
Augustine and the Case for Limited Government

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Augustine's thought has ever held a deep attraction for the Western mind and has, of course, profoundly shaped the moral traditions that inform Western political culture. Although Augustine, the Christian theologian and statesman, never produced anything that may be considered a treatise on political philosophy, certain conceptions developed in his voluminous writings became embodied in the Christian worldview which shapes social and political reality to the present day.

This article will examine those elements of Augustine's thought that bear on the issue of the proper tasks of political authority and will explore his insights for the light they shed on the appropriate role of government in a decent society. The aim is to show that both his political thought and ontology are in accord with the vision that impels the demand for limited government as well as with the view that regards "politics" as an inappropriate means for either individual or social improvement.¹ We conclude that Augustine, the "intellectual father of the concept of the limited state,"² offers a realistic interpretation of political phenomena that

¹ The term "politics" as here used represents that sphere of activity characterized by the aim to employ the organized power of government to achieve certain positive ends; it is distinct from both the establishment of law and the administration of justice.

² Gerhart Niemeyer, cited in Graham Walker, *Moral Foundations of Constitutional Thought: Current Problems, Augustinian Prospects* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 167.

remains an indispensable counterweight to the political idealism of both classical and contemporary political thought.

The Augustinian Conception of the State

Augustine was the first major philosopher to reject the deeply normative politics of classical thought and its conception of the state as the highest achievement of social existence. For Aristotle, the *polis* was the “perfect community”—the fulfillment of human association and the precondition for the cultivation of intellectual and ethical excellence. Cicero too defined the state in normative terms; a “republic,” he maintained, was an “assemblage [of men] associated by a common acknowledgement of right and by a community of interests.”³ To the classical mind, human flourishing was inextricably entwined with the flourishing of the state; personal and political fulfillments were symbiotic and inseparable.⁴

Augustine rejected identification of human flourishing with that of the state.

Augustine, the mystical Christian sage, was not impressed with such views. For he held a higher allegiance—to his God—along side which the human state and its strictly secular concerns paled to insignificance. Moreover, he held no illusions regarding the essence of political authority—coerciveness. Coercive rule was, for him, a necessary aspect of human existence but certainly not one worthy of reverence. Perhaps Augustine’s conception of the nature of political authority is best revealed by the anecdote he himself recounts to his readers:

When [Alexander the Great] asked [a captured pirate] what he meant by infesting the sea, he boldly replied: ‘What you mean by warring on the whole world. I do my fighting on a ship, and they call me a pirate; you do yours on a large ship, and they call you Commander.’⁵

One would think that inflationary political expectations would have been chastened for all time by such a clear-eyed realism.

³ Cicero, cited in Ernest L. Fortin, “St. Augustine,” in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1972), 156.

⁴ Plato, however, did share Augustine’s aversion toward politics as such; on his view, it was an order of affairs intrinsically inferior to, say, philosophy and the contemplative life. This is just one of several similarities between their respective views that have earned Augustine the title of the “Christian Plato.”

⁵ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. G. Walsh, D. Zema, G. Monahan, D. Honan, ed. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Image Books, 1958), IV:4.

In any event, Augustine held a sober and commonsensical (some would say pessimistic) conception of government and law. On his view, the coercive authority embodied in the state was, of course, indispensable to the well-being, not to say preservation, of members of society; nevertheless, it was hardly a noble phenomenon nor an appropriate object of devotion. Political rule was, on the contrary and quite literally, a necessary evil. Its existence was nothing to celebrate, for, according to Augustine, political rule came into being only because of man's fallen state. God "did not intend that his rational creature, who was made in his image, should have dominion over anything but the irrational creature—not man over man, but man over the beasts."⁶ Sin and sin alone brought the need for political coercion into human existence. Augustine's view, in short, was that government and law exist as a punishment and corrective for sin, a punishment which mankind, through the actions of Adam and Eve, had brought upon itself. Political man is fallen man.

Government serves a negative function: to restrain the wicked.

Augustine, however, does not condemn the state as such. Because men are prone to depravity and sin, political coercion is indispensable to social order. Government and law exist to intimidate and restrain those who would do evil so that the good may live in at least some semblance of peace and order. For Augustine, then, government serves an essentially negative function—to restrain and punish the wicked. Political rule is neither glorious nor enviable.

The Two Cities

Augustine believed that the human race is permanently divided into two mutually exclusive classes who, though related, remain nevertheless separated by an unbridgeable gulf. These two groups constitute, on Augustine's metaphor, two "cities"⁷—the

⁶ *City of God*, XIX:15.

⁷ George Sabine points out the very ancient lineage of the concept of "two cities." Augustine, he tells us, provided a "restatement, from the Christian point of view, of the ancient idea that man is a citizen of two cities, the city of his birth and the City of God" (George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 3rd ed. [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961], 189)).

We should also note that Augustine's "two cities" are mystical, universal entities constituted by all persons across time and space. They are not and never will be concrete, historical phenomena.

City of God and the City of Man⁸—the citizenry of which are determined by the quality of their inhabitants' respective loves. The *civitas dei* consists of all those who orient their love (*caritas*, or what is the same thing, their will⁹) and reason toward the Highest Good—communion with God. The *civitas terrena*, on the other hand, is peopled by the “castoffs”¹⁰ of the heavenly city—all those whose love (*cupiditas*) is exclusively directed toward the mundane order, those who pursue temporal goods as ends in themselves. These two groups, “commingled”¹¹ and more or less overtly indistinguishable in this life, will be identified and assigned to their respective final destinations—heaven and hell—on Judgment Day. Until that time, they abide together in the temporal community, the earthly citizenry fully at home, the citizenry of God “captives and stranger[s]”¹² in a strange land.

According to Augustine, then, there exists a “fundamental cleavage”¹³ within every society that runs along the lines of love (what we would today call “values”). Aside from a common desire for “earthly peace”¹⁴ or the “tranquility of order,”¹⁵ the members of the two cities are irremediably at odds in their respective evaluations of the goods of existence. In other words, there exists for Augustine an irreducible “pluralism” of values among the members of any society, a pluralism that originates in the very nature of being, that is, in its fallen state (this issue is discussed more thoroughly below). Consequently, political society cannot be based upon any genuine common agreement regarding right and wrong, for there can be no such agreement between the earthly men who do not and cannot know true justice (because they do not know God, the source and author of all justice), and the heavenly citizenry who do. Contrary to Cicero, then, Augustine denies that political society is or can be based on a common conception of right, for he believes the two citizenries can never come to terms in this regard.

⁸ *City of God*, XIV:1.

⁹ For Augustine, “[l]ove and will are commensurate terms. . .” (Walker, 85).

¹⁰ Etienne Gilson, in *The City of God*, 24.

¹¹ *City of God*, XVIII:47.

¹² *City of God*, XIX:17.

¹³ Walker, 105.

¹⁴ *City of God*, XIX:11.

¹⁵ Augustine, *The Political Writings of St. Augustine*, ed. Henry Paolucci (Washington: Regnery Gateway, 1962), 144.

As mentioned, however, the citizens of God and the citizens of Man do have certain goods in common: all require the “necessaries of this life”¹⁶ and at least some measure of temporal peace. For, Augustine tells us, “peace is a good so great, that even in this earthly and mortal life there is no word we hear with such pleasure, nothing we more strongly desire, or enjoy more thoroughly when it comes.”¹⁷ The citizens of Man desire peace in order to gratify their selfish desires and realize their material goals, for even they recognize that lawlessness, anarchy, and perpetual violence will preclude the fulfillment of their aims. The citizens of God also require earthly peace and security against violence, for they cannot pursue their love without a certain degree of temporal order. Because both groups share a common interest in securing earthly peace and human justice, they can agree on the need for government and law.

The most the state can do is foster a modicum of “earthly peace.”

From the Augustinian perspective, then, the classical view of politics was faulty because it posited a common hierarchy of values that does not in fact exist among members of any society; the members of the two cities embrace two irreconcilable scales of values. To impose the scale of the earthly multitude would be an abomination, for the stakes involved are, for Augustine, far too high (salvation and damnation). To impose the higher values of the citizens of God on the multitude is impossible, for those values cannot be achieved by the means of man but only, as we shall see, by the means of God. If any sort of earthly peace is to be gained, then, government must rest content with providing the “least-common-denominator”¹⁸ of human values, which “. . . reduce to the common interest . . . in the basic goods of this life, none of which is more basic than a modicum of ‘earthly peace.’”¹⁹

Such a conception of the proper tasks of political authority is, of course, very close to that embraced by advocates of limited government, all of whom agree that the fundamental responsibility of government consists in the realization of certain negative values—Augustine’s peace and justice (to which they add a third, free-

¹⁶ *City of God*, XIX:17.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Political Writings*, 9.

¹⁸ Walker, 106.

¹⁹ Gerhart Niemeyer, cited in Walker, 105.

dom). In short, they fully subscribe to the Augustinian view that, as Edmund Burke put it, “The great use of government is as a restraint.”²⁰ It is not implausible to consider Augustine as one of the sources of this conception.

His emphasis on the irreducible plurality of values may be viewed in the same light. Augustine, as discussed, recognized two classes of conflicting ends—“material” and “spiritual”—but, as Graham Walker explains, “. . . in principle, the number of [such] dissonant [classes] is as large as the number of objects that may attract [persons’] . . . love.”²¹ One need not subscribe to Augustine’s theology to recognize that persons, for whatever reason, do in fact serve unique scales of values and ends. Translated into the language of F. A. Hayek, this means that there are no concrete, particular goods unanimously desired by the millions of persons who comprise modern societies; the only thing all persons truly have in common in such complex orders are those values that sustain the social order itself. In other words, the truly common good in a “pluralistic” society consists in the preservation of the general framework—Augustine’s “earthly peace” and justice—which allows persons and groups to pursue their own goals, however determined.

Both Augustine and the defenders of limited government, then, place great significance on the indisputable fact that persons pursue vastly different and often conflicting values and ends, and both conclude therefrom that government should be restricted to the pursuit of certain negative values. Moreover, Augustine’s views support the argument for limited government in yet another manner. For he draws our attention to the highly limited effectiveness of political coercion in regard to the pursuit of positive spiritual or moral ends. Even if one believes government is justified in imposing a single scale of values on the populace, there are, according to Augustine, reasons why such an endeavor cannot engender the formation of the Good Society, reasons that inhere in the very nature of man.

Government’s ability to promote moral or spiritual ends is minimal.

²⁰ Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, Vol. VI (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), 2.

²¹ Walker, 105.

Augustinian Ontology

*Political rule
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Politics, as Augustine conceives it, is incapable of remedying human ills, the cause of and cure for which are ultimately spiritual. For the sin and evil that engender the need for political rule are, according to Augustine, the result of "ontic instability,"²² of a flaw in the nature of human being itself. The "original sin" of Adam and Eve—their willful and perverse rejection of the Eternal Goodness in favor of the goods of the mundane order—is visited on all their descendants in the form of a chronic "contraction of being," a "sort of precarious composition of being and non-being."²³ In other words, with the commission of "original sin," with man's deliberate aversion from the Divine Goodness, being itself "contracted" toward non-existence and the "bad will"²⁴ which causes all disorder sprang into play. For this "chronic deficiency of being,"²⁵ this absence of God, manifests as a willful self-love that intentionally turns away from knowledge and love of its source toward a passionate embrace of the things of the flesh.

According to Augustine, then, human nature before the Fall was good, complete, grounded in its source. All men since Adam, however, are born in a vitiated state, hence all are prone to depravity and sin. Nevertheless, all crave the restoration of their original nature (for man retains a measure of goodness; his nature is not evil, but contracted), and they strive to fill their ontic void by inappropriate material means—the means of man and of politics. It is this desperate striving that generates the behavior—the violence, deceit, lust for domination and glory, greed, envy, and so on—that calls forth the need for political rule.

Because such behavior has its source in man's ontological disorder, however, politics can merely palliate its effects but never cure its cause. Man's "alienation"—and Augustine was the first philosopher of alienation²⁶—is not to be overcome by the means

²² Walker, 108.

²³ Walker, 108; Vernon J. Bourke, cited in Walker, n48. As Augustine put it, "man did not so fall away as to become absolutely nothing; but being turned towards himself, his being became more contracted than it was when he claved to Him who supremely is. . . . [To experience such a state is] not quite to become a nonentity, but to approximate to that" (cited in Walker, 84).

²⁴ *City of God*, XIV:11.

²⁵ Walker, 87.

²⁶ Gerhart Niemeyer, *Between Nothingness and Paradise* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 216.

of man but only by the means of God, divine grace. For only the suffusion of grace, Augustine insists, can impel the willful turning toward the Source that restores vitiated nature to its original fullness of being; only conversion toward the Source can reorder the soul and eradicate the disposition toward vice and sin. When such an “ordinate” (“rightly ordered”²⁷) love is achieved, all the other virtues fall in line and wicked propensities vanish. Political coercion, necessitated, as we recall, as punishment and corrective for human sin, would disappear if all men regained the fullness of being attained by reunion with their Source.

Politics can palliate but not cure man's ontological disorder.

There is no possibility, of course, of realizing such a paradise. For Augustine is convinced that God grants the saving grace that impels the soul's conversion to very few indeed; thus the populace of the City of Man is guaranteed always to outnumber the citizenry of God. Government and law are, for Augustine, permanent elements of historical existence; heaven and earth are mutually exclusive categories.

Augustine and the Case for Limited Coercion

Augustine's insights into the nature of political authority and the ontological roots of social disorder provide a sobering counterweight to the extravagant political expectations embodied in both classical and contemporary conceptions of the state. For Augustine casts a profound suspicion on political power as such by drawing attention to the fact that the defining attribute of politics, that which distinguishes the political from all other aspects of social existence, is coerciveness. Surely such a view long served to offset tendencies to idealize the political sphere. Indeed, it may not be farfetched to suggest that Augustine's emphasis on the coerciveness of political rule is one source of that deep-seated prejudice against arbitrary coercion that is indispensable to the maintenance of constitutional or limited government.

In any event, it is clear that certain elements of Augustine's thought—his emphasis on the coerciveness of political authority, his insight into the limited effectiveness of political means in regard to moral and spiritual development, and his recognition of the plurality of value hierarchies embraced by a people—lend support to those who seek to limit the range of political authority.

²⁷ Walker, 89.

In what follows, I explore these insights for the light they shed upon the relation between coercion and the maintenance of a decent society.

Coercion and the Good Society

Political solutions are coercive.

It may be argued that Augustine's insight into the coercive nature of political authority is largely ignored in contemporary American politics, a fact that may be related to the ongoing growth of the political sphere so characteristic of our era. One of the most remarkable aspects of modern politics is the prevailing tendency to regard political authority as the source of all beneficence, a tendency that represents, from the Augustinian perspective, a widespread willingness to employ the means of coercion for any and all desired ends. Many contemporary persons, however, appear to be either blind or indifferent to the fact that political solutions are coercive solutions, either of which explanation is disheartening. For surely a decent society can only be had if its members are willing to reflect with some gravity on the appropriate and inappropriate uses of coercion. There is no question of doing without it, of course; certain behavior is simply intolerable in any social order. A people, however, that turns to coercion to achieve even the most trivial objectives—every can of peas *must* be labeled with the most up-to-date nutritional information—has its priorities in dangerous order.

Excessive reliance on coercion undermines political authority and respect for law.

This is so for several reasons. First, the gratuitous use of coercive means is barbarizing—moral sensibilities become jaded in a social climate characterized by ubiquitous coerciveness. Moreover, respect for the law, for genuine law, as well as the belief in impartial justice are being seriously eroded by the legislative frenzy (the generation of coercive directives) that passes for law-making in our time. Such an immoderate and unprincipled employment of coercion engenders cynicism and even contempt toward political authority. Who can retain respect for government and law when every trifling coercive regulation is granted the high dignity of law? It would seem that such respect is best preserved if political coercion is reserved for truly weighty matters. The current practice—the unwarranted and thoughtless reach of coercive authority into every nook and cranny of social existence—merely degrades the concepts of law and government. Moreover, the present

cavalier attitude toward coercion does not bode well for the future. For there is no possibility of maintaining constitutional government unless we remember that the ends do not justify the means.

Coercion and the Inculcation of Virtue

Augustine's views also throw cold water on all those still enamored of the classical dream of employing the coercive means of politics to instill "virtue" in the citizenry. As we have seen, for Augustine, political authority as such plays a very limited role in the drama of human history. He believed that "social problems" are, at base, spiritual and ontological disorders not susceptible of political resolution. More particularly, he believed that only freely willed love can engender that reordering of the soul essential to any genuine spiritual regeneration and thus to genuinely virtuous behavior. Surely he was right. Whatever else it may achieve, we all know that coercion is impotent in the realms of love and spirit; no one can be forced to love anything whatsoever, let alone the highest things.

The belief that one can instill virtue (and not merely enforce acceptable overt behavior) through political means reveals a sore lack of both moral and psychological insight. For, as Augustine pointed out, coercive rule may successfully regulate the "exterior man," but it cannot "remov[e] the evil disposition."²⁸ Even if we do not accept Augustine's theological explanation, we all know that prohibitions and commands are often counterproductive, that is, they ". . . increase . . . the desire of illicit action. . . ."²⁹ Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that the efficacy of coercive rule in regard to ethical development is stymied by human nature.

The idea that coercion can generate virtuous behavior has only the most tenuous justification in that being compelled to behave properly may habituate the unruly to more appropriate behavior. Such only becomes necessary, however, if persons have not previously absorbed the rules of civilized society throughout the process of enculturation. The need to resort to coercive means thus represents the breakdown and not the flowering of civilization.

²⁸ Augustine, cited in Walker, 109; Augustine, *Letters*, 153:16, cited in Walker, 107.

²⁹ *City of God*, XIII:6.

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Augustine does not aim, of course, to remove moral considerations or virtue from politics (as if that were possible); politics, for him, does not “function . . . in a morally blank world but in a fallen one, . . . [and he] . . . is happy for political rule to orient itself by the good as may be feasible.”³⁰ What he wishes to emphasize is that the source of disorder is spiritual and not material and that politics or coercive rule is an ineffective means of improving the human condition.³¹

Political authority can, of course, assist in the establishment of the necessary preconditions for moral development—earthly peace and human justice. Such tasks, however, are far less ambitious than those envisioned by the political idealists and moralists, particularly those who (perhaps unconsciously) conceive government as the agent of spiritual transformation or vehicle of salvation. Indeed, Augustine’s clear-eyed realism about morality and politics is the indispensable corrective to all the extravagant dreaming that has generated so many “implausible and ominous projects of virtue”³² over time. Such realism seems especially *apropos* in an age such as our own, an age which looks to government as persons formerly looked to God—as the source of all goodness and beneficence.

Finally, and on a more positive note, I would like to suggest that Augustine bequeathed the Western world perhaps the most precious of all political gifts—the conception of the private sphere of conscience.³³ Although it had a fairly small circumference for

³⁰ Walker, 107.

³¹ In this regard, however, I would like to suggest that Augustine’s insight into the relation between ontology and politics would be better served by removing inappropriate moral connotations, as well as the conceptions of punishment and damnation, from the entire issue. For it may very well be true that the source of personal and social disorder is rooted in the relative fullness or contraction of being, that is, in the relation of the soul to its Source. If we wish to “improve” human existence by means of spiritual regeneration, however, adding the unnecessary fear of punishment to an already painfully contracted state of being seems to me counterproductive. Again, coercive threats can never engender a loving aspiration toward knowledge of or communion with the creative Source. In the same manner, coercive politics can never engender a virtuous citizenry. What may do so is virtuous example—genuine nobility of purpose and demeanor, honor, integrity, truthfulness, concrete accomplishments, and so on—set by actual persons. Witnessing the real thing inspires persons to develop the qualities they admire in others; coercive threats have no such effect.

³² Walker, 109.

³³ Augustine probably rued his decision to countenance the use of force in the suppression of the Donatist heretics, for by this action he set an unfortunate precedent that took as firm a root as his more general aversion toward the em-

Augustine, he did believe that each person moved within a spiritual space that no government had authority to violate. Christians, he taught, had a duty to resist political authority when it commanded the commission of acts which violated God's law. Even though he counseled passive resistance,³⁴ martyrdom if necessary, he did make it clear that obedience to the Highest Good is more important than obedience to mere man. Perhaps no other idea in the history of Western thought has contributed more to personal liberty.³⁵

Conclusion

Perhaps it is unfortunate that Augustine's contribution is so deeply associated in the popular mind with theology and religion. For he has much to say that transcends such categories, insights

ployment of coercive means in religious matters. I think a case can be made that his advocacy of coercion was a pragmatic response to the civil disorder and violence engendered by the schism and not his settled opinion regarding the appropriate use of coercion in spiritual affairs (Walker, 107).

³⁴ This aspect of Augustine's thought is rather disturbing. For he preached an extreme quietism which virtually disables criticism of, let alone active resistance to, any government whatsoever. Even the most vicious regime, he implied, must be passively accepted so long as it does not prevent the Christian from practicing his or her faith. For, on Augustine's view, cruel or unjust regimes are the work of God, punishments for the wicked, trials and tests for the virtuous ("For whatever injury wicked masters inflict upon good men is to be regarded, not as a penalty for wrong-doing, but as a test for their virtues . . ." (*Political Writings*, 13)). Even a slave must not resist, for slavery too is the consequence of sin.

Moreover, we find in Augustine support for the pernicious idea that "inner liberty" is of greater value than personal liberty in the sense of freedom from arbitrary coercion; "a good man, [he tells us,] though a slave, is free . . ." (*Ibid.*).

³⁵ I would argue, moreover, that Augustine's defense of the ultimate superiority of spiritual over temporal concerns can be deployed to justify an even larger private sphere of conscience than that carved out for the protection of religious concerns. For it may be that so-called "material" phenomena—objects in space and events in time—are, strictly speaking, not "material" at all. They may be, rather, the form in which the soul or spirit manifests itself in our particular kind of reality. Thus a person's "property" in material goods, the state of his physical health, his relations with friends, family, employers, and so on are essentially "spiritual" phenomena—the expression of the psyche in the world of time and space. If this is true, the circumference of the private sphere of conscience is greatly enlarged. For, if the concrete world is the symbolic manifestation, the objectified form in which spirit expresses itself in the mundane order, then coercive manipulation of "material" phenomena is, in reality, coercive manipulation of transcendent-yet-immanent spirit. Perhaps asking ourselves when coercion of the spirit is justified may shed a new light on the appropriate role of coercion in human existence.

into the respective orders of being and politics that penetrate to the very heart of the human predicament. For one thing, he reminds us that human nature cannot be ignored in an examination of the appropriate role of government in human affairs. There may be reasons, for instance, reasons that derive from the very nature of being, why the manipulation of external material phenomena—one of the principal activities of contemporary governments—cannot, in itself, produce any significant or enduring improvement in either the individual or society.

Augustine's analysis of social ills from the angle of the relation of being to its Source seems to point in the right direction. If he is right, if a chronic "ontological instability" generates the behavior that calls forth the need for political rule, then we can readily understand why politics, as he suggests, should be ranked relatively low on the scale of human concerns. In short, the investigation of personal and social disorder from an ontological perspective, if freed from inappropriate moralistic connotations, is a promising avenue of research for students of social phenomena. These are thorny and difficult, if not impenetrable, matters; nevertheless, a "scientific investigation" of the psyche of the sort practiced by Augustine may be the *sine qua non* for the advancement of knowledge in this area.