

JUSTICE IN ST. AUGUSTINE'S *CITY OF GOD*

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Abstract

This paper exposes and critically examines St. Augustine's concept of justice. Informed by the relative need to re-evaluate the concept of justice in relation to the State within the contemporary society, the paper views that most contemporary values are driven by homocentric humanism. Augustine's masterpiece, *City of God* (Civitas Dei) the fulcrum of the stated exposé, relates that justice begins with according God His due of worship and service. Compelled by love of God and neighbour, true justice is typical of the city of God, whereas the earthly city propelled by its own kind of love basically lacks justice. For Augustine, commonwealth can derive its meaningfulness only within his context of justice. The paper finds eventually that peace remains the inevitable fruit of Augustine's justice.

Keywords: St. Augustine, Justice, Commonwealth, City of God, State, Peace

Introduction

Justice in St. Augustine's philosophy is not the product of his organic rational conception. Instead, he anchored its discourse on an existing concept as well as in the political situation of his time. His major work, *City of God*, which embodies his idea of justice, was written with the primary purpose of attacking the ancient Roman city with its polytheistic and 'pagan' practices. Sabine and Thorson note that "his great book, the *City of God*, was written to defend Christianity against the pagan charge that it was responsible for the decline of Roman power and particularly for having caused the sack of the city by Alaric in 410." (1973: 184) No wonder J. Carcopino asserted in his *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* that "the material characteristics of imperial Rome are full of contradictions." (1964:1) As regards the *City of God*, O'Meara observes that "the first ten of its twenty-two books attack in turn the Roman official view that temporal prosperity is dependent upon worship of the many false gods". (1973:18) The attack issued formally from Augustine's analysis of the concept of justice and commonwealth from a dialogue in Cicero's *De Republica*, as a response to the regard of the Roman city as a republic or state. Augustine argued that the immorality as well as the city's practices had rendered it unjust and, consequently, Rome could no longer maintain the status of a state. Hence, he states that:

If no heed be paid to the one who declared the Roman State a sink of iniquity, and if my opponents, content and it can best endure, are not moved by the shame and ignominy of the other degeneration that floods it, let them note that it

has not merely become the ‘sink of iniquity’ described by Sallust, but that, as Cicero maintains, it had long since perished, and no longer endured as a state. (Augustine trans. Bourke 1958: 74)

He further emphasized his intention thus; “In its proper place, I shall endeavour to show that that ancient creation was never a true republic because in it, true justice was never practiced.” (Augustine 1958: 74) Upon such a premise, Augustine was set to propose what would stand as his theory of justice.

Justice

Augustine did not attempt a conceptual definition of justice. Rather he built his position about the concept on an Aristotelian common definition of the term which he expressed thus: “Let us see; justice is the virtue which accords to each and every man what is his due.” (1958: 469) Augustine’s effort was not merely to contend with the definition but rather with the scope of the practical application of justice. Before delving into the exercise, he deemed it important to highlight the relationship between justice and right in order to elucidate his argument. For him, justice exists in the context of recognition of rights. Hence he surmised, “Where there is not true justice, there is no recognition of rights. For what is rightly done is done by right.” (469) If the practice of justice is limited to the human society and that of the gods (worship of pagan gods), Augustine questions its adequacy. Rather, for justice to be true, it must take into cognizance God’s due or right, that is, obedience and service by man, his creature, while He Himself remains the author of all existence as well as the supreme law giver. If on the contrary, Augustine asks:

What, then shall we say of a man’s justice when he takes himself away from the true God and hands himself over to the dirty demons? Is it a giving to each his due? If a man who takes away a farm from its purchaser and delivers it to another man who has no claim upon it is unjust, how can a man who removes himself from the overlordship of God who made him and goes into the service of wicked spirits be just? (469)

Reflecting on this position, Sabine and Thorson hold that “it would be a contradiction in terms to say that a state can render to everyone his own so long as its very constitution withholds from God the worship which is His due.” (1973:186) It is Augustine’s strong view that justice must begin with obedience and service to God the creator and sustainer of all existence.

Augustine considered this a logical implication of the common definition of justice. It became for him a solid platform for establishing his idea of State. Burnell is of the view that:

Augustine's general notion of justice which applies to any society, indeed any human enterprise is that it consists in devotion to reunion with God and ultimately in nothing else. Injustice, therefore, consists in disordered love and Augustine described it as a form of lust. (1993: 177-8)

As Augustine established a paradigm shift in the practice of justice from the realm of humanity to that of divinity, he did not neglect the human sphere. Rather, he insisted that the practice of justice must issue from the divine (absolute) to the relational. Thus:

Justice is love, which serving only God, governs well what is submitted to it; finally, fortitude is love that undergoes whatever test that God requires (*DeMor. Eccl*, I, 15-25). God's *caritas* is at the origin of the world and of man. His love calls man to walk toward the achievement of creation. This achievement is to love without end in the City of God. Justice plays its part in this process in so far as it governs well what is submitted to man. This means for Augustine that the soul governs the body, reason governs vice, and God governs the soul and the reason (*De Civ. Dei* XIX, 23). When this happens, justice is not the result of a common acknowledgment of rights and duties or the result of common interests, but the expression of man's love for God as God ought to be loved, and of man's love of his neighbor as himself. (Heller 2007: 2)

Accordingly, subjection to God produces further fruits of justice within the human person and as an intra-personal good, springs from within and blossoms for the good of one's neighbour and the entire society. Augustine posits to this end that: "The soul that is submissive to God justly lords it over the body; in the soul itself, reason bowing down before its Lord and God justly lords it over lust and every other evil tendencies." (Augustine 1958: 470) Justice in Augustine is thus conceived in terms of rulership and submissiveness, that is, the rulership of God who imbues the submissive soul with grace to rule over the vices. Foster (1952) translated it in terms of conformity to law and order. His perspective to this is that of universal and eternal law since man is a member of a universal and eternal society. As God is the eternal law giver, man's submissiveness to divinely driven legal designs in the society is regarded as justice.

Foster holds in his *Masters of Political Thought* that Augustine's justice finds expression in his comparison of the concept with Plato, an exercise suggestive of his lucid awareness of the obvious relationship between the two concepts. In this work he averred that:

For both, justice implies law; and law, society. But, whereas for Plato man belongs to no society wider than the state, and is therefore subject to no law transcending the state-law, for Augustine even man is member of a universal and eternal society, and hence subject to its universal and eternal law. The justice of Plato's citizen is thus relative to a social order limited both in space and time; it is binding only on him and his fellow –citizens, and it will change or pass away. But the law which is the standard of the Augustinian justice is the same for all times and for all men. Hence is derived the motion, still inherent in our own use of the term, that what is just at all must be just by an absolute standard. (Foster 1952: 209)

Augustine's theory of justice makes an incomplete meaning when considered in isolation from the State. If not, the theory would be divested of its inherent political flavor, thereby concealing Augustine's concern for the body politic and its constituents. In fact, Augustine's justice is appropriate for political philosophy, when considered in the context of the political society - the commonwealth. It is noteworthy that Augustine's primary intention for delving into the issues of justice was to identify the concept as an indispensable factor in the concept of commonwealth.

Justice as the Definitive Principle of Commonwealth

Augustine maintains that commonwealth is definable only in the context of justice. What does Augustine mean by commonwealth? His idea of commonwealth derives from Cicero's definition of the term in his *De Republica* as a fulfillment of an earlier promise to establish that the ancient Roman city ceased to be identified by the status of a commonwealth due to its moral depravity. It could be noted that in Book II, Chapter 21 of the *City of God*, Augustine made a distinction between Sallust's and Cicero's positions about the decline of the ancient city and gave credence to that of the latter. Sallust had described the degradation of the city as having sunk into the depths of depravity but Cicero maintained the discontinued existence of the city as a commonwealth. Dwelling on the subject of Cicero's judgment of the Roman Commonwealth, Augustine states that:

If our opponents scorn the historian's judgment that the Roman state has sunk to the depths of depravity, if they are not troubled about the disgusting infection of crime and immorality which rages in it, so long as that state continues to stand, then let them listen not to Sallust's description of its degradation, but to Cicero's argument that it has now utterly perished, that the republic is completely extinct. (1958: 72)

Augustine maintains that Cicero's position is for no other reason except lack of justice in the city. He pointed out his reason as explicit in the dialogue where while representing Scorpio, following the annihilation of Carthage, he argued vigorously against the prevalent notion that injustice is inevitable in government, a position defended strongly by Philius. He holds that a commonwealth which he defined as 'the weal of the community' whereas the community is defined as "an association united by a common sense of right and a community of interest, and only exists where there is sound and just government, whether power rests with a monarch or with a few aristocrats, or with the people as a whole." (73) In order to draw his point home he concluded that:

But when the king is unjust (a tyrant) or the noble are unjust (a *factio*-a caucus) or the people are unjust (a collective tyranny), then , the commonwealth as not corrupt, but by a logical deduction from the definition, it ceases to exist at all - for there can be no 'weal of the community', if it is unjust, since it is not 'associated by a common sense of right and a community of interest', which was the definition of the community. (1958:74)

But it would be important to determine Cicero's meaning of justice in order to comprehend him properly, although Augustine did not make such a formal attempt. Scorpio's analogy of music as quoted by Augustine is quite informative:

In the case of music for strings or wind, and in vocal music, there is a certain harmony to be kept between the different parts, and if this is altered or disorganized the cultivated ear finds it intolerable; and the united efforts of dissimilar voices are blended into harmony by the exercise of restraint. In the same way a community of different classes, high, low and middle, unites, like to varying sounds of music, to form a harmony of very different parts through the exercise of rational

restraint; and what is called harmony in music answers to concord in a community, and it is the best and closest bond of security in a country. And this cannot possibly exist without justice. (1958: 72)

Thus, Cicero possibly conceives of justice as the consistent performance of tasks by each constituent part of the whole and in this case is referring to government and other members of society. Cicero seems to have influenced Plato's concept of justice as the latter defines it as the "the condition in which each part of a thing performs the task to which it is in a sense naturally suited." (Nicholas and White 1979: 14)

Apart from the Aristotelian definition of justice which forms the basis of Augustine's theory of justice, that which he used to place the divine in the context of justice, Plato's notion of justice equally played a significant role in Augustine's discussion of justice in the state especially within the household.

The wide exposition of Cicero's judgment of the Roman commonwealth afforded Augustine a sufficient ground for establishing his own position on the relationship between justice and commonwealth. He argues that:

Where there is not due justice, there can be no association of men united by a common sense of light; and therefore no people answering the definition of Scorpio, or Cicero. And if there is no people then there is no weal of people: if therefore a commonwealth is a weal of the people; and if a people does not exist where there is no association by a common sense of right, and there is no right where there is no justice, the irresistible conclusion is that where there is no justice there is no commonwealth. (1958:882)

Cicero's position, no less than that of Plato, is homocentric, and the justice of their theories conform to temporal society. But Augustine found them incomplete and extended the relationship to the absolute or universal order in his usual theocentric conceptions. For if a man does not serve God, he is unjust. And if there is no justice in such a man, Augustine maintains there would undoubtedly be no justice in a gathering which consists of such men. The reason is simple. There would not be "that consent to the law which makes a mob into a people, and it is the 'weal of the people' that is said to make a commonwealth." (1958: 883)

Since justice is more advantageous to a society than injustice, and justice defines commonwealth, Augustine holds that “there are no advantages for men who live ungodly lives, the lives of all those who do not serve God, but serve demons - demons all the more blasphemous in that they desire that sacrifice be offered to them as to gods, though in fact they are most unclean spirits.” (883) He concludes thus as he avers that he consider that what he has said about ‘a common sense of right’ is enough to make it apparent that by this definition people amongst whom there is no justice can never be said to have a commonwealth. (883)

When Wisner in his *Political Philosophy* posits that “Augustine’s theory of justice and commonwealth radically undermined the importance and dignity of the state in its transference of all mankind’s loyalties to the spiritual community of the city of God”, (Wisner 1983: 99) he was invariably referring to Foster’s discernment that Augustine conceives of absolute justice which belongs only to the universal order, of which conformity is obedience to the will of God. He opines that the state in Augustine’s mind refers not to the wider society harboring the families, but to the widest society which is “the society of all men under the kingship of God and the universal order as that prescribed by the will of God for all.” (1952: 204)

Augustine’s state or commonwealth is what he called the city of God, the citadel of true justice and perfect peace. Wisner in his *Political Philosophy* is of the opinion that Augustine’s theory radically undermined the dignity and importance of the state in its transference of all humankind’s loyalties to the spiritual community of the City of God. Commenting on Aristotle’s *Politics*, Aquinas acknowledged the city as the highest society in the political order in so far as it pursues the highest good. Lerner and Mahdi enunciated this point thus:

The city includes all other societies, for households and villages are both comprised under the city; and so political society itself is the highest society. Therefore, it seeks the highest among all human goods, for it aims at the common good, which is better and more divine than the good of one individual. (1963: 301)

However, Aquinas was making this judgment when the city was the highest expression of political arrangement before the emergence of sovereign states. This categorization now belongs to the modern state.

The Two Cities

Augustine used the term 'city' allegorically to underscore his view of the two kinds of world societies, although the usage must have originated from his neo-Platonist influence as the city in Plato is a political society. In fact, the usage of 'two cities' was co-opted from Plato's reaction against the city-state of his time "with all the concrete defects that he saw in it, though for special reasons he chose to cast his theory in the form of an ideal city intended for the revelation of those eternal principles of nature which existing cities tried to defy." (Sabine and Thorson 1973: 55) But the idea of cities might have come to Augustine through the writings of earlier scholars as Wisser suggested that, "Prior to Augustine, the idea of two cities can be found in the writings of such stoics as Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius and in the works of such neo-Platonists as Plotinus and Porphyry." (1983: 96)

The bid to formally raise man's socio-political consciousness beyond mere physical association to the pursuit of the good in itself as a metaphysical reality independent of the will or reason, was Plato's sole effort in the *Republic*. The development of this theory to unavoidably involve man's spiritual development within the pursuit of the said good led Augustine to this concept of the two cities not as concrete realities but allegories for ethico-historical classification of the human race. The two cities represent Augustine's view of the socio-political world of man in relation to his spiritual relationship with God, thereby proposing man's final destiny in eternity. Hence he states that "I classify the human race into two branches: the one consists of those who live by human standards, the other of those who live according to God's will." (1958: 595)

Such classification would subtly project the impression of inconsistency on the part of Augustine whose thought strongly fringes on theistic monism whereas the classification tends vigorously to suggest Augustine's appeal to basic existential duality of the good and evil in reality. But since Augustine holds the principle of the good as the only basic reality and evil as a privation of the good, the fundamental idea of the earthly city must have been derived as the aberration of the City of God or Plato's ideal city which is the Good state inhabited by the good citizens.

By two cities, that is, heavenly (City of God) and earthly cities, Augustine means two societies of human beings as key to understanding the inclinations of humanity from its origin and through historical evolution. Sabine and Thorson summarized this thought: "The fundamental fact of human life is the division of human interests." (184) Augustine's two cities theory engenders his broad distinction of the forces present in the world propelling man to his specific final destination. In Heller's view:

Augustine's *magnum opus et arduum* presents humankind as belonging either to the earthly city, symbolized by Babylon, or to the City of God, represented by the heavenly Jerusalem. Throughout human history both cities develop and increase when man acts either moved by selfishness or sacrificial love (De Civ. Dei, XIV, 28). Both cities struggle with justice, order and peace, and this struggle is particularly complex given the fact that the cities are intertwined in this world. It is difficult to perceive the distinction between justice as practiced in the Earthly City and that pursued by the City of God. (Heller, 2002)

Whereas the citizens of the city of God are predestined to reign with God for all eternity, the citizens of the earthly city are destined for doom in the form of eternal punishment. Designating man as the citizen of two cities reflects Augustine's allusion to the traditional ontological constitution of man as a composite of body and soul being at once citizen of this world and possibly of heavenly city.

Augustine's theory of justice ultimately aims at the creation of a divinely driven commonwealth or a Christian commonwealth which he referred to as the city of God. Dunning refers to Augustine's City of God as the City of God's elect "constituting a commonwealth of the redeemed in the world to come - a commonwealth of which the church is a symbol on earth." (1930: 157)

But the city of God differs from the earthly city because of their divergent inherent characteristics which Augustine outlines thus:

The two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created self love reaching the point of contempt for God, the heavenly city by love of God carried as far as contempt of self. In fact, the earthly city glories in itself, the heavenly city glories in the Lord. The former looks for glory from men, the latter finds its highest glory in God, the witness of a good conscience. The earthly lifts up its head in its own glory, the heavenly city says to its God 'My glory, you lift up my head.' (1958: 593)

In the above passage, Augustine highlights the major factor that propels the two cities. The earthly city lacks justice because of its contempt for God, refusing to accord Him his due of worship and loyalty but basking in self love and vain glory. The heavenly city, propelled by love of God, justly worships

him in humility and obedience - a love equated to justice as it extends to one another in good conscience. But the earthly city does not embody the element of justice because it does not recognize God. Since it lacks justice, it is equally devoid of any social virtue for justice is the cardinal social virtue. Concerning the authorities of the two cities, Augustine maintains that:

In the earthly city, the lust for domination lords it over its princes as over the nations it subjugates; in the other both those put in authority and those subject to them serve one another in love, the rulers by their counsel, the subjects by obedience. The one city loves its own strength shown in its powerful leaders; the other says to its God, 'I will love you, my Lord, my strength. (1958: 593)

The citizens of the two cities are equally characterized by the object whose love and desire dominate their souls. Wisser discerned that:

The soul which is formed by the love of God is radically opened towards the transcendent and sacred object of its desire. The soul which is formed by the love of self is closed around itself and thus denied the openness of that relationship formed by God. (1983: 96)

Wisser's position here simply conforms to Augustine's earlier description of the characters of the citizens of the two cities:

In the earthly city its wise men who live by men's standards have pursued the goods of the body or of their own mind, or of both. Or those of them who were able to know God did not honour him as God, nor did they give thanks to him, but they dwindled into futility in their thoughts, and their senseless heart was darkened: in asserting their wisdom'- that is, exalting themselves in their wisdom, under the dominion of pride - they become foolish, and changed the glory of the imperishable God into an image representing a perishable man, or birds or beasts or reptiles' - for in the adoration of idols of this kind they were either leaders or followers of the general public - and they worshipped and served created things instead of the creator, who is blessed forever. In the heavenly city, on the other hand, man's only wisdom is the devotion which rightly worships the true God, and looks for its reward in the fellowship of the saints, not

only holy men but also holy angels, so that God may be all in all. (1958: 593-4)

Such pan-entheistic biblical statement sums up Augustine's sole desire for mankind calling for the pursuit of the highest good (God) as against inclination to inordinate transient desires.

Augustine's justice and the theory of the city of God represent a philosophy of love of God and neighbour in man's political life. Maritain understood this philosophy and modeled his thought along its line. According to him, "the bond of society, and especially political society, is fraternal amity grounded in charity." (1963: 167)

Justice and Peace

Many preceding socio-political philosophers including Plato, Aristotle as well as most after Augustine especially of the rationalist and empiricist folk anchor their political thoughts on a core humanist platform. Their theories of justice and possibly peace are conceived as socio-political elements aimed ultimately at the preservation of mankind without a dint of the divine or eternity in view. In Aristotle, the state, which is the highest form of human association harbouring other forms of association, is a creation of nature and has as its chief principle of stability the virtue of justice. Peace, the end of the state, conceived by Aristotle as happy and noble living is purely homocentric. Locke who conceived of justice in terms of laws for mutual submission of natural liberty and equality for the sole purpose of ensuring the enjoyment of property within the civil society proposes the end of civil government as "the peace, safety and public good of the people." (Somerville and Santoni 1963: 187)

For these thinkers, justice is a necessary antecedent to peace, the sole end of political society. But political arrangements begin and end with the human society without consideration for eternity. But Augustine in his theocentric tendencies extended the concept of peace and its relationship with justice to eternity. For Augustine, justice is also a necessary antecedent to peace. Peace defined by Augustine as ordered harmony is also considered by him as the highest good *summon bonum* for it is the aim of all even in wars. He holds that war is deplorable and at the same time took a radical position with regard to just war. For although war is deplorable, seemingly unjust and cannot achieve its desired peace, a war indulged in for the resistance of the injustice of an external aggressor is not only just but obligatory. For a ruler has a moral obligation to ensure the security of his territory and subjects. As Neil Elliott puts it:

Augustine makes several observations about warfare, among other aspects of human society. First, he comments on the “wretchedness” of obligations to society, which compel us constantly to choose between lesser and greater evils. Given this tragic aspect of human life, any truly wise person will “lament the fact that he is faced with the necessity of waging just wars” of defense from the greater injustice of an aggressor. No wise person will cheer even a defensive war with any degree of patriotic exuberance; to contemplate warfare “without heartfelt grief” only shows that one “has lost all human feeling”. (2010:1)

Augustine’s highest good is God, hence peace equates God. According to Augustine, the peace of the earthly city is at its best a misery because its justice neglects God’s due, who is Himself peace. Hence the misery meant as earthly peace affords only a solace in comparison to the perfect peace not experienced in the earthly life but in the heavenly city of God in eternity. Augustine’s peace is a reward for acts of justice for the citizens of the City of God who are only pilgrims in this earthly existence. Book 19, chapter 27 of the *City of God* captures Augustine’s notion of the relationship between justice and peace thus:

In this life, therefore, justice in each individual exists when God rules and man obeys, when the mind rules the body and reason governs the vices even when they rebel, either by subduing them or by resisting them, while from God himself favour is sought for good deeds and pardon for offences and thanks are duly offered to him for benefits received. But in that ultimate peace, to which this justice should be related, and for the attainment of which this justice is to be maintained, our nature will be healed by immortality and incorruption and will have no perverted elements, and nothing at all, in ourselves, or any other, will be in conflict with any one of us. And so reason will not need rule the vices, since there will be no vices, but God will hold sway over man, and the soul over the body, and in this state our delight and felicity in obeying will be matched by our felicity in living and reigning. There, for each and every one, this state will be eternal and its eternity will be assured; and for that reason the peace of this blessedness or the blessedness of this peace, will be the supreme Good. (1958: 893)

Conclusion

From the wide submissions of the paper, Augustine’s concept of justice reflects his strong theocentric inclination. As a system builder, his definition of the concept

derived from Aristotle for whom justice is to accord each his due. Even though the definition is arguably homocentric, Augustine found in it a logical basis to extend the bounds of justice to the divinity. In fact, for Augustine, justice is only meaningful once it basically takes God into cognizance. Thus, a just society is such that accords God His due of worship and service. Once the society is, as such, theo-conscious, its citizens cannot afford to be unjust because they are guided by love(God), the character of the citizens of the city of God. So in Augustine, love is the parameter of justice, for to act justly is to love. Of course, the absence of love remains the measure of the earthly city, the terrain of injustice and the abode of band of brigands.

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