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Augustine on the Religious Foundation of Citizenship

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Augustine on the Religious Foundation of Citizenship

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Augustine on the Religious Foundation of Citizenship

Introduction

In *Gaudium et spes,* the Second Vatican Council declared, "Let the citizens cultivate with magnanimity and loyalty the love of the country, but without a narrow mind, so that they always look also for the good of the whole human family, united by all kinds of links between the races, and the nations."[1] This declaration responded to one of the most pressing issues of the time, the problem of defining the limits of the state's social agency. Twenty years prior to Vatican II, the Church witnessed one of the most explosive wars in recorded history, a conflict that had violently stretched the limits of empires and nations, of small communities and institutions — and even the limits of the human soul. The theme of the time, not surprisingly, was one of anthropological change.[2]

Integral to the Second Vatican Council's view of the nation state was understanding what it meant to be a citizen. The council positioned citizens within a concrete political society, exhorting them to protect the unity of their national commonweal. Nevertheless, the council also recognized that secular citizenship cannot encompass the religious dimension of human life. The council resorted to the Augustinian paradigm of the two cities to circumscribe the proper aims of secular citizenship: "This council exhorts Christians, as citizens of the two cities,

[1] The Catholic Church, *Gaudium et spes,* in *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II,* (Boston, MA: St. Paul's Editions, 1965), 594. [Art. 75].

[2] For a contemporary study of Catholicism and citizenship in the modern nation state, see Massimo Faggioli, *Catholicism and Citizenship: Political Cultures of the Church in the Twenty-first century*, (Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2017).

to strive to discharge their earthly duties conscientiously and in response to the Gospel spirit."[3] The perennial problem of this paradigm is defining what properly belongs to the nation state, setting apart "what belongs to Caesar." Broadly speaking, secular citizenship is the social signifier that confirms a natural person's membership in a political community.[4] In recent times, as national and cultural boundaries shift, many people in the Church struggle to understand how their religious identity relates to their status as members of a nation state. What do Christians owe to their nations? What is the proper aim of secular citizenship? In this paper, we will look at the defining characteristics of the Augustinian concept of the two cities. This will provide us with a framework to rethink what citizenship means for the Christian faith in the 21st century.[5]

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[3] The Catholic Church, *Gaudium et spes,* 554. [Art. 43].

[4] This definition of secular citizenship provides a sufficient account for a concept that is notoriously difficult to define, especially in a theological or philosophical context. I call secular citizenship a "social signifier" in order to avoid assenting to two theoretically problematic notions of citizenship, namely that citizenship is either (1) an intrinsic element of one's personhood or (2) a positive convention. By stating that citizenship is a "signifier," I affirm that it is not an essential part of one's personhood without also saying that it is merely a convention, since certain signifiers can be said to be natural (i.e. one's gender). Throughout this study, I am purposely ambiguous with my use of this term because both of these conceptions of citizenship (i.e. the *natural* and *conventional* accounts of citizenship) can be valid under certain conditions.

On a related note, I also purposely defining citizenship by qualifying it with the term "secular." When I say that citizenship is "secular," I simply mean that it is something distinct but not necessarily contrary to the Augustinian notion of eschatological citizenship . This qualification is useful for the present study, since we deal extensively with the Augustinian distinction between citizenship in a historical polity and citizenship in the City of God. However, my use of the term "secular" does not make this concept an eschatologically neutral reality, as it is affirmed in R. A. Markus' conception of the *saeculum*. See R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine,* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1970). Due to the limitations of this paper, however, we will not address Markus' famous thesis about Augustine's conception of the *saeculum*.

[5] For a survey of recent scholarship in Augustinian political studies, see Bruno, Michael J.S. *Political Augustinianism: Modern Interpretations of Augustine's Political Thought,* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013). For two recent books on Augustine's ethics of citizenship see Mary M. Keys, *Pride, Politics, and Humility in Augustine's* City of God, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022) and Graham Walker, *Moral Foundations of Constitutional Thought: Current Problem, Augustinian Prospects, (*Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). Due

Augustine's vision of citizenship can help us expand our political horizon as we reckon with what it means to be a Christian in the modern nation state. Like the Bishop of Hippo, we find ourselves in a time of existential uprootedness, so to speak.[6] As Antonia Tripolitis recounts, "The Hellenistic-Roman age was an era of insecurity and anxiety. The shift from nationalism to cosmopolitanism, from the secure isolated city-state to the *oikoumene*, gave people a greater sense of individualism, but at the same time provided many with a feeling of alienation and insecurity."[7] This sense of "alienation and insecurity" came to a head in the Sack of Rome of 410 AD. More than any of his contemporaries, Augustine (354-430 AD) understood that the Sack of Rome changed the meaning of what it meant to be a Roman. For many people in the empire, in fact, the collapse of the "Eternal City of Rome" stood as a testament that their Roman citizenship had lost its ancestral prestige.

Like in many other Mediterranean nations in antiquity, Roman citizenship had an anthropological basis rooted in a cultural conviction that the Roman state had a religious foundation. This conviction was so prevalent in the Roman social

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to the constraints of the present study, I will only focus on the literature from the previous generation of Augustinian political scholars.

[6] A cursory reading of recent books published in political science would suffice to ascertain that modern societies in the West are struggling with a sense of *uprootedness*, which expresses itself in a variety of collective phenomena (e.g. social alienation, political stasis, civic apathy, etc.). It seems that the aim of many of these books is to exhume the philosophical underpinnings of certain normative principles that define our society. We can think, for example, of the dozens of political science books published in the last ten years defending or attacking liberalism, the foundational political philosophy of modernity. Two examples of this genre of books (one from sociology and another from political theory) are Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land,* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2017) and Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed,* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

[7] Antonia Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age,* (Cambridge, U.K: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 2.

imaginary that religious worship (*pietas*) was considered a civic virtue.[8] This civic and religious integralism sprung from an ancient pagan tradition of Greco-Roman political thought which placed human civilization at the center of the cosmos. In this tradition, the city and its civic religion defined the moral formation of citizens.[9] The character of Roman citizenship was teleological: the object of citizenship was moral excellence (*Virtus*), and in the Roman mind nothing was more virtuous than honoring one's city. The Christian religion challenged the Roman social order by placing the worship of God above the teleological orientation of Roman citizenship. This, in short, is the cultural context of Augustine's concept of the two cities. The aim of this paper is to show how this context defined Augustine's view of secular citizenship.

Methodology

For the most part, Augustine's political thought follows the anthropological framework of classical political philosophy. This anthropological framework, in short, presupposes that humans are rational and social animals who seek a life of happiness. For Augustine, this fact of human nature is true even *post peccatum*.[10]

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[8] Charles N. R. McCoy, "St. Augustine," in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy,* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally & Company, 1963), 156.

[9] In this paper, I refer to any sovereign political community (that is, a community ruled by a principle of national self-governance) as a polity. This definition is inclusive enough to talk about a wide variety of political regimes. By a polity, I mean a community guided by a set of cultural and legal principles, which bind a people together in a political social unity. This definition is wider than the modern conception of constitutional regimes, which takes the written constitution and the procedural norms of a regime as its chief normative framework.

[10] Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God against the Pagans,* trans. by R. W. Dyson, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998). 390. [X. 1].

According to Miikka Ruokanen, the Bishop of Hippo believed that, "Man's desire to be happy is a feature of the primitive good order of nature, *ordo naturae,* in the constitution of the human being."[11] Like his pagan philosophical predecessors, Augustine struggle to reconcile this fact of human nature with the reality of political life. The crux of his political thought, then, was discovering the truth of human nature by presenting a vision of the highest political society. Aided by Scriptural revelation, Augustine portrays this vision in eschatological terms.

Now, Augustine portrays the eschatological reality of the "Kingdom of God" using the familiar language of classical political philosophy. By referring to this eschatological reality as the "city" (*civitas*) of God, he used the same analytical procedure that Greek political philosophers used when studying the nature of a *politeia*. Eric Voegelin refers to this analytical procedure as the "anthropological principle."[12] The aim of the anthropological principle, according to Voegelin, is to study the nature of the human soul by contrasting its interior orientation with the orientation of its political community. The most famous example of this principle occurs in Plato's *Republic,* which presents an account of the best human life by constructing the best political constitution.[13] By creating an ideal image of political life, Plato sought to discover the true orientation of the human soul over against the social conventions of his time.

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[11] Miikka Ruokanen, *Theology of Social Life in Augustine's De civitate Dei*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 44.

[12] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 52-76.

[13] Plato, *Republic,* trans. by G.M.A. Grube, (Cambridge, UK: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992). [368c-d].

Plato's anthropological principle is normative because it sets a standard for virtue: one can only become virtuous by following the ideal archetype of the human soul.[14] This method presupposes that, in any particular political context, social life follows an axiological structure, namely, a worldview that defines what is best for human life as such. This principle, accordingly, seeks to distinguish what is normative for human life as such from what is considered to be normative for it in the axiological structure of a particular society. In order to draw this distinction, according to Voegelin, Plato elevated God as the ordering principle of the human soul.[15] Therefore, the political constitution that best satisfied the most noble aspirations of the human soul was considered to be more natural and by implication more divine (i.e. Plato's Callipolis).

Throughout this paper, I contend that the Bishop of Hippo follows the anthropological principle in his critique of the Greco-Roman conception of secular citizenship. He critiques the civic values of *Romanitas* using the eschatological symbol of the "City of God" as a normative measure. In other words, this eschatological city becomes the model for social fellowship.[16] Unlike Plato's "Beautiful City" which only came to life in philosophical discourse,[17] Augustine's

[14] For Plato, that archetype was exemplified in the contemplative life of philosophy.

[15] Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 66-70.

[16] Ruokanen, *Theology of Social Life in Augustine's De civitate Dei*, 22. For Augustine, as Ruokanen aptly observes, the eschatological city God is a social entity: "In accordance with the idea of creation, the life of *civitas Dei* as the object of eschatological is also by nature social life. 'How could that city have made its first start, how could it have advanced its long course, how could it attain its appointed goal, if the life of the saints were not social.' (XIX, 5:4-6.) [Ruokanen's quotation from Augustine's *City of God*]."

[17] Ernest L. Fortin, *Classical Christianity and Political Order,* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1996), 34-35.

vision of the Heavenly City was rooted in the revelation of the Holy Scriptures, as well as in the historical experience of the Christian community. As I argue in this paper, Augustine's critique of *Romanitas* is as much of a critique of Roman imperial ideology as it is of Platonic political philosophy.

Outline

(1) In the first chapter, I examine Augustine's view of secular citizenship by looking at his critique of the archetype of *Romanitas*, the model of civic virtue that shaped Romans' conception of citizenship. One of the difficulties of studying the history of Roman citizenship is locating a site where one could visualize the cultural landscape of the time. While instructive, studying the Roman legal corpus of citizenship laws would not reveal much about their underlying cultural foundations.[18] Instead, in this study I focus on the cultural institution that supplied Roman citizenship with its raison d'être, namely the Greco-Roman institution of civic education. This institution serves as site from which we analyze the anthropological basis of Roman citizenship. In order to do this, we must look at the values that defined Roman civic education and how they informed their understanding of human nature. This analysis will provide us with a template to examine Augustine's critique of *Romanitas*. Finally, I make the case that Augustine's critique of this civic archetype helps him formulate a positive conception of Christian civic virtue.

[18] This is especially true given the ad hoc nature of Roman civic law.

In my historical survey, I look at the cultural trends that defined Roman civic education in Late Antiquity. In this section, I relied on Charles N. Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture*, which offers a comprehensive study of Roman imperial ideology. Cochrane looks at the religious and philosophical sources of *Romanitas* and examines how Christian thinkers like Augustine refurnished these sources for their own apologetical purposes.[19] In the second part of this chapter, I argue that Augustine portrayed his conversion story to Christianity as a foil to the civic archetype of *Romanitas*. The objective of this analysis is to show how Augustine's religious conversion provides the experiential background for his famous eschatological account of citizenship in the Heavenly City. By providing an account of his conversion, I hope to illustrate how Augustine's personal engagement with his Roman secular citizenship informed his understanding of eschatological citizenship.

(2) The second chapter takes a much more philosophical approach to Augustine's engagement with Roman imperial ideology. In this chapter, I focus on his critique of Cicero's ideal commonwealth. First, I begin this chapter by responding to Quentin P. Taylor's claim that Augustine's critique of Cicero's political thought fails to provide a constitutional and thus normative account of politics.[20] I reply to Taylor's objection by contending that, in fact, Augustine started his study of political life from the same premise that prompted the

[19] Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Actions from Augustus to Augustine,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

[20] Quentin P. Taylor, "St. Augustine and Political Thought: A Revisionist View," Augustiniana , 1998, Vol. 48, No. 3/4 (1998), 292.

constitutional inquiries of classical political commentators.[21] Most classical political commentators — including Plato and Cicero — started their evaluations of political constitutions by defining the meaning of human nature. Their approach was similar to Augustine's, in that they abstracted the form of the best polity from the contours of the human soul.

By following Augustine's critique of Cicero's commonwealth, I present his normative view of political life and explain how it shapes his conception of secular citizenship. In this chapter, I argue that the Bishop of Hippo established two principles for secular citizenship, namely: (1) secular citizenship cannot realize the ultimate aim of human life, and consequently (2) the state must not attempt institute this ultimate existential aim as the principle for secular citizenship. These two negative principles, in short, provide an outline for a Christian conception of civic virtue. In the second part of this chapter, I attempt to harmonize Cicero's and Augustine's conception of social fellowship. This discussion looks at Augustine's assessment of citizenship ethics in Book XIX of the *City of God*.

(3) Finally, I conclude this paper by stating how the foregoing account of Augustine's social thought can inform our modern conception of citizenship rights. Hopefully, this could serve as a signpost for a broader study on this subject.

[21] Constitutionalism is the normative and prescriptive study of political regimes, an approach which seeks to define the social form of a polity based on its promulgated laws and social mores.

Chapter 1

Augustine on Civic Education

The word of man
is the daughter of death.
We talk because we are mortal:
words are not signs, they are years.
Saying what they say,
the words we are saying
say time: they name us.
We are time's names.

To talk is human.

— Octavio Paz, "Flame, speech"

Introduction

An essential part of what makes a people a polity is civic education. The end of civic education is teaching people the basis of citizenship, namely what binds them together in fellowship and what each part owes to the whole and the whole to the parts. Because of its crucial role in the formation of a people's identity, classical political commentators often considered civic education the measure for assessing the merits of a political regime.[22] In the *Republic,* for instance, Plato constructs his ideal Callipolis around the institution of education.[23] For the Greco-Roman mind, the perennial problem of education was cultivating an atmosphere where citizens could understand their position in the polity in light of the larger

[22] Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture,* 84.

[23] Plato, *Republic,* trans. by G.M.A. Grube, (Cambridge, UK: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992), 52-122. In his two main political works *Republic* and the *Laws,* Plato spends a considerable amount of effort analyzing the nature of civic education, especially the type of education that the city ought to provide to its future leaders.

backdrop of the cosmos. In the Roman Empire, cultivating a distinctively Roman cultural identity (*Romanitas*) was paramount for the preservation of the empire. According to Cochrane, the imperial ideology of the *Pax Augusta* stood on the cosmological worldview of "classical idealism," which conceived of the *polis* as a constitutive part of the natural world.[24] In this worldview, the *polis* (or in imperial Roman Stoic parlance, *oikumene*) was not alienated from the larger cosmos. In fact, its place in the cosmos was higher than that of the external natural world, as human beings possessed a rational soul akin to the eternal soul of God. In this context, civic and religious education were not incompatible terms. The Latin word for religion (*religio*) meant *re-binding* (as in re-binding people together under one sacred oath, *sacramentum*), which is why public religious rituals often had a civic character.[25]

In the first centuries of the Christian religion, the usual accusation against Christianity was that it was a superstitious cult. In the Roman religious worldview, superstition (*superstitio,* which literally means standing over) was the opposite of *religio* and was considered a civic offense of the highest order.[26] It was a civic

[24] Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture,* 82.

[25] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics,* 88-89. In this passage, Eric Voegelin points to the theo-political integralism of Rome before the advent of Christianity. "What St. Augustine could not understand was the compactness of Roman experience, the inseparable community of gods and men in the historically concrete *civitas,* the simultaneousness of human and divine institution of a social order." It is important to keep in mind, as we continue on with this analysis, that many of Augustine's intellectual targets are Roman figures (such as Cicero and Varro) who lived in a different historical time.

[26] Contrary to some historical surveys, the pagan Roman state did not have an open culture of religious toleration. Like most states in this region at this particular historical time, the Roman state of the Republican and early Imperial era had rather provincial religious tradition. It seems that Roman religious syncretism was predicated in many ways by its native religious tradition. For a pointed analysis of this issue, see Kinch Hoekstra and Quentin Skinner, "The Liberties of the Ancients: A Roundtable with Kinch Hoekstra and Quentin Skinner," in *History of European Ideas*, 44(6), 6-13.

offense because practitioners of superstitious rituals did not pledge alliance to the deities of the city, and so they forfeited their duty to shape their civic identity (*civis*, citizenship) in accordance with the "re-binding" of the city's official religion. Because they stood outside of the religion of the city, practitioners of superstitious cults were forced to reside outside of the city's walls, so to speak. Their mere presence in the city was sacrilegious: exile or capital punishment were the only efficacious means to eradicate their offense.[27] For early Christians, it became imperative to express their faith in a way that would not be completely incompatible with values of Roman citizenship.

Much has been written of the early Christian apologetic strategy to respond to the accusation of impiety. Many early Christians responded to this accusation by openly refusing to renounce their faith (as was the case with many of the martyrs). However, other Christians attempted to persuade civic authorities that their faith was not at odds with the empire. Often, both of these strategies worked in tandem. In some cases, the heroic example of the Christian martyr served as evidence that the faithfulness of the Christian community was not incompatible with the patriotic ideals of the empire.[28] Early Christian apologists contended that Christians were the most faithful adherents of justice — and thereby of all civic

[27] Punitive exclusions against practitioners of what were seen as superstitious cults was a common practice in the Mediterranean region. It is true that Rome had a relatively more lenient approach to such practices, but still the Roman state did not hesitate to prosecute "superstitious" religious groups, especially when they posed a threat to its civic and religious institutions. A prime example of this is Rome's persecution against the cult of Bacchus in 186 B.C. See Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age,* (Cambridge, U.K: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 22-25.

[28] Justin Martyr, *Apologies*, ed. By Denis Minns and Paul Parvis, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 88-91, 121. [Chapters 4, 5 and 17].

virtues — precisely because they worshiped the one true God.[29] Implicit in this line of thought was that Christians were better citizens because they followed a higher truth. Their defense highlighted the merits of Christian *paideia*. What Paul said to the Athenians concerning the transcendental nature of the Christian God implied that Christianity was a superior philosophy.[30] This point was repeated by later apologists such as Justin Martyr, who famously claimed that Christianity was the only true philosophy.[31] One of the ways in which early Christians responded to the accusation of impiety was by portraying their religious values in line with the cultural norms of Greco-Roman society.

I hesitate to call the early Christian confrontation with Greco-Roman society contextual theology. Unless we take this technical term in its broadest sense — as the experience of measuring an individual's worldview with the prevailing cultural opinion of the time — I believe this methodological approach would fail to capture the stakes of this discussion. In order to capture what is at stake, we must try to visualize what early Christians and their pagan interlocutors saw as their ultimate longing but also as their most intractable "stumbling block." This requires that we attempt to understand them in their own terms, or at least in the terms in which their cultural representatives portrayed their experiences. This analytical procedure demands that we *position* ourselves, to the best of our ability, in their axiological worldview. To put the aim of this study in more concrete terms,

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[29] Justin Martyr, *Apologies*, 98-100. [Chapter 10].

[30] Acts 17: 22-32.

[31] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho,* in *The Fathers of the Church,* ed. Ludwig Schopp, (New York, NY: Christian Heritage, Inc., 1948), 160. [Ch. 8].

we must (1) define the structure of their axiological worldview (that is, what they valued the most, the object of their ultimate longing) and (2) position ourselves in close proximity with their "stumbling block," namely with their experience of history. Considering the analytical complexity of such a task, I will focus this study on how early Christians contended with their secular citizenship (which we might call the locus of their historical experience) in light of the eschatological orientation of their faith (that is, the direction of their ultimate longing). This framework follows the anthropological principle we outlined earlier. It looks at how early Christians contrasted the spiritual orientation of their faith with the orientation of their political community.

Before we endeavor into this task, we must provide a historical survey of the philosophical and religious mores undergirding Roman citizenship. This historical survey will help us contextualize how Christians in Late Antiquity related to their secular education, which in the Greco-Roman world was the catalyst for cultural formation. Narrowing this analysis even more, we will turn to the testimony of Augustine of Hippo, not only because he excelled in the virtues of pagan and Christian education, but also because he synthesized the canonical distinction between earthly and heavenly citizenship, a central theological paradigm that has shaped Christians' social experience ever since. Even by focusing on the testimony of a man who is often praised as the biographer of a closing era — the era of the Christianization of the Latin world — we will inevitably make broad statements that would not be devoid of anachronisms. Be that as it may, the best we can hope for is that these anachronisms will prove that certain aspects of political life are universal to the human condition.

Section I: Historical Survey

By the 5th century, Christians were in many aspects fully Roman and fully Christian. It is true that Christianity completely transformed the Greco-Roman world, but the cultural conversion ran both ways. Successfully established in the society of the empire, many Christians were now members of the social and intellectual elites of important metropolitan centers.[32] Having been trained in the Roman trivium, Augustine was a card-carrying member of these intellectual elites. To see the 4th and 5th century through Augustine's eyes is to see an empire in decline through the eyes of a man who had been trained early in his life to look after the future of the empire. The Roman trivium was, after all, designed to train public officials. The world of the Bishop of Hippo was the world of a Greco-Roman cosmopolitan society that lacked a cohesive cultural identity. Even though his native Hippo Regius was insulated from many of the maladies that beset other parts of the empire, as a member of the intellectual elite, Augustine had to contend with this cultural malaise.[33] This being the cultural state of affairs, the time was prime for political and religious restlessness. Certainly, one could argue that in

[32] Brian Daley, "Building a New City: The Cappadocian Fathers and the Rhetoric of Philanthropy," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7, no. 3, (1999): 431-432.

[33] Augustine was acquittanced with many Roman elites in North Africa and Italy. Some of ones he knew in North Africa were refugees from the Sack of Rome in 410 AD. James J. O'Donnell explains an important fact about Augustine's audience: "The skeptics were to be found among wealthy and discontented refugees from Rome, who found themselves living as aliens in Africa, discontented and frustrated, taking the pleasures of the theaters and shows, but always hankering to return to the great city far away. The neat, even witty, polemical point of the opening book of *ciu.* is that the refugees have exactly the right attitude: they need to realign their loyalties and their longings toward a greater city, farther away, and then only will they see the fate of temporal kingdoms in true perspective." James J. O'Donnell, "Augustine, *City of God*," (Unpublished Notes), IV.

Augustine's time the "Eternal City of Rome" encountered a similar cultural predicament as Socrates' Athens.[34]

Given this uncertain cultural context, it is not surprising that a common point of contention among the elite had to do with education. "Who is corrupting the youth? And, who is to pass on the customs of old?" Questions like these haunted intellectual elites. Their preoccupation with education did not merely arise from the usual reactionary conservatism of the Roman aristocratic class. As we will elaborate in detail in the next chapter, the imperial ideology of the *Pax Romana* had deeply-seated roots in classical idealism, which was the overarching view of Greco-Roman culture concerning the limits of human agency.[35] Implicit in the Roman elites' obsession with the future of the classical *paideia* was a deep sense of existential anxiety about their place in the cosmos. They worried even more about the future of their children, the upcoming ruling class of the "Eternal City."[36]

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[34] In her insightful study *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age,* Antonia Tripolitis gives a compelling account of this cultural paradigm. She explains that in Late Antiquity, "As people became more mobile and individualistic, old traditions and values were steadily being uprooted, static class structures began to disappear, past certitudes were questioned, and the future became uncertain. By the 2nd century of the present era, the Hellenistic-Roman world had witnessed a succession of barbarian invasions, bloody civil wars, various recurring plagues, famines, and economic crises. Moreover, confidence in the traditional cults and their gods that served as the basis of the political, social, and intellectual life was waning. The general populace no longer placed its hope or faith on the ancient gods, whom they believed could not alleviate their daily encounters with the vicissitudes of Hellenistic life." See Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age,* 2.

[35] Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 74-114.

[36] For a contemporary sociological analysis of cultural elites, see C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite,* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1956), 2, 19. Basing his theoretical framework on the study of North American cultural elites, C. Wright Mills argues that the so-called "power elite" is a social stratum "composed of men whose positions enable them to transcend the ordinary environments of ordinary men and women; they are in positions to make decisions having major consequences." Mills also suggests that, since institutions of power "have many interconnections and points of coinciding interests," power elites tend to form a "coherent kind of grouping." To the extent that it is useful, Mill's study could show the reader the sociological basis of some of the

The cultural paradigm of the Late Roman Empire was ripe for anthropological change. For Roman elites, in particular, this was a time of reckoning. What was to become of their image as the cultural protagonists of the empire? This seemingly vain concern is a complex one. In the ideology of classical idealism the figure of the promethean leader was a foundational archetype. He was to be the mediator between God (or the cosmos) and humanity, the mover of history and the bearer of Divine Reason. This altruistic figure was to "consecrate" human virtue with his divine example.[37] This archetype was, in any case, the role model of the Greco-Roman elite, and it was reified in the poetic stories they learned in school. We can think, for example, of the figure of Vergil's Aeneas or Ovid's Romulus. One could even add Plato's Socrates to this list.

What citizenship meant in a Greek *polis* or in a rustic Italian town was something very different in the cosmopolitan and overly bureaucratized empire of Late Antiquity.[38] By the 4th century, Roman citizenship had lost much of its

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debates about higher education taking place in North American elite circles. The present analysis is in a way showing a historical precedent for some of these debates.

[37] Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 110-113. In this passage, Cochrane explains how this archetype sought to "consecrate" human virtue by citing this passage from Cicero's *De Natura Deurum* (Cf. *De Nat. Deor.* II. 2. 4): "'It is proper,' [Cicero] declares, 'to consecrate the intellect, loyalty, manliness, and good faith of humanity, to all of which temples have been publicly dedicated at Rome, in order that those who possess them — as all good men do — should feel that they have gods themselves dwelling within their own bosoms. For it is virtues, not vices that merit consecration.'" What Cicero says here was a commonly shared sentiment among Greco-Roman intellectual elites. We can think, moreover, of what Plato says about the "god-like" virtues of the civic rulers of Magnesia. See Plato, *Law*, ed. by Malcolm Schofield, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 435-470. [941a – 969d]. For a more Stoic formulation of this archetype, see Susana Elm, "Gregory of Nazianzus: Mediation between Individual and Community," in *Group Identity and Religious Individuality in Late Antiquity*, edited by Eric Rebillard and Jörg Rüpke, (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 96-98.

[38] Ibid., 30-33. Hellenic and Roman views on traditional customs of citizenship were different in some important respects. It is true, as Cochrane explains in this passage, that the Roman cultural view of citizenship was deeply influenced by Cato's rustic picture of agrarian Italian virtue. This aspect of the Roman civic spirit was not a Hellenic import.

ancestral religious bond. The Edict of Caracalla (c. 212) might have contributed to this complex process, in so far as it rendered citizenship solely a matter of legal right, untying it from other social bonds linked to ethnicity, nationality or religious affiliation.[39] Like in Socrates' Athens, the basis of Roman citizenship became a matter of convention, and as any other convention it lacked a claim to nature or to the divine; it was a "man-made" right.[40] This line of thought implied that the city, too, was conventional, a conclusion that stripped the city from its cosmological position as the *oikumene*.[41] If the city followed Protagoras' rule that "Man is the measure of all things," then the measure of the city becomes the "natural" constitution of the individual, which is to seek what is advantageous for the individual, namely the attainment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.[42] What it meant to be a citizen in the 4th century was far from the civic archetype of the divine hero, the Stoic altruistic ruler or the Platonic philosopher king. The crux of

[39] This is, of course, an oversimplified picture of the legal implications of the Edict of Caracalla. In a distinctively Roman fashion, this edict had important legal exceptions, and it seems that certain groups of people were arbitrarily excluded from it. See Herbert W. Benario, "The Dediticii of the Constitutio Antoniniana," in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association ,* 1954, Vol. 85 (1954), pp. 188-196. Interestingly, this edict did not abolish certain institutions which were still considered naturally binding, i.e. sex inequality and slavery.

[40] Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics,* 90-91. For an explanation of classical conventionalism, see Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History,* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1950) 104.

[41] James E. Holton, "Marcus Tullius Cicero," in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, *History of Political Philosophy,* 146-147. As James E. Holton rightly points out, Roman thinkers like Cicero were doubtful that something like the Stoic natural right doctrine would have sufficed to ground the city in a natural foundation. Certainly, one can see this skepticism at the end of Scipio's Dream in Cicero's *Republic.* See also Strauss, *Natural Right and History,* 107-108, 154-155.

[42] Strauss, *Natural Right and History,* 108-109: What Leo Strauss says about the conventionalism of 5th century BC Sophists applies, in principle, to the position of 4th century AD conventionalists like the Epicureans and the Cynics.

Roman elites' struggle to redefine their conception of citizenship sprung from a desire to base their civic identity on a higher principle than mere convention.

The ideology of classical idealism failed to respond to the historical contingencies that beset the Late Roman empire. The best illustration of how this played out was in the Roman elites' failure to lead the empire by their own example. They failed, in short, to revert the fortune of the empire with the merits of their "virtue."[43] Even without looking at how Christianity might have undermined the prestige of Roman citizenship, we can already see how the failure of classical idealism "revealed the horizon of the political life as a mere horizon." What Ernest L. Fortin calls the "horizon of the political life" was precisely the *telos* of civic virtue. This *telos* created "the protected atmosphere within which [the city] had thus far been able to thrive."[44] Leo Strauss describes this horizon as the atmosphere of civil society: "Man cannot reach his perfection except in society or, more precisely, in civil society."[45] The Roman cultural elite realized that the empire needed a new *telos* for human virtue.[46]

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[43] This is, in my opinion, the fate of utopian political ideologies. The most convincing evidence that an ideology is unsound is when its supporters fail to enact its ideals in the real world because they are incapable of applying those ideals in their own life. A cursory reading of Augustine's critique of the decadence of the Roman political elite in the *City of God* would prove this point.

[44] Fortin, *Classical Christianity and Political Order,* 39. Here, I am re-interpreting what Ernest L. Fortin says about Christianity as a statement that could be equally applicable to pagan classical idealism. He would not disagree with my conclusion that classical idealism exhausted the political "horizon" of the city. According to Fortin, "Classical thought has failed, not because it expected too much of most men, but because it was compelled to rely on purely human means to bring about the realization of the noble goals that it set for them."

[45] Strauss, *Natural Right and History,* 130. See also Aristotle's *Politics,* i. 1.

[46] We can think, for example, of the desperate and ultimately failed attempt of Emperor Julian the Apostate (331 – 363 AD) to *re-form* the empire along the lines of pagan integralism. See Cochrane, "Apostasy and Reaction," in *Christianity and Classical Culture.*

By the end of the 4th century, as we explained above, the tenets of the Greco-Roman *paideia* began to lose credibility. If Roman elites wanted to continue being the cultural mediators of society, they needed another role model in their civic formation. In her study of the Cappadocian Fathers, Susana Elm explains the mindset of 4th century Hellenic and Roman intellectual elites:

> [M]any of our ancient authors were themselves masters at articulating the tensions between the individual and the group, between individual agency and the demands of the collective. However, most of these individuals, these authors, were members of the elite. Nevertheless, the majority of the debates that deeply moved these (Greek) Roman elite men focused precisely on the tensions between the good order of the cosmos and the *oikoumene* of the Romans that formed part of that cosmos, and demands aimed at granting and ensuring individuals their own personal salvation.[47]

Elm provides an insightful account of the shifting cultural landscape in which Late Roman elites found themselves. As the cosmological foundation of *Romanitas* began to shake — and along with the whole edifice of the "Eternal City of Rome"— it became increasingly clear that people needed another face for their collective identity and another Savior (*Soter*) to represent them in the cosmos.[48] More importantly, they needed somebody or something to imitate. Imitation was the basis of the Greco-Roman *paideia*.

What Elm said about intellectual elites in the Eastern Empire would have been true for Augustine's milieu in North Africa and Milan. Like the Cappadocian

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[47] Elm, "Gregory of Nazianzus: Mediation between Individual and Community," 90.

[48] The term Savior (*Soter*) applied to Caesar. See Tripolitis, *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age,* 16: "The term "savior" means deliverer, preserver, protector from all ills, healer, or guide. In the Greek and Hellenistic-Roman world the title was given to individuals, divine or human, male or female, who had improved a situation or had prevented a perilous one, either personal, political, social, or intellectual."

In the next chapter, we will look at how Christian theologians like Eusebius of Caesarea fell into the temptation to assign a soteriological role to the Roman Emperor when Christianity became the official religion of the Empire.

Fathers, people in Augustine's circle were keenly interested in adopting what Elm calls a "programmatic life" for their Christian identity, a way of life that would help them understand their position as Christians converts and future ecclesial leaders.[49]

It is important to put an emphasis on conversion as the formative experience that shaped Augustine's social outlook. Augustine's conversion to Christianity marks the moment when he renounces his Roman citizenship, at least as *it was imparted to him in his secular education*. For Augustine, nevertheless, the way to conversion took the familiar paths of self-realization (*Bildung*) of the Greco-Roman imagination. Thus, the most important trope of Augustine's conversion, that of the Prodigal Son, follows the pattern of the Odyssean voyage or even of the Socratic philosophical conversion.[50] In the next section, we will look at how the Bishop of Hippo contends with these cultural tropes in his religious conversion to Christianity. The objective of this analysis is to show how Augustine's conversion provides the experiential background for his famous eschatological account of citizenship in the Heavenly City. His conversion story will play on some of the themes that defined Roman elite's perception of their cultural role, and this will defined Augustine's critique of Roman civic education, particularly as it was imparted to elites in Late Antiquity.

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[49] Susana Elm, "A Programmatic Life: Gregory of Nazianzus' 'Orations' 42 and 43 and the Constantinople Elites," in *Arethusa* 33, no. 3 (2000): 420. In Late Antiquity, a Christian "revert" or convert who had the intellectual credentials of somebody like Augustine or his friend Alypius would have been pressured to occupy an ecclesial leadership position. This is the same pressure that the Cappadocian Fathers faced after studying philosophy in Athens.

[50] See "Allegory of the Cave" in Plato, *Republic* (514a - 517e).

Section II: The Story of Augustine's Conversion

i. Pre-infancy

In order to comprehend Augustine's experience with his secular education, we must understand the main objective of the Greco-Roman *paideia,* namely, the formation of the student's soul and body. There were various theories of education in circulation in Late Antiquity which spelled out the structure of knowledge, but the one that Augustine was most familiar with was the Platonic theory of knowledge.[51] In the *Meno*, Plato makes the case that learning is the act of recollecting the things that the soul experienced in its eternal, pre-embodied existence.[52] The Delphic maxim "Know thyself" is an invitation to look inwardly at one's soul in order to understand the orientation of one's love.[53] By doing this, the philosopher was better positioned to apprehend the eternal nature of God, for the soul shared a certain type of kinship with God's immaterial reality. Socratic education involved a type of conversion. More than anything, the task of the

[51] The other theory of knowledge that was well-known at the time was the Epicurean materialist theory of knowledge, which relied mainly on the empirical input of the senses. This theory tended to deny any transcendental conception of the divine.

[52] Plato, *Meno,* in *Plato: Complete Works,* (Cambridge: UK: Hackett Publishing Company), 880-883. [81a – 84b].

[53] The highest love (*eros*) was of the love of wisdom, philosophy. Many of the myths supporting Plato's metaphysics portray the philosophical life as an upward ascent, which nevertheless seeks to integrate the multifaceted aspects of social life in the pursuit of the Good. To fulfil his obligation to the city, the tribute of the philosopher was to cure the citizens from the sickness of ignorance. In this task, the philosopher sought the company of beautiful and intelligent young men who would be eager to learn the way of philosophy. Integral to the philosophical life, then, was a commitment to education. See Plato's "Ladder of Love" in the *Symposium* (210a – 211d) or his account of philosophical friendship in the *Phaedrus* (256ae).

philosopher was to instruct students to imitate God, the measure of every virtue. Any other type of imitation would have been unbecoming.[54]

The problem with the Platonic theory of knowledge is proving that the soul participates in the eternal nature of God. This problem troubled every school of philosophy after Plato; and in Late Antiquity it had been reinterpreted in various forms by Neoplatonist philosophers.[55] The Bishop of Hippo adopted these reformulations of Plato's theory of knowledge in his theological conception of the human soul. Especially in his early works, Augustine emphasized that human life was rooted in "a metaphysics of preformation and even preexistence."[56] According to James Bernard Murphy, "In Augustine's version of Platonic preexistence, each person's soul originally existed with God and with knowledge of divine happiness, which we lost when we fell into our earthly bodies."[57] Certainly, Augustine's acquaintance with the Platonic theory of knowledge premised much of his self-introspective theological reflection.

The Bishop of Hippo saw the story of his conversion as a return to God, the first principle of knowledge. This, in short, is the philosophical framework of Augustine's theory of knowledge: Self-knowledge is the basis for all knowledge, and we can only arrive at self-knowledge in "God's Truth." In this distinctively

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[54] This is the main premise of Plato's scattering critique against poets and sophists, who had an influential sway over the education of young people in 5th and 4th century BC Athens. See Books 3-4 and 10 of Plato's *Republic.*

[55] James Bernard Murphy, *Your Whole Life,* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2020), 50-51.

[56] Ibid., 53.

[57] Ibid., 52.

Socratic formulation, Augustine begins the story of his conversion, the way in which he turns away from the world of shadows, so to speak. From the outset, nevertheless, Augustine does not know how to find the way back to God. What becomes crucial for him is to find somebody who will show him the way to "God's Truth." Moreover, what also prompts him to confess his conversion story is a longing to locate the place where he can encounter God. In Book I of the *Confessions,* Augustine cries out to God:

> How shall I call upon my God for aid, when the call I make is for my Lord and my God to come into myself? What place is there in me to which my God can come, what place that can receive the God who made heaven and earth? Does this then mean, O Lord my God, that is there is in me something fit to contain you?[58]

This longing is stirred by a type of "restlessness" that draws humans back to their origins.[59] This interior affection instills in them a desire for a primordial form of communion, something approximating a union with God's being. For this reason, Augustine wants to find somebody who will show him the way back to God because he does not think that one could arrive there alone. From the start, Augustine knows that the life of blessedness is not a solitary pursuit. Ultimately, he takes heed of the Gospel saying that Christ is "the way, the truth and the life." The Man God of Christianity becomes Augustine's companion as he walked through the "stony path" of his secular education.[60] In his conversion story, as I show below,

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[58]Augustine, *Confessions,* trans.by R. S. Pine-Coffin, (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1961), 22. [I. 2].

[59] According to Augustine, the opposite of this longing is a distorted type of restlessness that confronts us with the finitude of life. This is the restlessness that plants in us the seeds of concupiscence. The Devil and his emissaries are said to be in this constant state of disquietude. This point will be expounded later in this chapter.

[60] Augustine, *Confessions,* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1961), 30, 46.

the Bishop of Hippo attempts to escape from the "streets of Babylon," namely from a social context defined by an idolatrous archetype of human virtue.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine uses the Parable of the Prodigal Son as a template for his conversion story. These are the signposts that shape Augustine's conversion story: How can I return to my Father? Who will show me the way back? And who will teach me how to be a son?[61] Augustine's conversion story illustrates a man's attempt to find a teacher — or we could even say, a companion — who will walk with him along the path of self-knowledge and blessedness.

ii. Infancy

Augustine's account of infancy is often criticized because of its harsh characterization of infants' disorderly behavior. When talking about his early childhood, he exclaims, "Who can recall to me the sins I committed as a baby? For in your sight [God's sight] no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth."[62] To a modern audience, this statement might seem unbecoming, as we tend to regard infancy as an age of moral innocence. However, Augustine portrays this stage of life in this way because this is a pivotal time in the spiritual development of the human person. For Augustine, infancy is a climactic scene in the much larger story of salvation. The story of salvation plays out in the temporal existence of human beings, but its ultimate aim seeks eternal fulfillment

[61] I owe this framework for interpreting Augustine's *Confessions* to Russell F. Hittinger. See Hittinger's forthcoming book, *On the Dignity of Society: Catholic Social Teaching and Natural Law*, (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2024).

[62] Augustine, *Confessions,* 27. [I, 7].

in the love of God: "For all things find in you their true origin, their impulse, the centre of their being."[63]

The story of Augustine's conversion begins with an account of his infancy. In his famous remarks about infants, Augustine outlines the basis of social life, paying special attention to the nature of communication. From the moment of birth, according to him, we are possessed by a lust to conquer the world, as it were.[64] Pre-verbal nurslings engage in all sorts of antisocial behavior. Mothers and the other women in the household initiate infants into the moral code of society; they work out their asocial behavior "out of the system by one means or another."[65] Naturally, the initial object of their moral instruction pertains to the child's nourishment, as the mother's milk is the source of their biological sustenance. Nature and nurture, breastfeeding and the cultivation of morals, coincide at the earliest period of human life. And so does God's will, for it is the source of the infant's natural and moral nourishment:

> [N]either my mother nor my nurses filled their breasts of their own accord, for it was you who used them, as your law prescribes, to give me infant's food and a share of the riches which you distribute even among the very humblest of all created things.... They did this because they loved me in the way that you had ordained, and their love made them anxious to give to me what they had received in plenty from you.[66]

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[63] Augustine, *Confessions*, 22. [I, 2].

[64] Margaret R. Miles, "Infancy, Parenting, and Nourishment in Augustine's Confessions," (Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 1982), 353. Margaret R. Miles provides an important insight about Augustine's view of infants: "The original adaptive response of the infant in grasping for breath — in grasping breath — is the response that will be articulated and become normative as the lifestyle of the individual." Miles' observation is instructive because, as we will see later in this paper, Augustine often describes his experience of conversion using imagery of infancy, for he sees infancy as the period when habits of concupiscence were enacted. Returning to God in the act of conversion is a return to inface in order to reverse this process.

[65] Augustine, *Confessions*, 28. [I, 7].

[66] Ibid., 25. [1, 6].

Augustine uses the Pauline trope of milk to draw an analogy between the physical and the spiritual nourishment that humans receive from God. What he stresses in this passage is that God is invested in forming the human body and soul. According to him, the Word of God is inscribed in the natural world, especially in the nurturing care of the human family; and so it is through God's Word that humans are sustained even before they learn how to communicate. The Bishop of Hippo asserts that:

> For by your mercy, Lord, from the time when my mother fed me at the breast my infant heart had been suckled dutifully on his name, the name of your Son, my Saviour. Deep inside my heart [Christ's name] remained, and nothing could entirely captivate me, however learned, however neatly expressed, however true it might be, unless his name were in it.[67]

According to David Penniman, "The maternal food, for Augustine, was not simply a palpable presence of God's care. It was also the material form through which faith in Christ was transferred from adult to child. It is, in a sense, the physical implanting of that inward and spiritual food from which God feeds the soul throughout life."[68] The maternal nourishment of the human family is infused with God's Spirit, which shows to Augustine that certain kinds of human associations serve God's salvific mission.

Penniman points out that Augustine's emphasis on breastfeeding followed an important theme in the Greco-Roman *paideia*, and this is the role of the family in the formation of a child's moral character. He explains that, "In previous

[67] Augustine, *Confessions*, 59. [III. 4].

[68] David Penniman, *Raised on Christian Milk,* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 180.

generations, the power of breast milk had been amplified within the ideological system of Roman family values and incorporated into an enduring concern about human formation produced through Greek *paideia*."[69] This concern sprung from a conviction that culture, as transmitted by the institutions of the family or the state, has a crucial role in the formation of human nature. While certain aspects of an individual's constitution are determined by nature (which is the realm of fortune or providence), it is still within the power of the city to form his moral character. This optimism about the malleability of human nature is central in the Platonic doctrine of education. In Plato's view, the *polis* must procure for the education of people in order to form (or *reform*) their innate traits. Certainly, Augustine would not have disagreed with Plato on this score. However, what is most foundational for him is to highlight God's providential role in the benevolent works of human institutions like the family and the city.

This last point is crucial in Augustine's view of civic education. As Penniman explained, in the Greco-Roman *paideia* the family became one of the many social institutions that aided the state in the cultivation of civic mores. While the Bishop of Hippo does not oppose this practice, he reiterates that these institutions become corrupt when they find their *ultimate point of reference* in the temporal aims of the state. For him, the Christian family must prioritize the eternal salvation of its members over its social function in the state.[70] Likewise,

[69] Penniman, *Raised on Christian Milk*, 167.

[70] Augustine, *The City of God,* 944-945. [XIX. 16].

the state must not attempt to subjugate these social institutions to expand its reach other the citizen's civic formation.

iii. Boyhood

The next stage of Augustine life's is boyhood. This stage coincides with two important developmental signposts in human life: the beginning of semiotic communication and memory. These developments, in turn, prompt Augustine to take "a further step into the stormy life of human society."[71] The Bishop of Hippo indicates that this stage marks the beginning of his memory; and so, in a sense, this also marks the beginning of his confessions.[72] From this stage onwards, Augustine lives in a world immersed in language — in a world signified by language. The distance between the signified and the signifier provides the common space for social life. For Augustine, as we will see shortly, whenever this distance is severely shortened or stretched, the social world falls into confusion. For, when something becomes a self-referential sign, or when a sign is abstracted from its referent, human beings run the risk of losing sight of that which binds language to the world. His theory of semiotics underlies his theological view of citizenship.[73] For, Augustine considers human beings to be signs — or we could

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[71] Augustine, *Confessions*, 29. [I. 8].

[72] Despite the many regrets that Augustine feels about his pre-verbal infant behavior, he does not seem to be too concerned about integrating this in his confession, for this stage of life is absent from his memory. For he says, "But if *I was born in sin and guilt was with me already when my mother conceived me,* where, I ask you, Lord, where or when was I, your servant ever innocent? But I will say no more about that time, for since no trace of it remains in my memory, it need no longer concern me." Ibid., 28. [I. 7].

[73] For a famous critique of Augustine's theory of semiotics, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 5-9. Contra Ludwig Wittgenstein's' critique, Augustine was conscious that we cannot name

even say, images — that can turn to God in the act of conversion. This act of "turning," as we will explain shortly, expresses the true orientation of the human soul — and thus the normative structure of the best human society, which is the object of the soul's orientation.

Now, Augustine enters into the "stormy" social world by imitating the people around him. The people of his household taught him how to speak by accompanying words with particular facial expressions or tones of voice. The infant Augustine memorized these linguistic expressions and eventually learned how to "express [his] wishes by means of them." It was then that he could convey his internal dispositions to others and vice versa. The mechanics of infants' linguistic development consist in imitation, repetition and memorization. In this early stage of linguistic education, Augustine begins to see the fragility of social life. For, in any type of interpersonal communication, the communicator can only express so much about his internal dispositions with common signifiers. Internal introspection, too, relies on the use of these signifiers.[74] What Augustine shows in this account of early linguistic communication is that we cannot express our interiority either to ourselves or to those around us in a completely unmediated

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everything in the world by ostensive definitions alone. Of course, pointing to my "self" requires a much more sophisticated language game. It is the language game of religion. Wittgenstein made an overly simplistic account of Augustinian semiotics.

Recent scholarship have looked at the intersection between semiology and political theory in Augustine's social thought. See Remo Gramigna, *Augustine's Theory of Signs, Signification and Lying,* (Berlin, GER: De Gruyter, 2020) and Veronica Roberts Ogle, *Politics and the Earthly City in Augustine's* City of God, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[74] Augustine, *Instructing Beginners in Faith,* trans. by Raymond Canning, (New York, NY: New City Press), 55-59. See also what Augustine says concerning the proper use of words: Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* trans. by Edmond Hill, O.P., (New York, NY: New City Press, 2014), Book I. Chap. 2 and Book II. Chap. 1-3.

way. So much about who we are is embedded in a world of common signifiers. Self-expression depends on a common language. And yet, we cannot completely identify ourselves with a common signifier because we know that we are more than signs. *We are not self-referential signs*. The truth about ourselves, as Augustine learns in his conversion story, points beyond us, to God's Word. Self-knowledge, again, is only possible in God's Light.[75]

Augustine premised much of his critique of Greco-Roman *paideia* on this semiotic framework. The most valued part of the Roman trivium was rhetoric, which was predicated on imitation. Augustine excelled in this type of imitation by memorizing the poetic compositions of Roman poets. In the training of rhetoric, students were encouraged to imitate the eloquence of prodigious orators, not so much the truth of their words. This training often relied on abusive pedagogical practices. Even as early as in elementary school, Augustine coped with these practices:

> I was sent to school to learn to read. I was too small to understand what purpose it might serve and yet, if I was idle at my studies, I was beaten for it, because beating was favoured by tradition. Countless boys long since forgotten had built up this stony path for us to tread and we were made to pass along it, adding to the toil and sorrow of the sons of Adam.[76]

Indeed, Augustine's secular schooling was rather traumatic. Eventually, nevertheless, he accepted the utility of rhetoric and even took pleasure in it. According to him, schoolmasters compelled students to memorize the tales of

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[75] Augustine, *Confessions,* 211. [X. 5].

[76] Ibid., 30. [I. 9]. In this passage, the Bishop of Hippo portrays to his early secular schooling using eschatological imagery. Referring to his secular schooling "a stony path" built for the "sons of Adam" makes an illusion to salvation history.

Roman poetry, but they paid little attention to how these tales impacted their moral character.[77] They distorted the students' relationship with language, teaching them that language is valuable mainly for its extrinsic worth, that is, for the effect it has on the audience.[78] This distorts the proper use of language, which is to signify things in the world.[79] The point of rhetoric is to unbind words as much as possible from what they signify in order to embellish their meaning and make them more malleable for persuasion. These rhetorical abstractions aim to make signs increasingly more self-referential.

The Bishop of Hippo contends that rhetoric alienates us from ourselves. This practice makes signs something valuable for their own sake and not for their proper use (*uti*).[80] And so, when we attempt to say something about ourselves in the spirit of rhetoric, we run the risk of confusing who we truly are with the sign that we have inscribed into ourselves. This obscures God's imprint upon ourselves and the rest of the created world. According to Augustine, since we are created in God's image, we reflect God's Light with special dignity, and as such we carry within ourselves a sign of God's Word (*Logos spermatikos*). For Augustine, all signs and things derive their truth from God, each pointing to God in their own way.[81] What makes human beings unique among creation, nevertheless, is that

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[77] Augustine, *Confessions*, 37-37. [I. 16].

[78] Augustine's critique of this form of rhetoric is similar to Plato's famous rebuke of sophistry. Like Plato, Augustine thinks that sophistic rhetoric is detrimental to social fellowship and the morals of the citizenry.

[79] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* Book I. Chap. 2 and Book II. Chap. 1-3.

[80] Ibid., Book I. Chap. 2.

[81] Ibid.*,* Prelude. 7-8, Book IV. Chap. 11. This point is repeated throughout this book.

they can find God's Light within themselves by interpreting the order of the natural world through speculative reasoning, which is a power bestowed upon them by God's Spirit.[82] However, the "stumbling block" of the human race is to appraise their mind as the measure of meaning. This, in short, is the Mephistophelean sin of pride (*superbia*), which causes human and angelic beings alike to turn away from God and to become lights onto themselves.[83] For the Bishop of Hippo, nevertheless, what makes us different from the fallen angels is that we are *turning signs*, that is, that we can still turn to God in the act of conversion and through the mediation of God's Light, the Incarnate Word.[84]

iv. Youth and Adulthood

Before his famous conversion experience in Milan, the Bishop of Hippo underwent a series of "turnings," of conversions and reversions. One of the most significant of these turnings is the one he experienced after reading Cicero's *Hortentius*, an exhortation in praise of the philosophical life. He describes this moment as a conversion:

> It was my ambition to be a good speaker, for the unhallowed and inane purpose of gratifying human vanity. The prescribed course of study brought

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[82] It is often argued that Augustine subscribes to the usual rationalist prejudice which posits that other natural beings lack the ability to point back to God. It is true that he does not think that other natural beings have rational faculties, although he does attribute to them the power of memory. What is revealing, though, is that Augustine points out that the natural world is more willing to acknowledge God as their creator than most human beings. The way Augustine describes the natural world in Book X. 6-7 of the *Confessions* reminds us of the way he describes the good angelic beings (which are spiritual in nature). See Augustine, *City of God,* 459-461. [XI. 9].

[83] Augustine, *City of God,* 449-464, 498-500. [XI. 1-10, XII. 1]. See also *Confessions,* 250. [X. 42].

[84] Ibid., 250-251. [XI. 2]. See also *Confessions,* 250-251. [X. 43]. I owe much of this reflection on Augustine's eschatological theology of signs to Russell F. Hittinger.

> me to a work by an author named Cicero, which writing nearly everyone admires, if not the spirit of it. The title of the book is *Hortentius* and it recommends the reader to the study of philosophy. It changed my prayers to you, O Lord, and provided me with new hopes and aspirations. All my empty dreams suddenly lost their charm and my heart began to throb with a bewildering passion for the wisdom of eternal truth. I began to climb out of the depths to which I had sunk, in order to return to you.[85]

Cicero's *Hortentius* instilled in Augustine a desire to follow the life of philosophy, which takes an upward ascent. The path of philosophy points upwards.[86] However, Augustine still did not understand that the philosophical ascent that Cicero most likely had in mind was an allusion to the Platonic ascent to the immaterial realm of the Forms.[87] Shortly after Augustine reads Cicero's *Hortentius*, he becomes entangled with Manicheanism, a Gnostic religious cult which spoused an extremely dualistic view of creation.[88] Manicheans believed that humans needed to purify themselves from the evil of the material world by liberating the light trapped in their bodies.[89] What Augustine resents most about

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[85] Augustine, *Confessions*, 58. [III. 4]. Cicero's *Hortentius* is now lost.

[87] Interestingly, after Augustine reads the *Hortentius*, he tries to read the Scripture but fails to comprehend its meaning because it seemed to him "unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero." It is not until he becomes acquittanced with Ambrose's Platonist circle that he learns how to read the Scripture *philosophically,* that is, allegorically. Until then, Augustine practiced the exegetical methods of Manicheans. The Manicheans believed that the material world was the domain of evil and the creation of the King of Darkness. After a long and cubulated cosmic struggle between the King of Light and the King of Darkness, the human race comes into existence as a composite of bodily and spiritual matter. Christ is sent by the King of Light to save the human race. See John Arendzen, "Manicheism," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia,* (Vol. 9. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910). The Gnosticism of the Manicheans is different from Platonic dualism. Platonists did not believe that evil inhabited the material world, but only that it was the absence of good.

[88] Johannes van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon,* (Leiden: E.J. Brill), 35. In this passage, Johannes van Oort explains the proselytizing practices of the Manicheans and the reason somebody like Augustine would have been attracted to them. At first, Augustine was attracted to the Manicheans because they claimed that they had a rational religion "that was free of offence to reason." See also Augustine, *Confessions*, 95-99. [V. 5-7].

[89] Augustine, *Confessions*, 60-62. [III. 6].

the Manicheans is that they taught him that evil is a material substance brought upon spiritual beings by a being of darkness. Manicheans hypostasized "evil" and identified it with the material world. This is the opposite of what Augustine later says about created beings, namely that they were created for the sole purpose of turning to God.[90] Augustine's famous prayer at the beginning of the *Confessions* is a rebuke of the Manicheans' repudiation of the material world:

> Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you *thwart the proud*. But still, since he is a part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.[91]

In the passages when Augustine talks about the Manicheans, he frequently portrays his internal restlessness using bodily images. He talks about feeling "hunger and thirst" for God because he felt spiritually malnourished with the Manicheans.[92] Once again, Augustine stresses the role that God plays in providing human beings with bodily and spiritual nourishment.[93]

When Augustine fell away from the Manicheans, he began studying the books of the so-called Platonists, a motley crowd of philosophers influenced by Stoic, Skeptic and Neoplatonic sources. In those works, he learned about the spiritual nature of God, and this helped him overcome the Manichean conception of evil. Certainly, the Manichean's obsession with the material world kept

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[90] Augustine, *Confessions*., 148-150. [VII. 13-14].

[91] Ibid., 21. [I.1].

[92] Penniman, *Raised on Christian Milk*, 178-179.

[93] Augustine, *Confessions,* 61. [III. 6].

Augustine from apprehending the spiritual nature of God. "How could I see this [that evil was not a material substance] when with the sight of my eyes I saw no more than the material things and with the sight of my mind no more than their images."[94] He had become dissatisfied with the Manicheans because they had a rather shallow understanding of the relationship between the soul and the body. What the Platonist taught Augustine is that the soul is the ruling principle of the body. They also taught him that the soul can rule over the body only when it is properly oriented toward God, who is the first principle of the spiritual and the material world.

The passages in Augustine's *Confession* which talk about the Manicheans and the Platonists are filled with references to the Parable of the Prodigal Son. For instance, he compares the sacred food of the Manichean Elect with the "husks" that the prodigal son fed to the pigs.[95] Certainly, the Platonists helped Augustine find his way back to God by teaching him that the material world was not evil. Only then could Augustine stop thinking about God as a spiritual being opposed to physical matter. Still, the Platonists could not fully resolve for him how an embodied being could come into God's presence. They only showed him that the way to God was in the upward ascent of the philosophical soul. Ultimately, Augustine was looking for a teacher, somebody who could show him how to bring the fullness of his humanity to God's presence. As Augustine realized after his

[94] Augustine, *Confessions,* 62-64. [III. 7].

[95] Ibid., 62. [III. 6].

conversion, he was looking for the Son of God, the Incarnate Word who was "made flesh and come to dwell among us."[96]

Indeed, Augustine could not reconcile the Platonist view of the soul with the embodied reality of his life. Before his conversion experience in Milan, he struggle to appease the restlessness of his soul and body. He could not bring his will to obey the commands of his mind, and the disobedience of the will caused him to forsake his body to the temptations of sin.[97] "My inner self," Augustine says, "was a house divided against itself."[98] His internal commotion was stirred even stronger when he listened to the conversion stories of men like Victorinus and Ponticianus' friends, who abandoned their secular professions to pursue a monastic Christian life. Hearing their conversions made him want to follow their way, as if they were part of a sacred pilgrimage heading to the promise land. Spurred by the intense desire to imitate these men, Augustine arrives at the turning point of his conversion story

There is much we could say about Augustine's conversion scene in the Milan garden.[99] Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand how this scene resembles, *or even reenacts*, previous moments in Augustine's life. According to Margaret R. Miles, this scene closely resembles Augustine's pre-verbal infancy: "Augustine pauses in his account of the conversion experience to describe at length the bodily

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[96] Augustine, *Confessions*, 145. [VII. 9].

[97] This experience helped Augustine formulate his famous definition of sin, namely that the punishment of sin is disobedience itself. See Augustine, *City of God,* 611-614. [XIX. 15].

[98] Augustine, *Confessions*, 170. [VIII. 8].

[99] Here I am talking about the conversion seen in the *Confessions,* Book VIII, 8-12.

state which accompanied his mental 'storm.' The picture we receive is that of the random flailing motions of the newborn infant."[100] She also points out that, "[The] strong imagery [of this scene] suggests, as do several other elements in the account, that what is necessary is a return to the earliest psychic condition of anxiety, a stripping of the cumulative object-orientation which, in adulthood, has become ingrained behavior."[101] Miles argues that in his conversion Augustine returns to a condition of infancy.[102] In other words, Augustine revives his infancy in a spiritual form, and this initiates the reversal of concupiscence, which was enacted in his temporal infancy. Explaining the meaning of this scene, Penniman makes a similar case: "In the *Confessions,* Christian formation occurs by retreating from an adulthood besieged by unrestrained desires and arrogant claims of wisdom toward a mute infancy of perfect obedience and humility."[103] By retreating from these ingrained patterns of behavior, Augustine also sought to retreat from the ambitions of his secular education.

One of the ways Augustine's conversion scene reenacts his temporal infancy is in how it portrays him in a state of *speechlessness*. In the midst of this emotional turmoil, Augustine cannot bring his mind to obey the urging of his "own great

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[100] Miles, "Infancy, Parenting, and Nourishment in Augustine's 'Confessions,'" 356. This is the dramatic scene Miles that refers to: "I made many movements with my body — the kind of movements which people sometimes want to make, but cannot make, either because they have not the limbs, or because their limbs are bound or weakened by illness... I tore my hair, beat my forehead, locked my fingers together, clasped my knee... Then a huge storm rose up within me bringing with it a huge downpour of tears... I flung myself down on the ground somehow under a fig tree and gave free rein to my tears; they streamed and flooded from my eyes."

[101] Miles, "Infancy, Parenting, and Nourishment in Augustine's 'Confessions,'" 355.

[102] Ibid., 359.

[103] Penniman, *Raised on Christian Milk*, 181.

desire, which could be accomplished simply by an act of will."[104] In other instances, he could assent to any speculative conception about God, but in this moment he cannot find the words that could compel him to assent to his ultimate longing, which is to turn his love to God with "all his mind." In his boyhood, Augustine learned how to express the object of his internal wishes with words and physical signs, but now he is utterly wordless about his ultimate longing. His current state resembles the "mute infancy" of his nursling years. When Augustine finally surrenders his will to speak for himself, he hears the voice of a child saying, "Take it and read, take it and read," and spurred by the recollection of St. Anthony's story he is prompted to read the Scriptures. There, Augustine reads one of Paul's moral exhortation (Rom. 13:14) and is finally able to appease his internal state, "as though the light of confidence flooded into [his] heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."[105] This is the moment of conversion, the moment when Augustine lets God's Spirit in the Scriptures penetrate his mind.

The Scripture spoke forth the truth that his mind could never have spoken. Like a sign pointing to its true referent, the Bishop of Hippo turns to God by reflecting back God's Light as revealed in the Scriptures. The revelation of the Scriptures was there all along, but what Augustine ultimately needed to interpret it was God's Spirit. In the same way as the father of the prodigal son receives him

[104] Augustine, *Confessions,* 171. [VIII. 8].

[105] Ibid., 178. [VIII. 12].

with a feast, the Spirit of the Father descends upon Augustine in the Light of the Scripture.[106]

v. Spiritual Infancy

The conversion scene in the Milan garden, as Miles argues, reenacted the pattern of concupiscence that had gripped Augustine since his infancy, thereby initiating its reversal. Certainly, the phenomenology of the act of confession provides the basis for this event. For Augustine, confessing is the act of presenting our past in truthful recollection to God, in order to receive God into ourselves. Confessing is an act of turning to God in full recognition of one's dependence on him. Thus, Augustine says:

> Let me know you, for you are the God who knows me; let me recognize you as you have recognized me. You are the power of my soul; come into it and make it fit for yourself, so that you may have it and hold it *without stain or wrinkle*. This is my hope; this is why I speak as I do; this is the hope that brings me joy, when my joy is in what is to save me. As for the other things in life, the more we weep for them, the less they merit our tears, and the fewer tears we shed for them, the more we ought to weep for them. We know that you are a lover of faithfulness, for the man whose life is true comes to the light. I wish to act in truth, making my confession both in my heart before you and in this book before the many who will read it.[107]

This prayer illustrates the restoration that took place in Augustine's self after his conversion. Miles contrasts this restoration to the development of concupiscence that begins in infancy. "In contract to the 'development' of concupiscence, in which

[106] Once again, Augustine uses the image the "feast" in the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the same way that he interprets the Pauline Trope of spiritual milk. Ultimately, what makes the prodigal son and the infant similar is their helplessness; they both need nourishment, but they can only be fed if they turn to their nourisher with humble obedience.

[107] Augustine, *Confessions*, 207. [X. 1].

the content of earlier stages is continuously and restlessly changed even though the pattern remains the same, growth in the Christian life preserves and integrates every stage of growth."[108] Miles' observation describes a psychological occurrence that stems from a much deeper theological phenomenon. For Augustine, the act of conversion reenacts one's temporal birth. It is to be "born again" in the Spirit of God and finding one's birthplace in the Church, the Body of Christ. This spiritual birth restored the damage Augustine incurred in the "stony path" of his secular upbringing.

The Bishop of Hippo does not describe in detail the events around his baptism. In Book IX of the *Confessions,* nevertheless, Augustine is markedly less troubled with the riveting state of anxiety and doubt of previous books. During his time as an *infante* (the word used at the time for people preparing for baptism), Augustine is much more preoccupied with the study of the Holy Scriptures. This is part of his much larger effort to follow the example of the Son of God. Interestingly, as he starts to follow Christ's example, the people close to him also begin walking on the path to conversion. In Book IX, in fact, we begin to see how Augustine's immediate social relationships begin to change by committing to the Christian faith. Thus, we read how Augustine was baptized together with his closest friend Alypius and his son Adeodatus:

> Together we were ready to begin our schooling in your ways. We were baptized, and all anxiety over the past melted away from us. The days were all too short, for I was lost in wonder and joy, meditating upon your far-reaching providence for the salvation of the human race. The tears flowed

[108] Miles, "Infancy, Parenting, and Nourishment in Augustine's 'Confessions,' 361.

> from me when I heard your hymns and canticles, for the sweet singing of your Church moved me deeply.[109]

Certainly, Augustine's sees his entrance into the Church as the start of a new education. Before his baptism, he left behind his profession of rhetoric, along with the many ambitions of his secular academic training.[110] In a way, Augustine's conversion was also a conversion from his secular education. Of course, he did not renounce his training in rhetoric but only strove to use it for the transmission of the Christian faith. For him, integrating the use of human language, with all its potential pitfalls, with the transmission of the faith was paramount for the "programmatic" life of Christian converts.

The Bishop of Hippo spent much of his ministerial career post-conversion trying to make sense of his conversion in light of Scriptural revelation. The Scripture became for his veritable testament of the exile that the Christians find themselves in their earthly existence. Similarly, the several spiritual "ascents" that he experienced in his life (i.e. reading Cicero's *Hortentius,* overcoming the Manichean conception of evil, etc.) became for him signposts pointing to a larger eschatological horizon. Augustine portrayed his conversion story as the experiential background of his eschatological conception of the Heavenly City. What now became imperative for him is how to "walk" with the earthly community of the Church. His story of conversion continued in his ecclesial ministry, and the issue at stake then became how to instruct his fellow "pilgrims" in the faith.

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[109] Augustine, *Confessions*, 190. [IX. 6]. This passage is full of allusions to pilgrimage.

[110] Ibid., 185. [IX. 4]. "The day came when my release from the profession of rhetoric was to become a reality, just as, in my mind, I was free from it already. The deed was done, and you rescued my tongue, as you had already rescued my heart."

In conclusion, what Augustine's life post-conversion was following Christ's example of humility. Throughout the *Confessions*, as we said earlier, Augustine persistently asks, *Quit doceat me?* (Who will teach me?).[111] The crux of his conversion was finding a teacher, somebody who could be a role model in his spiritual formation. The person he now sought to imitate, as a new Christian convert, was the Son of God.

Conclusion

The Bishop of Hippo offers his story of conversion as a foil to the promethean archetype of self-realization of the Greco-Roman *paideia*. The narrative pattern of the two, however, is not different. What makes them different is the reference that they each have as their mimetic model, namely who they choose to imitate. Each of these mimetic models embodies a different archetype of human virtue, and accordingly they offer a different vision for the best type of society. For Augustine, the only teacher of humankind is the Man God of Christianity, who humbly obeyed his Father's will even unto death.[112] The pagan archetype, on the other hand, depicted a promethean hero exerting all his will against a world ruled by Fortuna. According to Augustine, Christ's humility shattered the pagan conception of virtue by teaching us that God's will is beyond

[111] Penniman, *Raised on Christian Milk*, 182.

[112] Augustine, *Confessions*, 251. [X. 43]. In this passage, Augustine reiterates this point more clearly: "How great was your love for us, good Father, for you did not even spare your own son, but gave him up' to save us sinners! How great was your love for us, when it was for us that Christ, who did not see, in the rank of Godhead, a prize to be covered, accepted an obedience which brought him to death, death on a cross!? He who alone was free among the dead,' for he was free to lay down his life and free to take it up again,' was for us both Victor and Victim in your sight, and it was because he was the Victim that he was also the Victor. In your sight he was for us both Priest and Sacrifice, and it was because he was the Sacrifice that he was also the Priest. By being your Son, yet serving you, he freed us from servitude and made us your sons."

the reach of fortune. The Greco-Roman *paideia* sought to consecrate the virtue of the Apollonian and Dionysian Hero in the altar of Fortuna, so to speak, in order to make it a perduring inscription of the human race's striving for self-transcendence.[113] The point of the Christian *paideia*, on the other hand, is not to imitate Christ's passion with the proud countenance of a tragic hero.[114] Rather, it is to teach humble obedience to God. According to Augustine, faithful obedience to God compels us to reject a vision of the world that is shrouded by the veil of fortune.[115] That is to say, a vision that paints the world against the backdrop of humans' mortal existence, which confronts them with the temptation to overcome this condition by any means necessary.

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[113] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy,* trans. by Clifton P. Fadiman, (New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995), 17. Friedrich Nietzsche expresses the pagan poetic vision of the world much more eloquently: "The entire comedy of art is neither performed for our betterment or education nor are we the true authors of this art-world. On the contrary, we may assume that we are merely pictures and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art — for it is only as an *esthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified* — while of course our consciousness of our own significance hardly differs from that which the soldiers painted on canvas have of the battle represented on it."

[114] Joseph Ratzinger, *The Unity of Nation,* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2015), 104-105. Joseph Ratzinger makes an illumining point about this. According to Ratzinger, Augustine thought that the martyrs negated the "virtue" of the pagan hero. In Book X. 21, Augustine recounts the story of Hera's son Heros, who was lifted into the air which was the abode of demons. "[Heros] was no longer merely a human being but had obtained power, was raised up to the 'principalities and powers (Col 2:15) by which human beings have allowed themselves to be led, and became a demon. The Christian martyr, on the other hand, was one who did not act in accordance with these powers, as was customary, but who, rather, defeated them thanks to his faith in God's greater power. His victory consisted in suffering and in saying "no" to the powers that governed the majority of people." Indeed, Augustine repeats this point more emphatically when he rebukes those who say that one ought to pay homage to the pagan deities of the polity (the civic idols) in order to avoid any misfortune. See Augustine, "Letter 138," in *Augustine Political Writings*, ed. by E. M. Atkins, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 41.

[115] This is the reason why Augustine cautions against the tendency to infuse certain events in secular history (*Saeculum*) with eschatological meaning. This admonition would apply to both the proponents of Christian imperial theology and to their opponents, adherents of Christian Millenarianism. See Bernard McGinn, "Augustine's Attack on Apocalypticism," in *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2018): 784-786.

The Bishop of Hippo cautions against this temptation, which induces us to view our reality with the eyes of concupiscence. As we noted earlier, this temptation haunted many people in the Roman cultural elite. They worried that their decaying cultural institutions would not prevent the eminent collapse of the "Eternal City of Rome." Their ultimate longing was to preserve these institutions — and themselves along with them — and yet they could not overcome their perennial stumbling block, the contingency of secular time (*Saeculum*). Therefore, Augustine contrasts the civic virtue of *Romanitas*, which sought to attain the object of this longing, with the humility of Christian virtue. In fact, in the Preface of the *City of God*, he says:

> I know, however, what efforts are needed to persuade the proud how great is that virtue of humility which, not by dint of any human loftiness, but by divine grace bestowed from on high, raises us above all the earthly pinnacles which sway in this inconstant age. For the King and Founder of this City of which we are resolved to speak has revealed a maxim of the divine law in the Scriptures of His people, where it is said, 'God resisteth the proud but giveth grace unto the humble. But the swollen fancy of the proud-spirited envies even this utterance, which belongs to God, and loves to hear the following words spoken in its own praise: "To spare the humble and subdue the proud."[116]

The Bishop of Hippo wrote these remarks in a correspondence with Marcellinus, who in another context had petitioned from him a response to the common accusation that "Christ's teaching" was contrary to "the ethics of citizenship."[117] Here, Marcellinus voiced this concern on behalf of his friend Volusianus, who had raised this issue along with other theological concerns, the most crucial of which

[116] Augustine, *City of God*, 3. [Preface]. Here, Augustine quotes Vergil's *Aeneid*, an epic poem often considered the manifesto of *Romanitas*.

[117] Augustine, "Letter 136," in *Augustine Political Writings*, 29.

pertaining to Christ's Incarnation.[118] Like other people in the Roman elite, Volusianus could not comprehend how the example of an incarnate God, who was executed by an earthly state, could be a model for civic virtue. What was even more troubling for them was that Christ's sacrifice sanctified human virtue by directing its aim to the eschatological Heavenly City. The Man God of Christianity subverted the conventional *telos* of virtue; and this in turn reoriented the *telos* of virtue to its natural object, which is to live in obedient and humble submission to God's rule.[119] Nevertheless, as Augustine insists, the natural object of virtue will only be fully realized in the *eschaton*.

[118] It is implied that Marcellinus, who was a high ranking imperial official and also a Christian Catholic, shared some of Volusianus' concerns, at least the ones that pertained to political matters (i.e. Christ's teachings being incompatible with the "ethics of citizenship").

[119] Augustine, *City of God,* 960-964. [XIX. 24-27].

Chapter 2

Augustine's Normative View of Social Life

> Contemporary history invalidates the belief in man as a creature whose essential being can be modified by social or pedagogical procedures. Man is not simply the result of history and the forces that activate it, as is now proclaimed, nor is history simply the result of the human will, a belief on which the North American way of life is implicitly predicated. Man, it seems to me, is not in history: he is history.[120]
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> — Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*

Introduction

Augustine's social thought is seldom consulted in contemporary studies of citizenship. One of the reasons for this is that it supposedly lacks the characteristic constitutionalism of classical figures like Plato and Aristotle, who famously studied the constitutional composition of various political regimes.[121] Broadly conceived, constitutionalism is the normative and prescriptive study of political regimes, an approach which seeks to define the social form of a polity based on its promulgated laws and social mores. At least in classical political philosophy, the study of citizenship determines the merits of a political constitution. Quentin P. Taylor, for example, argues that Augustine's political writings "are not only devoid of maxims on statecraft, they exhibit … an almost complete indifference to political forms, structures, and principles."[122] Taylor's critique points to Augustine's famous remark that, "As far as this mortal life is concerned, which is spent and finished in

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[120] Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude, trans. by Lysander Kemp, et al, (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1985)

[121] Taylor, "St. Augustine and Political Thought: A Revisionist View," 292.

[122] Ibid., 291.

a few days, what difference does it make under what rule a man lived who is soon to die provided only that those who rule him do not compel him to do what is impious and wicket?"[123] According to Taylor, Augustine is not concerned with the constitution of any particular regime, let alone its respective standards for citizenship. Even if this were the case, Augustine's social thought does not entirely lack a normative angle. In order to fully comprehend the normative character — and the potential constitutionalism — of Augustine's social thought, we must consider his critique of Cicero's definition of the commonwealth (*res publica*).

Section I: The Ciceronian Commonwealth

In Book II of the *City of God,* Augustine outlines Cicero's definition of the commonwealth, according to which a commonwealth is the property of an assembly of people who is "united in fellowship by a common agreement as to what is right and by a community of interests." Speaking through the figure of Scipio, Cicero (106-43 BC) says in addition that, "a commonwealth — that is, the property of a people — exists when it is well and justly governed, either by a single king, or by a few of the highest men, or by the people at large."[124] It is not until Book XIX that Augustine finally comes around to rebutting Cicero's definition of a commonwealth. He takes Cicero's own logic to its limit and concludes that: "If, therefore, a commonwealth is 'the property of a people,' and if there is no 'people'

[123] Augustine, *The City of God,* 217. [X. 17].

[124] Ibid., 78. [II. 21]. Cf. Cicero, *The Republic*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19. [1. 39].

where there is no 'common agreement as to what is right,' and if there is no right where there is no justice, then it follows beyond doubt that where there is no justice there is no commonwealth."[125] According to this conclusion, Rome — or any other earthly state for that matter — could not be considered a commonwealth because it subjected its citizens to the worship of impure spirits, which is a prime injustice. Thus, Augustine contends, "What kind of justice is it, then, that takes a man away from the true God and subjects him to impure demons?"

Augustine's main contention is that Rome is not a commonwealth under this definition because it worships "unclean spirits." But why is the worship of these spirits an injustice? Why would worshiping them keep the Romans from uniting themselves by "a common agreement as to what is right and by a community of interests"? Augustine accuses pagan civic religion of taking away "what is due" to both God and to the citizens of the polity.[126] According to him, what forms people's virtue is the proper worship of God; and so, if they fail to give God his due, they thereby inflict an injustice upon themselves. Moreover, Augustine contends that pagan civic religion cannot institute a principle of truth. The only thing animating civic religion, according to him, is the lust of "unclean spirits" to subjugate every domain of human life.[127] The principle of civic religion is confusion, which is why Augustine often compares the Earthly City to Babel. Like many of the nations of antiquity, the Roman Empire followed the religion of

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[125] Augustine, *The City of God.*, 951. [XIX. 21].

[126] Ibid., 952. [XIX. 21].

[127] Ibid., 162. [III, 16]. "The Romans, therefore," Augustine contends, "assigned every single thing and almost every single activity to separate gods."

the Earthly City by pursuing a demonic love of mastery. The citizens of Rome could not form of people because they did not worship the God who is the principle of truth. For Augustine, eschatological citizenship — the ultimate principle of a people's unity — is the sign of the true religion. Eschatological citizenship is the sign of the people of God.

For many of Augustine's contemporaries, the monotheistic character of Christianity appeared as a political remedy for the congenial maladies of pagan civic religion. After all, by instituting Christianity as Rome's official religion, the Roman state could now subject its citizens to the worship of the *one true* God — and thereby unify the empire under one cosmic power. Under this scheme, Rome could now aspire to reach the "ideal" of the Ciceronian commonwealth, that is, to have perfect justice (*vera iustitia*) as its ultimate end. That was, in a sense, the posture of Christian imperial theology, which saw the Roman Empire playing a providential role in God's salvific mission. Christian imperial theology held the view that political sovereignty had a religious foundation and that, by implication, the sovereign participated in the divine power of God.[128] According to some exponents of Christian imperial theology, the rule of Christian emperors had a divine mission.[129] Recounting the triumphs of Constantine, Eusebius proclaims,

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[128] Augustine, *The City of God*, 231-236. [V. 24-26]. In contradistinction to figures like Eusebius, Augustine only refers to Christian emperors by name a handful of times in the *City of God*. And when he does, he only commends their religious piety and humility. Unlike Eusebius, Augustine does not consider Christian rulers as special agents of God's salvific plan for humanity. Their political rule is only as good as it accords with the principles of the Christian way of life.

[129] Bernard. McGinn, "Augustine's Attack on Apocalypticism," 778. According to Bernard McGinn, early in his ministerial career, Augustine sympathized with some of the ideas of Christian imperial theology. For example, he even "hailed the Theodosian outlawing of paganism as a providential moment predicated by the Bible.

> Such were the dealings of the Supreme Sovereign, who ordained an invincible champion to be the minister of his heaven-sent vengeance (for our emperor's surpassing piety delights in the title of Servant of God), and him he has proved victorious over all that opposed him, having raised him up, an individual against many foes. For they were indeed numberless, being the friends of many evil spirits (though in reality they were nothing, and hence are now no more); but our emperor is one, appointed by, and the representative of, the one Almighty Sovereign.[130]

This passage illustrates the main tenet of Christian imperial theology: the Roman Emperor was appointed by God to overpower the enemies of the faith and to evangelize the world. This view was congruent with political monotheism, which upheld that the monarchic rule of the emperor corresponded to the one divine monarchy of God.[131]

The ideal of the Ciceronian commonwealth, at least as Augustine later interprets it,[132] follows the model of political monotheism: if a people is bonded together by a divinely ordained sovereign — and this political arrangement corresponds to the truth of God — then they constitute an assembly united by true justice. Even if Cicero's definition of a commonwealth was more pragmatic in

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[130] Eusebius of Caesarea, "Oration in Praise of Constantine," Ch. 7. 12.

[131] Erik Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem: A Contribution to the History of Political Theology in the Roman Empire," in *Theological Tractates,* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 96-97. In this passage, Peterson explains the christological implications of Eusebius' imperial theology.

[132] Miikka Ruokanen*, Theology of Social Life in Augustine's De civitate Dei*, 126-127. According to Miikka Ruokanen, Augustine reinterprets Cicero's conception of *ius* in a way that is not supported by Cicero's own argument. "It is evident here that Augustine applies to Cicero's thought an idea of justice alien to Cicero himself. Cicero's concept of *iuris consensus et utilitatis comunio* is more pragmatic than Augustine realizes [in the sense that it describes the way positive laws are based on "absolute natural justice." It is similar to St. Thomas' account of positive ordinances based on natural law]. But the idea of transcendent, perfect *vera iustitia* applied to political realities suits Augustine's purpose well: by these means he believes himself able to prove that Cicero's line of thought leads to a dead end… In the last resort, a question about *vera iustitia* is a question about true religion."

nature,[133] it still struck a chord with the political ideology of classical idealism, which sought to construct a society where contingency (*Fortuna*) could be contained by the power of human virtue (*Virtus*). According to Cochrane, the republican ideals of the Ciceronian commonwealth envisioned a society excelling in the virtue of practical wisdom (*phrónēsis*).[134] In this society, in contradistinction to the *politeia* of the philosophers, which was ruled by the wisdom of the Philosopher King, the rule of law provided the basis for social order.[135] This was Cicero's solution to what Cochrane calls "the classical problem of the commonwealth," namely the problem of founding a city without resorting to either tyranny or absolute liberty.[136]

The classical problem of the commonwealth ultimately had to do with the limits of political power. Determining such limits was the perennial preoccupation of the Roman polity. If the Ciceronian commonwealth failed to realize itself in Cicero's republicanism, it found an auspicious soil in the imperial ideology of the *Pax Augusta*.[137] Certainly, the pagan archetype of the all-powerful emperor, whose virtue reached a divine height in the rule of Augustus, found its bearings in the classical view of virtue, which conceived of virtue as the end of human life, an accomplishment so meritorious that it deserved divine consecration.[138]

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[133] Ruokanen, *Theology of Social Life in Augustine's De civitate Dei*, 167.

[134] Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 46-48.

[135] Holton, "Marcus Tullius Cicero," 143.

[136] Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 9, 104.

[137] Ibid., 61.

[138] Ibid., 112-113.

The political vision of classical idealism corresponded to the cosmological view of monotheism: a city ruled by a supremely virtuous leader followed the monarchic principle of the monotheistic God. According to Erik Peterson, the metaphysical premises of political monotheism were latent in pagan civic theology.[139] He argues that, "On the basis of the metaphysics of paganism … it was possible to draw a parallel between the lordship of Zeus, which had been instituted only after mythical struggles, with the construction of a new political order."[140] The pagan cosmological worldview, which presupposed the cyclical nature of the created order, could draw a parallel between God's struggle over cosmic chaos and the political ruler's triumph over anarchy — certainly, this is the theme of classical idealism, to establish order over chaos, to subdue fortune with virtue.[141] This cosmological worldview being so prevalent, it is not surprising that some Early Christian apologists sought to understand Christian eschatology from the point of view of Roman secular history. In fact, a common motif in Christian imperial theology is to track the salvific mission of Christ to the rule of Augustus. For

[139] Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem," 72-76, 104. As Peterson argued, these metaphysical premises were also latent in Jewish political theology. Jewish philosophers like Philo of Alexandria borrowed Neoplatonic language to argue for the philosophical superiority of the Israelite monotheistic regime. Because of the complexity of this topic, we will not address Augustine's view of eschatological significance of Israel. The reader is encouraged to review Peterson's essay for a thorough analysis of this issue.

[140] Ibid., 75.

[141] Ibid., 99-100. According to Peterson, in Late Antiquity, the motif of Christian imperial theology — which assigned a soteriological role to secular political rulers, i.e. the Roman emperor — was present in the political writings of prominent ecclesial figures like Ambrose or even among Christian scholars like Jerome. Like Peterson, I call Eusebius the spokesmen of Christian imperial theology because his orations in praise of Constantine set the tone for this theological posture. For a more throughout exposition of Christian imperial theology and its theological contender, Christian Millenarianism, see McGinn, "Augustine's Attack on Apocalypticism."

Christian imperial spokesmen like Eusebius, the *Pax Augusta* laid the foundation for the future evangelical mission of the Church.

The Fall of Rome shattered the lofty aspirations of Christian imperial theology. In a way, this catastrophic event vindicated the early pagan critics of Christianity, who accused the Christian religion of opposing the traditional values of Roman citizenship.[142] Augustine spends much of Book I of the *City of God* responding to the accusation that Christianity was to blame for the recent tribulations of Rome. Indeed, Augustine spends much of Book I and II of the *City of God* defining the true character of Christian virtue against the background of Christian and pagan imperial theology. After accusing pagan morality of a whole litany of iniquities, Augustine says this about Christian virtue:

> If 'the kings of the earth and all nations, princes and all the judges of the earth, young men and maidens, old men and children,' people of every age and each sex ... if all these together were to hear and embrace the Christian precepts of justice and moral virtue, then would the commonwealth adorn its lands with happiness in this present life and ascend to the summit of life eternal, there to reign in utmost blessedness.[143]

In this passage, Augustine does not embrace the Christian imperial position but only affirms the separation between this "present life" and the life of the world to come. Here, Christian virtue is defined by its eschatological end, the summit of "blessedness." Even though this eschatological end is only attainable at the end of times, Augustine enjoins Christians to endure the evils of the "earthly" commonwealth. He continues this passage by asserting that,

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[142] See Augustine's response to Volusianus' inquiries. Augustine, "Letter 136," in *Augustine Political Writings*, 29.

[143] Augustine, *The City of God*, 74. [II. 19].

> Christ's servants, therefore, be they kings or princes or judges, soldiers or provincials, rich men or poor, free or slaves, of whichever sex, are commanded to endure this earthly commonwealth, however depraved and wholly vile it may be, if they must. By their endurance, however, they will win for themselves a place of the highest eminence in the most holy and august court of angels, and in that heavenly Commonwealth whose law is the will of God.

This passage comes before Augustine's critique of Cicero's definition of the commonwealth in Book II. Certainly, Augustine concedes that Cicero's civic ideal could come into being but only "in that heavenly Commonwealth whose law is the will of God." The true commonwealth is not an earthly Christian state, but the one and only Heavenly City. Accordingly, Christian virtue is predicated on faith in divine providence, not on the self-willed strive for excellence. Augustine's view of the "heavenly Commonwealth" differs from the Ciceronian civic ideal in that it rejects the mastery of contingency through human virtue as its guiding principle. In another context, the Bishop of Hippo argues, "God, therefore, the author and giver of happiness, because He is the only true God, Himself gives earthly kingdoms to both good men and bad. He does not do this rashly, or as if were at random; for He is God, not Fortune. Rather, He acts in accordance with the order of things and times which is hidden from us, but entirely known to Him."[144] Here, Augustine opposes the skepticism of philosophers like Cicero and Seneca who denied the providence of God in human affairs, as well as the optimism of those who fused the secular history of nations with the eschatological plan of God.[145]

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[144] Augustine, *The City of God*, 184. [IV. 33].

[145] Besides the exponents of Christian imperial theology, the other group that Augustine had in mind here was Donatists, who spoused a radical form of North African ecclesiology. In a similar was as the Christian imperial theologians saw the Roman state, the Donatists infused the mission of the church, as a sociological entity, with an eschatological meaning, not considering that as such the church was to be entwined with the Earthly City until the end of times. We will not

For Augustine, the aim of secular citizenship cannot be an end in itself — which is to say, it cannot realized itself in the creation of a society excelling in virtue and standing above contingency. The Bishop of Hippo established two principles for secular citizenship: (1) secular citizenship cannot realize the ultimate aim of human life, and thus (2) the state cannot institute this ultimate existential aim as the principle for secular citizenship. The realization of this existential aim, which is eternal blessedness in the City of God, is the sole prerogative of God. Unlike pagan monotheism — which linked the rule of the emperor to the power (*dynamis*) of the divine monarch precisely by adopting the metaphysical edifice of polytheism, an edifice in which the emperor could rule over the domain of human affairs with the divine dignity of a pagan deity — Christianity could not provide a religious foundation for the reign of secular rulers.[146] Neither could the Christian religion include the future of the secular city into its eschatological vision for the people of God, the citizens of the City of God.

In broad terms, we could say that these two principles form part of Augustine's constitutionalist conception of politics, in so far as they provide a normative and prescriptive outline for the constitution of a regime. This outline, however, is negative in nature, for it only sets the limits of secular political authority. In fact, Augustine's rebuke of Cicero's commonwealth in Book II of the *City of God* tells us very little about the proper aims of political life. If we conceive

discuss Augustine's engagement with the Donatists in much length in this paper. For a comprehensive study of this, see Markus, "The Church in Augustine and the African Tradition," in *Saeculum*, 105-153.

[146] Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem," 69-72, 75.

of politics as the realm of social life — where individuals form a people and where a people form a polity — what then can we make of Augustine's view of secular citizenship, which is the social signifier for membership in a polity? In order to respond to this question, we must look at Augustine's definition of peoplehood in Book XIX.

Section II: Christian Fellowship

In Book XIX, Augustine proposes a new definition of peoplehood from the one proposed by Cicero. Instead of talking about the people of a commonwealth as being united in fellowship by an "agreement as to what is right and by a community of interests," Augustine proposes that they be regarded simply as "an assembled multitude of rational creatures bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love."[147] This account of peoplehood concedes that Rome formed a people with a commonwealth, albeit one with an improper object of love. Augustine's definition sets a measure for what constitutes a commonwealth which applies equally to the three kinds of societies that he calls "cities": to the City of God (*civitates Dei*) and to the Earthly City (*civitates terrenas*), as well as to the temporal cities in secular time[148] (that is, in the *saeculum*). These cities, considered by themselves, share the same social anatomy: each form a people "bound together" by a teleological object. What sets them apart is not a

[147] Augustine, *The City of God*, 960. [XIX. 24].

[148] Ruokanen, *Theology of Social Life in Augustine's De civitate Dei*, 116-117.

constitution or a regime form but the object of their love.[149] Defining a commonwealth by the love of its citizens shifts the principle of social unity. What now unites a people is the common object of their love, not a consensus on what constitutes justice.

Although Augustine eschews the Ciceronian definition of the commonwealth, he still holds one crucial premise from it, namely that a commonwealth is the property of a people who share a certain type of "common agreement." It is well-known, as Miikka Ruokanen points out, that Augustine interprets Cicero's conception of justice in absolute terms, that is, as a matter of transcendental truth.[150] However, the key premise in Cicero's definition is that a commonwealth is founded by the people's innate desire to maintain a bond of fellowship (*societas*). As Cicero explains after proposing his definition, "The primary reason for [the people of the commonwealth] coming together is not so much weakness as a sort of innate desire on the part of human beings to form communities. For our species is not made up of solitary individuals or lonely wanderers."[151] More than a common enterprise aiming at true justice (*vera iustitia*), Cicero saw the commonwealth as an enterprise aiming at maintaining fellowship. Therefore, Cicero asserts that,

> [E]very people (which is a numerous gathering of the kind described), every state [*civitas*] (which is an organization of the populace), and every republic [*res publica*, which is better translated as commonwealth] (which, as I said, is the property of the public) must be governed by some decision-making

[149] Here, again, we can see how Augustine follows what we called earlier the anthropological principle of classical political philosophy.

[150] See Footnote 132.

[151] Cicero, *The Republic,* 19. See also Cicero, *On Duties,* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9-10.

> process if it is to last. That process must, in the first instance, always come into being for the same reason as that which gave rise to the state.

The "reason that gave rise to the state," again, is the people's desire for fellowship. To be sure, Cicero is not a social contract theorist, in the sense that he does not see preservation as the main concern behind people's desire to form a political community. Instead, what he envisions is a political community that seeks fellowship for the sake of virtue. A virtuous polity, for Cicero, is one which attains a balance between liberty and obedience, which upkeeps a harmonious state of affairs. The regime that could best ensure this balance is a mixed constitution.[152] However, even in this mixed regime, as James E. Holton rightly points out,[153] the locus of virtue lies in the moral character of its leaders. Admittedly, Cicero's mixed constitution is aristocratic in nature. Nevertheless, Cicero's constitutionalism is rather subtle: it looks for something much more pragmatic than a polity excelling in all the virtues; it seeks, instead, to define the necessary conditions for social cohesion, which would ensure fellowship and thereby the possibility for the cultivation of virtue. One of those conditions is the rule of law, which would be binding to everyone in the polity, to the people and to the rulers alike. The constitution of this mixed regime would provide the necessary legal provisions to

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[152] Cicero, *The Republic*, 32-33.

[153] Holton, "Marco Tulio Cicero," 139. Holton makes a compelling case for this. He says that, "If examined carefully, however, the mixed regime proves to be in the most important respects an aristocracy. The arrangements are designed to ensure that the aristocracy, and thus the element of wisdom or counsel, is assigned the decisive role. While a measure of power is to be vested in the people, it is expected that the actual authority will remain with the Senate, for liberty is to be "granted in such a manner that the people [are] induced by many excellent provisions to yield to the authority of the nobles." The success of this "balanced and harmonious constitution" rests in large measure on the continued existence of an aristocracy possessing the particular qualities described by Cicero in the *Laws*." (See also Cicero's *Laws* II. 30; III. 24-25, 28, 38).

keep the ruling class in check.[154] The pragmatism of this constitution was designed to contain the sway of contingency, which makes any constitution susceptible to change.[155] By the same token, this constitution also seeks to prevent the absolutism of tyranny, which can equally provoke a constitutional crisis.[156] In the final analysis, the Ciceronian commonwealth seeks to maintain social order *for as long as it is humanly possible*. In other words, it aims at protecting the polity from both the rule of chance and the all-too-human tendency to fall into tyranny. It must be said, too, that this constitutional order also attempts to shelter the polity from the uncertain course of divine providence.[157]

Augustine sees certain aspects of Cicero's view of fellowship in a positive light. Taking fellowship in a more narrow sense — not as an end in itself but as a mean to a higher end (i.e. communion with God) — would make it into one of those social "objects" that makes a people "better." The Bishop of Hippo laments that the chronic stasis of Roman politics has "so ruptured or corrupted that bond of concord which is, as it were, the health of a people."[158] That bond of concord

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[154] Holton, "Marco Tulio Cicero," 143.

[155] Cicero was no stranger to the congenial stasis of political life. (In fact, he was assassinated for his involvement in politics). He was keenly aware that any constitution, no matter how well-constructed it might be, was susceptible to the contingency of history and nature. One could argue that Cicero's view of fellowship has a much more modest aim, namely ensuring the necessary means for human flourishing, the foremost of which is the promotion of civic virtue.

[156] For classical figures like Plato, the regimes that are least stable (and thus least desirable) are democracy and tyranny because they are susceptible to the most degree of contingency.

[157] This is also the reason why a Skeptic like Cicero would avow for the importance of civic theology, a writ of official myths that would account for the mysterious providence of God's will in the affairs of the city. That was Cicero's philosophical "noble lie." See Holton, "Marco Tulio Cicero," 148.

[158] Augustine, *The City of God*, 960. [XIX, 24].

(*Concordia*) seems to be an expression of this kind of fellowship.[159] What ruptured this bond for the Roman people, even in their famed past, was their inability to balance their desire for liberty and mastery. In another context, Augustine asserts this more pointily:

> The ancient and primitive Romans, therefore, worshipped false gods ... and sacrificed victims not to God, but to demons. But, as their history teaches with approval, "they were avid for praise, generous with their wealth, and desired boundless glory and riches with honor." This glory they loved most ardently. They chose to live for it, and they did not hesitate to die for it. They suppressed all other desires in their boundless desire for this one thing. In short, because they deemed it ignoble for their fatherland to serve and glorious for it to rule and command, the first object of all their desire was freedom, and the second mastery.[160]

The Roman people sought fellowship in their civic affairs, but ultimately what they really loved was glory. They could not enjoy their hard-fought liberty by itself if it was not accompanied by the mastery of other people: "Once they had achieved freedom, however, so great a desire for glory then arose that liberty seemed to them too little by itself, unless they also sought dominion over others."[161] Augustine's study of Roman history supports his overall view of human nature *post peccatum*. Time and again, the Bishop if Hippo insists that all earthly polities (with the

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[159] Augustine, *The City of God*, 77. [II. 21]. Here, Augustine makes the connection between concordance and fellowship more clearly by pointing to Cicero's view of musical harmony. In the *Republic*, Scipio says: "Among the different sounds of lyres or flutes and the voices of singers, a certain harmony must be maintained which the cultivated ear cannot bear to hear disrupted or discordant; and such harmony, concordant and consistent, may be brought about by the balancing of even the most dissimilar voices. So too, when the highest, lowest and, between them, the intermediate orders of society are balanced by reason as though they were voices, the city may embody a consonance blended of quite dissimilar elements. What musicians call harmony in singing is concord in the city, which is the most artful and best bond of security in the commonwealth, and which, without justice, cannot be secured at all."

[160] Ibid., 207. [V. 11].

[161] Ibid., 208. [V. 12].

exception, in a special sense,[162] of Israel) were liable to the congenial condition of sinfulness pervading secular time. This condition kept the Romans from attaining a balance between liberty and obedience, as they could not contain their desire for mastery. The moment the Romans became masters over themselves, they fell to the hands of a more perverse tyrant, which was the lust of dominating others. Unlike King Tarquin, this tyrant resided in the hearts of the Roman people, so to speak: "[I]ndeed, the kind of mastery [*libido dominandi*], to say nothing of any other, is itself the harshest kind of mastery, which lays waste the hearts of mortal man."[163]

To be sure, Augustine does not reject the merits of a society excelling in fellowship, but only reiterates that no political constitution can perdure for eternity. Most pagan Greco-Roman political philosophers — Cicero and his mentors Plato and Aristotle included — shared this anti-utopian sentiment. What distinguished Augustine, along with the tradition of Christian political philosophy, is his insistence that sin irreparably distorts the order of our nature. In this mortal life, according to the Bishop of Hippo, we are bound by the punishment of sin, which stirs in us a whole range of disorderly passions and brings about an unceasing state of internal disquietude, which throws us into a state of dispersion (*defluxus*).[164] One of the experiences in life that intensifies this internal disquietude is the conscious awareness of our mortality, the "sting of death."

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[162] See Footnote 139.

[163] Augustine, *The City of God*, 943. [XIX. 15].

[164] Augustine, *Confessions,* Book 10.

Augustine's eschatological theology of sin shapes his view of human politics. Time and again, Augustine reiterates that what separates the human citizens of the Heavenly City from those of the Earthly City is not so much a condition of spiritual purity — since they too suffer the effects of sin — as it is their steadfast and humble obedience to God. In contradistinction to the vainglory of the Earthly City, the mark of citizenship in the Heavenly City is obedience to God: "[T]his is the great difference that distinguishes the two cities of which we are speaking. The one is a fellowship of godly men, and the other of the ungodly; and each has its own angels belonging to it. In the one city, love of God has been given pride of place, and, in the other, love of self."[165] What Augustine insists on is that disobedience to God breeds disobedience within the self:

> [I]n the punishment of sin, what is the retribution for disobedience is not disobedience itself? For what is man's misery if not simply his own disobedience to himself, so that, because he would not do what he could, he now cannot do what he would? For although, in Paradise, before his sin, man could not do everything, he did not at that time wish to do anything that he could not do, and therefore he could do all that he wished. Now, however, as we observe in the offspring of the first man, and as the Bible attests, "Man is like to vanity." For who can count the many things that a man wishes to do but cannot.[166]

This passages illustrates what causes the perennial stasis of earthly cities: Human beings' prideful striving to transcend the limits of their own mortality drives them even deeper into their own fallenness, and in this downward plunge they drags many others with them.[167] For Augustine, sin and its opposite, the love of God, are

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[165] Augustine, *The City of God*, 609. [XIV. 13].

[166] Ibid., 612. [XIV. 15].

[167] Ibid., 943. [XIX. 15].

social phenomena, in the sense that *they both point beyond themselves*[168] in their attempt to reach the object of their love: in its social form, sin is the act of seeking the possession of other people in order to satisfy one's love of self, whereas the love of God re-orients the love of the self by elevating God as the principle of interpersonal relationships.[169] The perennial stasis of earthly cities comes about from the disordered love (*amor perversus*) of the self, which seeks to extend itself beyond the confines of time and space. Augustine's eschatological theology of sin exposed the idolatrous ideals of *Romanitas*. For him, the apotheosis of the Caesars — along with the consecration of Rome as the *oikumene* of the universe — was only the latest example of the all-too-human desire to make an idol of itself.

Section III: Christian Civic Virtue in the *Saeculum*

Augustine is not concerned with inventing an ideal constitution. For the Bishop of Hippo, the Heavenly City is the perfect commonwealth and its constitution is partly revealed in the Scriptures. Many of the things that Augustine says about this eschatological city are allegorical extrapolations of divine revelation. More than any other Scriptural narrative, Augustine struggles to interpret the story of the Fall, as this revelation points to the origin of the two

[168] See Augustine's theory of semiotics in Chapter 1, 33-36.

[169] Augustine, *City of God*, 941. [XIX, 14]. See also. Matt. 22: 36-40.

eschatological cities.[170] In order to interpret the nature of these two cities, he uses political allegories to describe their origin. Thus, he states,

> I divide the human race into two orders. The one consists of those who live according to man, and the other of those who live according to God. Speaking allegorically, I also call these two orders two Cities: that is, two societies of men, one of which is predestined to reign in eternity with God, and the other of which will undergo eternal punishment with the devil.[171]

Augustine's allegorical interpretation of the Scriptural account[172] of the two cities follows a chiastic logic: as a person's soul is oriented toward the object of their love, so a city, too, is oriented toward the object of the citizen's love. The relationship between a person's soul and the city is not merely allegorical because, in truth, a city is composed of people "bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love." Describing the constitution of a city without referring to the object of the citizens' love, according to this logic, would be like constructing a building without the proper measurements. The citizens' love is the measure of the city, not the other way around. For this reason, Augustine's depiction of the two cities always concludes in a normative account of the object of the citizens' love. Likewise, whenever he mentions the Earthly City, he points to the evil that this city incurs upon its citizens. As Ruokanen succinctly puts it, "The reality of *civitas terrena* is perceived more on the basis of what it effects than what it is in

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[170] That is, to the Fall of the evil angels that occurred before secular time and to the historical Fall of humankind. Augustine devotes much of his theological thought to exploring the meaning of Gen. 1. See Augustine's *De Genesi ad Litteram*.

[171] Augustine, *The City of God*, 634. [XV. 1].

[172] For a more comprehensive study of the Scriptural and philosophical sources of Augustine's account of the two cities, see Johannes van Oort, "The Doctrine of the Two Cities," in *Jerusalem and Babylon*.

its essence."[173] The effects of sin is the disorder that it brings upon human nature and their social context.

The Bishop of Hippo thought that the love of the Earthly City could materialize to some extent in the political achievements of a political community. For instance, the Romans' love of glory materialized in their imperial conquests and their hierarchical political structures. That was their earthly "reward."[174] Similarly, the philosophical love of wisdom could achieve its end in the moral and spiritual formation of the philosopher's soul (that is, in the *paideia* of the contemplative life). On the other hand, the Christian love of God will only be fulfilled at the end of time. As Augustine stresses in Book I of the *City of God*, Christians should not expect any worldly rewards for faithfully loving God; the object of their love is eschatological in nature. This does not mean, however, that Christians will not enjoy (*frui*) the object of their love in this life; they can do so in worship and piety in order to prepare themselves for eternal felicity. However, unlike the self-centered eudemonistic strivings of the philosophers,[175] Augustine stressed that Christians must accept that their final perfection depends on God's Love, which will be fully realized at the end of time.[176] According to Ruokanen,

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[173] Ruokanen, *Theology of Social Life in Augustine's De civitate Dei*, 116.

[174] Augustine, *The City of God*, 215-217. [V. 15].

[175] Fortin, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order,* 42. Fortin argues that Plato's Socrates was not interested in serving the city for its own sake. "Whereas [Socrates'] service to the city is an activity that is imposed in him, the search for knowledge us an activity on which he embarks freely and which alone, though few men understands it, promises true fulfillment.... Socrates is not interested in the city and its virtues for their own sakes but for the sake of philosophy."

[176] Another way to say this is that, unlike the *eros* of the philosopher, which emanates from their soul and elevates itself toward the immaterial Good (i.e. Diotima's "Ladder of Love," in Plato's *Symposium* 210, a-b), the Christian love of God depends on God's love of humanity, that is, on divine grace. "Indeed, man could not even trust in God's help," Augustine says, "without God's

Augustine's "eudemonism *in spe* differs considerably from the classical philosophical views of eudaemonism: realization of the good never becomes an immanent reality in the postlapsarian state of mankind but remains an eschatological object of faith."[177]

For Augustine, the eschatological love of the Church does not entirely reject the "things of this world." The citizens of the Heavenly City simply do not see such things as ends in themselves. They do not even consider their own mortal life as an end in itself, as the martyrs showed with their example. In fact, according to Augustine, the pilgrims of the Heavenly City (*civitas peregrini*) can even make use of worldly things that can assist them in their earthly pilgrimage, including the peace and political stability of a temporal city. Their use (*uti*) of them is instrumental. Augustine makes the case that,

> [T]he Heavenly City makes use of earthly peace during her pilgrimage, and desires and maintains the co-operation of men's wills in attaining those things which belong to the mortal nature of man, in so far as this may be allowed without prejudice to true godliness and religion. Indeed, she directs that earthly peace towards heavenly peace: towards the peace which is so truly such that — at least so far as rational creatures are concerned — only it can really be held to be peace and called such.[178]

Augustine provides a broad provision for how citizens of the Heavenly City can interact with earthly cities. They can even participate in the political affairs of temporal powers as rulers or legislators, so long as they stay away from the worship of the city's deities. The same is true about any attempt to institute Christian laws

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help; he did, however, have it within his power to withdraw from the benefits of divine grace by self-love." See Augustine, *The City of God*, 615. [XIV. 17].

[177] Ruokanen, *Theology of Social Life in Augustine's De civitate Dei*, 54.

[178] Augustine, *City of God*, 947. [XIX. 17].

of religion: the Heavenly City cannot have "laws of religion in common" with the earthly city because it "knows only one God Who is to be worshipped, and it decrees, with faithful piety, that to Him alone is to be given that service which the Greeks call *latria*, and which is due only to God."[179] Augustine's view of civic participation is strictly separationist. The pilgrims of the Heavenly City can indeed contribute to the welfare of their nations but without attaching a religious bond to their physical residence in them.

Augustine opened a new way to think about political societies from the eschatological horizon of the City of God. By setting the Heavenly City apart, as the ultimate object of the human soul, Augustine defined the proper social domain of temporal states. Temporal states lacked a true religious foundation or end because they cannot reenact the true order of the soul. In a way, Plato concluded the same thing by depicting the internal inconsistencies of his ideal *politeia*. Even in its most noble form, according to Plato, a political society cannot reenact the interior order of the human soul at large.[180]

Philosophers like Cicero and Seneca condoned the mendacity of pagan civic religion so long as it provided a foundational myth for the state. Rejecting the "noble lie" of philosophy, on the other hand, Augustine based his vision of the Heavenly City on the universal principles of Christianity.[181] According to him, the

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[179] Augustine, *City of God*, 947, [XIX. 17].

[180] Fortin, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order,* 36-37.

[181] Augustine, *The City of God*, 263-264. [VI. 10]. In this chapter, Augustine writes a devastating critique of the so-called "noble lie" of the philosophers with respect to their public observance of pagan theology. "Philosophy, clearly, had taught [Seneca] something great: not to be superstitious in the world, but to do in the temple what her certainly would not do in the theater. It had taught him to imitate the part of an actor for the sake of the laws of the cities and the customs of mankind."

truth of the soul was not dependent on a particular political constitution or set of religious customs, or on the self-willed ascent of the philosopher's soul, but on God's self-revelation in the Holy Scriptures and in the Church, the eschatological symbol of God's City. Ratzinger echoes this point more clearly, "Augustine understood the Christian faith as a freeing — namely, a freeing from the tyranny of custom for the sake of the truth."[182]

Conclusion: A New Political Horizon?

The previous section reconstructed some of the main themes in Augustine's view of citizenship. However, we still have not fully responded to Taylor's objection. Does Augustine provide a constructive account of "political forms, structures, and principles"? Certainly, Augustine provides a broad standard for how to live in a political society. So long as the heavenly citizens promote the fellowship of the polity and avoid the worship of political or cultural idols, they can enjoy the benefits of their secular citizenship. It seems, nevertheless, that this is only a provision for the inescapable demands of social life.

The pagan objection to the Christian's eschatological vision of citizenship cuts even deeper. According to Augustine's pagan critics, the universalism of Christianity threatened the "civic horizon" of the Roman polity. Fortin makes the case that, "By propagating the view that all men are equal and potentially members of a single cosmopolis ruled by God, Christianity revealed the horizon of the political life as a mere horizon, thereby destroying it and depriving the polis of the

[182] Joseph Ratzinger, *The Unity of Nation,* 77.

protective atmosphere within which it had thus far been able to thrive."[183] Fortin's observation is echoed in Taylor's critique of Augustine's political thought. Taylor accuses Augustine of ignoring the normative aims of the state to the point of reducing "the parameters of political life to maintaining order and rendering obedience."[184]

Fortin's and Taylor's remarks point to a contentious issue in Augustinian political studies. Does Augustine do away with the highest aspirations of the state? In a sense, he does do away with these aspirations by rejecting the religious pretentions of earthly powers. For Augustine, as Ratzinger argues, the religious ambitions of the Romans, their desire to apotheosize the political realm, kept them under the spell of "demons" who hid under the masks of pagan deities:

> In the Roman understanding, religion was an institution of the state and hence a function of the state; as such it was subordinate to the state. It was not an absolute that was independent of the interests of the various groups that professed it; rather, its value was dependent on its serviceability vis-à-vis the state, which was the absolute. In the Christian understanding, on the other hand, religion had to do not with custom but with truth, which was absolute.[185]

Ratzinger's observation can help us understand Augustine's view of secular citizenship. Ultimately, the foundation of secular citizenship cannot rest on an idolatrous civic ideal, on a mythological principle of "National Sovereignty." The basis of secular citizenship does not have a political theology. This does not necessarily mean that citizenship is simply a social convention. The most we can

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[183] Fortin, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order,* 39.

[184] Taylor, "St. Augustine and Political Thought," 292. Here, Taylor cites Reinhold Niebuhr's critique of Augustine's "political realism."

[185] Ratzinger, *The Unity of Nation,* 76.

say is that the citizenship we enjoy as members of the body politic is at best a symbol of our sociability.[186]

[186] See Mary M. Keys and Collen E. Mitchell, "Augustine's Constitutionalism: Citizenship, Common Good and Consent," in *Christianity and Constitutionalism*, ed. by Nicholas Aroney and Ian Leigh, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022). This study supports the thesis that Augustine's view of secular citizenship is based on the classical definition of human nature, namely that we are social animals.

Conclusion

In this study, we have analyzed in broad terms Augustine's engagement with the civic ideals of his age. As I explained in my historical survey of Late Antiquity, the conception of secular citizenship in the Roman Empire was embedded in a complex system of cultural and philosophical values, which we called the ideology of *Romanitas*. Admittedly, a study of this nature will only provide a sketch of a historical landscape that is hardly intelligible from our modern perspective. However, the landscape of Greco-Roman political thought still casts its shadow in our political horizon. So, while we might not think about our secular citizenship as something that is cosmologically linked to a religious ideal, as in the case of citizenship in the ideology of *Romanitas,* we still struggle to define the ontological basis of citizenship rights. Can we talk about citizenship in a modern nation state as something rooted on natural right? If so, where does this natural right come from? I did not attempt to address these concerns in this paper — that, of course, needs to be the task of another type of study — but I hope I sketched a historical precedent for an issue that will be immensely problematic in the future of the Western society.

Leaving aside the theoretical problems of history, we must confront the circumstances of our age. We can draw inspiration from historical figures like the Bishop of Hippo when we attempt to reconceptualize our understanding of citizenship. In a Christian context, we can understand our life of faith as a communal effort to reach "holiness." This eschatological conception of ecclesial life accords with the Augustinian account of social fellowship in the City of God. However, we must recognize that this eschatological vision, with all its cultural and

theological premises, would likely be unintelligible to a modern secular audience. This raises a number of issues for Christians, especially when they try to articulate the eschatological basis of their social ideals in a secular political context. We must reconsider whether certain Christian theological concepts — such as the Augustinian eschatological distinction of the two cities — can still provide us with a normative framework for political life. In this paper, I contended that this eschatological distinction can still inform how Christians relate to their secular citizenship. I found Augustine's engagement with the political thought of his age profoundly instructive; it shows how one can elevate one's religious convictions over the cultural norms of one's society. In particular, Augustine's conversion story shows how spiritually fraught a man's relationship to his society may be. For the Bishop of Hippo, an active political life requires a vision of one's highest love. Nevertheless, as with any other political ideal, one must tempter one's political vision with a sober assessment of human nature.

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