

St. Augustine (354-430 C.E.)

St. Augustine, originally named Aurelius Augustinus, was the Catholic bishop of Hippo in northern Africa. He was a skilled Roman-trained rhetorician/orator, a prolific writer (who produced more than 110 works over a 30-year period), and by wide acclamation, the first Christian philosopher. Writing from a unique background and vantage point as a keen observer of society before the fall of the Roman Empire, Augustine's views on political and social philosophy constitute an important intellectual bridge between late antiquity (relic) and the emerging medieval world. Because of the scope and quantity of his work, many scholars consider him to have been the most influential Western philosopher. Although Augustine certainly would not have thought of himself as a political or social philosopher, the record of his thoughts on such themes as the justice, the nature and role of the state and the relationship between church and state have played their part in the shaping of Western civilization. There is much in his work that anticipates major themes in the writings of moderners like Machiavelli, Luther, Calvin and, in particular, Hobbes.

Augustine's political arguments are scattered throughout his voluminous writings, which include autobiography, sermons (addresses), expositions, commentaries, letters, and Christian apologetics. Moreover, the contexts in which the political and social issues are addressed are equally varied. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to suggest that his arguments are not informed by a convincing theory. Taken together, his political and social deliberations constitute a remarkable fabric. Indeed, the consistency evident in the expression of his varied but related ideas leads to the assumption that Augustine's political-philosophical statements arise from a consistent set of premises which guide him to his conclusions.

Foundational Political and Social Concepts

1. Two Cities

Even though those elected for salvation and those elected for damnation (curse) are thoroughly intermingled, the distinction arising from their respective destinies gives rise to two classes of persons. Augustine refers to whom collectively and metaphorically as cities—the City of God and the earthly city. Citizens of the earthly city are the adamant progeny of Adam and Eve, who are justifiably damned because of Adam's Fall. These persons, according to Augustine, are aliens to God's love (not because God refuses to love them, but because they refuse to love God as evidenced by their rebellious disposition inherited from the Fall). Indeed, the object of their love—whatever it may be—is something other than God. In particular, citizens of the "earthly city" are distinguished by their lust for material goods and for domination over others. On the other hand, citizens of the City of God are "pilgrims and foreigners" who (because God, the object of their love, is not immediately available for their present enjoyment) are very much out of place in a world without an earthly institution sufficiently similar to the City of God. No political state, nor even the institutional church, can be equated with the City of God. Moreover, there is no such thing as "dual citizenship" in the two cities; every member of the human family belongs to one—and only one.

2. Justice and the State

The Augustinian notion of justice includes what by his day was a well-established definition of justice of “giving every man his due.” However, Augustine grounds his application of the definition in distinctively Christian philosophical commitments. “Justice,” says Augustine, “is love serving God only, and therefore ruling well all else.” Accordingly, justice becomes the crucial distinction between ideal political states (none of which actually exist on earth) and non-ideal political states—the status of every political state on earth. For example, the Roman Empire could not be synonymous with the City of God precisely because it lacked true justice as defined above; and since, “where there is no justice there is no commonwealth,” Rome could not truly be a commonwealth, that is, an ideal state. “Remove justice,” Augustine asks rhetorically, “and what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale? What are criminal gangs but petty kingdoms?” No earthly state can claim to possess true justice, but only some relative justice by which one state is more just than another. Likewise, the legitimacy of any earthly political regime can be understood only in relative terms: The emperor and the pirate have equally legitimate domains if they are equally just.

Nevertheless, political states, imperfect as they are, serve a divine purpose. At the very least, they serve as vehicles for maintaining order and for preventing what Hobbes will later call the “war of all against all.” In that respect, the state is a divine gift and an expression of divine mercy—especially if the state is righteously ruled. The state maintains order by keeping wicked men in check through the fear of punishment. Although God will eventually punish the sins of all those elected for damnation, He uses the state to levy more immediate punishments against both the damned and the saved (or against the wicked and the righteous, the former dichotomy not necessarily synonymous with the latter). Rulers, as God’s ministers, punish the guilty and always are justified in punishing sins “against nature,” and circumstantially justified in punishing sins “against custom” or “against the laws.” The latter two categories of sins change from time to time. In this regard, the institution of the state marks a relative return to order from the chaos of the Fall. Rulers have the right to establish any law that does not conflict with the law of God. Citizens have the duty to obey their political leaders regardless of whether the leader is wicked or righteous. There is no right of civil disobedience. Citizens are always duty bound to obey God; and when the imperatives of obedience to God and obedience to civil authority conflict, citizens must choose to obey God and willingly accept the punishment of disobedience. Nevertheless, those empowered to levy punishment should take no delight in the task. For example, the prayer of the judge who condemns a man to death should be, as Augustine’s urges, “From my necessities deliver thou me.”

3. On State

According to St. Augustine state was the result of gregarious nature of man, ultimately created by God. According to him it was of divine origin and inferior only to the City of God. He has not agreed with the Greek that it was based on justice because justice could not prevail in non-Christian states. Justice was attribute of church and not of the state. State was necessary for the existence of church because it sanctioned for it men, money and material. If the laws of the state are not in violation of morality these must be obeyed . The state had a divine sanction and therefore must be ordinarily obeyed, but if the decrees of the state violate

laws of religion or morality they must not be obeyed. In Christian states, behind every action of the state there was perfect justice, divine plan and purpose. Man should obey such a state because that way they are serving the purpose of God. A Christian obeys a secular authority because behind state laws ultimate higher will of God is hidden. He has tried to maintain two separate authorities temporal as well as spiritual but has given prior place to spiritual laws over temporal laws.

4. Church and State

Even though the ostensible reason for the state's divinely appointed existence is to assist and bless humankind, there is no just state, says Augustine, because men reject the thing that best could bring justice to an imperfect world, namely, the teachings of Christ. Augustine does not suggest that current rejection of Christ's teachings means that all hope for future amendment and reformation is lost. However, Augustine's whole tenor is that there is no reason to expect that the political jurisdictions of this world ever will be anything different than what they now are, if the past is any predictor of the future. Augustine clearly holds that the establishment and success of the Roman Empire, along with its embracing of Christianity as its official religion, was part of the divine plan of the true God. Indeed, he holds that the influence of Christianity upon the empire could be only salutary in its effect:

Still, while Augustine doubtlessly holds that it is better for Rome to be Christian than not. He clearly recognizes that officially embracing Christianity does not automatically transform an earthly state into the City of God. Indeed, he regards Rome as "a kind of second Babylon." Even if the Roman Emperor and the Roman Pontiff (Holy Father) were one and the same and the structures of state and church are the same, it does not result in the City of God. Because citizenship in the City of God is determined at the individual and not the institutional level.

He sees Rome as the last bastion against the advances of the atheist barbarians, who surely must not be allowed to overrun the mortal embodiment of Christendom that Rome represents. Nevertheless, Augustine cannot be overly optimistic about the future of the Roman state. It is because Rome is a state comprising society of men other than the City of God and is part and parcel of the earthly city. It is doomed to inevitable demise. Even so, states like Rome can perform the useful purpose of championing the cause of the Church, protecting it from assault and compelling those who have fallen away from fellowship with it to return to the fold. Indeed, it is entirely within the provinces of the state to punish heretics (doubters) and schismatics (divisions).