

AUGUSTINE ON THE STATE AS A NATURAL SOCIETY

I. INTRODUCTION

In this essay I shall argue that the assertion "The State is a natural society" is not inconsistent with Augustine's general thinking on social and political philosophy.

To say that the State is a natural society is to claim that there is

- (a) a natural need for the State, i.e. assuming a substantial growth in the human race, a society wider than the family would be necessary and useful to promote the common temporal good; and
- (b) that the authority which would be required for the functioning of such a society could be acquired and exercised in a way that would not involve a perverse "domination" of human over human¹).

It will be my contention that Augustine's views on human individuality and common sociability give a base for a need, and that he provides in the religious community an example of a social structure where authority is able to be claimed and exercised without treating humans as unequal before God.

II. AUGUSTINE ON THE NEED OF THE STATE

There is no question that Augustine believed that humans are social by nature. He writes: "The life of the wise man both on earth and in heaven is social"²). God created all humans from common parents so that they might be bound together by blood as well as racial similarity³). As long as we live with other humans we cannot reject society⁴). Indeed, in this world only two things are absolutely essential:

¹) I assume the truth of Simon's thesis that authority has two essential functions in every complex society and is therefore a property of all such societies. Cf. Yves R. SIMON, *A General Theory of Authority* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, Indiana, 1980), pp. 47-79.

²) *De civitate dei*, 19, 5; PL 41, 631.

³) *De bono conjugali*, 1, 1; PL 40, 373.

⁴) *En. in psalmos* 54, 9; PL 36, 655.

life and friendship⁵). The world itself becomes unfriendly when we have no friends⁶).

It is likewise clear that Augustine believed that the family was a natural and necessary expression of the human social nature. He writes:

And so it is that the first natural tie of human society is man and wife. Even these God did not create separately and join them as if strangers, but He made them one from the other, indicating also the power of union in the side from where she was drawn and formed⁷).

The society of Adam and Eve was a society of equals, a friendly society, in which necessary decision-making was achieved without "unnatural domination". The subordination was that found between friends where one asks out of love and the other obeys freely a beloved perceived to be part of one's being⁸).

This natural and friendly exercise of authority typical of that first human family is quite different from the subordination of master over slave. Slavery is not "natural" to humanity. It is clearly the result of sin and the wars that sin fomented⁹). Its very definition implies a perverse domination contrary to the natural equality of humans¹⁰). Even the most humane exercise of a slave-master's authority cannot make the social structure natural since the "claim" rests on a condition contrary to moral fact: that one human can "own" another. It follows that though there is a "natural" need for the family, slavery is a matter of human choice and it comes from a will that has been twisted by sin.

Is the "need" for the State to be traced to the same perverted

⁵) *Sermo 299D*, [Denis 16] 1; *Miscellanea Agostiniana*, I, p. 75.

⁶) «Ita in quibuslibet rebus humanis nihil est homini amicum sine homine amico». *Epistola 130*, 2, 4; PL 33, 495.

⁷) *De bono conjugali*, I, 1; PL 40, 373. Translated by Charles T. Wilcox, *The Good of Marriage* (New York, The Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955), vol. 27, p. 9.

⁸) *Ibid.* «Poterat enim esse in utroque sexu, ... alterius regentis, alterius obsequentis amicalis quaedam et germana conjunctio». On this «natural» subordination in the family, cf. *De Genesi ad litteram* 11, 37, 50; *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, I, 153. Markus notes: «The punishment (of woman) after sin was in the mode of her subordination. Even before sin she would be subordinate. But the servitude which Augustine identifies with loving subordination belongs to the nature in which man and woman were originally created». R.A. MARKUS, Two Conceptions of Political Authority: Augustine, *De Civitate dei*, 19, 14-15, and Some Thirteenth Century Interpretations, *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S., Vol. 16, pt. 1 (April 1965), pp. 74-75.

⁹) *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, I, 153; PL 34, 590. Cf. Gervase CORCORAN, *St. Augustine on Slavery*, *Studia Ephemeridis «Augustinianum»* 22, (Institutum Patristicum «Augustinianum»: Rome, 1985).

¹⁰) *De Genesi ad litteram*, III, 20, 30; PL 34, 292. Cf. *ibid.*, 22, 34; PL 34, 293-294.

source? Augustine never considered this question in the abstract nor did he give any scientific analysis of "innocent nature's need" for political society¹¹). His interest in political philosophy is purely pragmatic. His concern is the State as it actually exists, tarnished by sin like every other temporal institution after Eden. He has no doubt that in humanity's present wounded condition the State is needed as a corrective for human perversity. The goal of peace through order would have been a noble end for human society even in Eden, but in the actual sin-filled world harsh means to that end are required. Peace now can be preserved only through coercive laws, threats of punishment, and just judgment of malefactors. Humans are "tangled into knots" by their wounds and it takes strong medicine to maintain the peace. Moreover, in this world of fact rulers are frequently as bad as their subjects. It is not unknown that some kings acquire and exercise authority as perversely as the worst slave-masters. Augustine does not justify such domination but, considering the alternative (anarchy), he is willing to accept it as the lesser of two evils in a world that will never perfectly achieve the greatest of goods.

Augustine's clearly believes in the "factual" need for the State as a control on human perversity. Is there a basis in his thought for an argument leading to "natural" need, a need that would have been present even if humans had never sinned? I suggest the following structure for such an argument:

1. Humans have a natural desire for peace.
2. Peace depends on order among disparate parts.
3. When the parts to be ordered are free beings, the order will be based on decisions of beings who, because of different past experiences and different habits drawn from their unique past choices, will sometimes disagree.
4. In a complex society (composed of many families and many individuals), it is unlikely that consensus about means to achieve common goals will be achieved.
5. Therefore, the ordering of such societies towards the common good of earthly peace can only be effected efficiently through the exercise of authority.
6. But a society which seeks the temporal common good under the direction of authority is what is meant by the State.
7. There is therefore a "natural" need for the State.

Augustine's reflections on human life in society seem to support this argument.

¹¹) Cf. MARKUS, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

Augustine defines peace as the tranquility that comes out of order and order is the arrangement of like and unlike things in their proper places¹²). The human need for peace is just as natural as the thirst for happiness. He says that anyone who has studied human nature seriously must agree that there is no human heart that does not want and need peace¹³). The desire for peace is thus not the result of perversity but of nature. It existed in Eden and would have continued to exist if the human race had endured without sin. In paradise the essential peace among humans would have been the "peace of ordered concord". That first human family enjoyed an ordered concord among persons living together where some were in positions of decision making for the group and others were in positions of obedience. Unfortunately humans did not last long enough in innocence to see the development of the city or commonwealth, but if they did they would have desired the peace of the city: "an ordered concord among the ruler and ruled in people joined in citizenship"¹⁴).

Even without sin, then, humans would have had a natural need for peace. They would also have had a natural need to "use" material things. They would need to eat and drink. They would need to get from place to place. They would need to dispose of the natural "effluvium" of living in community. Paradise was a pleasant earthly place. It was not heaven. Humans had more perfect bodies than we experience but they were not glorified bodies. Thus the orderly use of material things would be a component of the peace from order that they desired. The goods described by Augustine as the purposes of the state in our present condition would have been necessary goods in Eden also. There is no reason for believing that the human race before sin was any less of a pilgrim people. "Good" families would need to use material and temporal goods while they anticipated the greater goods of heaven¹⁵). Eden was not heaven. It was a way to heaven. It was not in eternity. It was in time. There would thus be a need for the temporal peace and an orderly use of earthly things on which such a temporal peace at least

¹²) *De civitate dei*, 19, 13, 1; PL 41, 640.

¹³) *Ibid.*, 19, 12, 1; PL 41, 637.

¹⁴) «Pax hominum, ordinata concordia. Pax domus, ordinata imperandi atque obediendi concordia cohabitantium. Pax civitatis, ordinata imperandi atque obediendi concordia civium». *De civitate dei*, 19, 13, 1; PL 41, 640. It is interesting that the essential bond in the state, family, and among humans generally is the same «concordia». The only difference is that in the family and the state the «concordia» (friendship) exists between some who rule and others who are ruled.

¹⁵) *De civitate dei*, 19, 17; PL 41, 645.

partially depends ... air, water, food, and all that is needed by the body¹⁶). The question is whether such "orderly use of material goods" would have flowed naturally from the bond of friendship found among individuals or, if not, whether the social structure of the individual family was sufficient to bring it about.

Certainly friendship and family existed in Eden. Would these have been sufficient to achieve temporal peace if humanity had not been wounded by sin? It seems unlikely. Since humans are beings of freedom and beings who learn by experience rather than commonly infused knowledge, it is reasonable to assume differences of opinion even in a state of innocence. The story of Adam and Eve proves that even two humans who love each other can look at the same situation differently. Eve's experience with the tempter gave her new information concerning what should or should not be eaten. Adam had to be convinced of the new project before he made his fatal mistake.

The conclusion is simply this: humans are likely to disagree on the best means to even the same goals and this happens because they are free beings who are indeed *different*. This difference of view can lead to conflicting choices and in order to achieve common action there is needed some peaceful resolution of the differences.

It is certainly possible that this resolution could come about without the exercise of authority saying: "Everyone has had their say and every position has its own value, but we shall go *this way*". A community can agree on a common action by way of consensus ... a process whereby all agree on one plan as being the "best" plan for achieving the commonly agreed upon goal. In a state of innocence this would probably happen if in fact there were a "best" plan. But, as Simon says, in a complex society there very often will be no one "best" way to accomplish a desired goal. In such a situation consensus on the basis of reasoned argument will become difficult if not impossible. At very least trying to achieve such a consensus will be inefficient. In such situations there will be the need for authority to resolve the differences.

But would society have achieved that complexity in a state of innocence? If it did not, the natural authority residing in the father of the family would have been enough to resolve differences. There was no need for Adam and Eve to establish a State as long as their family was small. But there is no reason to suppose that the race would not have expanded if the innocence of Eden had been preserved. Augustine

¹⁶) *Ibid.*, 19, 13, 2; PL 41, 642.

believed (contra Manichaeism) that procreation is an expression of the good in humanity, not the bad. We may therefore assume that a complexity would arise in society which could not be resolved simply by the family unit. There would be a need to resolve differences of opinion among families and individuals who more and more had fewer and fewer shared experiences.

In sum, in the state of innocence it is very likely that society would become complex simply by increase in the numbers and that such complexity would make it practically impossible to achieve consensus in or among families about the best means to achieve the temporal common good. This being the case, there would be the need for a social organization broader than the family, endowed with the authority and responsibility to seek the temporal common good of the individuals and the families that make it up. This is our common understanding of a State and it also seems to be what Augustine means by his description of a "people" as an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by common agreement as to the objects of their love", where what they love is "earthly peace" and the ordering of temporalities necessary to achieve it¹⁷).

Thus, Augustine's views on the diversity of decision among free humans and on their natural need for a temporal peace as long as they were pursuing their pilgrimage on earth, would lead him to agree that, if a sinless human race had continued to expand, a time would come when some social group larger than the family would have been needed to organize individual efforts towards a temporal common good. A final question is whether the authority necessary to make such a society "work" could be acquired and exercised without an "unnatural" subordination of one human to another¹⁸). If not, then the State is "not natural" to human society even though there may be a "natural need".

III. THE MEANING OF "NATURAL" AUTHORITY

Authority is said to be "natural" or "in accord with human nature" if:

¹⁷) *Ibid.*, 19, 24; PL 41, 655. «Populus est coetus multitudinis rationalis rerum quas diligit concordi communione sociatus».

¹⁸) Augustine seems to suggest otherwise in his oft-quoted statement: «God wanted rational man, made to His image, to have no dominion except over irrational nature». *De civitate dei*, 19, 15; PL 41, 643.

- (1) its claim does not *rest on* an effect of human sinfulness; and
- (2) its exercise does not *manifest* a disorder in human nature.

Authority will fail the first condition if the only reason for asserting that "a" is superior to "b" is because of a false assumption of inferiority resulting (e.g.) from conquest in war or enslavement or a similar event rooted in human sin. Authority will fail the second condition if in its exercise it does not seek to achieve the common good (as opposed to the selfish interests of the authority) and/or treats the subjects as though they were not free human beings equal before God.

For example, in the family there is a subordination of children to parents from nature itself. In fact very young children are too deficient in knowledge and prudence to take care of themselves. One does not assume their inferior qualifications. They are *in fact* inferior¹⁹). The authority of parent over child is "natural" and becomes "unnatural" only if it is exercised beyond its due time or in an abusive manner.

The situation of slavery is quite different. There the authority of the master over the slave is "unnatural" in its very claim since it assumes that one human being is the possession of the other. This authority can be unnatural on the second count also, but not necessarily so. The slave master could exercise her/his supposed authority in a "natural" way by treating the slave with the respect due to an equal human being. In like manner a prince can exercise authority in a truly noble way. Augustine's "Mirror of Princes" reflects his view that a King can be virtuous in his rule even in a world wounded by sin. In the kingdom of the "God-fearing prince" there is a true subordination of ruled to ruler but the "domination" of master over slave is absent because the ruler "governs with justice", "remembers that he is only a human being", and considers his "sovereignty as a ministry of God"²⁰).

This passage suggests that Markus' statement²¹) that "coercion is part of the essence of political society ... without it the state is not a state" may be factually true in the state as it actually exists in a sinful world, but it is not true of the state *per se*. It is clear that the ideal of

¹⁹) As Corcoran notes (*op. cit.*, p. 61) the force of Augustine's statement «God did not want rational creatures to rule over rational creatures» did not preclude all subordination of one human to another but only that which mirrored human «domination» of irrational creatures.

²⁰) *De civitate dei*, 5, 24; PL 41, 170-171.

²¹) MARKUS, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

authority as "love that serves" was meant by Augustine to apply to all societies in which members of the City of God found themselves²²).

Since even the most perversely "claimed" authority (i.e. master over slave) can be exercised in a way that is truly human, it is clear that the problem of the "naturalness" of the authority required for the State is a problem of "claim". It is not *of the essence* of State authority that it be *used* unnaturally. But is the very "claim" to rule as prince contrary to human nature? Does the "claim" itself rest on an "unnatural" inequality among humans? Does the very "claim" to rule imply a denigration of those to be ruled?

Markus suggests that the crucial point about the origins of political authority

... is the question as to whether it is to be treated on the model of the authority of a master over his slave, or on that of a husband and father over his wife and family. These are the paradigm cases which give us a clue to the senses in which the concept of nature is applied to social groupings²³).

The structure of slavery clearly places it among those social institutions that flow from human sinfulness. The structure of the family places it among those that flow from nature. The question is whether the State is analogous to either of the above. If there are only two choices, it seems necessarily so to say that the State is just a more sophisticated form of slavery and the question of its naturalness ends there. It obviously cannot be equated with the family. There is no natural inequality among its members. There is no assumption of greater experience or wisdom of ruler over ruled as there is where parent rules over child. But are these the only two choices?

I suggest that there is a third model of social structure which is closer to the State than either slavery or the family. It is a society in which there is true authority exercised but in which there is no assumption of inequality. It is a society of equals pursuing a common goal under authority. It is the society described by Augustine in his writings on the Religious Community.

²²) Cf. *De civitate dei*, 14, 28; cf. Adolar ZUMKELLER, *Augustine's Ideal of the Religious Life*, trans. Edmund College (New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 1986), p. 236.

²³) MARKUS, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

IV. THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY AS AN EXAMPLE OF NATURAL AUTHORITY

The society exemplified in the Religious Community proposed by Augustine is a society of free, equal human beings gathered together under authority directing them to a common goal ... individual perfection in and through community life.

Several characteristics of this social structure are worth noting. First, there is present true authority to govern. The Rule written by Augustine for his communities is presented as a plan that *ought* to be followed by anyone who wishes membership. Individuals are free to join or not join, but once joining they are *not* free to ignore the precepts without fault. For example, Augustine stipulates that if members of the community fail in observance of Chastity and do not correct themselves, they are to be brought to the superior for judgment and punishment. The superior can even expel the malefactor if this is deemed necessary²⁴). The superior also has authority to organize the activities of the members towards the common good (e.g. in determining who will clean the clothes, who will do the cooking, etc.)²⁵). Indeed, the authority of the superior extends even to the private lives of the individuals, ordering them to do what is necessary for their physical health.

That this authority is true authority (the power to impose one's will on others) and not simply persuasive recommendations to friends is shown by Augustine's warning that the superior should not be too quick in apologizing for a harsh directive lest "by being too humble and submissive in your conduct towards these young people, then your authority, which they should be ready to accept, will be undermined"²⁶).

In Chapter 7 of the Rule, Augustine addresses the subjects in the society as follows:

Obey your superior as a father, but also give him due respect on account of his office, otherwise you offend God in him. This is even more true of the priest who bears responsibility for you all. It is primarily up to the superior to see that all that has been said here

²⁴) *The Rule of St. Augustine*, with introduction and commentary by Tarsicius J. Van Bavel, O.S.A., trans. by Raymond Canning, O.S.A. (Darton, Longman & Todd: London, 1984), c. 4, 11, p. 18. All references to the Augustine's Rule will be from this edition.

²⁵) *Ibid.*, c. 5, pp. 19 ff.

²⁶) *Ibid.*, c. 6, 3, p. 22.

is put into practice and that infringements are not carelessly overlooked. It is his duty to point out abuses and correct them. If something is beyond his competence and power, he should put the matter before the priest, whose authority in some respects is greater than his own²⁷).

The passage has a number of interesting implications. In the first place, although the superior is *like a father*, his claim to respect is *by reason of his office as superior*. Through that office he has received God-given authority to rule. It is not an authority that he has taken upon himself (as a slave-master) but an authority that is *given*. Secondly, the authority is specifically an executive authority to see to the accomplishment of the common good as this is described by the Rule. The Superior must see to it that all the members of the society carry out the duties that they have taken upon themselves by becoming members.

Under normal circumstances the rule should be based on "love" rather than fear. The only "domination" should be the domination of "love". Considering the wounds that have come from the fact of sin, it may be necessary to instill fear in the recalcitrant, but this domination by fear is caused not by the nature of the society itself but by the fact that it is composed of people already wounded by sin.

Even in communities less scarred by sin there is still true subordination of subject to superior but it is a subordination that is exercised in love. "The superior must not think himself fortunate in 'having power to lord it over you' (Luke 22: 25-6), but in 'the love with which he shall serve you' (Gal. 5: 13)". The goal of their rule is the good of the community and the good of the individuals that make it up. In working towards this goal they follow Paul's directions to "admonish the unruly, cheer the faint-hearted, support the weak, and be patient towards all (1 Thess. 5. 14)".

A third point worth noting about Augustine's description of Religious Community is that those ruled retain their identity and their equality as free humans before God. The purpose of their community is to live in one mind and heart as they make their way toward their eternal destiny²⁸). All members of the community are bound to observe the rules set down, but not as slaves living under law but as *free human beings* making their way towards their individual destiny under grace²⁹).

²⁷) *Ibid.*, c. 7, 1-2, p. 23.

²⁸) *Ibid.*, c. 1, 2, p. 2.

²⁹) *Ibid.*, c. 8, 1, p. 24.

It is obvious that the religious society of Augustine's Rule differs radically from the political society which is the State. Both are striving to create an environment of peace in which individuals can work to perfect themselves as humans but the State seeks their temporal good while the religious society seeks their spiritual good. Both the State and the Religious Community in fact exist in a world wounded by sin and both seek to overcome and control the effects of that sin, but the State is more concerned about controlling criminal actions while the Religious Community is more concerned about controlling disorderly desire (concupiscence). A further difference is that there is no natural need for the existence of formal Religious Communities. The State would have been needed (as argued above) even in the best of situations.

The example of the religious community gives no help in establishing the *need* of the State. It does help in establishing its possibility. Its example suggests that it is possible for a group of equal human beings to live in a society under authority where both the claim for and the exercise of that authority does not rest on the assumption of human sin. It suggests that such a society can flow from and be respectful of what is *best* in humans and not be present *simply* because of what is *worst* in them.

The model of the religious life helps to establish that the State could exist without perverse domination of human by human because the Religious Community is a society of equals in which there is yet a "natural" subordination of subject to superior based on an authority which is natural both in its acquisition and in its exercise.

In the first place, the claim for authority rests on freedom rather than on sin. Although Augustine has little if nothing to say about how superiors are to be chosen, it is clear from history that communities acting in his spirit have chosen superiors by choice of the community³⁰). It is not clear that in his day any superiors were "elected" in the modern sense of elections. And yet it remains true that the subjects were always free to accept that authority by staying in the community or rejecting it by leaving. The authority of the superior came from God and clearly not from the subjects. Still they subordinated themselves to that authority *freely* by choosing to remain

³⁰) Van Bavel suggests that the religious communities founded by Augustine had a more democratic structure (than other religious foundations of his day) because «in his experience the religious life developed out of a group of friends». *Ibid.*, p. 102. Thus the religious society was based on love while still being directed by authority.

in the society under that authority. Thus the source of the claim of this particular human to be superior over that particular human in Religious Community had nothing to do with human sinfulness. Rather, it rested on the most glorious natural gift given to human beings: the power of free choice.

Secondly, Augustine's description of the Religious Community indicates his belief that authority within a society of equals could not only be acquired "naturally" but also could be exercised "naturally". Authority could express itself through a loving domination in which the individuals were respected as equals before God and where the goal was to achieve the good of the community rather than any personal advantage or glory of the ruler.

In sum, Augustine's description of the Religious Community provides an example of a social structure in which true authority is exercised over equal human beings but where the authority does not assume sinfulness either in its origin or in its exercise.

V. CONCLUSION

The argument of this paper comes down to this. If Augustine was willing to admit that authority could be claimed and exercised in a human society (the Religious Community) in ways that had no assumption of human sin or perversity, there is no reason why he would not admit that necessary authority could be present to the State if that society was needed in Eden. If this is true, then the last obstacle is removed to asserting that Augustine's thought allows for calling the State a "natural society".

It is certainly true that in the real world the State is called upon to correct perversions more than to promote good. It is also true that the State in this world wounded by sin will always come up short because of the deficiencies of its members. But these factual defects do not obviate the "naturalness" of the State any more than the fact of divorce proves that the family is not a "natural society". Though humans may be cracked, friendship and the family and the State remain natural and necessary ways we have at hand to express our social nature.

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