

Interpretation

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In *Augustine's Political Thought*, editor Richard J. Dougherty has brought together an impressive set of essays which are united in their intention: not to deploy St. Augustine's rhetoric or arguments on behalf of this or that political issue of the day, but to understand comprehensively the founder of mature Christian political thought precisely as he understood himself. It will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Fr. Ernest Fortin that his work forms the common foundation of the various essays and his "fundamental concerns" naturally dominate the volume—above all the interplay between Christianity and political philosophy.¹

To oversimplify these essays greatly, they argue that according to Augustine classical political philosophy is on its own terms a failure. It is in the first place a political failure, for the political form it valorizes, the *polis*, gives way across the ancient world to expansionism, imperialism, and ultimately despotism. It is moreover a moral failure, since it teaches its politically minded adherents "to think they sought virtue for its own sake while secretly inflaming their love of human praise."² Magnanimity is one of the two foundations of the "pagan virtue" that failed "to promote sound politics" in the Roman Republic.³ This failure ought not to be surprising, since pagan magnanimity is itself founded on a false belief in one's own self-sufficiency, freedom, or happiness; the proper response to a clear-eyed evaluation of our situation

¹ Richard J. Dougherty, Introduction, 1.

² Veronica Roberts Ogle, "Augustine's Ciceronian Response to the Ciceronian Patriot," 211.

³ Richard J. Dougherty, "St. Augustine and the Problem of Political Ethics in *The City of God*," 27.

(viz., our incomplete knowledge of the good, the perverse habits that hinder us from pursuing the good, and the great difficulty or impossibility of rectifying those problems on our own, not to mention our dependence on external goods that can be lost) is not magnanimity but a “humble admission of genuine misery.”⁴ Pretended self-sufficiency leads to the sin of pride, which expresses itself in the politically minded as the *libido dominandi* (desire for domination) and the *libido principandi* (desire for princely rule). These desires “are beneficial neither to the individual nor to the civitas” and thus Augustine seeks to “break the spells of personal and civic pride that are behind political virtue.”⁵

Even that other great pillar of pagan virtue—justice understood as devotion to the common advantage—comes under fire from Augustine, and not only because he traces the Roman desire “to sacrifice everything to the *patria*” not to true justice but to the Roman love of glory or praise. Even absent this subterranean connection to pride, Augustine argues, “absolute devotion to an unjust city” is itself simply perverse.⁶ Put more simply, even the height of the classical conception of political justice is unjust; the virtues of the pagans are nothing more than splendid vices.

Of course, the classical political philosophers were aware of the limitations of their moral-political teaching. “Platonic political philosophy” arose in part as a response to the Sophistic Enlightenment of Periclean Athens, an enlightenment that caused a “spiritual crisis” and undermined the life and unity of the ancient *polis* long before Christianity.⁷ In other words, not only Christianity, but also the Sophistic Enlightenment (and eventually the universal Roman Empire) “made it impossible for the *polis* to remain a *polis*.” Plato sought to make “the *polis* possible again” or to provide “a new grounding for politics.”⁸ But this effort was a rearguard action meant at most to moderate a dissolution already well underway.⁹ And Augustine’s reading of Sallust led him to conclude “that in the Roman mind, the good and the base differ not in

⁴ Thomas P. Harmon, “The Few, the Many, and the Universal Way of Salvation: Augustine’s Point of Engagement with Platonic Political Thought,” 141.

⁵ Michael P. Foley, “The Other Happy Life: The Political Dimensions to St. Augustine’s *Cassiciacum Dialogues*,” 43.

⁶ Ogle, “Ciceronian Response,” 213.

⁷ Daniel E. Burns, “Augustine and Platonic Political Philosophy: The Contribution of Joseph Ratzinger,” 254.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁹ Much the same could be said of Cicero’s efforts.

what they seek, but how they seek it”—but of course this observation comes from Sallust himself.¹⁰ Plato too makes this criticism of political virtue in, among other places, the Myth of Er, and Aristotle observes something very similar in his treatment of justice in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Moreover, in his discussion of ostracism in book 3 of the *Politics*, Aristotle explicitly says that an action can be both politically just (or just with respect to the regime) and yet perhaps unjust when considered simply.

The failure of classical political philosophy was then in a sense not the fault of the classical philosophers; they did what they could with what they had, and what they did impressed Augustine a great deal.¹¹ The problem was that the classical political philosophers saw through a glass darkly: what Cicero (and by extension all the classical political philosophers) “surmised from afar has been unveiled” in the City of God, the only truly “Just City.”¹² Since the classical political philosophers held that the Just City existed only in speech, or that it was impossible, they were led by “a false sense of necessity” to make a series of “strategic decisions”—for example, attempting to encourage virtue by appealing to a vicious desire for glory, or denying divine foreknowledge in order to preserve human free will, or in general accepting the need for the noble lie.¹³ As Veronica Roberts Ogle puts it, “For Augustine, Cicero’s limitation reflects the limits of politics. On its own, the political is incapable of harmonizing the good of the human person with the good of the *civitas*; the most the *civitas* can offer is an immortal name, a mere shadow of the immortal happiness man truly desires.”¹⁴

And yet Augustine did not think that conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity meant the advent of the Just City on Earth. For Augustine just as for Plato, every real earthly city—even an earthly city professing the true religion—will be defective in justice when compared to the Just City, an insight Adam Thomas brings out in his essay on the *Confessions*.¹⁵ When Augustine “in effect demanded that the *polis* cease to be a *polis*,” he did so at least in part from a recognition that the earthly city’s claim to be a *polis*

¹⁰ Ogle, “Ciceronian Response,” 210.

¹¹ See, e.g., Ashleen Menchaca-Bagnulo, “Deeds and Words: *Latreia*, Justice, and Mercy in Augustine’s Political Thought,” 79–82.

¹² Ogle, “Ciceronian Response,” 208.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁵ Adam Thomas, “The Investigation of Justice in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” 120–21.

in the fullest sense was false and (at least by the time of the Roman Empire) pernicious.¹⁶ Augustine intended the Catholic Church, the “true revelation on earth” of the “*polis* of God,” to replace the classical *polis* to the extent that it could.¹⁷ Happily, according to Daniel E. Burns, the “Church does have one apparent advantage over the *polis* from the point of view of Plato himself”—its transpolitical character frees it from the “limits of political ‘possibility’” that constrain the classical political philosophers, allowing and compelling the Church to “speak the truth about the divine without worrying about whether the entire (earthly) city will find that truth acceptable.”¹⁸

I have thus far attempted to give a synoptic account of the broad argument of this volume; however, I do not want to leave anyone with the misconception that the authors are monolithic in their interpretations of Augustine. One finds, for example, varying presentations of the role of egalitarianism and the possibility of popular enlightenment in Augustine’s thought in the essays by Thomas P. Harmon and Ryan K. Balot, and radically different interpretations of Augustine’s references to demons in the essays by Daniel E. Burns and Daniel Strand. There also seems to me to be some tension between a handful of more triumphalist readings of Augustine and Peter Busch’s essay on the reception and modulation of Augustine’s teaching by Dante on one hand and Giles of Rome on the other. Busch brings out clearly the fact that one of Augustine’s principal concerns was moderating his coreligionists; not being a fanatic, Augustine did not wish to empower the fanatical and unscrupulous. As Busch wryly remarks when contrasting Augustine’s position with the political ultramontanist of Giles of Rome, “Augustine has a more chastened opinion than Giles does of what bishops are generally able to accomplish.”¹⁹

But whatever scholarly disagreements exist in this volume ought only to lend more weight to the explicit purpose of the book: not to advance a single theory or school of Augustine scholarship, but to spur a new generation of scholars to take up Augustine with renewed energy. In that respect, *Augustine’s Political Thought* is an unqualified success. It is an invigorating volume that amply demonstrates St. Augustine’s seriousness as both a student and a critic of ancient political philosophy. It is also a superb resource for anyone interested in Christianity’s engagement with Platonic political philosophy.

¹⁶ Burns, “Augustine and Platonic Political Philosophy,” 256.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 257–58.

¹⁹ Peter Busch, “Peace in the Order of Nature: Augustine, Giles, and Dante,” 70.

And St. Augustine's criticisms of political theology and his sober and sobering reflections on the nature and limits of politics are of perennial importance, perhaps especially for his fellow Catholics.

