

Partisans & Peace:  
rival visions of political conflict  
and civil concord

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## Abstract

This paper argues that the political philosophy articulated in the thought of Saint Augustine offers a fresh approach to the study of political conflict, especially when compared to the contemporary schools of liberalism and postmodernism. Rather than viewing conflict as something to be neutralized (liberalism) or embraced (postmodernism), Augustine argues that “love of neighbor” draws the individual out of self-love and reorients him toward the community. I argue that Augustine is able to avoid the pitfalls of both naive idealism and cynical partisanship because he holds a holistic view of human nature (i.e. sin) and human potential (i.e. “caritas”) that challenges contemporary views of politics.

## I. Introduction

Political life is often cast as a tragedy, as the contrast between how man ought to live on the one hand, and how he actually lives on the other. Politics is, in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, “an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises” (1932, 4). The “uneasy and tentative compromises,” only mitigate the effects of social discord and are, at best, only temporary because mankind’s propensity for violence, war, and the aggrandizement of power, inevitably break down the bonds of peace—limiting the extents of political cooperation achievable. And yet, what is perceived as tragedy in the modern age was widely viewed by ancient political theorists as the normal state of affairs and viewed with a sense of hope and optimism that challenges our cynical approach to political life. These differing views about the nature and scope of political life invariably leads to distinctions not only to the philosophical study of politics but also in the normative prescriptions drawn from such studies.

For the ancients, political philosophy oriented itself toward the rigorous investigation of foundations, often undertaken by building “cities in speech” that were never intended to be constructed in practice, but instead, were models from which citizens could examine “in what way justice and injustice naturally grow” (*Republic* 372e). In modern times, the liberal project broke sharply with this approach to philosophy because the violence seen in the name rival visions of the ideal political society convinced the first modern thinkers that the perfect had become an enemy of the good. Thus, instead of focusing on the ideal, modern liberalism sought to focus on the real, the attainable, and the tangible. In the end, political philosophy was recast, not as an attempt to understand the world, but to change it (*Theses on Feuerbach* XI).

Political conflict, however, is a difficult and often ambiguous starting point for inquiry since its effects vary from age to age: it can be small and evident only in the rhetoric of people who debate one another; or it can be violent and lethal as when a society undergoes revolution. And yet, we cannot examine a singular thinker or work because, as I have suggested, the difference in orientation leads to a difference in prescription. Thus, proceeding in a comparative manner should

highlight the contrasts in views and yield a deeper analysis. In the end, I shall argue that the Augustinian account of politics is both a more accurate analysis of the source of conflict and contains a more apt prescription than either of the two contemporary accounts of political life found in liberalism and postmodernism.<sup>1</sup>

On first impression, the modern and postmodern political thought are very attractive to theorists and practitioners of politics alike. There are no calls for naive concepts like virtue, citizenship, and love, but only cool dispassionate reason. Each claims merely to be realistic about the nature of politics and society and each offers seemingly compelling responses to the presence of conflict. And yet, both liberalism and postmodernism leave man with a restless anxiety. Man is isolated from his neighbor and does not form the bonds of unity necessary for civic flourishing. A city's happiness is connected to the happiness of the people, Augustine reminds us, "for a city is nothing other than a concordant multitude of men" (*CD* 1.15). By first surveying liberalism and postmodernism, I aim to demonstrate the need for a (re)turn toward Augustine. Augustine has much to say regarding conflict and love that will naturally provoke a response from any committed liberal or postmodernist, but only by first surveying the intellectual landscape of our contemporary situation, can we prime ourselves for a serious study of Augustine.

This essay proceeds in two main parts: in the first section, I attempt to show liberalism's foundation channels conflict out of the public sphere, into the private, in the hopes of creating a neutral administrative state; once the public sphere has been pacified, liberalism transforms political strife into perpetual economic competition wherein man is concerned more with his economic capacity than affairs of state. Postmodern thought critiques the liberal aim, re-illuminates the ubiquity of social discord and asks us to embrace, not flee, agonistic politics because, as Michel Foucault claims, "politics is simply war by other means" (2003, 15). In the second section, I turn, ultimately, to Augustine of Hippo. Conflict, Augustine tell us, stems from human pride because pride is at the root of man's separation with God, which is the source of conflict. Pride leads citizens to pursue a false civil peace—that is, the belief that we can eradicate discord from the public sphere—rather than seek out ends that are truly genuine, lasting, and permanent.

## II. Contemporary approaches to politics and conflict

### Liberalism and Social Conflict

Hobbes remains *the* entry point for a study of contemporary politics because for all intents and purposes contemporary politics retains many features first sketched out by Hobbes. Laurence Berns argues that Thomas Hobbes should be

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<sup>1</sup> "postmodernism" and "liberalism" are disputed terms. I use each with reservation. My intent here is not to make definitive claims about either the definitions or characteristics of each; rather, I aim to draw a distinction between liberal theory on the one hand, and post-liberal critics on the other. For more on the history of liberalism see Manet (1995), Strauss (1995), Sandel (1998), Rawls (2005). For studies on "postmodernism" see Lyotard (1984), Best and Kellner (1991), Butler (2003), and Hicks (2004).

viewed as a “founding father” of liberalism because he is among the first to reject the ancient method of political philosophy (Berns 1963, 354). Hobbes’s singular influence more than any other shifts the focal point of political life away from justice and toward security. For him, “there is no such *Finus ultimus* (utmost aim) nor *Sumum Bonum* (greatest good) as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers” (*Leviathan* xi.1). Elsewhere, he claims that the end of civil society “is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby” (xvii.1). But Hobbes’s break is not only with ancient philosophy, but Christian philosophy as well. This can be seen in his restatement of the golden rule in negative terms, “do not that to another, which thou wouldst not have done to thyself” (xv.35). The break is more radical than it first appears because it does not obligate man to do good for his fellow man, but only prohibits doing harm. From his break, Hobbes sets out to establish a morally binding natural law that is distinct from ancient reason or Christian natural law. In their place he builds his natural law on “what is most powerful in most men most of the time: . . . passion” (Berns, 355).

Passions are defined by Hobbes as the voluntary motions of man after the things he desires, or away from the things to which he is averse (*Lev.* vi.1). Among the strongest of passions is the fear of violent death, which Hobbes claims is “worst of all” (xiii.9). This fear drives man to escape toward a state of peace where he can assure both the goods he currently holds, and his potential for acquiring future goods. The pursuit of future goods are the only way in which man can guarantee his current state of well-being will exist in the future. Yet fear is not the only passion that motivates man’s behavior. We may consider, for example, Hobbes’s statement on the passion he calls felicity: felicity is man’s “continual success in obtaining those things which man from time to time desireth, that is to say, continual prospering” (vi.58); it is “a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another, the attaining of the former being still but the way to the latter” (xi.1). The pursuit of objects, however, leads to “a perpetual and restless desire for power after power” that ends only in death (xi.1) because “[man] cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more” (xi.2).

The pursuit of power after power exists both within and without civil society, but in the pre-political condition, what Hobbes defines as the state of nature, there is little or no incentive to cooperate with others, or surrender one’s own power for acquiring goods. In the state of nature, no other considerations except the protection of one’s own life exists because as Hobbes explains:

In such a condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently, no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no *Letters*, no society, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short (xiii.9).

In other words, for Hobbes, the state of nature and the state of war are identical because in the state of nature, man is under perpetual threat of violence and death. Rather than cooperate with his neighbor, man is compelled into that all to famous war of all against all (xiii.8). This is Hobbes's point of departure for building his moral law: passions, in the form of fear of violent death and desires for felicity, are the motivators that Hobbes employs to persuade man into civil society.

Because Hobbes is trying to channel violence out of political life, the moral law that he builds does not rely on virtue as understood in the way ancient and medieval philosophy did. Thus, the foundation of his moral laws, the Right of Nature, is the desire to protect one's life: "the liberty each man hath to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature, that is to say, of his own life" (xiv.1). For if man pursues power after power to protect his own life, he certainly then has the right, i.e. the liberty, to reason what is necessary to protect and ensure the well being of his life. Yet this right implies that man has the liberty to all things while pursuing the protection of his life, including the right to kill someone else (xiv.4). To escape this state of perpetual conflict and mitigate the fear of violent death, Hobbes posits two Laws of Nature: First, that man pursue peace as far as he is able—and when he is not able, man may engage in war (xiv.4). Second, "that a man be willing, when others are too, . . . to lay down his right to all things, and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself" (xiv.5). It is from these two laws that Hobbes creates the foundation of the modern liberal state.

It is not enough, however, merely to establish the laws that make the civil peace. Any peace that is created must then be managed, maintained, and extended. This leads Hobbes to identify other moral doctrines that man ought to keep in order to assure his felicity. Some of these laws compel certain actions by obligating man do specific tasks: for example, Hobbes's 3<sup>rd</sup> law ("Justice") is the obligation to perform covenants and his 4<sup>th</sup> law ("Gratitude") is the obligation to maintain the goodwill of whoever should show graciousness (xv.1-16). These two laws reinforce the obligation that men endeavor toward peace (xv.16). Other laws constrain and condition man in order to fit in civil society, such as the 5<sup>th</sup> law ("Complaisance"): "that every man strive to accommodate himself to the rest" (xv.17). Imagine a stone, Hobbes writes, that is either too large or too small, or too odd a shape so that it does not fit the general shape and size of other stones. A mason who is building a home will discard the odd stone because the final end, the home, is more important than any one stone (ibid.). Likewise, the man who refuses to conform his desires and interests to the majority of a society will also be cast out because such a man is disruptive to political order (ibid.).

This is the price man pays to preserve the civil peace: he must be conditioned and his actions constrained so that he "fits in" with other citizens inside the liberal state. Public opinion becomes the arbiter of what is acceptable and what is expected. As man strives to conform to society, he channels conflict out of the public sphere and focuses his attention on what is agreeable with others.

Yet this channelling of conflict is only partial at best because man has no way to guarantee that all other men are conforming their habits. Only the fear of returning to a state of nature compels men to comply with the 5<sup>th</sup> law. Hobbes continues to list 14 more laws, each directed at a specific action that Hobbes intends to constrain or promote.

Hobbesian liberalism creates the conditions though which man enters into civil society in order to pursue the perceived civil peace. But the project is incomplete. The anxiety of death, distrust of others, and the pursuit of power after power still remain in society. As long as these remain beneath the thin façade of society, the likelihood of violent conflict remains. One solution to this problem pursued by Hobbes's successors is to transform the remaining conflict into something other than warfare. Locke extends the Hobbesian project by transforming the pursuit of power after power that remains in the liberal state into economic competition. Locke pursues this goal by re-stating the terms of the state of nature and state of war so that they do not implicitly become defined with with one another. Yet it will be seen that rather than make man less warlike, Locke's distinction between the states of war and nature make conflict and competition more intensified. It is the intensified anxiety that Locke uses to channel conflict toward something other than war.

The state of nature that exists prior to politics is, for Locke, "a state of perfect freedom" wherein all men are free to "order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they see fit, within the bounds of the law of nature" (§4). In this version of the state of nature, there is a natural law to govern it "which obliges everyone: [that] no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions" (§6). And since violations of this law are in effect, violations against everyone, "the execution of the law of nature is, in that state, put into every man's hands And if any one in the state of nature may punish another for any evil he has done, every one may do so" (§7). By contrast, the state of war "is a state of enmity and destruction" and any man who declares a state of war is subject to be killed by others (§16). For even though the law of nature is to preserve peace whenever possible, "when all cannot be preserved, the safety of the innocents is to be preferred" (ibid.). In a state of war, therefore, "it is lawful for a man to kill a thief because using force, where he has no right to get me into his power, . . . I have no reason to suppose, that he, who would take away my liberty, would not, when he has me in his power, take away everything else" (§18).

Because Locke distinguishes the state of nature from the state of war more sharply than Hobbes, he seems to present the state of nature as a distinctly moral state because the state of war need not be present in the state of nature. Yet Locke intends a different conclusion from his distinction: that the state of war can exist both in the state of nature and in civil society when the authority of the state is absent or unable to protect man: "Men living together according to reason, without a common superior on earth. . . is properly the state of nature. . . . But force, or a declared design of force, upon the person of another, where there is no common superior on earth to appeal to for relief, is the state

of war” (§19). This shift restates more forcefully what was already evident in Hobbes: that the pursuit of power after power is not actually removed in civil society.

And yet, if man is perfectly free in the state of nature, and if a state of war can exist in civil society, why would he choose to leave the state of nature “and subject himself to the dominion and control of any other power?” (§123). The answer is that in the state of nature property is “very unsafe, very insecure” (ibid). Thus, men enter civil society to overcome those things that are lacking in the state of nature, namely (1) an “established, settled, known law, received and allowed by common consent to be the standard of right and wrong,” (2) a “known and indifferent judge, with authority to determine all differences according to the established law,” and (3) a “power to back and support the sentences when right, and to give it due (§124-126). If these things are lacking in civil society, or perceived to be lacking, man has reason to break his compact with others because he can not be assured that his property and life are protected. Locke acknowledges that because these things are lacking in the state of nature, man has the power” to do whatsoever he thinks fit for the preservation of himself and others within the permission of the law of nature” and the power “to punish the crimes committed against that law” (§128).

This is how Locke completes the Hobbesian project: by drawing a distinction between the state of war and state of nature, Locke is able to restate the Hobbesian pursuit of power after power in plain language and demonstrates that the state of war may exist in civil society. He then sets about channelling conflict and pursuits of power toward the acquisition of property, specifically money, to open a way for men to assure forever their felicity.

## Postmodernism and Social Conflict

The liberal project sought to free man from the state of nature by relegating the worst political violence outside the boundaries of acceptable practice. Yet, as Carl Schmitt explains, the problem of conflict was never actually solved, but was only masked from our perception. “The essence of liberalism,” he claims, “is negotiation, a cautious half measure, in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary debate and permit the decision to be suspended forever in an everlasting discussion” (2005, 63). When defining politics, Schmitt writes that the “specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy” (26).<sup>2</sup> Schmitt called this distinction “the political.” The friend/enemy distinction “denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation” (ibid.), and the various groups to which a man belongs transform into political entities “if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings effectively according to friend and enemy” (37).

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<sup>2</sup> It must be clarified that Schmitt does not mean our personal friends and enemies, but our political friends and enemies. See pg. 28 note 9: Schmitt draws a distinction in Classical and Biblical literature between the different words used for political and personal friends and enemies.

Whether or not the polemic against liberalism is intended to tear down the liberal project, one thing remains clear: Schmitt directs his concern about the state of politics at the forgetfulness in liberal society that leaves man unprepared to meet the most violent types of political conflict.<sup>3</sup> Liberalism alone seems capable of producing an unparalleled level of prosperity and economic flourishing, but for those living within its sphere it is too easy to forget, or ignore, the harsh reality of conflict that remains just below the surface. By reintroducing the idea of social conflict into politics, Schmitt seeks to guard against depoliticized terminology that transforms the “concept of battle in liberal thought [into] competition in the domain of economics and discussion in the intellectual realm” (1996, 71). “Instead of a clear distinction between the two different states, that of war and peace, there appears the dynamic of perpetual competition and perpetual discussion” (71-72). Within this new dynamic, society becomes immersed in simulated warfare and we lose our ability to discern real threats because the “self-understood will to repel the enemy in a given battle situation turns into a rationally constructed social ideal or program, a tendency or an economic calculation” (72). Finally, “[at] the intellectual pole, government and power turns into propaganda and mass manipulation...” (ibid.). The consequences of such a turn in liberal thought can be disastrous because a “[political] class that shifts all political activity onto the plane of conversation in the press and in parliament is no match for social conflict” (2005, 59).

Schmitt’s critique of liberalism acknowledges that unless man is reminded and aware of the possibility of war he will not be prepared when it comes. Yet for Schmitt, as for Hobbes and Locke, total war is only one possibility among many. Michel Foucault by contrast, claims that this possibility of total war is the only state of human affairs. Foucault appeals to us to accept, even embrace, the deeply agonistic nature of all human relationships, but especially politics. Foucault reaches this conclusion not by studying man in the pre-political condition, followed by an investigation of how political society is formed (2003, 1-10); instead he proves to be even more modern than Hobbes and Locke because he looks at society as it is and traces the developments of political ideas. Foucault’s method is worth noting because while appears that he is sketching the foundation of society in the manner of Hobbes and Locke, he is attempting something quite different. For Foucault, established knowledge and pre-political hypotheticals are suspect because they can ultimately prove to be a part of the repression that man must resist. Foucault concludes, and attempts to convince us, that we can only resist power with more power. We can dominate, or be dominated.

Foucault explains that “liberal conception of political power” has certain

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<sup>3</sup> It can be difficult to sift through the various and conflicting claims about Schmitt and his relationship with liberalism. Strauss (“Notes on Concept of the Political” in *Concept*) for instance claimed that he remained squarely within the liberal horizon, whatever his intentions. Balakrishnan (2002) writes that classical liberalism was “almost never the target” of Schmitt’s polemics, but instead the post-liberal corporatism that liberalism was becoming. For more on Schmitt and liberalism see Cristi (1999), Dyzenhaus (1998), McCormick (1999), and Mouffe (1999).



features that he describes as economic (2003, 13). Liberal theory, he claims, conceives power as “the concrete power that any individual can hold, and which he can surrender, either as a whole or in part, so as to constitute a power or political sovereignty” (ibid.). Yet for Foucault, the analysis of power leads to a different conclusion because power cannot be transferred or surrendered; it can only be exercised through action (14). Thus, power is not a commodity, but “is that which represses nature, instincts, a class, or individuals” (15). Here we see a reversal of Hobbes’s 5<sup>th</sup> law: it is not man who conforms his habits to society, but power, through society, which conditions man. And since power is not a commodity, to analyze both power and politics, a new paradigm is necessary. This is what leads Foucault to invert Clausewitz’s axiom and state that “politics is a continuation of war by other means” (ibid.).<sup>4</sup> This new characterization of politics as war, Foucault tells us, implies three things: First, “that power relations, as they function in a society like ours, are essentially anchored in a certain relationship of force that was established in and through war at a given historical moment that can be historically specified” (15). Second, “that within this ‘civil peace,’ these political struggles, these clashes over or with power, these modifications of relations of force. . . in a political system. . . must be interpreted as a continuation of war” (16). Third, that “[the] final decision can come only from war, or in other words a trial by strength in which weapons are the final judges” (ibid.). From these implications, Foucault claims that “political power does not begin when the war ends” (50). War and violence are present at the birth of all new states: all rights, peace, and laws are products of a war that first preceded them. “The law is not born of nature, . . . the law is born of real battles, victories, massacres, and conquests which can be dated and which have their horrific heroes” (ibid.). The liberties, rights, and laws that man enjoys in liberal society are products of, and continuations of, the state of war.

The postmodern response to conflict—in its acceptance of liberalism’s state of war, or rather its embrace of conflict as inherent to politics, and its rejection of the possibility of peace—raises two criticisms about the modern liberal thesis: First, that liberalism has not solved the problem of conflict. As a political paradigm its success as mitigating violent physical-conflict is unmatched, but comes at a cost of creating more anxiety and hyper-conflict in other areas of human affairs. Second, we see from the postmodern critique of liberalism that there is a tendency to embrace conflict instead of seeking to minimize it. In their criticism of liberal theory, Schmitt and Foucault lead us down a path of enmity and such implications are not reassuring about the future of politics. Political life is presented as a multiplicity of practices, structures, and regimes that discipline man to either accept his fate as a repressed subject or turn toward agonistic politics in which our liberation requires that we “will have to abandon decidedly, without reservation, the fundamental concepts through which we have so far represented the subjects of the political . . . and build our

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault later clarifies his statement regarding Clausewitz, claiming that it was Clausewitz who first inverted the relationship between war and politics. This reversal he traces from the original thesis in the middle ages through the advent of the modern state and emergence of Armies as institutions (see: 2003, 48-49).

political philosophy anew” (Agamben 2000, 16).

We seem stuck between two disconcerting choices: the first privatizes political conflict and transforms it into economic competition. The second asks us to accept and embrace the ubiquity of conflict as the only means by which we can truly liberate ourselves from a system of thought that conditions us toward the liberal peace. We are uneasy with the society that liberalism has created even as we benefit from it. We seek alternatives, which make a postmodern turn attractive, but it does not speak to our heart’s desire for a genuine lasting peace of the soul. If we can fault the former for underestimating the persistence of conflict, the latter can be faulted for overestimating it. We might, therefore, turn away from our dominant paradigms in search of something new within something old. That is, we can turn toward a possible third option that recognizes the paradoxical conclusion that society “is at once the basis for, and the nemesis of, that fullness of life which each man seeks” (Niebuhr 1932, 1). But once we recognize that Niebuhr’s view is Augustinian, we might ask, why not turn to Augustine himself.

### **III. An Augustinian approach to politics and conflict**

#### **Augustine and the Origin of Social Conflict**

Augustine, far from disagreeing with contemporary political thought, affirms that conflict appears to be coded into the very nature of our sociability (*CD* 12:28). Indeed, even “when the city is at peace and free from actual sedition and civil war, it is never free from the danger of such disturbance or, more often, bloodshed” (*CD* 19.5). What a state of contradiction man is in: we long for fellowship because it brings us a feeling of comfort and happiness, and yet even the most fragile bonds are made at great effort and expense. More often than not, our friendships are hindered by the amount of conflict in which we find ourselves, leaving us feeling mostly pain and anguish. And because the disintegration of friendship is more punctuated than its formation, we experience this pain more deeply than the pleasure of friendship. These bonds of friendship are not limited, in Augustine’s view, to those non-political associations in our private lives, nor are they the political-friendships described by Schmitt. For Augustine, there is little if any distinction between private and public friendships because the aim of politics, civil peace, can only be found when its citizens are free to create, build, and enjoy the pleasures of fellowship.

Augustine’s comment about the inescapability of conflict looks similar to those of liberalism and postmodernism, but here Augustine examines conflict in light of his deeply Christian worldview, which affects the response that he proposes. That is to say, where liberalism and postmodernism understand conflict as something normative, Augustine traces the source of conflict to man’s fallen nature. For him, conflict cannot be explained as merely a by-product of society’s structure—though Augustine would not discard social structure entirely—nor can it be traced to the state of nature. Rather, conflict seems to be something relational as Foucault explained. Conflict is intertwined with power and

seemingly inseparable from man's relationships with others and with society. J. Joyce Schuld has remarked that the "mechanics of power, according to Augustine and Foucault, develop through a finely textured and diversified interactive environment" (2003, 19). But rather than ask us to embrace "the political" in all our affairs, as Foucault does, Augustine locates the first cause of conflict in human sin because it pulls man away from God and from the community. Once divorced from God, human pride convinces man to use his own power as a means to solve conflict, which only exacerbates the problems of social conflict. Pride in the ancient world was seen by some as a virtue because it habituates a person to pursue excellence and avoid other, more corrupting types of vice.<sup>5</sup> Augustine rejects this view because pride fools us into pursuing false goods such as honor and glory rather than the permanent good of God. As a result, we make rash decisions (*ep. Io. Tr.* 2,13). The Fall—i.e. Original Sin—afflicts us all with "ignorance and difficulty" that handicaps our ability to perform the good even when we can see it clearly (Rist 1996, 213). Man sins because he does not keep the commandment to love, which according to Augustine "is both a grave sin and the root of all sins" (*ep. Io. Tr.* 5,2). Augustine's insight to pride is all the more germane because he includes himself as one who was concerned with personal pride and political ambition (*Conf.* IV-VIII; Brown 1967, 102). Pride "is the ambition of the world" (*ep. Io. Tr.* 2, 13). When we turn to pride as the means to create peace in our world, we become to ourselves "a land of famine" (*Conf.* II 10,18).

Pride, while affecting all aspects of human affairs, is particularly damaging to political society because of its blinding effect on our capacity to see the good. Pride misdirects our understanding of conflict differently in different ages: in the liberal age, we are led to believe that the solution to conflict is perceived to be a "rationally constructed social ideal" described by Schmitt. It seems to us that in order to definitely solve conflict we only need a little more education, a little more enlightenment, and a little more will power. Should these things fail, we turn to mechanistic or procedural solutions.<sup>6</sup> What is lost in all these attempts is the recognition of why we want to pursue a civil peace. "Peace is," we are reminded, "so great a good that, even in the sphere of earthly and mortal affairs, we hear no word more thankfully, and nothing is desired with greater longing" (*CD* 19.11). But even peace "is an uncertain good, since we do not know the hearts of those with whom we wish to maintain peace" (*CD* 19.5). All men seek peace, even when making war (*CD* 19.12). Here Augustine explains that peace is such a great end, that even those who disrupt the civil order and make war are ultimately pursuing peace—it is simply a peace of their own design rather than the one that they seek to overturn (*ibid.*).

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<sup>5</sup> In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explained that men with greatness-of-soul ('pride') are concerned about honor and acts of dishonor (1123b21) and that greatness-of-soul is itself "seems to be a certain kind of adornment of virtues" (124a3). Though it should be mentioned that even Aristotle says it "seems to be a certain kind" not that it is actually an adornment of virtues.

<sup>6</sup> For articulations of procedural justice see Rawls (1971;1999), and Walzer (1983). For a criticism on Rawls see Bloom (1975) who argues that Rawls creates an artificial edifice that cannot actually create happiness for man.

Man must learn that the only peace which is real and everlasting is the one offered by God because it is God alone who can offer a peace which is immutable. Book 19 of *City of God* highlights this: that not all so-called goods, or ends, of man are valid. If we agree that all moral and political actions of man are guided by the desire to either preserve or improve, then we must accept that there is an implicit premise that man desires the good. Peace is a good and it brings us a sort of happiness, but unless it is eternal it shall never suffice.

As Etienne Gilson has explained, we pursue those goods that make us happy; but those goods that we pursue will perish, and when they do, we shall lose whatever approximated happiness we had; and, if we can lose those goods, then we never truly possessed them in the first place—i.e., not in the way that we need to possess them; therefore, if we are to have permanent happiness, we must first possess permanent good (1960, 3-4).<sup>7</sup> But how, then, do attain a permanent good and everlasting happiness?

### **Virtue and the Final Good of Man**

We learned from Hobbes that man is acutely aware that his life will end. But Augustine knew this long before Hobbes. When man realizes that he will die, the fear of that death can be overwhelming. At its worst, the fear of death is the single greatest threat against the foundation of a just society because for Augustine, happiness is predicated on knowledge of, and love for God, which cannot exist when man is overwhelmed with the anxiety of death (Dodaro 2004, 35-36). The strongest tool at man's disposal in overcoming the fear of death, it seems, is virtue. But not any kind of virtue will aid man in his pursuit of happiness. If we are to overcome the fear of death and acquire true happiness, we must appeal to "true virtue," Augustine says (*ibid.*, 36). In the Augustinian view, the Hobbesian project is flawed because death is only delayed, but never escaped—and likewise the fear of death is only postponed but not overcome. Therefore we need to consider something other than a Hobbesian solution to the pursuit of the civil peace. Here we turn to Augustine's account of virtue because virtue appears to be a permanent good. By "virtue" I mean those habits that make man excellent with respect to moral rightness such as honor, courage, patience, integrity, etc.<sup>8</sup> Augustine draws out the virtues from his discussion of the Roman philosophers (*CD* 19.1-4), and from these discussions Augustine equates the pursuit of human happiness with a certain peace of the soul. That is, from the point of view of philosophy, it appears that virtue is the highest of goods that man can pursue because virtue has no good above it: "Of all these goods, however, whether of soul or body, there is none whatsoever that virtue places above herself" (*CD* 19.3). Virtue is true virtue when it "directs all

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<sup>7</sup> This applies equally to immaterial as well as material goods because even our own lives are passing (*ibid.*). It also bears mentioning that the ceaseless pursuit of temporary good may be precisely what Hobbes intended us to do.

<sup>8</sup> The two classic texts on virtue can be found in Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* and St. Thomas Aquinas *Disputed Questions on Virtue*. For contemporary studies on virtue ethics see especially MacIntyre (1988; 2007), and Pieper (1966; 1997).

the good things of which it makes good use toward that end where our peace will be so perfect and so great that it can be neither better nor greater” (*CD* 19.10).

Augustine, modifies this understanding of virtue, asserting that virtue only appears to be permanent, and that, in the final analysis, it too is only a temporary good (though it is a much higher good than other perceived goods). To prove this, he considers the political—or cardinal—virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude (also known as courage), and temperance (*CD* 19.3-19.5).<sup>9</sup> Prudence is the ability to discern the right course of action. Justice is giving others their due. Fortitude is the strength to endure evil in the pursuit of the good. And temperance is the ability to moderate our actions and consumptions. Augustine asks us to consider prudence and justice together. We know they allow us to discern the good in an imperfect world, and to give our fellow citizens their due; but he shows that their necessity demonstrates that we are surrounded by evil, and that evil dwells within us (*CD* 19.4). Fortitude is the means by which we have the courage to endure great evils in the name of the good, but again, it is only necessary because evil is present (*ibid.*). True virtue cannot prevent all evils, but neither does it seek a false escape from suffering. Rather, the political virtues aid us in our suffering. And yet, Augustine has shown the political virtues only to be a necessary condition for happiness, but not sufficient in themselves. Political virtues aid man in dealing with evil and correct the propensity to do vice; but we have not seen how the virtues by themselves can bring about happiness. In truth, they cannot because man still fails to execute virtuous actions perfectly. The virtues are imperfect goods and must therefore be perfected in their own right if they are to perfect man in the pursuit of supreme good and happiness.

Perfecting the virtues is no easy task. Indeed, its difficulty is so great, in Augustine’s view, that man cannot accomplish it without assistance. To overcome this challenge, Augustine appeals for us to turn to God. It is God, and God alone, who through his power and love for mankind can perfect virtue, and in turn perfect mankind. In *Letter* 155, Augustine tells an imperial vicar that when man is reunited with God the need for political virtue will disappear since there shall be no need for prudence to discern right from wrong, no need for courage to endure hardship, no need for moderation, and no need for justice since we shall enjoy the glory of God together (*ep.* 155.2). To reunite with God, man must rely on the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love because these virtues bring man in line with Christ, Who brings man to God.

When man is divorced from God’s love and unwilling to love Him unconditionally, the soul is prevented from giving itself over to another soul in a selfless act of friendship, which is the heart of the political and theological virtues. To give ourselves over to another means to be a genuine friend. But one cannot “truly be another’s friend unless he has first been the friend of truth” (*ep.*

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<sup>9</sup> Augustine does not mean that these virtues are strictly political. Robert Dodaro notes that the tradition of political philosophy uses the terms ‘political’ (i.e. civic) and ‘cardinal’ interchangeably (2004, 432 n4). See also Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (University of Notre Dame Press: 1966).

155.1). Fellowship—political or otherwise—must model itself on the love God has for humanity if it is to be genuine. To be “a friend of truth,” is to be a friend of God. Augustine adds that if it cannot be done freely, “it can never happen at all” (ibid.).

*Letter 155* forms the backdrop for Augustine to re-present the political virtues in light of the theological virtues. He asks his interlocutor, Macedonius, rhetorically, that if the philosophers can argue that a blessed life can exist even in torment with the aid of virtue, why would anyone not wish to remain and enjoy the blessedness (*ep.* 155.3)? No, the blessed life cannot be attained when surrounded by misery. Anyone who seeks the blessed life must turn toward God. God alone protects us from the worlds evils and it is only through God and his love that humanity can be lead to eternal happiness (*ep.* 155.4). Citing the Psalms, Augustine writes, “I will love you, Lord, my virtue” (*ep.* 155.6; *Ps.* 18/17.1). Perfected virtue is loving God. The citizen who seeks to live virtuously loves God with the selflessness that God himself shows man in his mercy. Turning to Christ’s perfection and unwavering strength becomes the foundation for reinforcing and correcting human fragility. For “we will not possess virtue unless he is present with us to help us, nor blessedness unless he is present with us for us to enjoy, and unless he swallows up with the gift of immortality and *incorruption* the whole of our changeable and corruptible selves” (*ep.* 155.6, emphasis original; cf. *1 Cor* 15:53-54).

Augustine is aware of the tendency of mankind to exalt its own capacity above divine wisdom. The infinite greatness of God can be perceived as a goal that we cannot attain. In place of God, we turn toward the perceived goods of the real, the attainable, and the tangible; in doing so, we lose sight of the permanent goods of true virtue and piety which are found in loving God (*ep.* 155.8): “Therefore, we should seek virtue from the Lord our God who made us, so that we can overcome the evils of this life” (*ep.* 155.9). A citizen or statesman who remembers this lesson and places reuniting man and God as the true end of the city will be better able to bring about a blessed and virtuous society. Thus, Augustines warning in explicit terms:

[If] any of our governing, however informed by the virtues I listed, is directed only to the final aim of allowing human beings to suffer no unjust hardships in the flesh; and if you think that it is no concern to suffer of yours to what purpose they put the peace that you struggle to provide for them (that is, to speak directly, how they worship the true God, with whom the fruit of all peaceful life is found), then all that effort toward the life of true blessedness will not benefit you at all (*ep.* 155.10).

Citizens cannot take a hands-off approach regarding to how their fellows utilize the freedoms and protections given to them by the state. Freedom of worship, association, and the other rights guaranteed by the liberal project do not exempt man from being concerned about their orientation. For Augustine, men and women should not pretend that taking a neutral position on the moral conduct

of their neighbors is the safe bet. Their actions matter because we all live in society. This point cannot be overstated because, far from being a panacea to all social conflict—a pacifist sentimentality that alone is capable of producing civil peace—Augustinian love may, at times, be the source of social tension when citizens, genuinely pursuing the good of their neighbor, articulate political agendas that run counter to what the neighbor wants.

This delineated point, however, should not discourage citizens from seeking out the good of their neighbor because such a practice will yield more positive effects than negative. Augustine’s aim realigns the political virtues with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (*1 Cor* 13:13). Love is the greatest virtue because when properly ordered it mirrors the selflessness and infinite mercy that God shows us. This selfless giving is what Augustine directs our attention to when saying that we must be friends of truth. To be a friend of truth prepares us to be friends toward our neighbors in the way that Christ commands that we be: that is, loving our neighbor as we love ourselves (*ep.* 155.14; *Mt* 22:37-40; *Mk* 12:30-31; *Lk* 10:27; *Deut* 6:5; *Lev* 19:18). Augustine understood the dual commandment of love (for God and for neighbor) to be the same love because man is made in image and likeness of God (*Imago Dei*). Therefore if we love our neighbors and ourselves properly, then we are loving God selflessly.<sup>10</sup>

Love of neighbor proves especially fruitful in political life because it draws the citizen out of a corrupted self-love in which sin and conflict are rooted. Moreover, our neighbors include not only our dearest friends and family—which makes loving them easy—but also the more difficult challenge: our worst enemies (Canning 1993, 250). Thus, although the love of neighbor has been shown, at times, to be a limiting variable in bringing about civic peace, it is, more often, a wellspring for social healing because, as Augustine knew, genuine love of neighbor is impossible unless a person is “intent upon God with all that lives in him” (1993, 250).<sup>11</sup> Our neighbors include our dearest friends and family, which makes loving them easy; but it also includes the more difficult task of loving our worst enemies (*ibid.*). Therefore, since our neighbors include our enemies, loving our enemies is a crucial component to the foundation of a just and peaceful political community. Through the love for our enemies we overcome hostilities and are reconciled to God’s love and to perfected freedom. Love for neighbor habituates man to love what he can see all the while preparing him for the love of greater things that he cannot see (1993, 250; 262-263).

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<sup>10</sup> Canning (1993) argues that it was Augustine who, through an analysis of the *uti/frui* distinction, first successfully articulated an understanding of how love for God and Neighbor are one and the same love. The unifying force between the two loves is, of course, Christ who is both God and our neighbor (258)

<sup>11</sup> An insight shared both by Lincoln (*Second Inaugural*) and Martin Luther King (*Letter from Birmingham Jail*; “*I have a dream*” *Speech*)

## Conclusion

Augustinian studies in the midst of a revival. Scholars seem intent on (re)discovering his insights because they seem uniquely suited to the challenges of our times.<sup>12</sup> Saint Augustine offers us a vision of politics that is neither liberal nor postmodern. Indeed, his analysis of politics has much in common with both of the contemporary views. Where he breaks with them is on the source of conflict. He does not presume that conflict is normative simply because it is ubiquitous. Instead he sees conflict as a result of mans fall from Grace and divorce from God. To resolve conflict, therefore, man must restore his connection to God. This is no easy task, to be sure: indeed, only in the City of God is reunion complete and permanent. Augustines realism kept from thinking that man could eradicate conflict from the earthly city. On this he agreed with thinkers like Foucault. Yet it is Augustine who sees deeper than Foucault to mans inner nature and capacity for love and yearning for fellowship.

This essay briefly surveyed the dominant political theories of contemporary society. It began by touching upon the foundation of liberal theory in Hobbes and Locke. Then it explored the contemporary postmodern responses to conflict in Schmitt and Foucault. Each method is faced with the problem of conflict and each has a response that leaves the individual yearning for a permanent peace that remains unattainable. It is an uneasiness that leaves “experts and ordinary citizens” lamenting “the growth of mistrust, cynicism and scandal” (Elshtain 1995, 2). Conflict may indeed be a perennial feature of political life, but it is not the whole sum of politics. Rather than tear down our structures and regimes, disengage from politics, or pursue the privatization of conflict, we should turn to our fellow citizens, and transform our concern for their well-being.

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine is not without his critics: Connolly (2002) reads Augustine through Nietzsche and Kant and argues that his moralism is overbearing, dominating, and self-deluding. Gregory (2010) in contrast, reconstructs Augustine’s thought in order to buttress the strengths of liberalism. Mathews (2010) sees Augustine as a source for rebuilding Christian Citizenship in a post-9/11 era.



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