

ST. AUGUSTINE AND POLITICAL THOUGHT

A Revisionist View

For those steeped in the rationalist tradition, the “political writings” of St. Augustine (354-430) will appear curious and perplexing.¹ Indeed, they suggest that Augustine was not so much a *political* thinker, but a theologian whose *religious* thought occasionally touched on matters of government and public life. It is not simply that he never wrote a treatise on politics or that his political remarks are unsystematic and scattered throughout his voluminous *oeuvre*. If the latter were true, “one might be able to reconstruct and expound methodically what could properly be regarded as Augustine’s political philosophy.”² Rather, Augustine’s thoughts on “politics” and “civil society” are so deeply rooted in a theological *weltanschauung* as to defy the name of philosophy. As Ernest Fortin notes, Augustine “never undertook a methodical treatment of political phenomena in the light of reason and experience alone. His highest principles are drawn not from reason but from Sacred Scripture, whose authority he never questions and which he regards as the final source of truth concerning man in general and political man in particular.”³ This distinctive feature of Augustine’s “approach” to politics — his methodological and normative reliance upon *revealed religion* — places his remarks in this area beyond the realm of political *theory* (or political *philosophy*), and squarely in the domain of political *theology*.⁴ As such, Augustine’s political *thought* (to use a generic term) “is

¹ There are two editions of Augustine’s “political writings” currently in print, *The Political Writings of St. Augustine*, ed., Henry Paolucci (Washington, D.C., 1962) and *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed., Ernest L. Fortin and Douglas Fries (Indianapolis, 1994).

² Ernest Fortin, “St. Augustine,” in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, eds., *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, 1987), 178.

³ Fortin, “St. Augustine,” 176.

⁴ Andrew Hacker draws a sharp distinction between “political theology” and “political science,” but claims that the former “has always been an acknowledged branch of political theory.” *Political Theory: Philosophy, Ideology, Science* (New York, 1961), 120. Hacker’s characterization raises the question: “acknowledged” by whom? Only the most general (and therefore empty) definition of political theory could encompass both Augustine’s theological politics and the ancient and modern classics.

comprehensible only in the dramatic-historical mode of apprehension which characterizes biblical faith."⁵

The forgoing picture suggests that for all his greatness and influence as a theologian, the student of political theory may politely bypass Augustine for lack of jurisdiction. (Such a verdict, I hasten to add, does not issue from the mere *presence* of religious elements in his political thought — nearly all the classics contain these in some form — but from their unmistakable *preponderance*.) Why, then, does Augustine invariably find a place (sometimes a prominent one) in the standard histories of political thought? Why is he commonly referred to as a political "philosopher," a political "theorist," even a political "scientist"? Is it, perhaps, due to the Bishop's musings on political life in the late Roman Empire? His conception of an ideal state? His reflections on social arrangements and political structures?

Oddly, Augustine's reputation as a political thinker rests upon no such foundations. "He did not," it has been observed, "set out to produce a theory of the State. There is no discussion of the merits of the various forms of government".⁶ Even the classic *City of God* (said to contain the core of Augustine's political thought) "is written from [a] theological perspective ... [and] is not concerned with politics as such and for its own sake ..."⁷ Moreover, "at no point in his voluminous work does Augustine ... talk about specific social and political arrangements ... political, social, economic, and cultural arrangements — are deliberately eschewed ..."⁸ Nor does he bother to "prescribe[] a particular form of government,"⁹ or consider "the question of how a given system of rule can be changed so as to make it more just or more satisfactory."¹⁰ Indeed, "the basic themes of political philosophy, such as the concepts of the state, or of political obligation, were never the central objects of Augustine's interests ..."¹¹

⁵ Reinhold Niebhur, "Augustine's Political Realism," in *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York, 1965); reprinted John Downton, ed., *Perspectives in Political Philosophy*, vol. 1 (New York, 1971) 245.

⁶ John N. Figgis, *The Political Aspects of St. Augustine's "City of God"* (Gloucester, Mass., 1963), 66.

⁷ Hiram Caton, "St. Augustine's Critique of Politics," *New Scholasticism*, 47 (1973), 439.

⁸ Dorothy F. Donnelly, "The *City of God* and Utopia: A Reevaluation," *Augustinian Studies*, 8 (1977), 121.

⁹ John East, "The Political Relevance of St. Augustine," *Modern Age*, 16 (1972), 173.

¹⁰ Herbert A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York, 1963), 241.

¹¹ R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge, Eng., 1970), 97.

These omissions — the very stuff of politics — tend to reinforce the conclusion that Augustine “is writing theology rather than political philosophy,”¹² and that his “explicit remarks in this area constitute no clear body of ‘political thought’.”¹³ This finding is strengthened by Augustine’s radical devaluation of “the political” — a devaluation expressed in a decidedly “negative” view of the state and public life in general. In this capacity, Augustine may indeed represent a major figure in the history of *anti*-political thought, but not in the history of political philosophy.¹⁴

How, then, does one account for his *de facto* place in the latter? A misunderstanding? Special pleading? Or perhaps something else? Christopher Morris is one of the few commentators to sense the need for an explanation.

No paradox in the history of political thought is more striking than that presented by St. Augustine of Hippo. He has been immensely influential in that history and he was, in one sense, a very great political philosopher. And yet no major western thinker has gone nearer to rejecting politics altogether.¹⁵

Morris correctly identifies the “paradox” surrounding Augustine’s status as a political thinker, but he fails to resolve the tension between perception and reality. In fact, his characterization of Augustine as “a very great political thinker” who was near to “rejecting politics altogether,” only recapitulates the paradox. Accordingly, we must look elsewhere for an answer. One explanation has already been offered, but it may be prudent to consult the views of those who have reserved an honorable place for Augustine in the annals of political thought. In particular, it will be useful to consider these views as they related to the alleged relevance, legacy, and value of his political ideas.

¹² Peter J. Burnell, “The Status of Politics in St. Augustine’s *City of God*,” *History of Political Thought*, 13 (1992), 26.

¹³ Markus, *Saeculum*, 73. Peter Barthory’s claim that Augustine’s “positive political teaching” is actually “implicit in [his] seemingly nonpolitical language” is a tacit (if unintended) corroboration of this observation. *Political Theory as Public Confession: The Social and Political Thought of St. Augustine of Hippo* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1981), xii.

¹⁴ Rex Martin, who refers to Augustine as a “political philosopher,” observes that in relation to the classical tradition Augustine “can be said to have written an anti-politics.” “The Two Cities in Augustine’s Political Philosophy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 33 (1972), 216.

¹⁵ Christopher Morris, *Western Political Thought: Plato to Augustine* (New York, 1967), 208.

ST. AUGUSTINE AND REALISM

At the broadest level, there is a general consensus that Augustine made a major contribution to the school of political realism. He has even been called "the first great 'realist' in western history."¹⁶ While Thucydides would surely contest this honor, Augustine may be duly numbered among the representatives of the realist tradition. Generally speaking, "realism" expresses itself in a healthy skepticism regarding the abilities of political communities to realize and sustain an "ideal" state of affairs. Whether conceived as a condition of "justice" in the *polis* or "perpetual peace" among nations, realists instinctively eschew all "visionary" thinking in politics. Instead, realists emphasize the "facts" of political life, the need for pragmatism, and the virtue of prudence. Justice and peace are certainly among the proper ends of politics, but all experience confirms that justice can only be approximate and peace temporary. Social progress remains possible, but it is neither inevitable nor always an unmixed blessing. More fundamentally, no political innovation or material advance is capable of ridding the world of conflict and coercion, violence and misery. The root cause of such perennial ills — *human nature* — is simply not susceptible to a "political" cure. Accordingly, most realists tend to view the role of government in limited and concrete terms. From this perspective, *imprudent* or *unrealistic* expectations regarding the nature of power, the motives of rulers, and the function of government represent the essence of political folly.

Augustine's "political thought" appears to comport well with this description of realism. He was certainly no utopian. Indeed, the *City of God* may be fairly characterized as "a mandate against utopianizing ... a rejection of the utopian mode of thought."¹⁷ Nor did he have any illusions about the nature of political power or the capacity of government to render men just or content. Augustine never denies that justice and peace are the true ends of civil society, but he believes that they are incapable of ever being truly realized writ large. To think otherwise would be to blindly ignore the untoward realities of human nature, which Augustine identifies as the ultimate and ineradicable source of all social ills. Accordingly, "[i]f anything positive is to come out of human government, then men must set limited political goals for themselves."¹⁸

This brief summary appears to leave little doubt regarding

¹⁶ Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," 244.

¹⁷ Donnelly, "City of God and Utopia," 123.

¹⁸ Hacker, *Political Theory*, 127-128.

Augustine's "realist" credentials. On closer inspection, however, his credentials are less than impeccable. At one level, Augustine's realism is simply lacking in specificity. His "political writings" are not only devoid of maxims on statecraft, they exhibit (as noted above) an almost complete indifference to political forms, structures, and principles. "As far as this mortal life is concerned," Augustine writes, "... what difference does it make for a man who is soon to die, under what ruler he lives, if only the rulers do not force him to commit unholy and unjust acts."¹⁹ While the final clause is a notable qualification, few realists, I suspect, would endorse such a glib attitude towards the outward forms of political power. Nor would they likely embrace the main implication of this view: an absence of any tangible restraints on the exercise of political power.

Here we encounter a genuine paradox in Augustine's "political" thought: he restricts the *role* of government to preserving order and punishing wrong-doers, but places no real limits on governments' *power*. There would be no necessary contradiction if Augustine's position rested on *prudential* grounds; e.g., that such restrictions would hamstring the state in pursuing its limited task. He offers no such rationale however. Rather, he simply ignores the issue of what constitutes legitimate (or illegitimate) uses of state power. This crucial oversight is strikingly reflected in Augustine's doctrine of civil disobedience. For Augustine, *de facto* rulers and regimes are owed an unconditional obedience in all matters of government and public life. Even a patently oppressive regime — "wicked and most vicious though it be" — must be obeyed!²⁰ God, the source of all earthly power, determines who shall wield the sword, and it is not within the competence of any subject to question His purpose. Moreover, resistance to established power can only result in disorder, and disorder is liable to end in anarchy. Accordingly, civil disobedience has no moral authority for Augustine and no subject can claim immunity from punishment for violating even the most unjust laws.²¹

¹⁹ *Quantum enim pertinet ad hanc vitam mortalium ... quid interest sub cuius imperio vivat homo mortiturus, si illi qui imperant ad impia non cogant?* Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, vol. 2, trans. William M. Green (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), V:17.

²⁰ *tolerare Christi famuli iubentur ... etiam pessimam, si ita neccesse est, flagitiosissimamque rem publicam ...* Augustine, *City of God*, vol. 1, trans. George E. McCracken (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), II:19.

²¹ As Morris notes, Augustine's doctrine of passive obedience "deprives the subject of what is so often his best weapon against oppressive government, for he cannot argue that an oppressor, being unjust, has forfeited his right to rule ... Nor can the oppressed appeal to any natural rights or natural law. 'Nature' in that sense was abrogated by the Fall." *Western Political Thought*, 234-235.

That Augustine admirer's find such features of his "realism" regrettable goes without saying. An otherwise well-disposed Reinhold Niebuhr acknowledges that "Augustine's realism was indeed excessive." So excessive, in fact, that "[o]n the basis of his principles he could not distinguish between government and slavery ... between a commonwealth and a robber band ..."²² As noted above, this fatal flaw, this "shocking realism"²³ is directly attributable to Augustine's "failure to recognize the difference between legitimate and illegitimate, between the ordinate and inordinate subordination of man to man."²⁴ The implications of this failure have already been suggested. In short, "Augustine allows no scope for any limitations of [a ruler's] power by his subjects or for any disobedience or resistance to his commands."²⁵ In the absence of such provisions, Augustine effectively reduces the parameters of political life to maintaining order and rendering obedience. In such a polity, "[t]here is to be no talk of human rights or justice or liberty or rule of law as being the ends of government."²⁶

The foregoing observations confirm that Augustine was a "realist" of a peculiar stripe. His failure to meaningfully distinguish legitimate from illegitimate authority suggests that he might be better described as a "positivist." His doctrine of passive obedience — that even despots and usurpers must be obeyed — points to the resigned submission of the "quietist." His deep pessimism regarding the powers and prospects of mankind implies that Augustine might reasonably be called a "fatalist" as well. The plausibility of such attributions does not speak to the matter of inconsistency, although he is certainly open to the charge.²⁷ In this instance, however, it underscores the highly ambiguous nature of Augustine's contribution to the realist tradition.

²² Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," 247.

²³ Herbert A. Deane, "Classical and Christian Political Thought," *Political Theory*, 1 (1973), 423.

²⁴ Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," 248-249.

²⁵ Deane, *Ideas of St. Augustine*, 143.

²⁶ Hacker, *Political Theory*, 128. Peter Burnell attempts to mitigate such judgments in, "The Problem of Service to Unjust Regimes in Augustine's *City of God*," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 54 (1993), 177-188.

²⁷ As Morris observes, "Augustine's view of secular society is by no means consistent." *Western Political Thought*, 224. Burnell notes that "he constantly changed his mind on the matter" of civil life. "St. Augustine's *City of God*," 13. Figgis also acknowledges the Bishop's "inconsistencies." *Augustine's "City of God"*, 7. In fairness, the charge of inconsistency rests in part on differences in the "early" and "mature" Augustine. In general, his "political thought" became less "classical" and more "Christian," less sanguine and more pessimistic with the passing of time. See Markus, *Saeculum*, 72-104.

ST. AUGUSTINE AND THE STATE

The unattractive features of Augustine's "realism" have not prevented scholars from finding a silver lining in some aspect or implication thereof. A number have divined in Augustine's reconceptualization of the state a contribution to political theory of the first order. Rejecting the classical idea that justice is an essential component of a *res publica*, Augustine redefined the state in morally *neutral* terms. Conversely, by sharply demarcating the status and functions of church and state, he radically *secularized* the body politic. The result, it has been said, was "an entirely new concept of the state."²⁸ Whether this "new concept" represents an advance on the classical idea is, however, less clear. Edward Hardy maintains that Augustine "deserves credit for providing a basis for Christian criticism of the State by defining it objectively." Yet he "would have done more justice to his own thought," Hardy admits, if he had conceived the state in morally indeterminate rather than morally neutral terms.²⁹ Niebuhr considers Augustine "a more reliable guide than any known thinker,"³⁰ but concedes that the bishop was unable to distinguish proper authority from sheer force. Hiram Caton observes that Augustine's "descacralization" of politics argues against theocratic government, but sees in his "denial of the moral sovereignty of the state" the specter of Machiavelli and Hobbes.³¹

While examples of this kind could be multiplied, they all indicate that Augustine's famous redefinition of the state — his "most important political contribution"³² — is fraught with difficulties. We have already identified the source of the trouble in Augustine's failure to place limits on state action, his indifference to political forms, and his doctrine of passive obedience. More to the point, Augustine's generic definition of the state is little more than a commonplace; a frank recognition of "[t]he structure of

²⁸ D. J. MacQueen, "The Origin and Dynamics of Society and the State According to St. Augustine," *Augustinian Studies*, 4 (1973), 88. Others have characterized Augustine's generic definition of the state as though he approached the subject as a modern political scientist. Figgis writes, "His sense of reality led him to prefer a definition which would include all existing and historical communities, and hampered as little as possible by an abstract ideal." *Augustine's "City of God,"* 63.

²⁹ Edward R. Hardy, Jr., "The City of God," in Roy W. Battenhouse, ed., *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine* (New York, 1955), 275, 279.

³⁰ Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," 257.

³¹ Caton, "Augustine's Critique of Politics," 457.

³² George J. Lavere, "The Influence of Saint Augustine on Early Medieval Political Theory," *Augustinian Studies*, 12 (1981), 9.

political society, its vested order of command and obedience ..." For Augustine, "[s]uch an order just happens among fallen men. Largely because he feels he can take it for granted, Augustine can dismiss it."³³ It would go too far to say that Augustine was indifferent to the *quality* of the social order. Yet in defining this order in exclusively *religious* terms, he was able to evade a perennial concern of political philosophy: the role of politics and government in shaping the character of social life. This abdication may have been theologically sound, but it hardly recommends Augustine as a political thinker. Indeed, in severing "the good life" from the realm of politics, in stripping the state of its ethical significance, Augustine committed "a deplorable error for a great Christian teacher."³⁴

ST. AUGUSTINE'S "POLITICS": INFLUENCE

The ambivalence which characterizes discussions of Augustine's political ideas suggests that his significance as a political thinker must reside elsewhere — either in the historical influence or the implications of his "politics." Augustine's influence on subsequent political thought has attracted scant attention from scholars, and would in any case be difficult to trace through the "dark ages" and beyond. George Laveré, however, has identified early pontiffs Gelasius I (492-498) and Gregory the Great (590-604), as well as churchman-scholar Isidore of Seville (560-636) as "neo-Augustinian" political theorists.³⁵ Or has he? Laveré's equivocal account leaves the reader wondering whether Gelasius, Gregory, and Isidore actually developed or *departed* from Augustine's political ideas. "In marked contrast to Augustine's views," Laveré writes, the neo-Augustinians "tended to draw the state into the Church, even to the point of absorbing the functions of the state by the Church." Gelasius may be said to have followed Augustine by clearly distinguishing secular from sacred, princely from priestly authority.³⁶ Yet because of inconsistencies and imprecision, Gelasius' doctrine of the "Two Swords" was nebulous in

³³ P. R. L. Brown, "St. Augustine," in Beryl Smalley, ed., *Trends in Medieval Political Thought* (Oxford, 1965), 14.

³⁴ A. J. Carlyle, "St. Augustine," in F. J. C. Hearnshaw, ed., *The Social and Political Ideas of Some Great Mediaeval Thinkers* (London, 1923), 51.

³⁵ Laveré, "Influence of Saint Augustine," 3.

³⁶ The deeply dualistic nature of Augustine's thought — theological and political — had a profound influence on the Christian mind throughout the Middle Ages. As Morris writes, "[h]e was as much responsible as anyone for the dualistic pattern of most medieval thought, for the habit of thinking of everything in terms of pairs." *Western Political Thought*, 236.

its implications: it could be read to sanction the separateness and complementarity of temporal and ecclesiastical power, "or, alternatively, to assert the ultimate supremacy of the clerical over the lay power ..."³⁷

If Gelasius was ultimately ambiguous regarding the temporal role of the *ecclesia*, Gregory I "considerably reinforced and expanded" the "tendency to involve and often confuse secular authority and papal authority ..."³⁸ Like Gelasius, Gregory agrees with Augustine that all political power comes from God, and that religious officials are subject to secular authority. Yet in contrast to Augustine, who minimized the role of the state in realizing a fully Christianized society, Gregory tended to blur the functions and ends of the "two cities," particularly in his dealings with the Germanic kingdoms in the west. Indeed, as Laverre acknowledges, the pope's numerous interventions on behalf of the Church "drew the center of political power into an inextricable amalgamation with ecclesiastical power."³⁹ How, then, is it possible to speak of Gregory as a "neo-Augustinian" in politics when his conduct "eventually reduced secular rulers to political vassals of the pope"? As we have seen, Laverre does so in spite of himself. R. A. Markus, on the other hand, has recognized a "profound difference between Gregory and Augustine," based in part on the former's tendency to collapse distinctions between lay and clerical power.⁴⁰ Given the growing authority of the papacy and the increasing role of churchmen in public functions, Gregory's conflation of the "Two Swords" was a predicable response to historical circumstances. As Markus writes, "Gregory's Church was so closely integrated into the administrative structure of the Empire and this dispensation was so readily accepted by the bishops and popes that questions such as those that had agitated the age of Gelasius could now scarcely arise."⁴¹

With the Church firmly ensconced in the City of Man, Augustine's ambivalence regarding the relation between lay and clerical authority could be abandoned in favor of a more positive conception in which the state was expected to actively support the official Church and Church officials expected to have a hand in governance.⁴² By the sixth century it could be

³⁷ R. A. Markus, "The Latin Fathers," in J. H. Burns, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c.350-c.1450* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988), 102

³⁸ Laverre, "Influence of St. Augustine," 2.

³⁹ Laverre, "Influence of St. Augustine," 4.

⁴⁰ Markus, "Latin Fathers," 120.

⁴¹ Markus, "Latin Fathers," 117.

⁴² In truth, this "positive conception" was already taking shape in Augustine's own day, and there are glimpses of it in his writings. As Bathory notes, "[t]he world of the Christian bishop had by the time of Augustine become closely aligned with that of the Roman bureaucrat. From the time of Constantius (336 to 361 A.D.), bishops had joined

taken for granted that rulers would be (at least nominally) Christians, that orthodox believers would no longer suffer persecution by the state, and that churchmen would play an important role in temporal affairs. Whether Augustine would have approved of the latter remains a matter of dispute. It is one thing for secular rulers to support the Church and defend true religion, but quite another for ecclesiastics to exercise political power directly. Even the former practice, Augustine notes, is not a *defining* function of the state: "the 'function' of a political system as such is limited to cowing the vicious into respect for law ..." ⁴³ His successors, however, were led to infer that "the state exists precisely in order to maintain specific values, to preserve the true ends of loves dictated by the Christian religion." Yet it is clear that "Augustine did not draw this conclusion in the *City of God* ..." ⁴⁴ Hence the claim that Gelasius, Gregory, and Isidore were "neo-Augustinian" political thinkers is, as Lavere concedes, a "tenuous" one, for "they failed to carry over and preserve Augustine's most important political contribution — his political realism based upon the concept of the state as secular." ⁴⁵

The ambiguity of Augustine's influence on the political *praxis* of the Middle Ages is widely recognized among his expositors, who are often at pains to distinguish Augustine's "politics" from "political Augustinianism." ⁴⁶ As suggested above, the bishop's lack of clarity and consistency regarding church-state relations created a double tendency

'the bureaucrats as members of the new governing class' [*pace* Peter Brown]. Even more important, they had also become local administrators. Though Augustine's public position was less exalted than the powerful positions of his medieval successors, his place in the ebb and flow of local political issues was unchallenged. With little notice, he became city judge, and his decisions — now bound with civil law — carried far more authority than those of his predecessors who had relied on church law and apostolic tradition." *Political Theory as Public Confession*, 1. There is also, of course, the matter of Augustine's (reluctant) support for suppression of heresy by the state. Moreover, there are passages in Augustine that are amenable to "theocratic" constructions. See *City of God*, II:19, 21, IV:3; *Letters*, CXXXIII:5, 8, CXXXIII:9-15; and *On Psalms*, LXI:6.

⁴³ John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge, Eng., 1994), 226.

⁴⁴ Brown, "Saint Augustine," 16. George Sabine underscores this same point: "It would be easy to infer ... that the state must logically become merely the 'secular arm' of the church, but the inference is not necessary and the circumstances were such that Augustine could not possibly have drawn it." *A History of Political Theory*, 4th ed. (Hinsdale, Ill., 1973), 185.

⁴⁵ Lavere, "Influence of Saint Augustine," 9. See also R.A. Markus, "The Sacred and the Secular: From Augustine to Gregory the Great," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 36 (1985), 84-96.

⁴⁶ I leave the question of whether this distinction is plausible to the reader. The issue is oddly reminiscent of the well-worn debate over the relationship between Marxism and Leninism.

developed by his successors — one culminating in Luther's "unqualified endorsement of state power,"⁴⁷ the other in the canonists' doctrine "that the empire ought to be run by bishops with the pope at their head."⁴⁸ One scholar has traced this sharp antithesis to a "fundamental inconsistency" between Augustine's (formal) analysis of the state and his assertion (sparked by the Donatist controversy) that secular rulers are obliged to suppress heresy and schismatics.⁴⁹ Others have discovered in Augustine's "desacralization" of public authority the seeds of medieval theocracy.⁵⁰ Some have even argued that his "«secularization» of the realm of politics implies a pluralistic, religiously neutral civil community."⁵¹ The precise nature of Augustine's "influence" — its weight and direction — will, of course, never be known. What is clear, however, is that his impact on political thinking in the millennium following his death was indirect and deeply ambivalent. As the author of the leading study of Augustine's political ideas writes, "[p]erhaps the most important and enduring influence that Augustine exerted on medieval political thought stems from a misinterpretation of his teaching."⁵² Insofar as this legacy may be ascribed to deficiencies in Augustine's own writings, it argues against his prominent place in the canon of political classics. Nor is such a place warranted by his influence on the modern era, for the *City of God* "seems not to have attracted the attention of any principal modern political thinker."⁵³

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, "Augustine's Political Realism," 247.

⁴⁸ Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford, 1986), 105.

⁴⁹ Sabine asserts that "what he put beyond question for many centuries was the conception that, under the new dispensation, the state must be a Christian state ..." *History of Political Theory*, 186. John Bowle affirms that St. Augustine "insists ... that the State must be closely bound up with the Christian Church," and "points the way" to theocracy. *Western Political Thought* (New York, 1948), 138. Caton, on the other hand, maintains that for Augustine "[a] Christian state is a contradiction in terms." "Augustine's Critique of Politics," 453. See also Ernst Barker, "Introduction," in R. V. G. Tasker, ed., *The City of God* (London, 1945), xxxiv-xxxvi.

⁵⁰ Deane, *Ideas of St. Augustine*, 228.

⁵¹ Markus, *Saeculum*, 173. See also Burnell, "St. Augustine's *City of God*," 13-29.

⁵² Deane, *Ideas of St. Augustine*, 232. Ironically, Augustine had a personal hand in the distortion of his views when he authorized a young priest to compile a history vindicating the Christian (Augustinian) view of human events. In contrast to the position charted in *The City of God* (XV-XVIII), Orosius "wrote as though church, empire, and heavenly city could be identified in one confused mishmash." The subsequent popularity of Orosius' "universal history" has been identified as the first episode in "the medieval misrepresentation of Augustine ..." James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine* (Boston, 1985), 55.

⁵³ Caton, "Augustine's Critique of Politics," 433. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who is frequently mentioned in connection with Augustine's "politics," is perhaps a qualified exception. There are, on face, some striking similarities between the two thinkers, although Augustine's actual influence on Hobbes was probably negligible. See Deane,

ST. AUGUSTINE'S "POLITICS": IMPLICATIONS

It may still be that Augustine's true significance as a political thinker rests not with his influence, but in the broader implications or contemporary relevance of his thought. We have already touched upon this dimension, but it bears closer scrutiny. First, there is little doubt that Augustine's realism has its positive aspects. Whether expressed in hostility to civic utopianism or in the demystification of the state, Augustine's stark view of power and politics is a useful corrective to all forms of unfounded idealism.⁵⁴ Such a view might result in the cynicism of Machiavelli or the absolutism of Hobbes, or it might inform that higher political wisdom found in Hume, "Publius", and Burke.

Second, there is value and relevance in Augustine's recognition of the limited (spiritual and ethical) significance of politics as an activity and of the political realm as such. Recent demands for a "politics of meaning" notwithstanding, few contemporaries would deny that "political life is incapable of exhausting the full range of human possibilities or satisfying completely man's longing for wholeness."⁵⁵ Alternatively, Augustine's reduction of the state to its essential attributes and delimitation of its ends made room for what another anti-political thinker called "a world that is again fairly independent of the welfare of the state ..."⁵⁶ For Augustine this is the Church-centered world of Christian faith and piety. By extension, however, it is the world of *civil society*, separate and distinct from the state. The enormous significance of this concept in the development of Anglo-American liberalism hardly requires comment. It is notable, therefore, that in conjunction with his "negative" view of the state, Augustine's sharp division between *saeculum* and the sacred vaguely adumbrated modern theories of limited government, church-state separation, and civil society. That these theories were developed in connection with the revival of paganism (Machiavelli), the Reformation

Ideas of St. Augustine, 234-237.

⁵⁴ See East who finds in Augustine's realism "an indispensable inoculant against modern statism, fascist, communist, or liberal." Augustine, East writes, teaches that "governments must resist the ever present temptation to be the promoter and provider of the good life, for that inexorably means government will become the hard taskmaster of the utopians." "Relevance of St. Augustine," 173.

⁵⁵ Ernest Fortin, *Political Idealism and Christianity in the Thought of St. Augustine* (Villanova, Pa., 1972), 35.

⁵⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator [1874]," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, Eng., 1983), 148.

(Luther, Calvin), religious toleration (Locke, Jefferson), and market capitalism (Hume, Adam Smith) is not without historical irony.⁵⁷

Such associations are always subject to a number of judicious qualifications. At the level of theory and inference, however, Augustine's leading political ideas are susceptible to various extrapolations. More to the point, if Augustine is to truly "live" as a political thinker, if his significance is to transcend purely historical or antiquarian interest, extrapolation is necessary.⁵⁸ A number of Augustine's expositors appear to tacitly recognize this injunction by their efforts to identify "relevant," "progressive," or "illuminating" aspects of his political thought. Whether such efforts can be ascribed to a desire to "save Augustine from himself" is not particularly important. It is, however, appropriate to consider the merit of these claims. Unfortunately, peculiarities in Augustine's "political thought" often make this a difficult task. As history and recent scholarship illustrate, Augustine's scattered and unsystematic "political" remarks are capable of multiple constructions. Yet amidst this very confusion lies the answer to the riddle of the bishop's "paradoxical" politics: that the double tendency of his influence and divergent readings of his "politics" are all rooted in the radical *indeterminacy* of his own thought.

First, Augustine's relative indifference to political doctrines, forms, and institutions leaves the vital question of actual governance up for grabs: nothing is proscribed, nothing is prescribed, except the basic purpose of the state, which is to provide order, keep the peace, and defend the realm. Such a limited role is obviously compatible with a *polis* or an empire, a republic or a monarchy, a Christian or a pagan state. Second, Augustine's austere doctrine of passive obedience makes political obligation consistent with any *de facto* government. Citizens or subjects (including clerics) simply owe obedience to existing public authority, regardless of its particular configuration. Finally, Augustine's belief that "the quality of a

⁵⁷ Beyond the secular thrust of modernism which is fundamentally at odds with Augustine's religious and eschatological outlook, the actual character of a truly Christian society as envisaged by the bishop would look very different from a pluralist or liberal one. As Rist notes, his ideal "would be a community of households, transparent to one another and living without guile, centering their lives on the Christian basilica. There would be minimal 'public' or 'secular' space in such a city: no theatres, no shows, no circuses, but adequate bread distributed by honest Christian officials." *Augustine*, 254.

⁵⁸ Recent exercises in "applied" Augustinianism include, Graham Walker, *Moral Foundations of Constitutional Thought: Current Modes, Augustinian Prospects* (Princeton, 1990); William E. Connolly, *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality* (London, 1993); and Jean B. Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame, 1995). See also Edgar H. Brookes, *The City of God and the Politics of Crisis* (New York, 1960).

state ultimately depends upon the values of its members,"⁵⁹ reduced to irrelevancy the traditional concern for institutions and regime types.⁶⁰ The assertion that the values of rulers and ruled, their loves and hates, will strongly influence the quality of society, irrespective of its political institutions, is indeed a truism.⁶¹ Yet unlike the ancients and moderns, Augustine failed to integrate this insight into a positive political framework.⁶² Aristotle was keenly aware of how a people's *ethos* shapes its *politeia*, but he also recognized how a constitution shapes public values. "Publius" acknowledged that "a dependence on the people is no doubt the primary control of the government," but he did not overlook "the necessity of auxiliary precautions."⁶³ Augustine failed to make such crucial distinctions, and as a result his "political thought" remained dangerously *indeterminate* in both its normative and empirical implications.

The conclusion that indeterminacy is the hallmark of Augustine's "politics" (and at the root of his peculiar legacy) is indirectly supported by a number of his commentators. For example, Morris notes that Augustine draws "[n]o clear distinction ... between an outwardly Christian and a pagan state. Both, being earthly, are highly imperfect. Neither can provide true justice. But both can provide a certain relative or approximate justice. Moreover, kings, including pagan or tyrannical kings, may provide this rough justice and may thereby serve God's purpose."⁶⁴ Conversely, Markus observes that Augustine's views are "compatible with almost any political programme which does not set itself up as an ideology with

⁵⁹ Brown, "Saint Augustine," 16.

⁶⁰ As Norman Baynes notes, "[t]o Augustine forms of government are really irrelevant: the character of the State is determined by the character of the citizens who compose the State." "The Political Ideas of St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*," in *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London, 1955), 305.

⁶¹ Despite the presence of this idea in Plato and Aristotle, if is often treated as an innovation of Augustine's, who is credited with having redefined civil society in terms of "love" instead of "justice." Originality aside, it is not immediately apparent that his "redefinition" represents an advance in political thought. It may be that a society's values "give a better clue to its character than do its constitutions or systems of justice or formal declarations," but the latter are also expressions of values which, for better or worse, shape the character of society. Anthony J. Parel, "Justice and Love in the Political Thought of St. Augustine," in Hugo A. Meynell, ed., *Grace, Desire, and Politics: Essays on Augustine* (Calgary, 1990), 75.

⁶² Alexander Hamilton makes this very point in his gloss on Alexander Pope's famous couplet: "For forms of government let fools contest/ Whate'er is best administered, is best." A good administration may be "the true test of good government," but an indifference to forms is nothing short of "political heresy." (*Federalist* No. 68).

⁶³ James Madison, *Federalist* No. 51.

⁶⁴ Morris, *Western Political Thought*, 230.

absolute claims upon men's loyalties."⁶⁵ Such characterizations suggest that Augustine's political commitments were, if not wholly indeterminate, essentially of a *contingent* nature. This is particularly evident in the wide range of church-state relations compatible with Augustine's definitions and principles. At one end of the spectrum, a ruler may "legitimately disestablish Christianity and punish worship as a civil offense."⁶⁶ Because rulers govern with the assent of a God who is often inscrutable in purpose, even religious persecution must be tolerated.⁶⁷ In such cases, Christians should hold fast to their faith and resist enforced idolatry, but they must not attempt to overthrow the ruler.

Augustine also allows for a more or less complete separation of church and state. Here the state's relation to the *ecclesia* is neither marked by hostility nor support, but by neutrality or indifference. In this scenario, the "temporal state is distinguished not by its political structures and social arrangements but rather by whether it fulfills the standard that those 'who govern do not force [subjects] to impiety and iniquity'."⁶⁸ Augustine can also be read to endorse a more positive position; e.g., that the state "can and should preserve the Church's outward peace and unity."⁶⁹ Even if such a policy is pursued for purely mundane reasons, it is a fortuitous boon for pilgrims of the heavenly city. Finally, it is possible that rulers will be sincere Christians who "make their power a servant to the divine Majesty ... [and] spread the worship of God far and wide."⁷⁰ In this sense, "the character of the state is dependent upon the moral and religious commitment of its rulers."⁷¹ Augustine implies that "Christian Emperors" are a blessing to the body politic, and may even signify a pledge of divine favor. Yet as events in his own lifetime tragically proved, a godly prince

⁶⁵ Markus, *Saeculum*, 172. Rist makes much the same point: "If the Emperor happened to be a Christian, he would have the opportunity to act firmly, effectively and deliberately for the glory of God; if he were a pagan, he would not, of course, promote the interests of a Christian society directly, but his mere imposition of order and [peace] would providentially allow the good to thrive, or at least to remain alive and in greater security." *Augustine*, 229.

⁶⁶ Caton, "Augustine's Critique of Politics," 455.

⁶⁷ Ernest Troeltsch has suggested that Augustine entertained this scenario because "he wanted room for the possibility of irreligious Emperors (regarded as a visitation of God and a punishment of sin), and for the moral rejection of the powers that be in so far as they did not allow themselves to be guided by divine righteousness." Quoted in Barker, "Introduction," xxxv.

⁶⁸ Donnelly, "City of God and Utopia," 122; citing Augustine, *City of God*, V:17.

⁶⁹ Morris, *Western Political Thought*, 233.

⁷⁰ *suam potestatem ad Dei cultum maxime dilatandum maiestati eius famulam faciunt.* Augustine, *City of God*, V:24.

⁷¹ Lavere, "Influence of Saint Augustine," 9.

does not guarantee the welfare or security of the nation."⁷² The vital point, however, concerns Augustine's capacity to accommodate each of these configurations within his "political thought," thereby underscoring its essentially *indeterminate* or *contingent* nature. In itself the concept of indeterminacy is supremely important; it is an assumption at the root of all normative and empirical enquiry in politics. Yet its place in Augustine (as opposed to Aristotle, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, or Burke) is invidious, because it fails to delimit (or even identify) the range of *possible*, *preferred*, or *tolerable* political arrangements. Simply put, Augustine "is insufficiently aware and insufficiently precise about the problem of what means are acceptable in pursuit of desirable ends in public life ..."⁷³ He does provide a basis for preferring Christian rulers and an official Church, but shows no further interest in charting the relation between political values and temporal welfare. Some of the historical and theoretical consequences of this indifference have been noted. The implications for Augustine's status as a political thinker has also been suggested. Indeed, both indicate that the sum of his positive political philosophy can be reduced to a basic formula.

To the degree that a political society promoted peace it was good; to the degree that it embodied a well-ordered concord among its members it was even better; to the extent that it encouraged a Christian life and avoided conflict in loyalties between religious and political obligations, it had fulfilled its role within the universal scheme.⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

As with any attempt at "revision" in the history of ideas, the preceding account of Augustine's political thought is likely to draw its share of criticism. Yet even his admirers acknowledge that Augustine can be spoken of as a political thinker in only the most qualified sense. It is also widely recognized that his scattered reflections on government and public authority are often inconsistent and at times morally dubious. Such admissions have not, however, deterred sympathetic scholars from treating

⁷² As Figgis' notes, Augustine's assertion that even Christian leadership is ultimately incapable of successfully mediating between the Two Cities marks "the final repudiation of the old views, as much Jewish as pagan, that temporal felicity follows the service of the true God — alike for the individual and the nation." *Augustine's "City of God."* 9.

⁷³ Rist, *Augustine*, 235.

⁷⁴ Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston, 1960), 125.

Augustine as an important political philosopher.⁷⁵ Yet this Augustine often bears slight resemblance to the African bishop who described the City of Man as "this hell on earth," viewed slavery as punishment for sin, and denied that tyrants may be resisted or cashiered. Rather, we frequently find a *hellenized* or a *modernized* Augustine, a "demon-free" Augustine, indeed, a "political theorist" who would be fully capable of engaging Aristotle or Rousseau in conversation. Does not Augustine's place in the canon of political thought assume this very ability? Yet such a conversation is only possible if the discussants share an understanding of the parameters of political discourse. As a "political" thinker, Augustine draws his first principles from revealed religion (Holy Scripture) and his entire orientation toward the social world is inspired by an eschatological vision. It is therefore difficult to imagine Augustine comfortably discoursing with classical and modern political thinkers, whose first principles are predominantly secular, rationalist, and naturalistic. The lack of a common tongue in this area indicates not merely a difference in degree, but a difference in *kind* — the difference between *philosophy* and *theology*. This is hardly to say that Christianity (or religion) is incompatible with the former.⁷⁶ Yet unlike John of Salisbury, Thomas Aquinas, and latter Christian thinkers, Augustine did not attempt to harmonize revelation and reason, theology and natural philosophy in the realm of politics. Rather he turned away from the temporal and man-centered values which are the special province of political theory. For this reason, above all others, even Augustine's "most considered reflections on political society ... are no more than the anxious questioning of a shadow."⁷⁷

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⁷⁵ In addition to many of the authors cited above see Oliver O'Donovan, who argues that Book XIX of *De Civitate Dei* "is correctly read as an essay in social or political philosophy." "Augustine's *City of God* XIX and Western Political Thought," *Dionysius*, 11 (1987), 90.

⁷⁶ James V. Schall has explored the subject of Christian political philosophy at length in a series of books and articles. See *Christianity and Politics* (Boston, 1981); *Reason, Revelation, and the Foundations of Political Philosophy* (Baton Rouge, 1987); and *The Politics of Heaven and Hell* (Lanham, Md., 1984). My assessment of Augustine as a political thinker, and the place of the theology in politics is, however, fundamentally at variance with Professor Schall's.

⁷⁷ Brown, "St. Augustine," 18.