

16

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Augustine's political philosophy

The topic of Augustine's political philosophy must be approached with care.¹ Augustine never devoted a book or a treatise to the central questions of what we now call "political philosophy." Unlike Aristotle, he did not attempt serially to address them and to draw out the institutional implications of his answers. Unlike Thomas Hobbes, he did not elaborate a philosophical theory of politics, if by that is meant a synoptic treatment of those central questions which relies on theoretical devices contrived for the purpose. Discussions of politics can be found in a number of Augustine's writings, but these are generally conducted in service of conclusions which neither we nor he would regard as philosophical. Indeed it is questionable whether Augustine thought that political philosophy has a subject-matter which should be sharply distinguished from the subject-matters of other areas of philosophy or of political enquiry. His own treatments of political subjects draw heavily upon ethics, social theory, the philosophy of history, and, most importantly, psychology and theology. It is possible to recover a distinctive set of political views from Augustine's texts. That set constitutes not a political philosophy, but a loose-jointed and heavily theological body of political thought which Augustine himself never assembled. It does not fit comfortably into any one of the disciplinary categories now standardly associated with the study of politics.

Though Augustine did not draw his own political views together into a coherent whole, subsequent generations of readers have seen unity and power in his political thought. In the sixteen centuries since Augustine's death, the body of work he left behind has proven a perennially rewarding source for philosophers and theologians concerned with the nature and purposes of government, the relations between Church and state, the implications of religious and moral pluralism for political society, and the conditions of just war. Its importance for medieval political theory would be difficult to overstate. In the twentieth century, creative social thinkers as different as Reinhold Niebuhr, Alasdair MacIntyre, and John Milbank have returned to it with profit.² Unfortunately it is not possible to trace the gestation of that body of thought through Augustine's many

writings, to describe in any detail the classical and Christian political views on which it was nourished, or to discuss its subsequent influence. My primary aim is simply to sketch its profile as it appeared at maturity.

Love, the two cities, and the *saeculum*

The richest source of political material in Augustine's literary corpus is *De civitate Dei*, a book Augustine undertook to answer those who blamed the christianization of the Roman empire for the sack of Rome in 410. There he argues that despite the great diversity of human cultures, nations, and languages, the most fundamental cleavage in humanity is that between the two groups he calls the City of God and the Earthly City.³ It is significant that Augustine employs a concept which denotes a discrete political entity, a city, to describe these two groups. His use of it suggests, correctly, that he thinks the internal dynamics of the two groups are to be explained using the same concepts appropriate for explaining the behavior of more familiar political entities like Rome. It also suggests, misleadingly, that each of the two cities can be identified with one political society or another. To see why this is mistaken and to see how the motif of the two cities structures Augustine's political thought, it is necessary to begin with his psychology and the central place of theology within it.

According to Augustine, human beings are moved by what he calls their "loves." He uses this term to embrace a variety of attitudes toward things we possess, as well as a wide range of human appetites and aversions toward things we do not possess.⁴ These loves may be transient motives which explain isolated actions, engrained traits of character that motivate habitual action, or fundamental orientations of the person that unite her traits and unify her character. Two ways of loving are especially important for Augustine: what he calls "use," and "enjoyment." To enjoy something is to love it for its own sake; he contrasts this with regarding things as useful for securing something else.⁵ Something that is worthy of being loved entirely for its own sake is the sort of thing that is capable of conferring true happiness.⁶ Its secure possession brings about the quiescence of desire. Only God is worthy of being loved in this way and, as Augustine famously says to God in the first paragraph of his *Confessions*, "our hearts find no peace until they rest in you."⁷ On the other hand, no creature, whether animate or inanimate, ought to be loved entirely for its own sake; no created good can completely quiet the appetites and confer the happiness and peace that the enjoyment of God can bring.

Perfect justice, Augustine thinks, would consist in an enduring disposition to love objects, including God, according to their worth.⁸ Sin, the condition of humanity since the fall of Adam and Eve, is a turn away from God that causes psychological disarray. It introduces disorder into our loves so that we give

ourselves and the satisfaction of our own desires undue importance, a disorder Augustine associates with the sin of pride.⁹ Because of this prideful exaltation of self, the way we love things is at odds with what their nature merits.¹⁰ We are prone to enjoy objects which ought to be used and to use goods which ought to be enjoyed. We are also prone to seek happiness in the possession of things that cannot confer it, including pleasures of the flesh, transient glory, enduring reputation, and, especially, power over others. Despite the disordered loves that sin causes, Augustine thinks that we also retain some desire to do what we ought. This puts human beings at odds with themselves. It explains why Augustine was so impressed with St. Paul's famous lament "the good that I will to do I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I do."¹¹ As a consequence of our turn away from God, even the best human lives are beset by inner conflict¹² and conflicts with other people, conflicts evident in even the most intimate human relationships.¹³

In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine relies on this account of love to explain the origin of the two cities and their progress through time. The loves to which he appeals are not transient motives; they are fundamental orientations of the members of the two cities. The City of God consists of those who glory in God and love God rightly. Its members are unified by their common love of God, "a love," he says, "that rejoices in a common and immutable good: a love, that is, that makes 'one heart' out of many."¹⁴ The Earthly City, Augustine asserts, was created "by love of self extending even to contempt of God."¹⁵ It consists of those who exalt themselves and love dominion. Fractious though it is,¹⁶ it has a certain unity since its members look for glory, revel in the strength of their rulers and subjugate nations.¹⁷ Because each of the two cities includes all those who are alike in their deepest loves, it follows that the members of the cities are dispersed in time and space. Augustine traces the founding of the Earthly City to Cain, the son of Adam and Eve who is said by the scriptures to have killed his brother Abel and founded a city.¹⁸ The City of God, he says, includes the saints and the angels;¹⁹ only some of its citizens are in the world and they are spread throughout it. Augustine speaks evocatively of them as being "on pilgrimage" in this life. He spells out the implications of this poignant image using technical language he introduced in his discussion of love. Members of the City of God, he says, merely use the world while they are in it; they do not enjoy it.²⁰

Augustine sometimes speaks as though the City of God is the Church.²¹ His considered view, however, is that "many reprobate are mingled in the Church with the good. Both are, as it were, collected in the net of the Gospel; and in this world, as in a sea, both swim without separation, enclosed in the net until brought ashore."²² Thus members of the two cities exist side by side in the visible Church.²³ Every political society also includes citizens of each. Indeed Augustine is emphatic that before the coming of Christ members of the City of God were to be found even outside the society of Israel, as the example of Job makes

clear.²⁴ Therefore no visible society or institution can be identified with either the City of God or the Earthly City. The distinction between the two cities is an eschatological rather than a political one. It is a distinction between those who are and are not destined for eternal life with God, rather than one between those who are and are not members of a given society. The members of the two cities are intermingled in what Augustine calls the *saeculum*, the realm of temporal existence in which politics takes place.²⁵

In *De civitate Dei* Augustine seizes on the lust for domination which he says characterizes the Earthly City. There he poses a question which seems an obvious counterpoint to his remark in the *Confessions* that the human heart finds true rest only in God. "But, once established in the minds of the powerful, how," he asks, "can that lust for mastery rest until, by the usual succession of offices, it has reached the highest power?"²⁶ The answer, as we shall see, is the arrogant do not rest until they have achieved dominion. This restless love for power explains the sway of history's great empires and Rome's hegemony over Augustine's own world. Indeed love and conflict are central to Augustine's discussions of politics. Augustine's identification of a love which defines one of the cities with one of the driving forces in political history suggests that history unfolds as a result of a contest between the Earthly City and the City of God. In fact nothing could be further from Augustine's view than this facile dualism. Though people may differ in their most fundamental orientations, every human being has a divided will. Even those who are destined to spend eternity with God are to some extent responsible for the conflicts of temporal life. Even they therefore need the restraint that, as we shall see, Augustine thinks government exists to provide.

Slavery, government, and property

Augustine is relatively uninterested in a question about government that was of central concern to both Plato and Aristotle: Which form of government is best? In an early passage Augustine remarks perfunctorily that if a people are committed to the common good they ought to be allowed to choose their own rulers. He does not give the matter further consideration.²⁷ Again unlike Plato and Aristotle, Augustine is uninterested in the historical and social processes by which one regime – kingship, for example – is typically transformed into another. He is far more interested in how God's providence works through political history than he is in how that history depends upon the social forces characteristically set in play by one or another institutional form.

To see this, it is helpful to see exactly what questions his discussion of government is intended to answer. Augustine seems not to have had a clear concept of the state, understood as a society's governing political apparatus. Thus when he speaks of Rome, as he often does in *De civitate Dei*, he sometimes has in mind

the city of Rome, sometimes the Roman republic, sometimes the empire and sometimes the society of Roman citizens together with their traditions, laws, and mores, but never the set of institutions which collectively administered Rome's political affairs. Augustine's remarks about the origin and purposes of government are therefore not answers to questions about the origin or purposes of the state.

Crudely put, Augustine is interested not in a political institution, but in the rationale for a human relationship. He observes that some human beings have the authority to govern or, better, to control the actions of others by the use of coercion. This he regards as unnatural, at least outside the family. He then asks how such an authority relationship came to be and what ends it serves. His answer is that it exists only because human beings are sinful creatures who need to be humbled and restrained by force and the threat of force. This conclusion depends crucially upon the fact that Augustine does not distinguish clearly between a relationship which is specifically political and other relationships of authority and subjection, especially the relationship between a master and slaves.

The qualified assimilation of political subjection to slavery is the key to Augustine's views about the purposes of political authority and its origins in human sinfulness. His argument that slavery is unnatural and results from sin does not add significantly to views he inherited from the Patristic tradition. He enjoins masters to treat their slaves kindly and reiterates St. Paul's injunction that slaves should obey their masters. What is significant is Augustine's use of traditional ideas about slavery to explain government. Augustine says that human beings are naturally social. They have a common origin in Adam and because of this common origin they are naturally drawn together by bonds of sympathy and kinship.²⁸ Indeed he remarks that there is no species so naturally social as humanity.²⁹ Augustine also intimates that, had original sin not been committed, sinless human beings would have reproduced and multiplied to fill the earth.³⁰ Because of their natural sociability, they would have lived in groups and those groups would presumably have needed direction. At issue is whether that direction would most aptly be described as an exercise of political authority. Analyzing the argument that it would not brings to light Augustine's assimilation of political authority to the mastership of slaves.

Augustine closes *De civitate Dei* 19.14 by talking briefly about the authority exercised by a benevolent father and husband. He opens chapter 15 by saying that "this is prescribed by the order of nature: it is thus that God created man." God, Augustine continues, intended human beings to exercise dominion *only* over irrational creatures and members of their families. He adduces two scriptural passages as evidence of God's intent. First, he quotes Genesis 1.26 to show that God gave Adam dominion only over the fish, the birds, and things that crawl

on the earth. Later he refers to the patriarchs, saying that they were shepherds rather than kings. "This was done," he says, "so that in this way also God might indicate what the order of nature requires, and what the desert of sinners demands. For we believe that it is with justice that a condition of servitude is imposed on the sinner."³¹ The closing discussion of chapter 15 and the second of Augustine's scriptural allusions suggest that he thinks if original sin had not been committed, human groups would have been guided by paternal authority akin to that exercised by a Roman *paterfamilias* or a biblical patriarch. It is this, in turn, which suggests that he thinks political authority is a result of human sinfulness. But what is it about political authority that makes Augustine think it would not have existed if human beings were not sinful? And what is it about sin that makes Augustine think political authority exists because of it?

Let us take the second question first. As we saw, Augustine observes that human beings are the most social of species by nature; he completes the thought by saying that human beings are also the most "quarrelsome by perversion."³² Human beings, Augustine says, never lose their desire for peace. Indeed, he implies, we crave peace. But the psychological disorder which is symptomatic of our sinfulness makes it difficult for any of us to live in peace with ourselves and others.³³ The human tendency to conflict is so strong that peace could not be brought about if groups were governed only by parental power. After the commission of original sin, political power is required.

Because of the distorted loves of sinful human beings and the conflicts that arise among them, the aims of political authority must be limited. Augustine says "the earthly city . . . desires an earthly peace, and it limits the harmonious agreement of citizens concerning the giving and obeying of orders to the establishment of a kind of compromise between human wills about the things relevant to mortal life."³⁴ In answer to the question of why those who have the power to establish peace also have the authority to do so, Augustine would reply that their authority comes ultimately from God, who ordained political authority as a remedy for sin.

Augustine's treatment of property follows the pattern laid down by his treatment of political authority. He follows other Patristic writers in thinking that the division of property is not natural.³⁵ What he means can be teased out of a passage in one of his letters, where he suggests that those who make bad use of their property, or acquire it unjustly, possess it unjustly.³⁶ We might expect Augustine to suggest that those who hold property unjustly would be deprived of it under a just system of property law. A thinker more interested in institutional questions might go on to say what those laws should be. Instead Augustine continues, surprisingly, that one of the functions of laws of property is to protect unjust possession so that "those using their [their property] badly become less injurious"³⁷ than they would otherwise be. Presumably what he has in mind is

that those who make bad use of the property to which they are legally entitled do so because of their strong attachment to material goods. Their attachment is so powerful that they would steal or illegally retain the things they wanted if the laws required them to give them up when they used them badly. Laws which allow the unjust to retain possession of property thus keep them from “obstruct[ing the faithful] by their evil deeds.” As should be apparent from his discussion of love, Augustine thinks that so strong an attachment to finite goods is an affective disorder that results from human sinfulness. Therefore the fact that sinful human beings have an undue love for material things is what explains the feature of private property Augustine regards as the most salient and unnatural: the fact that laws which establish property protect the claims of those who should not own it. Like political authority, it providentially works to the benefit of all by allowing us to live together more peacefully than we otherwise could.

This brings us back to the first question: what is it about political authority that makes Augustine think it would not have existed if human beings were not sinful? The answer is that for Augustine, the most salient feature of political authority is just that feature an authority would have to have in order to govern a society of people all of whom are constitutionally prone to conflict: the authority to coerce them. This authority is common to those in positions of political power and the masters of slaves. Augustine also insists that subjection to political authority, like the subjection to a slave-master, is morally improving because both foster humility, particularly when the good are subjected to the bad.³⁸ Thus political authority and the mastery of slaves both rely on coercion, and both teach humility to sinfully proud human beings. It is because of these fundamental similarities that Augustine assimilates the former type of authority to the latter, easily moving back and forth between the two in chapter 15 of *De civitate Dei* and elsewhere.³⁹

Augustine, Cicero, and Rome

The claim that political subjection is fundamentally akin to slavery seems prey to a number of obvious objections. First, no, or very few, societies maintain peace through forms of coercion that bear any resemblance to the treatment of slaves. Augustine’s study of history should have taught him that peace in any society depends on a large measure of voluntary, if sometimes grudging, compliance. Secondly, political society arguably exists to bring about some degree of justice. The fact that societies are perceived by their members to do so helps to explain why the members of those societies comply with the demands of the social order. Thirdly, it might be thought, it is precisely because political societies effectively aim at justice that citizens, especially citizens who are active in political affairs, realize important elements of the human good. They develop and

exercise virtues like justice, patriotism, and self-sacrifice which both are good for them and help to sustain their society. These second and third of these points are stressed by Cicero, who, by defending the second of them, placed himself in a tradition of political thought which had its origins in classical Athens. By setting out to refute these claims, Augustine takes a firm stand against that tradition.

Cicero raises these points in his dialogue *De Re Publica*, a work well known to Augustine. One of the participants in the dialogue is Scipio Africanus, who claims that a society is “not every assembly of the multitude, but an assembly united in fellowship by common agreement as to what is right and a community of interest.”⁴⁰ Scipio later asks rhetorically “what is a society except a partnership in justice?”⁴¹; still later he praises those who dedicate themselves to public service, implying that they are the most virtuous of citizens.⁴² Augustine mentions the first two of these remarks early in *De civitate Dei*⁴³ and returns to them in Book 19. There he makes the traditional claim that justice prevails only where each is given his due. It therefore demands, he says, the worship of the true God. Since God was not worshiped in Rome, justice never prevailed there. Since it is granted all around that Rome is a society, it follows that Scipio's definition of a society must be wrong.⁴⁴

Augustine began writing *De civitate Dei* to answer the charge that the abandonment of the Roman deities for the God of Christianity was an injustice to the gods which had led to Rome's sack by the barbarians. The argument that Rome was unjust because the Christian God was not worshiped there would therefore have struck many of Augustine's intended readers as high-handed provocation at best and question-begging at worst. Augustine therefore supports his reply to Cicero by several more sophisticated strands of thought which he deftly interweaves. One is a highly polemical version of Roman history. Augustine reminds his readers that the founder of Rome was a fratricide who could not bear to share the glory of the founding with his brother.⁴⁵ He recounts the Roman abduction of the Sabine women with a gleeful sarcasm aimed at the Roman historian Sallust, who boasted of the justice of the early Romans.⁴⁶ Worship of the Roman gods, Augustine says, was characterized by “horrible and detestable evils,”⁴⁷ particularly in the theaters where the deeds of the gods were re-enacted.⁴⁸ He quotes Sallust himself on the efforts of the Roman rich to suppress the poor before the destruction of Carthage, and on the moral decline of Rome afterwards.⁴⁹ In reply to those who would blame Christianity for the fall of Rome, Augustine writes:

Rome was founded and extended by the labors of those men of old; their descendants made Rome more hideous while it stood than when it fell. For in that ruin there fell only stones and wood; whereas by these men's lives were overthrown, not her walls, but her moral defenses and adornments. More fatal than the flames which consumed the city's houses were the lusts that burned in their hearts.⁵⁰

Augustine furnishes this narrative to support his claim that if Rome was a society, this was not because justice prevailed there but in spite of the fact that it did not. But Augustine uses history in service of another and more subtle point. The upshot of his narrative is that because of Rome's injustice, the city never was worthy of the place its patriotic citizens gave it in their loves. Augustine believes, as we saw, that justice requires us to love things as their nature merits. This claim, together with his historical narrative, strengthens his case that justice never prevailed in Rome, for it implies that even the noblest citizens of the Roman republic were not just, his passing remark about "moral adornments" notwithstanding. This conclusion, in turn, allows him to advance two further arguments. It enables him to rebut Cicero's contention that devoted citizenship draws on genuine human excellence by replying that even when Rome was at its apogee, the noblest of its citizens developed qualities which merely bore outward resemblances to the virtues. It also enables him to rebut the related thesis that the stability and power of Rome in this period were to be explained by the civic virtues of its citizens. Augustine can be at his most shocking and effective when he impugns the virtue of venerable figures in Roman history. The passages in which he does so lend his position considerable rhetorical force,⁵¹ especially when conjoined with his view that Christians are the best subjects and office-holders a society could have.⁵² The real burden of his case against the moral superiority of the great Romans of the past depends, however, upon his account of what the virtues are and are not. As we should expect, claims about the right order of love lie at the heart of that account.

Some of Augustine's most extreme claims about the conditions of virtue, and his most extreme conclusions about the noble Romans' lack of it, are to be found in *De civitate Dei*. There Augustine writes of the ancient Romans:

glory they loved most ardently. They chose to live for it, and they did not hesitate to die for it . . . Because they deemed it ignoble for their fatherland to serve and glorious for it to rule and command, the first object of all their desire was freedom, and the second, mastery . . . It was, therefore, this avidity for praise and passion for glory that accomplished so many wondrous things; things which were doubtless praiseworthy and glorious in the estimation of men.⁵³

Since Augustine thinks that justice requires loving things according to their nature, he goes on to deny that it is "a true virtue unless it tends toward that end where the good of man is."⁵⁴ Earthly glory, for oneself or one's city, is not "where the good of man is." Therefore the Romans' passion for glory was not a virtue, a genuine human excellence, regardless of the achievements it brought to the city they loved. Augustine does not deny that "those men of old" who "founded and extended" Rome exhibited a self-discipline which "their descendants" did not. They "overcame the desire for riches and many other vices";⁵⁵ this suppression is presumably what he means by speaking of Rome's "moral adornments." To

determine whether such self-restraint is genuinely virtuous, however, Augustine argues that it is necessary to look at the loves – the underlying family of desires and aversions – which constitute its characteristic motive.

Augustine argues that acts of self-restraint are sinful if performed from fear of punishment⁵⁶ and that abstinence “is only good when it is practiced in accordance with faith in the Supreme Good, which is God.”⁵⁷ He claims that the self-restraint of the ancient Romans was rooted not in such faith, but in fear of destruction by the enemy city of Carthage⁵⁸ and in desires for Rome's freedom, dominion, and the ersatz immortality that comes from lasting glory. As Augustine says, “What else was there for them to love, then, but glory, by which they sought to find even after death a kind of life in the mouths of those who praised them?”⁵⁹ He concludes that neither these loves nor the self-restraint they motivated made the Romans virtuous. They only made them “less vile.”⁶⁰

Elsewhere Augustine is more measured. In a letter written about the time he began *De civitate Dei*, he grants that those who founded and preserved Rome had “a certain characteristic rectitude” which he refers to as “civic virtue.”⁶¹ The notion of a civic virtue assumed great importance in civic republicanism, a tradition of political thought which has its origins in Cicero.⁶² According to this tradition, true excellences are traits that orient their possessor toward their city's common good. In Augustine's writing, however, there is no implication that this probity is a genuine virtue. As if to make this point, Augustine hastens to add that the Romans had these traits “without true religion.” Thus Augustine's remark about civic virtue should not blind us to the radical character of his political thought. His arguments that political authority is exercised because of human sinfulness, that it is fundamentally akin to slavery, that it exists to restrain and humble those subject to it, and that citizens do not develop the virtues by dedicating themselves to political life, together constitute a sustained assault on the tradition of political thinking which locates “the good for man” in the common good of an earthly rather than a heavenly city.

The assault culminates in Augustine's alternative definition of a commonwealth, which he offers in Book 19 of *De civitate Dei*. “A people,” Augustine famously says there, “is an assembled multitude of rational creatures bound together by common agreement on the objects of their love.”⁶³ Political societies will enjoy the voluntary support of their members as long as their members love the same things. For present purposes, what is most important about Augustine's definition of a people is that what sustains a society need not be a common love of or aspiration for justice. Instead what sustains societies may be nothing more than that their citizens love the limited peace their governments establish.

Augustine is sometimes labeled a “positivist” about politics or, more commonly, a “political realist.”⁶⁴ His definition of a people lends some credence to the charge of positivism. Positivists in the philosophy of law maintain that some

precept counts as a law in virtue of having been enacted or posited in the right way. It is no less so because it does not stand in the right relationship to natural or moral law. Similarly, Augustine thinks that some groups count as a people in virtue of having a common object of love. They are no less so because the object of their love is not just; indeed Augustine intimates in one place that robber bands count as societies.⁶⁵ There are also ample grounds for describing Augustine as a political realist. He recognizes that those in authority must sometimes do things they deeply regret, like torturing the innocent.⁶⁶ He recounts embarrassing details about Roman history and demolishes the myths latter-day Romans tell themselves about their city's past. He is clear-eyed about the loves of power and glory that actually move human beings and that, as we have seen, explain why political authority and subjection exist in the first place.

Augustine's positivism and realism do not imply, however, that he thinks any state of affairs is as good as any other, that any society is as good as any other, or that whatever those in political authority do to ensure peace is acceptable. He would surely recognize that earthly peace can be established on terms that are better or worse. Though he believes ideal justice cannot be realized in political society, he would certainly recognize the possibility of incremental improvements. Augustine says at one point that human law must conform to divine law, though this commitment is absent from his more mature work.⁶⁷ He suggests that the world would be better off if it were partitioned into small kingdoms rather than far-flung empires.⁶⁸ Immediately after offering his own definition of a people as a multitude in agreement on the objects of their love, Augustine continues "and, obviously, the better the objects of this agreement, the better the people; the worse the objects of this love, the worse the people."⁶⁹ Having remarked that those who are devoted to glory cannot have real virtue, he grudgingly concedes that those whose passions are checked by this devotion "are more useful to the earthly city when they have even that imperfect kind of virtue than they would be if they did not have it."⁷⁰ Finally, as we shall see below, he holds out an ideal or "mirror" for Christians in positions of political authority.⁷¹ Augustine does not, therefore, believe that various aspects of political life are beyond any ethical assessment. What he does believe is that the moral assessment of political authorities turns crucially on how they try to bring about earthly peace. The moral assessment of the peace they establish depends upon its terms. The claims that Augustine has a "negative" view of politics or that he thinks politics is "morally neutral" are therefore overstated.⁷² They emphasize Augustine's departure from a tradition of thought according to which politics is an integral part of genuine human flourishing. In doing so, they obscure the fact that even those whose loves are properly ordered can attach some instrumental value to the end political authority exists to secure.⁷³

The instrumental value of earthly peace opens the possibility of a positive

assessment of Rome's political and military accomplishments. That, in turn, raises the question of why Rome accomplished what it did. This is just the question to which Roman historians hoped to provide a persuasive answer by citing the virtues of the ancient Romans⁷⁴ or the wisdom of the Roman constitution.⁷⁵ Augustine would not deny that the self-restraint, military discipline, and patriotism of the Romans strengthened Rome and extended its sway.⁷⁶ By denying that these qualities are virtues, and later by denying that we can "by clear inspection . . . give judgment as to the merits of kingdoms,"⁷⁷ Augustine robs the explanation of its intended force. Furthermore, to seize on this explanation of Roman success is to miss what is most important in Augustine's discussion of the rise and fall of empires.

As we saw earlier, Augustine's analysis of politics departs from the fact that some human beings can guide the lives of others by the threat and employment of force. Their authority to do so is ordained by God, Augustine says, to humble those who are subject to it and to control their desires for earthly happiness. Even the good need this discipline, Augustine thinks. Sometimes it is imposed by subjecting them to the bad; to this end, God makes use even of men like Nero.⁷⁸ What is true of the subjection of some people to others is equally true, Augustine thinks, of the subjection of populations to empires. He says:

God, therefore, the author and giver of happiness, because he is the only true God, himself gives earthly kingdoms to both good men and bad. He does not do this rashly, or as it were at random, for he is God, not Fortune. Rather he acts in accordance with an order of things and times which is hidden from us, but entirely known to him.⁷⁹

History does not provide evidence that Rome or any other empire is favored by Fortune or destiny, nor can Roman ascendancy be understood simply by appealing to the moral qualities of the Romans. It was God who gave power to Assyria and to Persia.⁸⁰ It was God who made use of Roman patriotism and discipline "to suppress the evils of many nations."⁸¹ Political history is governed by God's providence. To the extent that historical explanations are possible, they must refer to it. But for Augustine, such explanations must always be tentative. He can conjecture about God's reasons for giving power to Rome,⁸² but his considered view seems to be, as he says in the quoted passage, that the reasons history unfolds as it does are "hidden from us."

Justified violence

Even if no political society can be the City of God, should not the Christian ruler try to approximate it in his realm? Despite the difficulty of discerning God's action in history, is it not likely that God raised up Christian rulers for precisely

this purpose? Augustine's attitude toward the christianization of the Roman empire and the duties of Christian rulers is complex and I can only touch upon it here. He is certainly less enthusiastic about the conversion of the empire than some of his contemporaries and less sanguine about what it will bring. To those who argue that imperial power can be used to advance Christianity he replies that pagan Rome advanced the cause of Christ by creating the martyrs.⁸³ In his most famous piece of writing on the duties of Christian rulers, the "mirror for princes" in *De civitate Dei* Book 5, Augustine does say that they are to "make their power the handmaid of his majesty by using it to spread his worship to the greatest possible extent."⁸⁴ As a result of his protracted involvement in the Donatist controversy in northern Africa during the closing decade of the fourth century and Donatist violence against Catholics, Augustine abandoned his opposition to religious coercion.⁸⁵ While he never endorsed coercing pagans or Jews, he came to believe that as a result of official sanctions, members of what he thought a heretical sect of Christianity could be brought to sincere and orthodox conviction.

This conclusion is, however, hard to reconcile with Augustine's insistence on the opacity of the human heart and on how little we know of our own and others' motives. Augustine takes this opacity and ignorance to have political implications, as he makes clear late in *De civitate Dei*. There Augustine writes that Christian judges must sometimes torture innocent witnesses in an attempt to uncover the truth, even though they may never learn whether they have attained it.⁸⁶ Thus, he concludes sadly, "the ignorance of the judge is very often a calamity for the innocent."⁸⁷ This suggests that Augustine had modest hopes about what public officials can accomplish and so he has modest hopes for politics. The suggestion draws some support from his description of earthly peace as a mere compromise. It draws still more from a rhetorical question Augustine poses earlier in *City of God*. "As far as this mortal life is concerned," he asks, "which is spent and finished in a few days, what difference does it make under [whose] rule a man lives, who is so soon to die?"⁸⁸

Augustine is sometimes said to have "interiorized" personal ethics by moving the focus of ethical evaluation of an agent from the agent's action and its effect on the world to the psychological dispositions from which the agent's actions proceed.⁸⁹ This gains some credence from his discussions of Christian officeholders. Despite his remarks about putting imperial power at God's service, Augustine's mirror for princes is really an extended paean to the Christian emperor who loves and fears God and who acts from the virtues of clemency, mercy, compassion, humility, piety, and generosity.⁹⁰ This, conjoined with his warning that Christian emperors may be deposed,⁹¹ and his argument that judges must proceed though they cannot be sure they will ascertain the truth, suggests that public officials, at least, will not be judged by their effectiveness. A

fully interiorized ethic would hold not only that persons will not be judged by the effectiveness of what they do, but also that they will not be judged negatively even if what they do seems on its face to be bad. This is what is required to give full force to Augustine's famous remark "love and do what you will."⁹² To find such an ethic in Augustine, it is necessary to turn from his treatment of the duties of office or his remarks about peace to his discussion of war.

It is ironic that an author who writes so eloquently about the good of peace should have played a pivotal role in the emergence of a body of Christian thought justifying warfare. Many in the early Church had interpreted the Gospel's injunction to "turn the other cheek" as forbidding the use of force to defend oneself or others and forbidding participation in warfare. In reply to the pacifist interpretation of this injunction, Augustine points out that Christ challenged the temple officer who hit him rather than turning his other cheek toward him.⁹³ He maintains that what Christ requires "is not a disposition of the body but of the heart, for there," he continues, "is the sacred resting place of virtue."⁹⁴ This suggests that at least some forms of violence may be justifiable if they proceed from a heart which loves rightly.

In an early work, Augustine argues that laws which permit the use of force to defend oneself, and perhaps another, against unjust attack are not unjust laws. He does so on the grounds that laws may permit lesser evils to prevent greater ones.⁹⁵ As he hastens to add, however, this leaves open the possibility that actions of this kind are in conflict with a higher law even if the law which permits them is not. He does not assert that it is morally permissible for private persons to use force to defend others. In one of his letters he seems to claim just the opposite,⁹⁶ despite saying elsewhere that the law which permits them to do so is unexceptionable. He reaches a different conclusion, however, about soldiers. To see how he does so, note that legal actions declaring war do not typically *permit* soldiers to fight; they *require* it. It would be paradoxical for Augustine to assert that legal actions declaring war are justifiable but that all the subjects to whom they apply are obliged to disobey them. Therefore if Augustine is to argue that Christians may participate in war, he must argue both that the legal actions declaring war are morally acceptable and that Christians are permitted or obliged to obey them. The first he establishes by arguing that wars may be waged in self-defense, if another nation refuses to return property it has unjustly appropriated or if it refuses to rectify injustices.⁹⁷ The second he establishes with the qualified assertion that soldiers are obliged to fight a war that has been declared by lawful authority.⁹⁸ The qualification he adds is that soldiers engaged in warfare should not be motivated by cruelty, bloodlust, or desire for vengeance. Augustine thinks that we can never be certain of our own motives. So long as they try not to act from these motives, Christians may fight in wars despite Christ's seeming command to the contrary.

The continuing significance of Augustine's political thought

The division of the world into two cities does not originate with Augustine. It is an image that he found in other writers and adapted to his own purposes.⁹⁹ Why does he do so? Why, that is, does he assert that those who love God constitute a single city composed of the angelic, the living, and the dead? The notion of a communion of saints has theological implications that Augustine draws out to explain how heavenly denizens of the City of God help those of its members who are still on pilgrimage.¹⁰⁰ But what does this assertion add to his political thought?

I noted earlier that Augustine does not place politics beyond ethical assessment. Still less does he believe it beyond theological critique. The force of that critique depends crucially upon the alternative social model that he develops, the City of God. That city serves as a social ideal the rightly ordered love, peace, and justice of which no earthly society can realize. It is an ideal by comparison with which every earthly city must suffer. Thus Augustine compares the riches of Rome with the treasury of the City of God.¹⁰¹ He juxtaposes the specious immortality sought by Roman heroes with the eternal life gained by the Christian martyrs.¹⁰² He contrasts Rome with the City of God by comparing it to the Earthly City, reminding his readers that both were founded by fratricides.¹⁰³ He therefore uses the City of God as a standard against which actual political societies, especially the great empires,¹⁰⁴ can be measured and found wanting. This enables Augustine to expose the vanity of their moral pretensions and to heighten his readers' desire to be members of that city where the "Supreme Good is to be found."¹⁰⁵ As he says early in *De civitate Dei*:

Of the rise and progress and appointed end [of the two cities], then, I shall now speak . . . I shall do so as far as I judge it expedient to the glory of the City of God, which shall shine forth all the more brightly when compared with the other city.¹⁰⁶

I mentioned at the outset that Augustine's political thought does not fit comfortably into the contemporary categories of political enquiry. Like Augustine's work, the disciplines which now study politics – political theory, political philosophy and political science – have critical implications. Political theory and political philosophy articulate norms by which actual societies are to be judged. The same is true of some political science. Where their practitioners part company with Augustine is in their view that political activity can be made or shown to be a rational undertaking. They attempt to understand political behavior in terms of rational choice theory; to rationalize decisions among policy options according to their expected risks, costs, and benefits; to locate rational preferences and procedures for their rational aggregation; to defend deliberative procedures for the rational exchange of opinion so that citizens will respect one another and

become attached to their common good; to frame institutions which encourage progress by liberating human reason, and to find principles of justice the rational authority of which will stabilize and legitimize institutions conforming to them. By contrast, what seems to interest Augustine about politics is what it shows about the divine and psychological forces which govern human life but which human reason cannot fully penetrate or control.

We have seen that in Augustine's hands, an analysis of political life invariably reveals the work of those forces he calls "loves." He appeals to the loves of self, glory, immortality, and peace to explain why human beings need a regime of private property and coercive authority, why they build and maintain empires, how societies remain stable. Augustine allows for the possibility that, as with the Romans, political life will discipline the less desirable human loves. But he would deny that politics can eradicate or redirect those fundamental loves, or that those loves can be enduringly subjected to our reason by felicitous institutional design. Instead, he offers an explanation of political stability that interestingly rivals explanations appealing to rationalist accounts of mutual respect, justice, and institutional legitimacy. He thereby promises a corrective to political theories which exaggerate the role that reason can or should play in ordering political life.

That promise can be made good only if he can persuasively undercut alternative theories of the way human beings do or could behave in politics. In a sustained attempt to do so, Augustine recalls episodes that apologist historians either paper over or neglect. He tirelessly probes what purports to be virtuous behavior, exposing the operation of misdirected loves and showing how frequently they masquerade as nobler motives with the connivance of self-deception and ideology. After the close of what Isaiah Berlin once called "our terrible century"¹⁰⁷ it might seem doubtful that we need Augustine to teach us about either brutality or hypocrisy. Yet many of the best political theories now on offer are premised on psychologies that are extremely optimistic. They leave us without the conceptual resources necessary to understand the evil which human beings visit on one another. Peter Brown once wrote that for Augustine, "political activity is merely symptomatic: it is merely one way in which men express orientations that lie far deeper in themselves."¹⁰⁸ Augustine's account of those deep human orientations provides a set of concepts with which religious thinkers can make sense of political evil. This account is among his most enduring and valuable contributions to political thought.

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Brian Daley, S.J., Robert Markus, Brian Shanley, O.P., and Eleonore Stump for helpful comments on an earlier draft.
- 2 See Niebuhr 1953; MacIntyre 1988; Milbank 1990.
- 3 On human diversity, see *De civ. Dei* 14.1. Unless otherwise noted, quotations of *De*

civitate Dei are from Dyson 1998. Of the available English editions, this is generally to be preferred for its literalness and economy of translation, and for the briskness of its prose. On occasion, I have followed Bettenson 1972 or have retranslated passages myself. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from other of Augustine's works are my own.

- 4 *De civ. Dei* 14.7.
- 5 *De doct. christ.* 1.31.
- 6 *De civ. Dei* 8.8.
- 7 *Conf.* 1.1.
- 8 *De vera relig.* 48.93.
- 9 *De civ. Dei* 14.13.
- 10 *Ibid.* 15.22.
- 11 Romans 7.19.
- 12 *De civ. Dei* 14.7.
- 13 *Ibid.* 19.5, 19.8.
- 14 *Ibid.* 15.3.
- 15 *Ibid.* 14.28.
- 16 *Ibid.* 15.4.
- 17 *Ibid.* 14.28.
- 18 *Ibid.* 15.2.
- 19 For the angels, see *ibid.* 10.7.
- 20 *Ibid.* 15.7.
- 21 *Ibid.* 13.16.
- 22 *Ibid.* 18.49; see also 18.54.
- 23 *Ibid.* 1.35.
- 24 *Ibid.* 18.47.
- 25 For a fine discussion of this notion in Augustine's thought, see Markus 1970.
- 26 *De civ. Dei* 1.31.
- 27 *De lib. arb.* 1.6.
- 28 *De civ. Dei* 12.23–24, 14.1.
- 29 *Ibid.* 12.28.
- 30 *Ibid.* 13.24, 14.26.
- 31 *Ibid.* 19.15.
- 32 *De civ. Dei* 12.28 (following Bettenson).
- 33 *De civ. Dei* 21.15.
- 34 *De civ. Dei* 19.17 (following Bettenson).
- 35 See generally Deane 1963, 104–105.
- 36 *Ep.* 153.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 *Enarr. in Ps.* 124.8.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 *De civ. Dei* 2.21; cf. Cicero, *De Re Publica* 1.25.
- 41 *Ibid.* 1.39.
- 42 *Ibid.* 6.26.29.
- 43 *De civ. Dei* 2.21.
- 44 *Ibid.* 19.24.
- 45 *Ibid.* 15.5.
- 46 *Ibid.* 2.17.

- 47 Ibid. 2.6.
 48 Ibid. 1.32.
 49 Ibid. 2.18.
 50 Ibid. 2.2. In the first sentence, I have followed Bettenson's translation, which gives a more accurate rendering of Augustine's word "foediorem."
 51 Ibid. 1.19.
 52 *Ep.* 138.
 53 *De civ. Dei* 5.12.
 54 Ibid. (my translation).
 55 Ibid. 5.13.
 56 Ibid. 14.10; *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 30.
 57 *De civ. Dei* 15.20.
 58 Ibid. 1.30–31.
 59 Ibid. 5.14.
 60 Ibid. 5.13.
 61 *Ep.* 138.
 62 On republicanism, see Pettit 1997.
 63 *De civ. Dei* 19.24.
 64 See Deane 1963, 221–243 and Niebuhr 1953, chapter 9.
 65 *De civ. Dei* 4.4.
 66 Ibid. 19.6.
 67 *De vera relig.* 31.58. For the claim that this commitment is not found in later works, see Markus 1970, 89.
 68 *De civ. Dei* 4.15.
 69 Ibid. 19.24.
 70 Ibid. 5.19.
 71 Ibid. 5.24; *Ep.* 155.
 72 See the literature cited in Burnell 1992.
 73 Cf. *De doct. christ.* 2.25.
 74 See the remarks about Cato and Sallust at *De civ. Dei* 5.12.
 75 See, for example, Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire*, Book 6.
 76 *De civ. Dei* 5.12.
 77 Ibid. 5.21.
 78 Ibid. 5.19.
 79 Ibid. 4.33.
 80 Ibid. 5.21.
 81 Ibid. 5.13 (following Bettenson).
 82 *De civ. Dei* 18.22.
 83 For a nuanced discussion see Markus 1970, chapter 3.
 84 *De civ. Dei* 5.24.
 85 The best study of this matter is Brown 1964.
 86 *De civ. Dei* 19.6.
 87 Ibid.
 88 *De civ. Dei* 5.17.
 89 For a sophisticated treatment see Taylor 1989, chapter 7.
 90 *De civ. Dei* 5.24.
 91 Ibid. 5.25.
 92 *In Johannis epistulam ad Parthos tractatus* 7.8.

- 93 John 18.23.
 94 *C. Faust.* 22.76.
 95 *De lib. arb.* 1.5.
 96 *Ep.* 47, cited at Deane 1963, 311 n. 22.
 97 Here I follow Deane 1963, 160.
 98 *C. Faust.* 22.74.
 99 *De doct. christ.* 3.34.
 100 See the remarks about the ministry of the angels at *De civ. Dei* 10.7.
 101 *Ibid.* 5.16.
 102 *Ibid.* 5.14.
 103 *Ibid.* 15.5.
 104 *Ibid.* 18.2.
 105 *Ibid.* 19.11.
 106 *Ibid.* 1.35.
 107 Berlin 1991, 127.
 108 Brown 1965, 9.