Politics and the Order of Love

An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship

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Chapter 6 responds to the second of Arendt's challenges by refuting the claim that love for God either eclipses or instrumentalizes love for neighbor so as to render Augustinian love inconsistent with liberal politics. My argument again turns this criticism on its head: where Arendt finds antiliberal otherworldliness and others find pathological authoritarianism, I find an Augustinian ethics of democratic citizenship that both celebrates love and respects difference. Synthesizing the vast literature on Augustine's theological eudaimonism, I argue against readings of Augustine's "use" and "enjoyment" that rely on a preconceived submissionist teleology (one that subordinates proximate goods as means to an ultimate good). These readings employ metaphysical categories of "hyper-transcendence" or "hyper-immanence" that need not be Augustinian (nor, for that matter, Platonic). My argument focuses on the moral dimensions of Augustine's discussions of the radical unity of the love of God and the love of neighbor. I connect these texts with some modern theological proposals. By way of conclusion, I discuss the power of traditional images in political theory and themes of nostalgia and the sacred.

Such is the structure of my book. Political theory and theology are contextual enterprises, and my interest in retrieving an Augustinian account of political motivation based on the relational virtue of love has its own motivations. One of the earliest motivations behind this book was a concern that an overly familiar characterization of political Augustinianism threatened the tradition (like Augustine's own restless self) with premature rest. On the one hand, a prideful Augustinianism is content to repeat its mantras about sin and the realistic limits of politics and virtue. This appeal to the limits of politics often travels with a stern appeal to a politics of necessity that can justify all manner of injustice in the name of two kingdoms, regretful responsibility, and "dirty hands." Lutheran streams of Augustinian politics are particularly vulnerable to this temptation, evident most recently in theological justifications of the use of torture to combat terrorism. On the other hand, an equally prideful Augustinianism celebrates its retreat into a postliberal withdrawal from political life altogether. In either case, I worried that a vital tradition of inquiry is in danger of becoming simply an entrenched cultural mood rather than a living argument that might still matter for our politics. This concern joined a frustration that sophisticated treatments of love in both Augustine studies and Christian ethics were disconnected from renewed efforts to relate virtues to liberal politics. This neglect has been enforced by
communities over to utilitarian calculations. Like many feminist defenders of a political ethic of care, Ramsey challenges those who would condemn love to a private virtue consigned to the "interstitial spaces" (BCE, 3). He also does not denigrate justice in order to elevate love, a denigration that often blinds Niebuhrians to injustices in the private realm and permits injustice through the "dirty hands" of the public realm. As Jackson interprets Ramsey, "love does not choose between justice and mercy, for these two goods are internally related to agape" (PL, 110). Love, while not subject to a rule-morality, is itself a radical obligation to serve the neighbor in need rather than an impossible suffering selflessness that "may obscure the ultimate purposes of providential action." The commands of love," Ramsey writes, "are as stringent as the needs of the world are urgent: sensing this, let any man then do as he pleases" (BCE, 90). This ethic, for Ramsey, stems from the radicality of God's own love for the neighbor, a love that is not limited by eschatological expectation or restricted to powerlessness as the only way to admit divine activity in the history of the people of God.

The relation between obligation and an ethics of love is a fundamental subset of love's relation to justice. Ramsey thinks Christians owe people love. Feminists might see this move as yet another masculine morality of deontological obligation, even if it extends the range of considered virtues beyond liberal justice. Christian agape, on this reading, implicitly assumes a justice framework even while rejecting it. But it is an odd kind of morality of obligation that would focus on "traits of character, forms of action, and concrete social consequences." Neighbor-love of this sort is neither rationalistic nor does it issue into a persistently self-sacrificial ethics of benevolence or radical altruism. Unlike Niebuhr, Ramsey allowed room for the self within an ethics of love and he did not reduce justice to contractual reciprocity. Neighbor-love remains central in terms of ethical justification, but it can cast up various possibilities. These include concern for one's own rights (albeit, for the neighbor's sake) and a concern to protect innocent others against harm (again,
order to achieve other goods. Neither justice nor realism demand this much chastity about love. However one judges the practical constraints of citizenship, incommensurability should not be built into the possibilities of liberal theorizing. Theorizing the virtues of liberal society should operate under less rigid constraints than civic practices in political societies might themselves allow, especially when even the communitarian challenge essentially "has been turned around so that it functions as a rationale for greater complacency with our own historically evolved liberal way of life." 13

The possibility of imagining love's normative relation to both justice and respect is part of my more ambitious Augustinian liberalism. Words and concepts have histories. I have not made a historical claim as to when political theorists and political theologians stopped talking about love, or at least stopped talking about love in the way that is relevant for the ethics of liberalism and Augustinianism. Certain figures, dates, and texts suggest themselves. They include the familiar list of late mediareals and early moderns who today preoccupy the minds of critics of modernity and liberalism. As we saw in writings of Hannah Arendt and John Rawls, contemporary liberal theory has not completely abandoned discussion of love. But their attention to love has primarily served a strategy of exclusion—a strategy that privatizes loves and renders them beyond the pale of liberal reciprocity. This exclusion is particularly stringent with regard to any love that is connected with religious desires. By not finding a secure place for love within its account of politics, liberalism mistakenly alienates those citizens who are unwilling to sacrifice the norm of love as their basic moral orientation in political life. Feminist writers have sought to restore something like an ethic of love back into the discursive regime of liberal political theory. My refigured Augustinian Christianity provides another, different voice. It uses Augustine's grammar of love and sin to open up more conceptual space within liberal politics.

12. I remain open to the possibility of tragic dilemmas internal to a Christian ethics of love. However, wholesale rejection of the virtue of love in order to achieve liberal justice is not one of them. For a poignant account of Christian love, tragedy, and providence, see Philip Quinn, "Tragic Dilemmas, Suffering Love, and Christian Life," Journal of Religious Ethics 17, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 55–83.

13. See Ronald Beiner, Philosophy in a Time of Lost Spirit (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 16. Beiner rightly challenges us not to "bore ourselves to death by reducing the grand tradition of Western theory to ridiculously modest proportions—that is, by merely tinkering with the economic and political details of the liberal order" (17).

While not driven by sociological ana from the increasing self-absorption of consumer-oriented liberal culture. This is exacerbated in Christian social ethics by theology that reject political liberalism Augustinian suspicion about the religi liberal democracies. I also have Augustin of democratic optimism. No generation vice. I am sympathetic with Jean Bethke rary liberal society:

By any standard of objective evidence, the resive forms of isolation, boredom, and dem in politics; to the overall weakening of civil society, have the better case.... Th life requires robust yet resilient instinctic and shape, our passions and our interest of social life disappear or are stripped wilderness spreads. (LP, 2)

Augustinians might think the wilderness ambivalence demands a more balanced eties merely in terms of aestheticism, be the mirror image of a reading that imagi of dogmatism, religious coercion, and a here to cite Milbank against his more of modernity: "Finding the right persp adapt Augustine) of being open to the (TST, 43). This dialectical perspective as ceaseless loss and gain: the Enlighten principles of individual liberty and equi the very worst tyrannies, but at the same of free association for common purpose ment by not only recognizing that the

14. Milbank, "On Complex Space," 279. I that there is "small practical difference between that is, nonetheless, in essence totalitarian" (Milbank's description of nouveaux philosophes).