

Article

## The Justice Game: Augustine, Disordered Loves, and the Temptation to Change the World

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**Abstract:** Augustine’s thought on justice offers enduring wisdom to today’s undergraduates as they grapple with the difficult questions that arise when they ponder what it means to change the world in the light of the reality of injustice in this world. By juxtaposing Augustine’s theological writings on the nature of justice and power within the earthly and heavenly cities with Augustine’s letters that demonstrate his public engagement with injustice, we learn how Augustine thought about justice and how his convictions intersected with his practice. Through exposure to Augustine’s life and thought, students can be encouraged to wrestle with the existence of injustice, their complicity in its existence, their understanding of justice, and what it takes to seek justice today.

**Keywords:** Augustine; justice; teaching

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### 1. Introduction

Not long ago, while I was still teaching at Hope College, I met with three college students in my office on the same day, all of whom articulated that they felt called to move to Africa. Each of these students had a longing to help those who did not have the same access to clean water, health care, and supportive parents that these students had had their whole lives. Each student wanted to do what she could to change the world. Each understood this as a way of seeking justice. Meeting with these three young, sweet, female Midwestern students back to back to back as they named this fairly dramatic desire to move across the world to, in their minds, pursue justice and help change the world, was striking.

I used my better judgment and refrained from handing to any of these students my copy of *City of God* or an excerpt from *The Trinity*. Yet, as our students think deeply about the brokenness of this world, as they become aware of its injustices, as they seek to understand where their deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger (as Frederick Buechner eloquently describes vocation [1]), Augustine can and ought to be one of their guides. But how are they to call upon him of whom they have not heard? How are they to hear without someone to teach him? We cannot assume that undergraduates will encounter the enduring wisdom of Augustine before they graduate, but if given the opportunity, we ought to do our best to bring the richness of Augustine's thinking before their eyes. With a body of writing as large as Augustine's, we could tap any of a number of veins and invite our students to wrestle with the insights that flow forth. Here, I invite us to focus on Augustine's thoughts on justice as a way to encourage our students to grapple with the difficult questions that arise as they face the reality of injustice and ponder what it means to change the world.

## 2. Augustine the Idealizer

Let us turn more directly to Augustine to assess the claim that Augustine has lasting wisdom to offer today's undergraduates as they seek justice in this world and navigate the temptation to save the world. I offer as a starting place one of my favorite passages from Augustine's corpus, found in *The Trinity*:

The essential flaw of the devil's perversion made him a lover of power and a deserter and assailant of justice, which means that men imitate him all the more thoroughly the more they neglect or even detest justice and studiously devote themselves to power, rejoicing at the possession of it or inflamed with the desire for it. So it pleased God to deliver man from the devil's authority by beating him at the justice game, not the power game, so that men too might imitate Christ by seeking to beat the devil at the justice game, not the power game. Not that power is to be shunned as something bad, but that the right order might be preserved which puts justice first [2].

According to Augustine, both justice and power are God-given goods. Power becomes corrupt when it becomes an end in itself rather than being referred to the higher good of justice [3]. In reflecting on the devil, Augustine notes that his fundamental mistake was placing love of power over love of justice. He desired to play the power game rather than the justice game. Jesus Christ did just the opposite, using his power to prioritize justice. In so doing, he beat the devil at the justice game and freed humanity from the devil's power. In following Jesus, humans are called to imitate Christ by loving justice more than power, by using their God-given power in Christ to play the justice game rather than the power game.

How might a person acquire this love of justice? Here is the potential catch, one that I have been pondering since writing upon these themes in my first book, an exploration of Augustine and contemporary political theory [4]. Within Augustine's framework, love of justice can be acquired *only* in and through the redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ. In his theoretical writings, Augustine maintains that the only society that can be described as just is the one that recognizes Christ as its King, namely the Heavenly City, because outside of Christ citizens' loves are so disordered that they are not able to place justice

over power. On their own, apart from grace, they cannot resist the ensnarement of the lust for domination and love of self that mark sinful humanity, which means they are not able to love rightly or act justly. Does this mean that there is no hope for justice in the earthly city? Does this mean that my three undergraduates who want to move to Africa for the sake of justice need a shocking shower of Augustinian realism to wash away their theologically-naïve desire to make a difference here and now?

Let us begin to answer these questions by diving more deeply into the theological convictions that lead Augustine to the dramatic conclusion that no justice is to be found in the earthly city and its citizens. In *De Trinitate*, Augustine describes redemption in terms of humility, justice, and power. By divine justice, God allowed humans to be handed over to the power of the devil for the sin of the first humans. God would in due course overcome the devil not by God's power but by God's justice. This was not because God lacks power but because God prefers justice to power. Jesus Christ chose to shed his innocent blood for the sake of those who were guilty; he chose the "justice of humility" even though, through the "power of divinity", he could have avoided this humiliation. In his innocent death, we see justice, and in his resurrection and ascension, we see power [5]. This justice and this power are offered to humanity through Christ, for "by the death of one so powerful we powerless mortals have justice set before us and power promised us" ([5], XIII, 18).

This understanding of justice and power in relation to Christ's redemptive work is intricately connected to Augustine's understanding of order. God's original divine order was one of perfect justice. In this "right order", higher goods are to be preferred to lower goods and all goods are to be enjoyed for the sake of God. But what happens when goods are used for the wrong ends? What is the result when goods are unfaithfully prioritized? Injustice. If any lower good is placed over a higher good, if power, for example, is placed over peace, or love of self over love of God, then the divine order is disrupted and justice is not upheld ([6], XIX, 13). Because Augustine's definition of justice is so deeply tied to right order, true justice is not possible outside of Jesus Christ who reordered all that had become disordered after the fall of humanity. When humans initially chose a lower good to the greatest, unchanging good of God, their loves became so disordered that they needed a fundamental re-ordering. This is what necessitated the justification offered in and through Jesus Christ, for it is only in and through Christ that a fallen people's disordered loves and priorities can be re-ordered. In Augustine's theological framework, only through the transforming power of Jesus' reconciling love can humanity's lust for power be subsumed under a love of justice.

For Augustine, this theological understanding of justice impacts not only individual pursuit of justice but also our collective pursuit of justice in the earthly city. As Augustine writes, "if a soul does not serve God it cannot with any kind of justice command the body, nor can a man's reason control the vicious elements in the soul. And if there is no justice in such a man, there can be no sort of doubt that there is no justice in a gathering which consists of such men" ([6], XIX, 21). This means justice can only be found in a "gathering" whose citizens have had their disordered loves transformed so that by the grace of God in Christ they are united in their rightly ordered love of God and neighbor [7].

To put this differently, only the City of God is capable of true justice [8]. Robert Dodaro explores this when he writes, "Augustine maintains that justice cannot be known except in Christ, and that, as founder (*conditor*) and ruler (*rector*), Christ forms the just society in himself. United with Christ, members of his body constitute the whole, just Christ (*Christus totus iustus*), which is the city of God, the true commonwealth, and the locus for the revelation of justice" [9]. This, in turn, is what leads

Augustine to famously critique Cicero's definition of a commonwealth as "the weal of the people" in which the people are "an association of men united by a common sense of right". How can there be a common sense of right when people's loves are wrongly ordered? How can the disordered loves of fallen people lead to a political society that is marked by anything but disorder and injustice? Augustine argues that, "where there is no justice there is no commonwealth" ([6], XIX, 21).

Augustine explores similar themes in *De Trinitate*, using there the language of good will with an extended play on the word "power". Justice, he writes, is a property of good will, and people can only have good will if they are cleansed of their faults. Otherwise they will be overpowered by their faults, and they will "will" badly. Augustine, seemingly wryly, notes that people "hardly ever want to be powerful in order to overpower" their own faults or their bad will; instead they seek power in order to overpower others. In a surprise twist, Augustine encourages people to seek power—but only if their desire is to seek power from Jesus Christ to overpower their faults, so that they might have good will. Once they have this good will restored through Christ, they will be able to be entrusted with power that serves justice rather than power that overpowers justice ([5], XIII, 17–18).

After his critique of Cicero's definition of a commonwealth, Augustine provides an alternative definition of a people as those united by "a common agreement about the objects of its love" ([6], XIX, 24). Although they lack justice, they do not lack love, for even disordered people have things they love and can come to some collective agreement about those loves. Augustine offers love of peace as a love that can be found within every city, even in those cities that are at war. Those who go to war ultimately long for victory and peace, so although it might be a twisted notion of peace, it can be considered a common object of love ([6], XIX, 11). Interestingly, the enjoyment of earthly peace can even be understood as a gift from God to be enjoyed as a God-given good [10].

I write "interestingly" here because I find this to be the site of a fascinating component of Augustine's thought. Augustine has a category for "earthly peace" that he does not have for justice. When it comes to justice, if we are to be consistent with his stated theological framework, true justice lies in the city that has Jesus as its ruler and nowhere else. With peace, he makes a different move. He differentiates true peace from earthly peace, but nevertheless has a place for both of them, and in fact an important place. When Augustine thinks about true peace, he believes that it would be marked by justice and equality under God's rule. When the power game leads fallen humanity to prioritize the peace of pride, the aim is no longer justice and equality but the assertion of will and dominion over others ([6], XIX, 12). This means that earthly cities can only possibly attain earthly peace, a limited peace, a compromise between competing human wills. True peace, heavenly peace, like justice, arises from "the perfectly ordered and harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God, and of each other in God" ([6], XIX, 17). Augustine writes that the peace of the earthly city does not compare to that of the Heavenly City, "which is so truly peaceful that it should be regarded as the only peace deserving the name" ([6], XIX, 17).

With lines like these, you think he might be leading you down the "no earthly peace like there is no earthly justice" route—but he stops short of that. On the contrary, he acknowledges the importance of the role of peace in the earthly city. He views it as a good that ought to be pursued by pilgrim and earthly citizen alike. Not so for justice. He does not distinguish between heavenly justice and earthly justice and then offer the pursuit of justice in this earthly city as a good. His convictions about the need for our loves to be reordered for justice to be realized seem to prevent him from making this move. Yet

he has acknowledged that peace is the Supreme Good of the Heavenly City; he writes that justice is to be related to the ultimate good of peace; he submits that justice is to be maintained so that peace can be attained. Overall, Augustine argues that the Supreme Good of peace has a counterpart in this earthly city but not the slightly lower good of justice. What does this mean for our pursuits and our hopes for this earthly city? What does this mean for our students who want to give their lives to seeking justice?

Despite his rhetoric here related to justice, I have never seen anyone in writing suggest that Augustine does not care about justice even in the earthly city—although some, like Peter Kaufman, are skeptical of how much can be realized. Even those who strongly put forward the argument that in Augustine’s thought only Christ establishes the just society (Robert Dodaro), and only the Heavenly City is truly public and truly just (Rowan Williams), do not go on to suggest that Augustine gave up any and all hope for justice here and now [11]. In the estimation of Dodaro and Williams, the ideal just society sets the standard for the earthly city and can therefore provide a heuristic device for assessing the earthly city. The ideal may be unreachable, but it allows for the possibility of hope and critique in the earthly city today. Importantly, then, in this understanding, the ideal Heavenly City is held up not to condemn what is happening in the earthly city but to enable critique of the *status quo*. The picture it offers of justice provides the aspiration, the longing for more justice in this earthly city. It is an eschatological hope that impacts one’s hopes for and action in the present.

As I read him, while offering a lens for critique and a vision for the present, Augustine’s understanding of the eschatological realization of justice and peace tempers Augustine’s convictions about our ability to change the world ([12], p. 102). The Heavenly City and its justice and peace cannot be realized in the *saeculum*, despite our best efforts. Our loves are too disordered. Our desire to play the power game rather than the justice game is too strong. It cannot be fully checked by human will or even the intentional creation of structures of checks and balances. In Augustine’s estimation, political structures do have an important God-given role to play within a fallen, power-hungry world. But as we engage the world, Augustine reminds us not to place false hopes in what can be accomplished. This represents one of Augustine’s significant contributions in his day, as it allowed him to have some critical distance from the political powers and empires [13]. It prevented him from naively believing that an ideal society can be created by human hands or from dangerously acting as if the city of God can be ushered in by human effort. At the same time, his vision of true justice and peace within the Heavenly City gave him a lens through which he could critique present realities.

When it comes to peace, Augustine is more explicit about the role it plays: citizens of the Heavenly City, while here on earth in the *saeculum*, instead of trying to force the eschatological peace of the Heavenly City, can and should enjoy the earthly peace of the earthly city as a good from God, they should view it as a good suitable to the temporal life and a good they seek to foster, even as they recognize that it is not the highest good for which they hope. When it comes to justice, he does not provide such explicit guidance in *City of God*, as the close connections between justice, the right, and properly ordered loves prevent him from using the term “justice” for what can be sought in the political realm. That being said, when we look at his non-theoretical writings, his correspondence with ecclesial authorities, political authorities, friends, and others reveals more of Augustine’s “everyday political thinking” and action ([11], p. xi).

A look at Augustine’s life “on the ground” as revealed in his letters can be considered an exploration of Augustine as “an inspired subverter of his own idealizations”, as James Wetzel puts it [14]. Wetzel

views Augustine as both an idealizer and a subverter of those very idealizations he has named, so that we can find in his writings the “ideal type” and places where he pushes beyond the scope or the potential limitations of that ideal. So in Augustine, we see a heavenly city where justice reigns and, as Wetzel puts it, “an earthly city that is divisiveness itself. This is all idealization” ([14], p. 12). Wetzel pushes this idealization by exploring Augustine the subverter, calling this “the more gratifying, and also the more vexing, labor” ([14], p. 10).

When it comes to the topic at hand, Wetzel is concerned that eschatology, while essential to Christian theology, is a “form of idealization” and that at times we see in Augustine “an overheated eschatology” ([14], pp. 21–22). Wetzel in turn worries about those who put too much weight on Augustine’s eschatology. So, of Robert Dodaro, who places considerable emphasis on Augustine’s eschatology in his exploration of the just society, Wetzel writes, in characteristic style, “Bob is the sanest eschatologist I know. But...” ([14], p. 21). For Wetzel, the “but” has to do with the concern that Augustine’s eschatology, taken on its own, overlooks “material difference” and that other areas of Augustine’s thought honor more fully the material context in which we live.

A brief look at two of Augustine’s letters will help us explore how his eschatological and theological convictions framed and shaped his hopes and actions in the material earthly city in which he lived. By holding “Augustine the idealizer” together with “Augustine the subverter”, we get a more complete picture of Augustine’s theology in relation to justice (I would suggest that whenever teaching Augustine, it is exceptionally fruitful for students to read a letter or sermon alongside his more theoretical writings to get a more nuanced picture of who Augustine is).

### **3. Augustine the Subverter**

So having looked at Augustine the idealizer through his theoretical writings on justice and the City of God, let us now look at Augustine the subverter through his letters. Reading even just two of Augustine’s letters, “Augustine to Alypius” and “Augustine to Macedonius”, suggests the extent of his public engagement; he certainly lives as someone who believes his involvement can make a difference in what we from the outside would call just outcomes. To take the example of slavery, all the valid concerns about Augustine’s acceptance of slavery as an inescapable institution in this fallen world notwithstanding, from his correspondence with his dear friend and fellow bishop Alypius we see a man horrified by the injustices associated with the actual practice of slavery in his day [15]. We see a bishop motivated by his sense of right to take action against this corruption in his town of Hippo and to write this letter to encourage action against this corruption in other areas along the coast of northern Africa. We see his church regularly involved in freeing slaves, crying over the stories of abduction and kidnapping that led to their enslavement, caring for those who were rescued, and having a reputation for these acts of mercy. We see Augustine appealing to a law written under a previous emperor to check the corruption of the slave trade as a useful help and possible remedy, sending this law to Alypius for his use, clearly having both experienced its effectiveness and having hopes for it to have an impact on limiting injustice. At the same time, we see Augustine reluctant to use and share this law because of how harshly it calls for the merchants of slaves to be punished, noting that they are using the law only to free slaves and not to punish those guilty of wrongfully enslaving them. This is characteristic of Augustine’s counsel to those with authority to judge and punish, as he consistently

encourages Christians with that power to be as merciful and forgiving as they can be, remembering how much mercy and forgiveness they have received in Christ.

Noticeably, in describing his efforts in relation to slavery and appealing to his Christian brother to take up the same level of advocacy, Augustine never uses the word justice. In another letter, one that is part of his correspondence with Macedonius, the vicar of Africa who had responsibility for the legal administration of the civil diocese then known as Africa, we do find him using language of justice in relation to the earthly city. The need for the letter arose when Macedonius questioned the practice of Augustine and other ecclesial authorities at that time to intercede on behalf of guilty criminals. The practice was to appeal to political authorities to prevent criminals, even those known to be guilty, from receiving severe punishment or in some cases from receiving any punishment [16]. Augustine looks to Jesus' intercession on behalf of the woman caught in adultery, in which she is spared the punishment of stoning, as the basis for this priestly duty.

Towards the end of the letter, Augustine begins to address what to do if corruption and bribery swayed a legal decision. Here he draws on language of justice to describe what ought to be done: "If we are honestly to serve justice, we will say to the advocate: 'Return what you have received when you appeared against the truth and on the side of injustice. You deceived the judge, you opposed the just cause, you won your case through lies.'" ([16], section 25). This is one of the rare instances in which Augustine uses language of justice without qualification to refer to the earthly city, implying that it is possible for some kind of justice to be served in that realm.

Very shortly after this, however, he returns to his eschatological perspective on justice. He goes on to write that holding possessions lawfully implies holding them justly, and holding them justly implies holding them well, and almost no one in our earthly city holds possessions well because this would mean despising their own property and their money—"the less they love it, the more rightly they possess it"—which is not possible outside of the reordering we need in Christ. He casts an eschatological vision in which only the just are gathered, in which the citizens of the Heavenly City rightly own all that has been given to them. Importantly, though, between now and the final fulfillment of the Heavenly City, Augustine acknowledges an important place for civil laws to guide the use of possessions. While technically, in Augustine's understanding, all of those whose loves have not been reordered hold their possessions wrongly and therefore unjustly, this injustice is tolerated in the earthly city. Legally this takes shape in civil laws that are intended not "to make them use possessions rightly, but rather to make them less oppressive in misusing them" ([16], section 26). Here is an instance in which we can see very clearly the dynamic role that an eschatological vision of justice can play in the earthly city. Augustine initially seems to offer this reflection on "possessing rightly" as a way of pushing back on the possibility of full justice in this earthly city. What happens ultimately, however, is that his understanding of what will happen in the Heavenly City—when all will use what they have been given rightly (rather than selfishly and oppressively)—informs his sense of what the civil law ought to and can accomplish in this age—namely being less oppressive. In short, his vision of justice in the Heavenly City shapes his hopes for justice in the earthly city.

Of course one could raise the question, as many have, why Augustine's vision for justice is not more ambitious, more wide-ranging, more structural. While lots of ink has been spilled to address this question, particularly in relation to slavery, it is important to remember one other component of Augustine's thought in relation to justice in this earthly city. Augustine was, perhaps surprisingly,

hopeful about what Christian rulers would be able to accomplish in the earthly city, at least in his idealizing side. Because Christian rulers would have had their loves reordered in Christ, they alone had the capacity to place justice over power, to place love for God over lust for domination, to remember that even “the loftiest summit of power... is nothing but a passing mist” [17]. A Christian ruler could, in short and in theory, rule with justice [18]. This conviction is more significant than it might seem to our contemporary ears for, as Dodaro suggests, Augustine follows Cicero in “focusing the concept of the just society on the role of its leaders in establishing justice” [19]. If it is true that Augustine follows Cicero in believing that justice in a society comes through just rulers, then we can understand the consistency of his argument related to the importance of Christian rulers and even interpret it as a sign of hopefulness. A form of justice could be possible in this earthly city. The ideal statesman found in Christ, the just King of the Heavenly City, could inspire and enlarge the imaginations of rulers for justice in the earthly city [20].

What Augustine’s theological vision could mean for the earthly city today lies somewhere in between the two extremes of completely abandoning the earthly city and looking to the earthly city to achieve utopian-like harmony, justice, and peace. Augustine is clear that citizens of the Heavenly City share in the goods of the earthly city, making use of its earthly peace and helping to defend and sustain the limited harmony that is possible in the earthly city, “a kind of compromise between human wills about things relevant to mortal life” ([7], XIX, 17). Augustine’s understanding of justice, in particular, as an eschatological reality does not prevent him from working towards a form of what we would call justice in this earthly city, nor from finding in the tension between what he hopes for in the age to come and what he sees in the here and now, aspirations for just outcomes. The earthly city can, then, achieve limited goods, limited justice, even if not the greatest goods or the full justice for which humankind was created and which it will experience in full in the City of God.

#### 4. Conclusions

To bring this back to our three students who are motivated by a desire to seek justice, how does this exploration of Augustine the idealizer and Augustine the subverter help them? As a starting place, my hope would be that the idealizing side of Augustine on justice would push them to do some considerable grappling with why injustice exists in the first place. I hope it might help them to articulate their own convictions about what justice, wholeness, and flourishing look like—for each person and for a society, and to consider what it takes to get from present reality to that vision. I likewise hope that they will consider how they are complicit in the existence of injustice, rather than viewing it as a problem “over there”, outside of themselves, outside of their own practices and culture.

Augustine the idealizer could also help bring to light for these students the significant role of structures and institutions in any effort to seek justice, as they brush up against the seamlessness with which Augustine moves between individual disordered loves and the societies made up of such individuals. As James Davison Hunter has recently argued so powerfully in his book *To Change the World*, loving the hearts, minds, and (I would add) bodies of individuals is the default approach that many take today, but we have to also acknowledge the collective societies in which these individuals live and the structural realities that either promote or inhibit the flourishing of those hearts, minds, and bodies [21]. Further, I hope that Augustine’s sense that things are much more disordered and unjust in

the earthly city than we might think combined with his conviction that it is not up to humanity to overcome that disorder and injustice will lift the weight off their shoulders that comes from thinking they have to change the world—and prevent the burn-out that almost inevitably comes down the road when they realize they can't change the world despite their best efforts and initial passions (preventing this kind of burn-out is one of the motivations behind my forthcoming book on justice [22]).

At the same time I hope that this realization will not squash all of their desire to be responsible with what they have been given. May Augustine the subverter motivate them to look for ways to engage people, institutions, and structures right where they are, to recognize, as George Eliot shows us in a very different way through her novel *Middlemarch*, that we do not all have to be celebrated saints like Teresa of Avila to love others and impact our communities right where God has placed us [23]. May Augustine prompt them to seek the grace of God in Christ that in all that they do they might prioritize the justice game over the power game, that they would be faithful, responsible, and as Peter Kaufman reminds us so eloquently in his contribution, humble with the power that has been entrusted to them—not avoiding power as inherently evil but using it for the greater good of justice.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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3. So Augustine can write of the “power of humility” in *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972, I, Preface.
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5. For “what could be a greater show of power than to rise from the dead and ascend into heaven with the very flesh in which he had been killed? So he overcame the devil with justice first and power second, with justice because *he had no sin* (2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pt 2:22) and was most unjustly killed by him; with power because dead he came back to life never to die thereafter.” Augustine. *The Trinity*, XIII, 18; emphasis in original.
6. Augustine. *City of God* XIX, 13.
7. “It follows that justice is found where God, the one supreme God, rules an obedient City according to His grace, forbidding sacrifice to any being save himself alone; and where in consequence the soul rules the body in all men who belong to this City and obey God, and the reason faithfully rules the

vices in a lawful system of subordination; so that just as the individual righteous man lives on the basis of faith which is active in love, so the association, or people, of righteous men lives on the same basis of faith, active in love, the love with which a man loves God as God ought to be loved, and loves his neighbour as himself.” Augustine. *City of God* XIX, 23.

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17. Augustine. *City of God* V, 26 (drawing on James 4:14).
18. Augustine. *City of God* V, 24.
19. Dodaro raises this point to help explain why Augustine contrasts Cicero’s ideal statesman with Christ as the truly ideal statesman who alone can establish the truly just society. See ([9], p. 2).
20. This does not mean that historically they usually do or did—but merely that it is possible!
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