth century, figures like Reinhold Niebuhr and Robert Markus found Augustinian resources that might aid democrats facing the crises of totalitarianism and fascism. But demands for a truly just politics were channeled by a release valve that either funded compensation in another world or took comfort in the value of an ethical personality protected from the flux of this world. These versions of Augustinian politics typically equated a moralized politics with sentimentalism. In particular, invocations of love in conceptions of political life were met with suspicion. While Niebuhr's Augustinianism, which can degenerate into vulgar pragmatism, has returned to public discussions via President Barack Obama and his defenders, things have changed in the academy.

Different varieties of Augustinian liberalism remain, including a republicanism committed to principle exemplified in a figure like Martin Luther King Jr. By my lights, he is America's greatest (and most radical) Augustinian, tapping into Augustine's notions of both love and sin. His analysis of America's loves was able to historicize rather than simply psychologize injustice, offering a vision of a "beloved community" that joined the structural and the personal by diagnosing failures of will as much as flaws of will. Many of today's Augustinians, however, adopt Augustine's critique of empire in order to expose democratic action as a repressed work of violence. For some, democratic action is itself idolatrous.

Augustine's language of *using* the world and *enjoying* God can drain activity in time from theological significance, dreaming only of reconciliation beyond history. Politics is just one example of misplaced faith. But supposed Neoplatonic oppositional contrasts betray Augustine's effort to

refuse a tournament of competitive loves between God and the world, especially one predicated on strong distinctions between “natural” and “supernatural.” A competition between time and eternity, between the inner and the outer, is what his Christology actually rejects. Here, I think, is a powerful resource for what Pantelis Kalaitzidis calls “the hidden Christological dimension of social and political action on behalf of our neighbor.”¹¹ Political action, which promotes just relations among persons, becomes a means by which one loves God and neighbor.

Such hiddenness, however, risks virtual denial by many political Augustinians. They are confident in their rejection of any political confidence. Augustine admittedly confessed a hope familiar to both Eastern and Western traditions: We only find happiness and redemption in the afterlife. His restless heart yearned for something more than the fairer distribution of scarce resources, the hope of modern democratic politics. He longed for a shared redemption of the world and its common objects of love. Such freedom could only be found after death. This Augustine, it might be thought, could sing the blues only as a lament for the mediocrity of the fallen human condition in exile. Unlike Billie Holiday’s singing of the song “Strange Fruit” in which the “strange fruit” is “hanging from the poplar trees”¹²—which like Augustine’s critique of Rome, unmasked the innocence of American democracy—Augustine’s meditations on eating forbidden fruit and a Christ nailed to a tree tend not to inspire protest or reform, let alone revolutionary ambition in a world incapable of moral redress. They provide occasions for mourning, possibly the consolation of spontaneous compassion as symbolic gesture.

For critics of dour Augustinianism, this is the world of merciful slave owners, compassionate doomsayers, or perhaps, bourgeois consumers of fair-trade goods who write checks to Oxfam from time to time. Those more hopeful about democratic action worry about this Augustinian legacy, one that can make Christians comfortable with injustice or lethargic in despairing fatalism. Highlighting the limits of politics can promote a charity complicit with injustice, a benevolence that supports domination and exploitation just as much as innocent hopes in the prospects of liberalism.

Humanitarians and Good Samaritans

This theme, launched by many Enlightenment figures disappointed with Christian politics of charity, has been powerfully examined in recent criti-

cal discussions of the rise of humanitarianism and the ideology of “humanitarian space.”¹³ While scholars raise questions about the exclusionary politics of humanitarian practices (now predicated on the “empire” of neoliberalism), many of my Princeton students, disillusioned by modern politics and hungering for moral clarity, see such direct action as the last best hope to make bearable an unbearable world. Hearing their voices has led me to that curious and fraught last figure in my title. The story of the Good Samaritan is often heralded as a defining moment in the universalism of Christian charity, an exemplar of humanitarian concern for the suffering of strangers. Augustine’s influential reading of the parable helped to develop its reception in this egalitarian direction.

But much of modern politics (and theology) subsumes benevolence under the rubric of justice, or considers it only a second-best response to injustice. Justice is seen as the primary virtue of politics lest we fall prey to libertarian or conservative attacks on the welfare state. After Kant and Nietzsche, moreover, charity is seen by many as a semblance of political virtue that obscures the demands of justice. It is hard to read about the sociology of compassion without tripping over references to “the will to power,” “class control,” and “disciplining technologies.” If you google “humanitarianism,” for example, you immediately find titles like *The Dark Sides of Virtue* or *Humanitarianism in Question*.¹⁴ Tracing links between humanitarianism and colonialism has been a major preoccupation of historians, yielding a consensus that movements like the abolition of slavery were motivated by far more than the morality of compassion.¹⁵ Charles Taylor has argued that the moral demandingness of modern politics can itself be traced to secular transformations of the parable. In his long story about our new moral order and the pressures of time, Taylor expresses a Weberian lament about the nature and character of these demands that form their own guilty political subjects and missionary agendas. He argues that modern ethics and politics have distorted the message of the Good Samaritan by reducing its prescriptions to a rigorous code in an immanent frame. For him, the parable must be understood as an event, a fleshly act of love in time that participates in the life of God.

Augustinians have their own resources to support each of these suspicions. Christian charity, funded by Augustine’s emphasis on love as the form of worshipping God, has fostered compelling commitments to the equal dignity of persons and the creation of democratic institutions that manifest this commitment in ways that do not rely solely on a good will.

It also has a shadow side, rendering victims of injustice merely as objects of suffering. Far from an expression of cosmopolitan solidarity, humanitarianism can become the mask worn by the powerful, the supposed virtue confessed by the paternalist and the realist.¹⁶

So humanitarianism is as contested as democracy and Augustinianism. Some humanitarians link their actions to broader political commitments to development; others resist such linkage in the name of charity and the distinct identity of victims. These debates, however, reveal more than they sometimes admit in their discussions of moral obligation and the legacy of Christian charity. They raise fundamental questions about how to interpret the character of life in our world as such (including judgments about history). For example, anthropologist Peter Redfield's work in comparing Albert Schweitzer's medical mission, the Red Cross, and Médecins Sans Frontières highlights the subtle yet profound religious difference in modern humanitarianism that finds "moral certainty in alleviating anguish and protecting life" and a "distinctly material project of salvation."¹⁷ Redfield prefers to characterize this project as a reoccupation of the religious rather than its transposition, though others argue that humanitarian practices are best understood as a secular theodicy, accenting terms of "spiritual awakening" and "vocation" now in the face of constant emergency.¹⁸

Conclusion

Henry Kissinger once quipped that the secret of success in life is low expectations, something psychologists have labeled "defensive pessimism," a strategy of damage control to manage anxiety and despair. Things can always get worse, but they are always better than we deserve. In politics, as in the rest of life, there are no good choices, only lesser evils, full of sacrifice: not just in places like Syria and Afghanistan, but everywhere, anytime. Such bleakness is taken to be Augustine's tonic for a world that hopes too much from politics.

Peter Kaufman recently has reminded us of the political implications of how bad Augustine thought the bad news of Genesis and the tumult of North Africa really was. For all the apparent success we might have in struggling against the darkness, political action "amounts to little more than damage control in dystopia."¹⁹ The *City of God*, Kaufman tells us, is Augustine's "disorienting device for those who [grow] too comfortable with

time.”²⁰ Augustine was “convinced that Christianity could not redeem terrestrial cities. Life in time was a Gulag or—in current coin—a Gitmo, a detention camp.”²¹ Time is anything but comfortable.

All politics involves loss, even the most liberal thinkers admit to us, either because the goods of life are themselves in conflict, or as Augustine might have it, because the most fundamental battles are problems internal to the will. Augustine’s moderation does offer a cautious wisdom about politics, perhaps not too dissimilar from Rawlsian meditations on realistic utopia. But Augustine’s metaphors for politics are pastoral and medicinal, rather than technocratic or economic, requiring delicate and discerning practical skills, calling into question the confident psychologies that support many of today’s moral and political theories, including both humanitarians *and* their critics. Kaufman’s challenge to Augustinian liberals is formidable, posing the most difficult questions for those trying to imagine a different Augustine for our time. Differences may arise not simply from interpreting the historical Augustine, but from assessing the needs of our age. We might need to transcend some Augustinian lessons we have learned too well, including the fear of demanding too much from our politics and ourselves. Augustine’s allegorical, even parabolic, reading of history resists closure and resignation. Even-tempered aspirations should not be trapped in a God-forsaken time that is only a race to death, loitering on the stage of a Samuel Beckett play.

Never demoralized, Augustine sought to provide for a confused, disillusioned, and anxious culture something to live for, rather than simply stand against. There is no certain knowledge, and constant recognition of limits, but can the exercise of political virtues—responsive to true human goods—be a part of the life of piety, even proleptically referred to those virtues perfected in heaven? Augustine’s vision of participation in excellence complicates his received dualisms because being for the good involves being for particular goods, even if our virtues are fragmented, frail, and partial, always resisting our integrative efforts. Given a God who suffers time with us, the perfecting of virtue requires such time. On my reading, Augustine’s heavenly city cannot erase time’s virtues. They are consummated, but not consumed.

Salvation may not be internal to history, but it is also not thoroughly external: “Time stands as both the wound of existence and as the salve necessary for healing this wound.”²² I have not offered a theology of history,

let alone prophecy, but I think more reflection in this direction might relieve possible tensions between anti-Pelagian doubts about politics and their hyper-Augustinian refusal. It might also allow for a deeper recognition of the plurality of moral excellences nurtured in the graced time that is political history.

Theological interpretation of political history, in a world with real detention camps, is always in danger of self-deception and excess. Augustinians, at their best, remain critics of empires and nationalisms (especially ones that lay claim to democratic virtue). But I have suggested a political Augustinianism that wants to be more than a counsel against idolatry risks saying something about the mysterious and hidden ways of God, even in political action. Some still need to be reminded of Augustinian limits and the enigmas of temporal life. But in a world that has largely abandoned any hopes for redemption (in this life or the next), articulating the possibility of redemptive agency in the world strikes me as urgent. Such a political theology might offer more than critique, even for those who long for another city after time.

Notes

1. Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 1.

2. Pantelis Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology* (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2012), 138.

3. Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2010), 82. Bretherton argues that Augustinian (and Pauline) eschatology aims to avoid a triumphalism that is “marked by an expectation of progress until the church overcomes the world” and a separatism “wherein history is oriented by regress or movement away from God.”

4. Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 82.

5. Oliver O’Donovan, “Response to Gerrit de Kruijf,” in *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically: A Dialogue with Oliver O’Donovan*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Jonathan Chaplin, Robert Song, and Al Wolters (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), 239.

6. O’Donovan, “Response,” 146. For a more explicit discussion of O’Donovan on politics and salvation history, see Eric Gregory, “The Boldness of Analogy: Civic Virtues and Augustinian Eudaimonism,” in *The Authority of*

the Gospel: Explorations in Moral and Political Theology in Honour of Oliver O'Donovan, ed. Brent Waters and Robert Song (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

7. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 104.

8. James O'Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 125.

9. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 19.12.

10. Augustine, *City of God* 19.17.

11. Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*, 122.

12. Billie Holiday, *Strange Fruit*, by Abel Meeropol. In *The Best of Billie Holiday: 20th Century Masters*. Hip-O 589995. CD. 2002. Recorded 1939.

13. See, for example, Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

14. David Kennedy, *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) and *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, and Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008).

15. See, for example, David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966). According to Davis, "Antislavery was a highly selective response to labor exploitation. It provided an outlet for demonstrating Christian concern for human suffering and injustice, and yet thereby gave a certain moral insulation to economic activities less visibly dependent on human suffering and injustice" (251).

16. On welfare and pity, see Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998). For an elegant, and exceptional, defense of state welfare provisions based on the parable of the Good Samaritan, see Jeremy Waldron, "Welfare and Images of Charity," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 36, no. 415 (October 1986): 463–82.

17. Peter Redfield, "Secular Humanitarianism and the Value of Life," in *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age*, ed. Courtney Bender and Ann Taves (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 144–78, here 148 and 169.

18. On the spirituality of secular humanitarianism, see Stephen Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

19. Peter Iver Kaufman, "Augustine's Dystopia," in *Augustine's City of God: A Critical Guide*, ed. James Wetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 55–74, here 57.

20. Peter Iver Kaufman, "Christian Realism and Augustinian (?) Liberalism," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38, no. 4 (December 2010): 699–724, here 719.
21. Kaufman, "Augustine's Dystopia," 55–56.
22. Richard Avramenko, "The Wound and Salve of Time: Augustine's Politics of Human Happiness," *The Review of Metaphysics* 60, no. 4 (June 2007): 779–811, here 784.