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Adrienne M. LaFrance  
*Roger Williams University*

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## Obligatory Service Is Not Service

Adrienne M. LaFrance, Department of Modern Languages and Classics: Classics/French '08

Augustine of Hippo (known in contemporary times as Saint Augustine), one of the four founders of the Christian church, wrote of service in his *Confessions*: “Nemo enim invitus bene facit, etiamsi bonum est quod facit” (XII.XIX.109). Augustine says, “For indeed no one does well unwillingly, even if that which he does is good.” To be compelled begrudgingly towards service is to take from that act its goodness; a truth that a man expounding his love of his own service to God was able to discern. Service required is not service at all. This logic has led me to the consideration that our forefathers would debate against service requirements in higher education like those we have at Roger Williams University.

The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary offers as a definition of service: “contribution to the welfare of others.” Construed in this sense, service is simply an action devoid of any meaning beyond that action. As a primarily Christian society—more specifically here in New England, a traditionally puritanical one—is there not a sense of something more behind the act of true service? Mustn’t we fulfill a service because to serve another is right? The question hearkens to Socrates’ arguments in Plato’s *Euthyphro*, widely read by students in our own Core Literature and Philosophy classes, in which Socrates asks the young *Euthyphro*, “The point which I should first wish to understand is whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods?” (Jowett). Do we do service because it is in fact good or because we are told it is good (and therefore may simply be compelled to perform such an action)? And if we do service because we are told it is good, and if we are compelled to do good only because someone else deems us good as a result, and we selfishly seek only their praise—is that service still pious, holy, and purely good? If we secretly seek the praise of others in our good deeds, then those deeds are no longer good and shall not be rewarded, for “we should conclude that except for such rewards we have no obligation to serve... and service of that kind would prove us... greedy and covetous” (Augustine, *City* I.VIII.33-8).

Augustine writes of piety in his momentous and vast work *The City of God*. On the topic of victims who are subject to the sins of others during the sack of Rome, Augustine notes that a sin committed in the presence of the pious, or even *upon* the pious (as in the case of rape), the victim, if s/he always kept from his or her own mind irreverence and did not secretly enjoy the sin, is still considered good and shameless (I.VIII). For we do not indeed think that the chaste woman, having been ravished, is any less chaste. We can turn this same argument around and say that if one, in place of shirking from the mind the immoral as in Augustine’s example, keeps in mind the moral—that person is good and dutiful. Just as if one feels the slightest joy in some sin, or if one feels some selfish gain in a good act, then that act is sullied and is no longer good. On this Augustine rightly suggests, “restrain us from too eager pursuit of goods such as we enjoyed also by the wicked” (*City*, I.VIII.18-22).

Service is not just helping another person in an hour of need, but rather it is helping another in any hour, ignoring our own selfish gains from taking up the act. In this sense, therefore, service cannot by meaning be compulsory. This is not to say that I denounce the university’s efforts towards service. It is commendable to inform students about opportunities to serve and to educate students about service, an instance seen weekly in school e-mail inboxes with the Feinstein Service Learning “Service Opps” newsletter. It is merely that *obligatory* service is not service at all. Socrates and Plato, who, at RWU, serve as our models of an examined life—devoid even as they are of religious arguments—demonstrate, as does Augustine, a universal, nondenominational point regarding service. For after all, Augustine was at one time a pagan but still writes, “They fear to jeopardize or lose... their own safety of reputation... because of the weakness that is pleased by a flattering tongue and the favor of men... they serve certain bonds of selfishness, not the ties of love” (I.IX.71-9).

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