

Augustine on Politics and Society

Platonic theme: Truth=realness=goodness=naturalness

Each kind of creature was very good at creation, even though not as good as others. Part of its goodness consists in occupying its proper place in the natural order. *Natural evil is the cause of moral evil.* At creation, nothing was naturally evil. So, nothing was morally evil. The explanation of evil in the world is by means of the idea of a fall or decline from original perfection. Human sin introduced natural and moral evil into the world by upsetting the natural order of things. *Evil is not an actual quality of anything. It is the lack or privation of something good. Hence, it is not a being of any sort.* So, it is not something that was created by God. If it were some sort of definite entity or being then only God could be the original cause of its existence. But everything that is from God is good. Hence, evil is not some sort of definite entity, but a lack or absence or privation of being. Just as disease is not a positive state, but the absence of a positive state, i.e. health, so vice and wickedness in the soul is the absence of virtue. Lust, for example, is a corrupted, perverse kind of love, a love of things that are inferior to the human soul as opposed to things that are superior to it.

There are degrees of goodness. Created goods are not supreme and unchangeable. They may be increased or diminished. To the degree that a thing has being, it is good to that same degree. To the extent that one thing is better than another, the closer it is to the ideal pattern in God's mind for that kind of thing. At creation, each kind of thing was as close as a creature can be to the ideal. Since humankind's fall from its original condition, people have declined greatly from the ideal form. Yet they have not lost all of the form that is from God. To do that would be to cease existing altogether. Hence, nothing can be totally evil; not even Lucifer, leader of the fallen angels and the original rebels against god. In order to make possible free choice of good over evil, God created different degrees of goodness in creatures. If God had not made any creature between beasts and angels then there would not have been an earthly creature capable of a good greater than that possible for any other earthly creature, free choice of good over evil. That human beings freely chose evil, means that they imitate Lucifer's arrogance and pride. This is the great tragedy of all life on earth. God's punishment of this error is part of his Goodness because it is just punishment.

The natural goodness of the human soul which existed in its first creation consisted in its unconditional love of God, the only object capable of making human beings completely happy. Nothing else can give lasting satisfaction to the human soul's innate desire for happiness than loving and being loved by God.

One of Augustine's favorite analogies is that the original relation between God and the human soul is like the original relation between the human soul and the human body. The soul is the life of the body, its animating, energizing principle. The body is ruled by the soul and is its proper instrument. Wise, virtuous bodily behavior was the result of this condition. Similarly, God was then the life of the soul and the soul's wisdom and happiness was the result of loving obedience to God. This follows from the general platonic principle that the soul moves toward and becomes like what it loves. Augustine affirms the platonic notion that love is the dynamic and energizing force of the soul. "The being of each man is according to his love. My weight is my love. Each man, whether he wills it or not, is a slave to those things by means of which he seeks to be happy."

As a consequence of the original sin or proud rebellion against God and against their own proper status as creatures, human life became punishment. The evils of death, misery, suffering, crime, lust and social conflict, which did not exist in the beginning, became characteristics of human life. Unlike disease of the body, sin is a corruption of the will. The will is so deeply harmed by pride that it is crippled. Hence, the corruption of sin is much worse than bodily disease. Not only can we desire to cure bodily diseases, we can often discover treatments for them, cure them and restore the body to health. The corruption of the soul is something one may wish to overcome and heal but it is no longer possible for the human soul by its own power make its crippled will as good as new or even improve it to any degree. Such an attempt is doomed by the fact that it presupposes the disposition to choose and love that which is superior and better. But that is exactly what has been lost, according to Augustine. Human beings cannot rid themselves of sin by their own efforts. They are utterly dependent on an undeserved gift of faith in God's only son who was sacrificed in order to atone for the sins of mankind. Had it been possible for Human beings to treat and renew their soul's condition, it would have been unnecessary for God to sacrifice his only son to redeem human sin. But His only son did die for the redemption of sin. So, this strategy of self-reliance and regaining of lost perfection is not possible for human beings.

Only a small minority of human beings are destined to receive this gift of faith.

The majority of people are destined to eternal punishment, never to know salvation, to suffer for eternity in torment.

Each man, regarding himself and his own satisfactions as the center of the universe struggles ceaselessly to acquire the objects he hopes will satisfy his boundless appetites and bring him happiness. The essence of the sinful state of mind - Pride - is the idea that man is the measure of all things; that human ideas, wants, ambitions and beliefs do not have to be evaluated against any superhuman standard. Human beings have the natural right to chart their own destiny and may justly claim all credit for everything they do. The human power of decree or of collectively establishing conventions is sufficient to determine the worth or nature of anything whatever. Human beings are self-sufficient and owe no recognition or gratitude or obedience to anything superhuman.

Cupidity (lust for money and possessions) is a type of selfishness. It is the first identifying characteristic of fallen Man. The second identifying characteristic is the lust for power, a passion to dominate others. This sin, too, is rooted in the basic sin of Pride. Pride led humanity to revolt against God in an insane desire to be like God, to play God, holding dominion over all creatures including other human beings, to be the creator and judge of values and standards, to set the course of human destiny by their own will alone.

Human beings were created equal to one another. No one was originally given the right to dominate other human beings. Human beings were given the right only to dominate and use inferior creatures, to be their caretakers. Ironically, human beings succeed only in imitating Lucifer, the first rebel against God, rather than God.

The third identifying characteristic of fallen Man is sexual lust. Augustine saw little if any positive good in sexual desire or sexual activity. He did not say that no good can be accomplished by sexual activity. Virginity in God's service is the best sexual state but lawful marriage and bearing children is morally good provided sexual activity is engaged in only for purposes of procreation. Sexual activity not intended to lead to childbearing is at best a permissible sin, though it is better than adulterous sex. Sexual activity in fallen humanity is due to involuntary lust. Human sex organs and the body's reproductive system were subject to the control of the human will before the fall. Now sexual lust dominates the body and the will. This, according to Augustine, is one of the appropriate punishments imposed by God for the original disobedience. It is not

sex per se which is original sin, according to Augustine. No child, except for Jesus, is conceived without sin after the fall.

By God's grace, a small minority of people are chosen for eternal salvation. These, together with the good angels constitute the City of God. At the end of the world, they will live forever in peace and happiness and in the enjoyment of God. The rest of mankind, the majority, together with Lucifer and his angels are citizens of the earthly city, which is doomed to eternal punishment.

City of God = true Jerusalem = whole assembly of saints = invisible church headed by Christ

The human part of the city of God is a single society that extends throughout the whole world and it is made up of men of different eras. Jesus said "My kingdom is not of this world" This makes it plain to all men and their earthly rulers that he had no intention of interfering with their temporal governance. No earthly state can ever claim to be a part of or represent the city of God. It is not embodied in any earthly institution.

The Hebrew covenant made between God and Abraham was established and ordained by God but it is not a temporal incarnation of the city of God. The city of God is to be gathered from all nations.

Even the visible church, which contains many condemned sinners as well as saved, is not an earthly division of the city of God, even though it was established by Christ as the vehicle through which the saved are to be gathered together. Citizens of the city of God pass through this world but they are only here as pilgrims or wayfarers. Their true country is Heaven. While on earth they share in the joys and sorrows of men but they live as wayfarers in a strange land.

So, most of the citizens of earthly states will be unredeemed sinful people. There cannot be an earthly society made up solely of the saved. The two cities are bound together until the Last Judgement. The political and legal systems of earthly states must be designed and operated on the assumption that it is dealing with fallen sinful citizens.

The state is an *external order*. The peace it seeks to maintain is an *external peace* (=absence of overt violence). It is a coercive order maintained by the

use of force. It relies on fear of pain or loss of property as its sanctions for compliance to its commands. It has no instruments by which it can mould thoughts, desires and wills. It does not seek to make people truly good or virtuous. Its only proper interest is in outward actions. It attempts to restrain its citizens from certain harmful or criminal acts. It is a *non-natural and remedial* institution, like private property, slavery and other forms of domination of man over man. This is a consequence of the Fall. It is part of man's punishment for sin and is intended as a remedy for man's sinful condition. It is the only alternative to power-mad, avaricious and lustful chaos. This is obviously different from the sort of order that exists among the angels in the city of God. That order is a spontaneous order of love.

No earthly state, pagan or Christian, possesses true justice. True justice can exist only in a *Republic* (= an assemblage of people who acknowledge in common what is right, i.e., serving and loving God). So understood, an earthly state cannot be a republic. It can only consist of an assemblage of reasonable beings who are agreed in common as to what they love.(= a *commonwealth*) An earthly state can be called "just" only in the sense that it is "well-ordered", has a certain harmony and concord among its citizens, a measure of temporal peace. Rulers are of central importance in securing this external order. They must govern on the assumption that the vast majority of the citizens will try to be unjust and struggle against one another for power, possessions, pleasure and glory.

The "virtues" sufficient to maintain an earthly state are not true virtues. They are based entirely on rational self-interest. Great kingdoms are essentially the same as bands of robbers knit together by a pact, ruled by a leader. When it gets big enough it becomes a "legitimate" state.

The state cannot make its citizens truly virtuous. It can only make them law-abiding. Only by fear of punishment can this be done. It has no way of changing the hearts and wills of men or even of knowing what peoples' true characters or motives are. A truly just state would actually mean the disappearance of the state, as we know it. The whole apparatus of legislation, punishment, coercion and repression would be unnecessary. The state would wither away into an anarchist paradise, an order of spontaneous love.

The state's instruments of repression are necessary because they are the only way of restraining the lusts of sinful people.

In The City of God, Augustine said

Surely it is not without purpose that we have the institution of the power of Kings, the death penalty of the judge, the barbed hooks of the executioner, the weapons of the soldier, the right of punishment of the overlord. While these are feared, the wicked are kept within bounds and the good live more peacefully among the wicked ... human recklessness should be confined by the fear of the law so that the innocent may be safe among evil doers and the evil doers may be "cured" when their freedom of action is held in check by fear of punishment.

Paradoxically, the very sin of loving earthly goods supplies, to some extent its own corrective remedy. God uses the evil desires of fallen men as a means to the establishment of earthly peace and order. The ruler's authority over subjects is therefore derived from God. No matter how wicked or unjust the ruler may be, his authority is legitimate. No disobedience to the commands of earthly rulers is justified. Christ said to Pilate "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above".