The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine

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effects its use of these weapons will have on a given man or on the society as a whole.  

To introduce this imperfect instrument and the rough and partial justice that it is able to secure into the realm of men’s thoughts and beliefs, especially their religious beliefs, involves Augustine in a contradiction of the most fundamental kind. The paradox that results from using the blunt weapons of the political system to deal with men’s innermost thoughts is so striking that it cries out for exposure by someone who possesses Augustine’s own mastery of the techniques of irony and scorn. The tragedy is heightened by the fact that he knew, at least during the first years of his struggle with the Donatists, that compulsion and legal punishment could never come to grips with thoughts and beliefs, and that even “successful” coercion could do no more than make hypocrites and surface conformists of most of the heretics.  

Long years of discouragingly unsuccessful efforts to win back the Donatists by the use of reason, persuasion, and appeals to the Scriptures, combined with the experience of seeing that systematic, vigorous compulsion was indeed “successful” in bringing some of the Donatists back to the Church, explain, even if they do not justify, Augustine’s reversal of his position. More terrible and less easy to understand than his change of attitude is his use of the doctrine of love in defense of the policy of coercion. To defend the Church’s appeal to the State to punish heretics and schismatics by imprisonment, fines, and exile as a labor of love toward errant sinners, to argue for this policy on the basis of the analogy with a father’s loving correction of his son, to speak of the successful results of the state’s coercion as “conquests of the Lord” — all these demonstrate the grim conclusions to which even a very wise man can be led by zeal for the promotion of orthodoxy.

CONCLUSION

The central theme of Augustine’s realistic political theory is that the State exists to maintain earthly peace so that men can live and work together and attain the objects that are necessary for their earthly existence. The State accomplishes its purpose primarily through the use of coercion and the fear of punishment. By means of these external, repressive, and essentially negative instruments of the legal system, it protects the lives, the safety, and the property of its citizens, and it keeps men from destroying one another by preventing some crimes and by punishing those that are committed. The State preserves external peace and order, the peace of Babylon; this peace is absolutely necessary for all men, including the wayfaring pilgrims from the City of God, as long as they live in this world. Of course, the peace and order maintained by the State are not true peace and true concord, and the rough justice which rulers and magistrates can secure is only a shadowy reflection of the true justice found with God and in His kingdom.

Even after we have given up the hope that the State will be able to inculcate true virtue and wisdom in its citizens, we find that it can accomplish its proper tasks—the maintenance of earthly peace and the punishment of those who violate the norms of earthly justice—only in a most imperfect fashion. The two major defects of fallen man, perversity of will and ignorance (which is a result of misdirected will), infect every action that the State takes through its all too human agents. Since all those
who bear political power—rulers, officials, judges, policemen, soldiers—are only men, their judgment is fallible, their information is inevitably inadequate and often incorrect, and their decisions are frequently biased by passion and self-interest. Their actions, even when they are successful, never dispose of the problems that they face, whether these be domestic issues or questions of foreign relations. Since the problems persist, all that the political agent can do is to deal each day, as best he can, with the particular aspect or example of the problem that most urgently demands his attention, knowing full well that tomorrow will bring new events that will both require new decisions and destroy or weaken the solutions that were painfully pieced together today or yesterday.

Augustine’s thought has no place for the vision of a politics of perfection, in which all-wise rulers devise truly good and lasting solutions for social problems and in which contented subjects live together in stable harmony. Politics is a realm in which fallible, sinful men work out imperfect, precarious solutions to recurring difficulties and tensions; Augustine would have had no difficulty in understanding Max Weber’s comment that “politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards.” No matter how tranquil the surface of political life may appear to be at a given moment, the peace and order that the State seeks to preserve are always liable to be shattered by sudden outbursts of greed, violence, and hostility from within or without. Above all, politics is a realm in which paradox, irony, and dark shadows abound. The legal system exists to hold in check the worst effects of human sinfulness, and yet if men were not sinful, if they did not love the things that can be taken from them against their will, the punishments and threats of punishment which the law wields would be completely ineffectual. Political rulers and their subordinates often make the right decision for the wrong reasons, and, just as often, good intentions lead them to decisions that prove in the event to have been wrong or evil. The instruments which the State employs to discover crimes and to punish criminals are often morally repugnant and cruel—informers, spies, the rack, and the noose—and at the center of even the “well-regulated state” stands the grim figure of the executioner.

A statesman wrestles with problems of war and peace, knowing all the time that if he takes a strong stand he may set in motion a train of events that can bring about the destruction of his country and the death of many of his countrymen, while if he hesitates or shows weakness he may also invite invasion and disaster. He may even have to face the terrible necessity of choosing between the safety of his country and the preservation of its honor and good faith.

However, Augustine’s profound awareness of the imperfect nature of politics, his recognition that the justice and peace secured by the State are faulty and unstable, and his insight into the complexities, ambiguities, inequities, and harshnesses inherent in the political process never lead him to suggest that the State and the order it provides are unimportant or superfluous. Since even the pilgrim members of the City of God need the State and its earthly peace as long as they sojourn on this earth, they have a sacred obligation to respect and honor its rulers and its laws. For sinful and unredeemed men, the great majority of the human race, the rewards and punishments of the legal system, backed by the coercive power of the State, are still more essential. Without these divinely established remedies for sin, without the rough approximation of justice which is maintained by the power of the State, the conflicting wills of sinful men would create a situation of anarchy and war in which mutual injury and common misery, if not total annihilation, would be the fate of mankind.

Augustine’s conclusions agree with one of the important strands in the Christian attitude toward the State—it is a divinely established institution to repress and punish the wicked, and its
rulers, who are ordained by God, are the ministers of His wrath and a terror to evildoers. No matter how corrupt, wicked, or cruel rulers may be, they must be accorded absolute obedience and respect; this obedience must be given not only because of fear of their power, but for conscience's sake, since God has commanded that they be obeyed. Only when their orders are contrary to the clear commands that God Himself has given to men must kings and rulers be refused obedience. Men must always obey the commands of the superior authority; so when a king dares to order his subjects to violate God's express ordinance against, for example, the worship of idols, he must not be obeyed. Even in this case, however, the subject has no right to rebel against or to resist the ruler. He must not raise his hand against the minister of God, but must be willing to accept the punishment—fine, imprisonment, or death—that the ruler imposes upon him for disobedience to his orders and adherence to God's commandments. The subject must accept this punishment as retribution for his sins or as a trial of his devotion to God; his only recourse is to pray that God will forgive his transgressions and limit his punishment and that He will convert the ruler from his wickedness to true goodness and piety.

It is clear that Augustine accepted many of the ideas about the State and politics that he inherited from the Christian tradition, and that he clarified, deepened, and expanded these conceptions. In addition, however, he modified or rejected some elements of the Christian tradition in order to bring about an accommodation of the Church to its new role as the established religion of the Empire. The first and most obvious change is that Augustine insisted not only that Christians might take part in political activities without violating the commands of Christ, but also that they had a positive duty to participate in the State's work of governance, adjudication, punishment, and warfare, if they had the talents that fitted them for these duties.

His defense of war and military service, his elaboration of a doctrine of just wars, and his efforts to demonstrate that Christ's teachings did not prevent a Christian from serving in the army or killing the enemies of the State are striking examples of the differences between his views and those of the early Church and of the reconciliation that he effected between the Church's doctrines and the practical needs of the new age. Of course, Christian service in the armed forces of the State was not a novelty in Augustine's day; nor was he the first Christian thinker to accept military activity and warfare as compatible with the teachings of Christ. However, no previous thinker had elaborated so complete and detailed a defense of these activities and of Christian participation in them. Nor had anyone undertaken such a direct assault on the tradition of antimilitarism and pacifism that was embodied not only in the writings of thinkers like Tertullian and Lactantius but also in the attitudes and beliefs of many ordinary Christians, even in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Augustine's effort to harmonize the teachings of Christ with the view that the Christian is obliged to serve as a soldier and to kill in battle rested primarily, as we have seen, on the argument that Christ's injunctions against the use of force and His commands to resist evil only by loving one's enemies and by turning the other cheek to those who inflict violence were meant to be interpreted spiritually rather than literally. By these commands Christ was urging His followers to act in a spirit of true love and benevolence toward their enemies; He was not enjoining upon them non-resistance and passivity in the face of evil, injustice, and violence. Augustine saw no incongruity in exhorting Christian soldiers to retain in their hearts an attitude of charity and good will toward their enemies while they were killing or wounding them, even though he recognized that most of the wars waged among states were in no sense just. He allowed to the Christian serving in the army no independent judgment of the justice or
righteousness of the conflict in which he fought, since he reserved for the ruler alone the decision whether another state's conduct was so flagrantly unjust that it required to be punished by war. Augustine's acceptance of war as a grim necessity if even a minimum of justice and order is to be preserved in the world, his attempt to distinguish between just and unjust wars, and his flat rejection of pacifism and merely passive resistance to evil may be more realistic and more adequate than the ethic of love and non-resistance. They represent, however, a pronounced change from the beliefs of the early Christian Church, and they mark a significant milestone in the process of relativizing and accommodating Christ's teachings to the imperatives of earthly existence and to the views of right and wrong that were generally accepted in the world into which Jesus came.

A similar process of accommodation to "reality" occurs when Augustine teaches that it is the Christian's duty to participate actively in the work of the State as emperor, official, judge, policeman, or jailer. Although he is aware of the special dangers and temptations that Christians face when they occupy positions of power and employ coercion, and although he knows that the necessities that confront the governor or the judge often compel him to act with harshness or cruelty, he insists that, like the soldier, the Christian ruler or judge must remain at his post. The Christian is guilty of no violation of Christ's commandments when he judges other men's actions or when he inflicts punishment upon those he believes to be guilty; indeed, he remains "sinless," although miserable, when he orders that the accused man whose guilt has not yet been determined or even the completely innocent witness be put to torture. When we contrast these statements with the Gospel warnings against the desire for lordship over other men, with the prohibitions against recourse to the law by Christians, with the command, "Judge not lest ye be judged," and with Christ's refusal to judge the woman taken in adultery, we see a profound change in Christian attitudes toward participation in political and judicial activities. Once more, we must recognize that Augustine is not responsible for the entire movement away from the early Christian view that it was not permissible for the servants of Christ to occupy positions of authority in the State or to employ physical force even for official purposes. Nevertheless, his acceptance of the "necessities" involved in the work of public officials and his unquestioning approval of Christians who serve as rulers, judges, and officials mark a decisive moment in the relations between the Church and the world.

Augustine's most startling reversal of the traditional attitude of Christians toward the State and its rulers came when, in the course of his struggle with the Donatists, he finally took the position that the political authorities had not only the right but the obligation to use their power to punish those men who, in the eyes of the Church, were guilty of heresy and schism. During the long years of bitter controversy, the Donatists repeatedly charged that the Catholics had surrendered their Christian beliefs and had become the allies and instruments of the ungodly political authorities. They frequently referred to the traditions of the Church and especially to the writings of the great figures of African Christianity, Tertullian and Cyprian, to demonstrate that their view that the State had no right to intercede in the affairs of the Church was the orthodox and true position. These arguments were extremely effective weapons against the Catholic Church, particularly in the rural areas of Africa where religious zeal was combined with bitter hostility to the Roman State and to its officials and tax-collectors. Augustine shows his awareness of the power and appeal of the Donatists' anti-state position by his repeated efforts to prove that on a number of occasions (the
original appeal to Constantine, the appeal to Julian, the use of state power against their own dissident factions) they had shown themselves willing to seek and accept state aid and protection. Although he is compelled to acknowledge that no example can be found in the New Testament of the Church appealing to the State or its officials for support, he tries to explain the change by making a distinction between the Church of the period of the apostles and the martyrs, when kings were her enemies and persecutors, and the Church of the present age, which is defended and supported by the Emperor. This distinction he seeks to establish on a Biblical foundation by reference to King Nebuchadnezzar, who first persecuted the servants of God and later ordered that anyone in his kingdom who failed to worship the true God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego should be punished. At the end of the previous chapter, I discussed the theocratic implications of Augustine's doctrine that the State has the duty to punish those whom the Church regards as schismatics or heretics, and the fundamental inconsistency between this doctrine and his general analysis of the State's principal functions and of the means which it employs to accomplish its tasks. Here we need only note that this defense of the principle of using state coercion against heresy (including the use of the phrase, *Compelle intrare*, from the Gospel of Luke) constitutes Augustine's most important break with the outlook and beliefs of the early Church and his most influential contribution to the political thought and practice of the medieval Church. The doctrine that in compelling the Church's enemies to return to the fold rulers act as instruments of God's grace is far removed from the traditional view that rulers are established to punish the wicked and have nothing to do with the governance of Christ's Church. Moreover, the doctrine flatly contradicts that strand of Christian thought which saw the kingdoms of this world and their rulers as parts of the kingdom of the devil and as fundamentally hostile to God and His Church—a strand which, as we have seen, is one of the elements in Augustine's own thought. However, in the medieval period it was the theocratic element implicit in Augustine's doctrine that the State must use its coercive powers against heresy and schism that exercised far greater influence than either his occasional acceptance of the traditional tendency to identify political authorities with the powers of darkness or the position more characteristic of his thought—a realistic recognition of the State's inherent imperfections and limitations, combined with an insistence on its absolute necessity in view of the sinful nature of fallen man.

It is not difficult to see why Augustine's political realism received little attention and no further development in the centuries that followed his death. With the downfall of the Western Empire and its replacement by a series of unstable and shifting barbarian kingdoms, the Church and its hierarchy became the only visible unifying force in the West. With each passing century the Church became more and more involved in temporal affairs; not only was it a temporal power in her own right, but her bishops and other leaders were deeply involved in governance and politics, both as royal officials and as virtually independent feudal magnates. For almost a thousand years, no state in Western Europe possessed anything that even resembled the power and authority of the Roman Empire, and at some periods the State almost ceased to exist as an entity independent of and superior to the complex network of private rights that we call feudalism. The political order was neither strong enough nor secure enough to stand much realistic examination. Even if the Church had not itself been intimately associated with the process of governance, it might well have tended to support and extol
the virtues of a stable, centralized political system rather than to encourage a sharply critical attitude toward the State and the means that it uses to accomplish its ends. In any case, the weaknesses and inadequacies of the State, as well as the cruelties and crimes of rulers, were too obviously apparent to all observers, especially in the early Middle Ages, to require special notice by Christian thinkers.

I do not propose to present here an outline of medieval political doctrines or to attempt to trace the influence of the various elements of Augustine’s thought upon medieval writers. 19 I simply note that in the medieval period Augustine’s attitude of pessimistic realism about the State and politics received little attention and exerted no great influence. It is possible that we hear echoes of his thought in some of the arguments used by medieval Popes and their supporters during their controversies with Emperors and kings and their partisans. In these polemics the papalist writers occasionally seek to strengthen the position of the Church and of the Pope against the imperial or royal claims that regnum is an authority equal to and independent of sacerdotium, by the argument that temporal power is inherently inferior and subordinate to priestly authority because the power of kings rests on pride, cupidity, and crime, the works of the devil.

Pope Gregory VII, for example, in the famous letter to Hermann, Bishop of Metz, written in 1081, says:

Who does not know that kings and princes are sprung from those who unmindful of God, urged on, in fact, by the devil, the prince of the world, and by pride, plunder, treachery, murders and by almost every crime, have striven with blind cupidity and intolerable presumption to dominate over their equals, that is to say, over men? 20

Later, he quotes Augustine’s statement in Book I of the De Doctrina Christiana, “Indeed whoever strives to gain control over those who are naturally his equals, that is men, is intolerably proud in every way,” and says that “it is unfortunately true that demons rule over all the kings and princes of the earth who do not live a godly life and do not fear God in their deeds as they ought, and they torment them with a wretched captivity.” 21 It is particularly necessary for the Church and the Pope to compel kings and emperors to act with humility, since “worldly glory and secular anxiety usually do draw into pride, in particular those who rule; as a result, neglecting humility and pursuing their own glory, they perpetually yearn to dominate their brethren.” 22 Gregory says that even the good and humble are made worse by the exercise of temporal power; he notes that of the countless kings who have ruled since the beginning of the world very few have been found to be saints, while almost a hundred of the occupants of the Roman See have been canonized. 23

Even if, as Gregory’s reference to Augustine suggests, statements of this kind about the vices of temporal rulers reflect the influence of Augustine’s teachings about politics, they do not represent a significant continuation or development of his doctrines. A single aspect of his complex thought about politics is extracted for use as a polemical weapon. Since Gregory’s primary concern is to demonstrate that priestly authority is in every way superior to temporal authority, he uses a variety of arguments or analogies that seem to support his position, but he is not interested in elaborating a coherent, realistic view of the State and political power. As the quotations from his letter to Hermann indicate, his attitude toward rulers is far more moralistic than Augustine’s. His condemnation of the vices and crimes of most kings focuses attention on their wickedness, while Augustine is much more concerned to point out the inadequacies and injustices that are inherent in the very operation of the political and legal systems, whether the ruler happens to be a relatively good man or an unusually evil man.
Perhaps the most important and enduring influence that Augustine exerted on medieval political thought stems from a misinterpretation of his teaching. His great vision of the separation and conflict throughout all history between the City of God and the earthly city could quite easily be translated into the distinction between the Church and temporal authority, the sacerdotal power and the royal power, provided that the visible Church was equated with the City of God. Although Augustine himself did not make this identification and insisted that many members of the Church as organized in this world would not be members of the City of God, it was perhaps inevitable that as the power of the Church and of the Papacy increased, the distinction between the hierarchically organized Church and the City of God in heaven should become increasingly blurred. Once the Church was identified with the City of God, Augustine could be used to support the view that the authority of the Church and of the Pope was immeasurably superior to the authority of temporal rulers and, indeed, that all power (plentudo potestatis) rested in the hands of the Pope, who then delegated to secular authorities the power to deal with temporal affairs.

An interesting example of the use of Augustine's writings to defend an extreme version of theocracy and the doctrine of papal supremacy is found in an anonymous anti-papalist tract, the Quaestio de potestate papae (Rex pacificus), written in 1302. The author first gives a number of the familiar arguments for papal supremacy over temporal rulers and then tries to refute them. One of these arguments, probably taken from the work of the papalist writer, Egidius Romanus, is based on Augustine's statement in The City of God that true justice exists only in that republic whose founder and ruler is Christ. The quotation runs:

Moreover, true justice does not exist in the commonwealth of which Christ is not the ruler. But the commonwealth of the Christian people ought to be just and true. Therefore Christ ought to be the ruler in it. But the Pope is the vicar of Christ. . . . Therefore the Pope is the ruler of the commonwealth even in temporal affairs.

It should be noted that in a theocratic theory of this kind, the State, although it is reduced to the status of an organization vastly inferior to the Church, is also "divinized" or sanctified since it is regarded as an instrument of ecclesiastical authority and, ultimately, of divine authority. The Pope as the head of the Church and the vicar of Christ is the de jure sovereign in respect to both spiritual and temporal matters; if he delegates to kings the exercise of temporal authority, he always retains the authority to overrule their decisions and to remove them if they misuse the power devolved upon them. Although the independence and majesty of political authority are severely limited by this doctrine, it also provides a halo of divine sanction for the State and its actions which offers little encouragement to the kind of realistic analysis of political life that Augustine undertook.

Augustine's central political insight—the idea of a politics of imperfection, a necessary consequence of human sinfulness—and his profound awareness of the inevitable limitations of a coercive political order were obscured under the impact of this "sanctification" of the State by theocratic doctrines, as well as by the revival of the classical view that the State is an organization intended to promote the good life in this world and to produce good and virtuous men. Although this classical conception of the State never reappeared in its full force, some of its elements were combined with traditional Christian political doctrine when St. Thomas incorporated important aspects of Aristotelian thought into his great philosophic synthesis. St. Thomas accepts
attaining power over other men. Since the ends which each man pursues are similar to those of every other man, since the wealth and power that all men seek are both limited and comparative, and since all men are roughly equal in natural ability, the clash of their egoistic drives leads to a situation of general conflict (the Hobbesian *bellum omnium*), universal frustration and misery, and complete instability of all possessions.

Because anarchy and mutual destruction are the consequences that both Augustine and Hobbes see as inevitable if human appetites and passions are unrestrained, they both regard peace and order as the highest earthly goods and as the prerequisites of all other satisfactions and accomplishments. The task of the State, then, is to maintain peace by employing its overwhelming powers of coercion to hold in check the warring aspirations of selfish men. Its weapons are the deprivations of property, liberty, and life that it can inflict through its punishments and the fear that it is able to inspire by the prospect of punishment. By these means and by its control over the doctrines and dogmas that are publicly taught, rather than by any effort to mold or change the internal desires, attitudes, and beliefs of its citizens, the State preserves an external peace—what Augustine calls earthly peace or the peace of Babylon—even among men whose basic egoism remains unchanged. As a result, men can live and work together in relative tranquillity and in the assurance that the products of their industry will generally be protected from attacks by others. Both thinkers insist that subjects must give unquestioning obedience to the commands of the political authorities (Augustine makes the exception that rulers must be refused obedience when they order men to neglect or violate God’s express commandments, while for Hobbes the subject is not bound to obey orders to destroy or injure himself). Both Augustine and Hobbes refuse to grant to the individual subject the right to decide whether
the commands of the ruler are just or wise and so obligate him to obey, since they believe that such subjective decisions would lead to a disruption of the framework of order maintained by the State and a relapse into the condition of general anarchy.

It might be said that the Hobbesian theory or vision of man and society is the Augustinian vision after God and the City of God have been eliminated. Augustine's picture of the characteristics of most men, who are sinful and proud, is accepted by Hobbes as a description of the basic drives of all men, and Augustine's condemnation of this sinful nature is rejected. The Augustinian conception of the State as the guarantor of an imperfect peace during the brief period of man's pilgrimage in "this hell upon earth" becomes for Hobbes the vision of the State as the defender of peace, prosperity, and all the arts of civilization, which constitute the only heaven available to men. In addition, Hobbes's theory demonstrates the effects of the Reformation and of Calvinism by grounding the political order on the freely given consent of each member of society, whereas Augustine simply accepts political authority as inevitable after the Fall and does not inquire into its earthly origins.

This comparison between Augustine and Hobbes reminds us that the most important reason for studying the history of philosophy and, in particular, the history of political thought, is that each great thinker has emphasized and highlighted certain qualities and characteristics of human nature and of social and political life. Since each major philosopher sensitizes us to a certain range of phenomena, we must look at society and politics from all the angles of vision that they offer if we wish to achieve the fullest understanding that our tradition offers. The particular aspects of society that each philosopher selects as most significant and into which he probes deeply are the result of many influences—the time and place in which he lives, the intellectual tradition available to him (which both shapes his thought and constitutes a body of ideas against which he reacts), the circumstances of his own life, his personality, temperament, and interests, and the social, political, and moral questions that are crucial in his day.

Every great social and political philosopher offers us a theory—literally, a vision—of man and society; these visions have enduring importance because each of them provides us with a searching analysis of certain dimensions of human experience. Each theory achieves its power to penetrate far beneath the surface of human actions by concentrating on some facets of social life while ignoring or passing lightly over others. I think that John Stuart Mill was right when he said that most original political and social philosophers are, like Bentham, "one-eyed men" who sacrifice range and completeness of view in order to focus sharply on some aspect of human action. Each of them then tends to see everything from this particular angle, sub specie of his own vision, with the consequence that other elements in social and political life are often distorted or blurred.

As far as I can see, this defect is inherent and irremediable. Certainly it cannot be attributed to the inadequate intellectual power of the philosopher, whether he be Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, or Hegel, or to his naive failure to recognize that he and his predecessors have omitted or slighted many things because of their concentration on some things. The partiality of his vision is essential to his accomplishment. Unless he is so deeply concerned about some particular problems or certain facets of human experience that he ignores others, unless he drives relentlessly forward to catch up as much of the world as he possibly can within the limited range of his vision and his leading ideas, he will not make a major contribution to social and political thought. The man who is so aware of the dangers of
as completely vitiated by sin. Every human action from the most sublime expression of altruism or patriotism or the highest intellectual or artistic achievement to the most sordid or trivial action is rooted in human sinfulness—in each man’s burning desire for self-aggrandizement, whether by the relentless accumulation of material goods and money, the driving lust for power over other men, or the insatiable appetite for fame and glory and, therefore, for the approbation of other human beings. Occasionally, Augustine notes that there are meaningful differences among these sinful actions and among the sinful men who perform them. The patriotic devotion and the desire for glory of the ancient Romans spurred them on to deeds of great bravery and heroic self-sacrifice which enhanced the safety and prosperity of the nation. Although Augustine recognizes that their conduct was “quasi-virtuous” and far more admirable than the materialistic self-indulgence of the later Romans, he does not pursue the idea that there may be “higher” and “lower” forms of sin, better and worse actions. Since his attention is focused on the sinfulness of men’s wills and deeds, he sees that even these acts of heroism and self-sacrifice are radically infected with vice—the terrible vices of pride and of vainly seeking immortality by winning the applause of deluded men.

His thought is dominated by the sharp contrast between unredeemed man, whose every action is an exhibition of sin and pride, and the man who has been saved by the gratuitous gift of God’s love, and who is therefore capable of truly virtuous action since not he but the love of God now works within him. In this perspective, the varieties or gradations found in sinful actions, the fact that in the eyes of the world certain sinful deeds are “good” or “honorable,” and the fact that the redeemed man may, on occasion, lapse into sinful deeds are all profoundly irrelevant. In Augustine’s vision there are two clearly separated types of man
the minority, who love God and do His will, and the great majority, who love themselves and earthly goods, wealth, power, fame, and pleasure. In consequence, there is in his thought no room for the idea that every man is a particular, complex mixture of good and evil impulses, of love and hate, or of egoism and altruism.

His basic idea that most men are sinful and self-seeking leads him directly to the vision of society as a scene of constant strife and mutual injury where each man struggles to satisfy his desires and ambitions at the expense of all other men. It is this vision which constrains him to believe that only the State, with its apparatus of laws, punishments, and coercion, can hold these conflicts within bounds and prevent men from annihilating one another. Because of the violence of men's passions and the strength of their appetites, the peace and order which the State maintains are supremely important and, at the same time, highly precarious. Augustine is so sharply aware of the need to impose a system of order on the conflicting wills of sinful men if human society is to be kept from collapsing into anarchy that he insists that the maintenance of peace is the primary function of the State. He is willing to settle for this one great accomplishment and to ask for relatively little in the way of positive benefits from the political system, because he is so acutely conscious of the importance and the fragility of earthly peace and so deeply impressed by the disastrous consequences of disorder, strife, and war.

As a result of his concentration on the necessity of preserving peace and order (which must always be the first word, though not the last, that is said about the goals of the political system), Augustine insists on absolute obedience to the commands of all rulers, no matter how wicked or corrupt they may be; he allows disobedience, with no attempt at resistance, only when the ruler's orders run counter to the clear commandments of God. Also, he completely ignores the problem of classifying and evaluating different forms of government, as well as the question of how a given system of rule can be changed so as to make it more just or more satisfactory. The worst possible government is far better than anarchy, and in any case it must be endured as a divine punishment for men's sins. Revolution and rebellion, which would destroy the framework of peace and order, would serve only to compound the evil and the suffering.

In addition to his fundamental insight into the essential function of the political order—maintaining peace by the application of coercion—Augustine also gives us penetrating analyses of the complexities of political action and of the pitfalls of ignorance, pride, and cruelty inevitably associated with the exercise of political power. No one who has read Augustine carefully can fail to be impressed by the ambiguities and limitations inherent in political action, and by the enormously difficult tasks and the almost insoluble moral dilemmas that confront the ruler at every turn.

As he surveyed the collapse of ancient institutions and the rising tide of destruction in the world around him, which led many of his contemporaries to the conclusion that the end of the world was at hand, Augustine's keen sense of the perpetual power of human pride and sinfulness compelled him to reject any hope that the future would bring enduring peace or progress. Both his theological beliefs and his experience and observation of men's actions in an age of disorder enforced upon him an attitude of pessimistic realism, which would not allow him to sentimentalize or evade the darker aspects of social and political life.

In our own century, when, once more, men have been compelled to recognize the almost incredible brutalities of which human beings are capable, especially when they struggle for political power and military domination, it is no accident that
Augustinian pessimism and realism have enjoyed a considerable revival among both theologians and secular thinkers. As a result of our own experiences, we are much more prepared than our fathers were to give a hearing to the doctrine of original sin and to the view that ceaseless application of coercive power is necessary in order to hold in check human pride and the fruits of pride—aggression, avarice, and lust—and to preserve the fabric of civilization which is constantly imperiled by these forces.

We may have learned our lessons by reading Freud and by observing the new barbarism of our century rather than by listening to Christian realists. Nevertheless, the optimistic beliefs of many nineteenth-century liberals and Marxists—the certainty that the future would inevitably bring a sharp reduction, if not the complete elimination, of the need to employ coercion in social life, and the faith that men could be educated to cooperate voluntarily in a just and harmonious social order—strike us as hopelessly irrelevant as guides to present and future action and shamelessly hypocritical if offered as descriptions of present realities. We know that pride, self-assurance, and a sense of being the instruments of Providence or of historical necessity, as well as the more obvious vices of avarice, lust for domination, and hatred, can lead men and nations to perpetrate enormous crimes. We know too that we must be prepared to use awful weapons to defend ourselves and our civilization from threats of destruction, although we also recognize that our use of these weapons and techniques renders us liable to fall into the same vices. For, like Augustine, we have learned that greed, pride, aggressiveness, and hatred are not simply characteristics of other men and other states. We know that since these impulses dwell in each of us and in our society, we too are capable of translating them into action once the pressures acting upon us rise beyond a certain level.

I believe that these are some of the reasons why pessimistic analysts of human nature and of society and politics have received increasing attention during the last two decades, and why Augustine’s views are entitled to our serious consideration. If we are going to preach—or listen to—neo-Augustinianism, we should be willing to examine its doctrines in their original and most compelling forms. My argument is not that grim realism is the only viable political and social doctrine for our age or that the Augustinian version of it is the closest approximation to the truth. I say only that in our era of war, terror, and sharp anxiety about man’s future, when, again, a major epoch in human history may be drawing to a close, we cannot afford to ignore Augustine’s sharply etched, dark portrait of the human condition. How much of that picture each of us accepts or rejects, how much he modifies it, is a problem that each man must solve for himself. Only one thing is certain. The intellectual equipment that we employ as we face our dilemmas will be needlessly restricted if it has no place for Augustine’s powerful and somber vision.

Quibus parum vel quibus nimium est, mihi ignoscant; quibus antem salis est, non mihi, sed Deo mecum gratias congratulantes agant. Amen. Amen. (DCD, XXII, 30; CCSL XLVIII, 866.)