Augustine's *City of God* XIX and Western Political Thought[1]

Oliver O'Donovan

My earliest encounter with Book XIX of Augustine's *City of God* took place when I was a theological student with little experience of reading the Fathers but a great confidence in my own ability to storm the citadels of the theological classics and carry off their treasures. Like a self-conscious young man, bathing by the sea shore, who flexes his arms and his legs and breathes deeply to prepare for his big dive, I braced the muscles of my intelligence and stood poised for an elegant plunge into the waves of a masterpiece. And, like a swimmer who finds that he has incautiously become entangled in a mass of seaweed, I remember feeling first bewilderment and then panic at the drifting complexities of Augustine's discussion. Now that I teach this book to students approaching Augustine for the first time, I know that my experience was not unusual. Yet for nearly two decades it has shaped my mind, and I regard it as one of the unchallengeable masterpieces of Western writing. Ideally one would not try to meet Augustine through its pages, but would dare to approach it only after one was widely conversant with his work. For then one would marvel at the old man's capacity to resynthesize all the elements of a lifetime's theological culture into a new and unprecedented venture. One can say of this late work that he had never done anything like it before; and yet almost every move in the argument is familiar to those who know his earlier work. The "new and unprecedented venture" was a general theory of society from the point of view of a Christian theology of history; and it is this which makes *City of God* XIX a text of continuing interest to students of Western political thought who know nothing else of Augustine. My purpose in this lecture is to provide an account of the book which may assist some new readers to appreciate it with less difficulty than I experienced. To do this I shall first of all

1. Parts of this paper were delivered as a lecture at the kind invitation of the Faculty of Classics in Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and other parts at Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina. I am grateful to the members of both these institutions for their hospitality and discussion. I must also thank Professors R.A. Markus and R.D. Williams who commented on the typescript. I have not attempted to remove the marks of a *pièce d'occasion* which fit the propaedeutic aspirations of the paper — though I hope that some who have no need of a propaedeutic may find some of the exegetical remarks helpful.

try to demonstrate that it is correctly read as an essay in social or political philosophy. Then I shall try to characterise the outline of a political philosophy that we find there, concentrating on two features: first, a feature in which it seems to anticipate modern Western political thought, in its separation between society and virtue; secondly, a feature in which it appears alien to modernity, in its failure to allow for the progressive transformation of the social order.

City of God XIX has a central place in any recent attempt to describe Augustine's contribution to Western political thought. The author whose work in this field represents the measure by which other attempts in our generation must be judged, R.A. Markus, entitled his monograph *Saeculum*,[2] thereby giving expression to the view that Augustine was the first theorist of the secular realm — a view which depends heavily on our book for its justification. But not all who write about the *City of God* are agreed that we are justified in looking for a contribution to Western political thought within it. A caution about the political pretensions of Book XIX has been widely spread by a popular commentary on it, that of R.H. Barrow, designed to introduce readers to the *City of God* as a whole.[3] Barrow repeatedly stresses that St. Augustine did not propound a carefully thought-out contribution to political theory: "He is concerned with historical criticism, and not with developing a theory of the state" (pp. 249, 253).

In order to reach an opinion on this disagreement, we need to review the contents of the book. It has twenty-eight chapters. At the beginning of Chapter 21 Augustine announces what appears to be an appendix, superfluous to the agenda of the book. That agenda, developed in Chapters 1-20, is to provide an introduction to the fifth and last main section of the *City of God*, Books XIX-XXII. The first two main sections (bks. I-V, VI-X) were devoted to a polemical rebuttal of the principal objections to Christianity raised by paganism, first in its political and then in its philosophical and religious aspects. In the third to fifth sections Augustine undertook to write of the origins, history and ends of the two cities which between them comprise the totality of mankind, the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena*. Their origins are dealt with in

2. R.A. Markus, *Saeculum*, Cambridge 1970.
3. R.H. Barrow, *An Introduction to Augustine's City of God*, London 1950. A more recent book by Peter Denis Bathory, *Political Theory as Public Confession*, New Brunswick 1981, has imaginatively highlighted the aspects of Augustine's thought which are of most significance for political theory; but the author's habit of adding "says Augustine" to wide-ranging speculations of his own is one of a number of disconcerting features which makes his book a treacherous tool for scholarship.

Books XI-XIV, their histories in Books XV-XVIII and with Book XIX he comes to address their ends. Books XX-XXII will tell of judgment, hell and heaven in that order, and it is the task of the nineteenth book to provide a general discussion of the "ends" *(debiti fines)* to which the two communities of mankind are destined. But because Augustine shares in the classical conception of a thing's "end" as being its "perfection" *(non quo consumatur sed quo perficiatur)*, such a discussion must deal with the question of the supreme end-of-action, the *summum bonum*, that "for the sake of which all else is sought, but itself is sought for itself alone."[4] This, then, comprises the primary agenda for the book.

A recurrent feature of the *City of God* is extended line-by-line engagement with a representative pagan text. Book XIX begins with one of these passages; to the inexperienced reader, certainly one of the most formidable. The text is a section of Varro's lost *De philosophia*, in which the pagan author identifies six cardinal questions on which moral philosophers are observed to disagree, and by computing the possible combinations of answers to these six questions postulates a theoretical total of 288 different philosophical sects; then, by discounting in turn the importance of all but one of the six questions, he reduces the number of serious alternative positions in moral philosophy to three: either virtue is pursued for the sake of the immediate ends of action (pleasure, repose, health, etc.); or the immediate ends of action are pursued for the sake of virtue; or each is pursued for its own sake, the view that Varro himself prefers. This elaborate exordium (chs. 1-3) can have a most chilling impact. There is, it is true, a glint of humour in Augustine's treatment of Varro; but the joke, which extends to 321 lines of Latin in the Bibliothèque Augustinienne edition, is a long drawn out one. Augustine then announces his intention of giving the Christian view ("the response of the City of God") on each of Varro's six questions. Notice how he fulfils his promise. The first two questions are treated together in a long chapter (4)

4. XIX.1.1: "Finem boni ergo nunc dicimus, non quo consumatur, ut non sit, sed quo perficiatur, ut plenum sit; et finem mali, non quo esse desinat, sed quo usque nocendo perducat." There is need for more commentary on the paradoxical idea of *finis mali* or *summum malum*. It will be noted that Augustine's definition here is inconsistent with his definition at XIX.4.1: "respondebit aeternam vitam esse summum bonum, aeternam vero mortem summum malum: propter illam proinde adipiscendam istamque vitandam recte nobis esse vivendum." The problem is well outlined in G. Bardy's note in the *Bibliothèque Augustinienne* edition (xxxvii p. 725f). Augustine has inherited the antithesis of *fines bonorum et malorum* from Cicero and the Stoics. But the antithetical terms cannot be taken in the same sense. "Le ciel est un bien sans aucun mélange de mal; mais il reste encore du bien dans l'enfer."

of 195 lines, which declares that the Christian answer is different from any that Varro has considered. Neither the immediate ends-of-action nor virtue can be the final good, for neither can overcome the miseries of historical contingency. The final good is eschatological, for only in eternal life can happiness, the true end of all action, be secure. He then turns to Varro's third question, whether or not the final good is social; and to this he devotes the main part of the book, 729 lines of Latin (chs. 5-17). The fourth question is then dispatched in 19 lines (ch. 18); the fifth and sixth are handled together in 44 lines (ch. 19), in which Augustine has only to say that the answer to them is a matter of indifference to the Christian church. A brief résumé (ch. 20) brings Augustine to what appears to be the end of the book proper, leaving only the appendix which takes up some unfinished business from Book II.

This helps us to understand why there is a disagreement about Augustine's intentions in Book XIX. He has set himself an agenda, taken from Varro's discussion of the final good; and he has then treated Varro's agenda with a strong measure of irony. Varro regards the question "whether the wise man should share the final good with a companion" as a secondary matter, not to do with the substance of the final good itself; but Augustine makes society central to it.[5] His successive reformulations of the definition of the final good aim to build into it not only the eschatological but the social determinant: "life everlasting in peace", "peace in everlasting life" (11), where "peace" stands as the most general category of the social good. He could almost, he thinks, simply say "peace", were it not that "peace" is used also, in a relative sense, of the social conditions of this life. "When they wish to say that the wise man's life is a social one, we agree, and we say it much more clearly than they do" *(nos multo amplius adprobamus,* 5).[6] Augustine has therefore challenged the classical account of the supreme good over the way it has organised the question. To grasp this is to grasp why *City of God* XIX is indeed an essay in po-

5. XIX.1.3: "Cum ergo quaeritur de sociali vita . . . non de ipso summo bono quaestio est, sed de adsumendo vel non adsumendo socio ad huius participationem boni." I take this occasion to apologise to any whom I may have misled by a careless use of this text in *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* (New Haven, 1980) p. 115.

6. Thus G. Combès understands these words correctly: "Nous l'approuvons et bien plus qu'eux" *(B.A.* xxxvii p. 79). Other translators (e.g. H. Bettenson in the Penguin translation, p. 858) suppose that Augustine means that on this question there is more fulsome support from the church for the philosophers than on the previous questions. But on the previous questions there was no support from the church for the philosophers at all. It is, moreover, more idiomatic to take the infinitive *socialem vitam esse sapientis* rather than the clause *quod . . . volunt* as the object of *adprobamus.*

litical thought, contending for the acknowledgement that society is a primary determinant of the human good.

To this argument we may add another, based on the curious phenomenon of what I have called the "apparent" appendix (chs. 21-25). "This is the place", Augustine announces at the beginning of Chapter 21, having to all appearances wound up the business of Book XIX "to fulfil as expeditiously and clearly as I can the promise I made in Book II, showing that if we adopt the definition advanced by Scipio in Cicero's *De re publica* there never was a Roman commonwealth". There follows the most explicitly political section of the book, tacked on apparently as an afterthought to take up some business left unfinished some ten to fifteen years earlier. What does Augustine mean by taking up this business in this place? Let us look back to Book II, where Augustine was in the full flood of his polemic against pagan Roman religion. Roman religion, he argued, had no inherent tradition of moral teaching. Those pagan authors who most praised the austere virtue of the early Roman republic witnessed most damningly to the failure of Roman culture to perpetuate its early morality within the changing conditions of growing national security and power. Cicero represents the hero of its second century B.C., Scipio Africanus, as saying that the Roman commonwealth was a commonwealth only in name and not in reality. For a commonwealth *(res publica)* is a community welfare *(res populi)*; and a community *(populus* — you will pardon the inexactitude of the translation in order to catch the play on words) implies association both by an agreement about right *(ius)* and by a shared utility *(utilitas)* — two things which have altogether disappeared from the later, degenerate Roman populace. To achieve his ostensible polemical purpose all that Augustine needed to do with this passage (the sentiments, of course, are Cicero's own, not those of the historical Africanus) was to quote it. It supports his position sufficiently. In declaring that he would go further, and demonstrate how, on Cicero-Scipio's terms, the Roman commonwealth never existed, he clearly indicated that the polemical argument of Book II did not form the horizon of his interest. This is the promise he takes up at XIX.21. The agrument is straightforward. True right *(ius)* implies obedience to the true God; for "righteousness", or "justice" *(iustitia)*, is the virtue which assigns to everyone his due, and there can be no justice when the worship owed by the creature to its creator is offered instead to unclean demons. But if there is no righteousness or justice *(iustitia)*, then there is no "right" *(ius)*. "One should not", he says, "describe as 'rights' *(iura)* what are merely the unequal institutions of men" (21.1). And if no right, no community

(populus) associated by agreement about right, and therefore no commonwealth *(res publica)*.[7]

It is easy to see why Augustine could not say all this in Book II, where the discussion first arose. He needed to lay the groundwork for the premiss that justice implies the worship of the true God. This he does at length in Book V, where he argues that good moral qualities *(mores* or *bonae artes)* can be inspired by fundamentally vicious motivations. The Romans achieved what at their best they did achieve, an austere courage, self-mastery, and adherence to high standards of honour, only because they were driven by an overmastering passion for glory. But true virtue is not achieved this way, but only by that piety which involves humility. This argument is recalled in Chapter 25 of Book XIX to provide support for the controversial premiss about justice and true religion. But why, we must wonder, is the whole matter deferred to Book XIX, and not concluded where we might have expected it to be, at the end of Book V? Now, that is a dangerous question to pose; for there were so many non-philosophical constraints upon the construction of a work composed over so many years, intermittently and without the benefit of notebooks and jottings and revisions, that we cannot rule out sheer arbitrariness.[8] Right in the middle of this very section of Book XIX we have an example: a digression about references to Jesus and to the God of the Jews which Augustine had found in Porphyry's *Philosophy from Oracles*. It ought to have been included in Book X, but it was too late for that, and Augustine put it here rather than leave it out.[9] It is conceivable that Augustine had simply forgotten about the promise made in Book II until he was well-advanced in the composition of the *City of God*. However, the interpreter may justly prefer an explanation which makes the ancient text more intelligible, and I think that there is a good case for taking at their face value the confident words of connexion which introduce Chapter 21: *Quapropter nunc est locus*, "That is why this is the place to fulfil my promise. . .".

7. I simplify the argument slightly, omitting the move in 21.2, which takes up Cicero's argument from the subordination of the body to the soul, and of the soul to God, and arguing that only a community made up of individuals who are thus ordered can be a just community. This is not strictly necessary to Augustine's argument, but in view of his search for a unified concept of *iustitia* (see below, p. 99f.) it is of great interest, closely echoing Plato's *Republic*.

8. For a sensitive treatment of arbitrary features in Augustine's composition, see H. Marrou, *S. Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, Paris 1938, pp. 59-76.

9. This explanation, however, fails if we accept J.J. O'Meara's hypothesis that the ἐκ λογίων φιλοσοφίας is the same work as the *de regressu animae* which he used in Book X (*Porphyry's Philosophy from Oracles in Augustine*, Paris 1959.)

The *quapropter* refers us back to the short chapter of summary (ch. 20) which concludes the discussion of Varro's questions and, in effect, sums up the long treatment of Varro's third question. There are two points made in the summary, corresponding to a division of the argument within the central section itself. First, he says in a concessive clause, "the supreme good of the City of God is everlasting and perfect peace", in comparison with which "the life we live here, however many goods of mind, body and circumstance may complete it, is to be judged the most miserable". This summarises the first five chapters of the central section, Chapters 5-9. Nevertheless, he goes on, we can speak without absurdity of a happiness here and now, if we "refer the use of this life to the goal of that one". It is the hope of the eternal that makes us (relatively) happy; for only in hope can we enjoy the true good of the mind, wisdom, which is to contemplate the eternal. This summarises the rest of the central section, Chapters 10-17, in which Augustine has used the all-embracing category "peace" to bridge the gap between the exclusive social good of the Kingdom of Heaven and the relative social goods which are embodied in historical communities. Then follows the *quapropter*, which links the appendix to the main body of the discussion in two ways. First, there never was a Roman commonwealth, because justice is absent from history for the same reasons that wisdom is absent from it: only in contemplation of the eternal can either justice or wisdom be realised. But secondly, just as there is a relative sense in which we can speak of earthly happiness, there is a relative sense in which we can speak of a commonwealth, in that those who set their minds, in hope, upon transcendent justice, may make provisional use of the temporal institutions of society. And so in Chapter 24 Augustine offers us an alternative definition of a "community" (*populus*) which makes no mention of justice and so may be applied without difficulty to earthly political communities.

To the content of that new definition we return in a moment. Here we note simply that it is superfluous to the polemical concerns of Book II which prompted the discussion. But, if I am not mistaken, it has been the goal to which his thought has tended from the beginning to formulate a definition of a political community to which a Christian could subscribe. It is clear, then, why the discussion was postponed to the nineteenth book. He needed first to develop an account of the social good which was compatible with the belief that only in the eschatological Kingdom could the *summum bonum* be realised. He needed to teach us to think of a peace which was "more consolation of misery than delight in happiness" (27) , an "unequal peace" (12), a peace which consists in "the ordered agreement of citizens about the giving and receiving

of commands" (13) which is "to establish a compromise of human wills about things relevant to this mortal life" (17). In this relative, earthly peace the City of God participates, making use of its facilities until the conditions of mortality pass away. It is to this theme that Augustine returns in Chapter 25, rounding off his appendix, and demonstrating that what presents itself formally as an irrelevant addendum to the structure of Book XIX is in fact thematically integrated with it. It would not, then, seem sensible to me to deny that Book XIX was an attempt at Christian political thinking, working towards a conception of the earthly political community which would comport adequately with the self-understanding of the City of God.

The second task we have assigned ourselves is to look more closely at what Augustine's conception of the political community is.

II

Augustine replaces Cicero's definition of a community — the assembly of a multitude associated by agreement about right and by a shared utility — with a definition of his own which excludes all mention of "right": a community is "the assembly of a rational multitude associated by a harmonious sharing in the objects of its love" (*coetus multitudinis rationalis rerum aqas diligit concordi communione sociatus* — 24). It is a commonplace, which for the sake of our discussion we may cheerfully accept, that the great difference between ancient and modern political theory is that the modern has severed the ancient's connexion between society and virtue. If that is so, then Augustine has, to all appearances, set up the first standard of modern political thought against ancient, casting the political community off from its moorings in justice to drift on the tide of popular consensus. We may welcome this implication or we may deplore it, depending on our position in the more general confrontation between the modern and the ancient; but we cannot simply dismiss it on the grounds that Augustine did not know what he was saying. I have already indicated my reasons for seeing this new definition as the goal to which Augustine's argument has been tending. I will not, therefore, delay over Barrow's uncomprehending suggestion that he introduces it merely by way of example to show how empty and vacuous a definition would have to be if it had to encompass all the polities which have been called commonwealths in the history of the world. "But he goes on at once", Barrow says, "to show how useless this definition is," a statement for which I can find no support whatever in Augustine's text.[10] What Augustine does say is that it is "not

10. R.H. Barrow, *An Introduction to Augustine's City of God*, p. 253.

absurd" to use the term "community" *(populus)* in this value-free way, allowing that some communities love better things, others worse things; and that he himself adopts this usage because "I would not be prepared to say that [the Roman community] was no community, or that its welfare was no commonwealth" (24).

Cicero's Scipio Africanus, we remember, proposed two grounds of association in a community, both of which Augustine rejects. Most of his attention, and that of his commentators, is given to the repudiation of "right" *(ius)* as the basis of political association; we may shed some light, however, on that more controversial move if we consider his reasons for repudiating association by "shared utility" *(communio utilitatis)*. There is, he says, "no utility for the affairs of life *(utilitas viventium)* for those who live impiously — as do all those who serve demons instead of God". (21) This is a perplexing reply. When we use the word "utility", we think of *means* which are neutral in respect of ends. "Utilities" are our term for those life-sustaining goods which the community affords, on the basis of which we may pursue our own ends; it perfectly expresses the modern concept that ends are private, means are shared. When Cicero/Scipio spoke of "shared utility", he probably meant something similar. But Augustine, in keeping with his practice throughout his life, will speak of "utility" only where the supreme good is in view as an end.[11] Augustine would have liked to impose the same discipline upon the noun "use". He more than once maintained that there was no "use" of things to wrong ends, but that the proper term was "abuse"; and his preferred habit was to describe the wicked as "wishing to make use" of things that they ought to enjoy rather than as actually doing so.[12] He was, however, forced to recognise a much wider practice in common speech, making it possible to speak quite generally of the "use" of things which can only be enjoyed.[13] With "utility", however, he held the line, not merely for the sake of being precise but in order to make the substantial point that there *are* no means which are simply neutral in respect of ends.

This affects the way we understand the important question of the relation between the City of God and the earthly city in their dealings with material goods. In Chapter 17 Augustine tells us that there is a *communis usus* between the two communities of mankind; but the *finis utendi* is proper to each, and very different. He then goes on: "Similarly the earthly city, which does not live by faith, seeks an earthly peace, and so determines the concord of

11. Cf. the early *de diversis quaestionibus lxxxiii* 30.
12. See my article "*Usus* and *Fruitio* in Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* I", *J.T.S.* xxxiii (1982) p. 376.
13. *de civ. Dei* XI. 25

its citizens with respect to ordering and giving orders as to ensure a kind of composition of human wills about matters of mortal life." It is the easiest mistake in the world for the casual reader to take the words rendered "similarly" *(ita etiam)* to refer to what has gone immediately before: the City of God and the earthly city get on together by having a common use and differing ends; similarly, the earthly city in itself comprises citizens with a common use but differing ends. From this misreading we would conclude that the earthly city is a neutral institution of shared means to private ends. To demonstrate that it is a misreading, I must simply ask you to read Chapter 17 in Latin from the beginning, and see how the sentence beginning "*ita etiam . . .*" picks up the first sentence of the chapter: "The household of those who do not live by faith seeks an earthly peace. . . . Similarly the city of those who do not live by faith seeks an earthly peace." Augustine does not think that the earthly city is constituted in the same way as the relation between the earthly city and the heavenly city is constituted. He would not say that there was a common use but differing ends among members of the earthly city. There is in fact a common end, eternal punishment, and no use in the proper sense at all, because there is no utility, no real final good which gives value to the pursuit of the intermediate goods.

Here the difference between Augustine and the moderns emerges at its sharpest. It is the single weakness of Markus's fine book to have obscured this difference. "Society", writes Markus of the tendency of Augustine's thought "becomes intrinsically 'secular' in the sense that it is not as such committed to any particular ultimate loyalty. It is the sphere in which different individuals with different beliefs and loyalties pursue their common objectives insofar as they coincide. His 'secularisation' of the realm of politics implies a pluralistic, religiously neutral civil community" (p. 173). So runs the modern liberal tradition — but not Augustine. For him the earthly city, with its earthly peace, did have an ultimate commitment, in which all its members shared: "love of self to the exclusion of love of God" (XIV. 28). The members of the heavenly city, therefore, are never *bona fide* members of the earthly city, however much they "preserve the composition of wills (i.e., *within* the earthly city, not between themselves and the earthly city) as much as piety allows". Furthermore, there never emerges a *tertium quid* between the two cities, a neutral space on which they meet as equal partners. Markus writes that "membership of either is compatible both with belonging to the Roman, or some other state and with belonging to the church" (p. 60f.); but this goes beyond Augustine, for whom, it would seem, true Christians were never true Romans, nor false Christians true members of the

Church. We observe how Markus reaches for the word "state"; we could sum up the difference by saying that Augustine simply had no conception of the state. Only the "earthly peace", "the temporal peace of the meantime, common alike to the good and to the wicked" (26) — not an institution, but simply a condition of order — is common to both communities. Each community makes, as it were, its own peace out of it. What Augustine likes to say is that the City of God makes use of "the peace of Babylon"; and then, quoting Jeremiah, "In her peace is your peace".

We turn, then, to the major change Augustine made to Cicero's definition, the removal of the reference to "right". He was, of course, perfectly aware that *ius* need mean no more than "a system of law". But one *ought* not, in Augustine's view, to speak of *ius* simply in that way without raising the question of its relation to justice. Cicero himself had argued that the loss of *iustitia* caused the Roman commonwealth to cease existing. "Even they admit", he says, "that *ius* is what flows from the fount of *iustitia*!" (21). One might as sensibly object to Augustine's argument on this score as complain that Plato failed in the Republic to distinguish different senses of δικαιοσύνη. Augustine had argued in Book II that Rome, lacking a religious morality, lacked a unified public moral culture, having only the heterogeneous elements of a philosophical morality, a tradition of law and a flagrantly immoral public religion (II. 12). Thus reflective and conscientious Romans like Cicero ended up with a sense of bad faith in regard to the public culture (II. 27). A unified account of justice, which related law to religion, was for him a philosophical *sine qua non*.

We may, however, be surprised that Augustine did not embark upon an analogical treatment of justice, which would have allowed for it to be instantiated on different levels of society. This would have been to treat it in the same way as he treated peace: there is absolute peace and there is relative peace, so why not also absolute justice and relative justice? There is, in fact, a relative justice in Augustine's thought, but it does not extend downwards to embrace the ordinary legal activities of the earthly commonwealth. We notice the disparity in the treatment of peace and justice from the opening of Chapter 27: "That peace which is our special possession . . . is enjoyed here with God by faith, and will be enjoyed for ever with him by sight. Yet any peace we have here, whether that which we share or that which is special to us, is more like the consolation of our wretchedness than a delight in happiness." There are, we notice, three kinds of peace mentioned in that sentence: the final peace of heaven, the interior peace of the City of God enjoyed by faith, and the peace which is common to the two cities. He proceeds: "Similarly, the justice which is ours, though

in its true justice oriented to the supreme good, consists in this life more in the forgiveness of sins than in the perfection of virtues." There we have only two kinds of justice or righteousness, both peculiar to the City of God, and there is no mention of any third kind which might be common to the two cities. As the discussion proceeds it becomes evident why. The Latin *iustitia* (like the Greek δικαιοσύνη), is notoriously translated in theological English by no fewer than three words: righteousness, justice and justification. Augustine cannot use the word without being aware of the problematic represented by the third of these, the *iustitia Dei, non qua iustus est sed qua iusti sunt homines quos iustificat*, "not in the sense of his being righteous, but in the sense of his justifying mankind."[14] He cannot, or will not, disengage a separate social or political sense of the word from this theological discussion. "Justice" must include the forgiveness of sins. That is why Chapter 27 thereupon takes an unexpected turn, prompted by mention of the forgiveness of sins, into terrain which belongs to his long-fought controversy with the Pelagians over Christian perfection.

Yet in at least two places in earlier books of the *City of God* Augustine has spoken of justice in connexion with civil government. What are we to make of this? Is it a simple discrepancy attributable to the long intervening years which separated the composition of one part of the work from another? Well, it may be. I do not hold a strong brief for Augustine's verbal consistency, nor do I think it likely that in 415, when Books IV and V were composed, he had an exact conception of what he would say a decade or more later. Nevertheless, a consistent account of his views on justice can be given which respects all that we find him saying in the *City of God*; and I do not think such an account should be overlooked. On this account Augustine is held to believe two things: (a) that justice is a *virtue* of civil government, even though it is not a necessary criterion for it; (b) that this virtue is realised only when civil government is conducted by Christians.

There is a famous aphorism in IV.4 which has caused interpreters much toil: "Remove justice, and what are kingdoms but gangs of terrorists on a grand scale? What are criminal gangs but petty kingdoms?" The broader context of this aphorism makes it evident that Augustine's principal concern is to point to the structural equivalence between the *regnum* and the *latrocinium*: this he does by referring to an episode in Roman history which clearly fascinated him (cf. III.26), the Servile War, in which some gladiators under Spartacus revolted against Rome and established a petty kingdom of their own in Campania which lasted for two

14. *Ep.* 140. 72. Cf. *de spiritu et littera* 32.56.

years. Augustine argues that whatever can be said about the rise of Rome ought to be said *mutatis mutandis* about the *latrocinium;* for there is no formal difference between them (IV.5). (The point is still in his mind at XIX. 12, where his first example to show that peace is the universal object of human aspiration is that of a *latrocinium.*[15]) Yet this is all true only "if you take away justice". The aphorism is immediately preceded by a contrast between two kinds of kingdom: everyone benefits, he says, from the rule of the good — which is to say, from the rule of those who have no great desire to be rulers, since their piety and integrity are sufficient for their happiness (IV.3). And there is, of course, only one kind of ruler of whom that can be true. Only the Christian is sufficently detached from earthly goods and free of lust for glory to be able to rule "justly" — in the same sense of "just" as when we speak of the just living by faith. The brief "mirror for princes" which Augustine provides at V.24 shows us why: just rule means an insusceptibility to flattery, a love of God's kingdom which is stronger than the love of one's own kingdom, a reluctance to punish from personal animosity, a concern for the amendment of wrongdoers and a gentleness in showing mercy; a mastery of appetite and a readiness to make the sacrifice of humility, compassion and prayer for what one has done amiss (a point of great importance in Augustine's portrait of Theodosius).[16]

It is a measure of the distance which Augustine set between himself and the propaganda of the Christian empire that these claims for Christian rulers strike us with something of a shock, as an element in the discussion for which we have not felt prepared. Peter Brown remarked that "his portraits of Constantine and Theodosius are . . . some of the most shoddy passages of the *City of God*",[17] suggesting, I suppose, that they were gratuitous and superficial. I think that judgment needs some qualification. Simply as a theoretical matter it cannot have appeared a very attractive

15. This viewpoint was incomprehensible to the Thomist-influenced thinkers who laid the foundations of modern political thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For Grotius, for example, it was self-evident that a state may commit aggression or injustice without losing its political capacity, and a band of pirates can never become a state. For it is bound together solely by the commission of crime, whereas states are associated for the mutual support of lawful rights (*de iure belli ac pacis* III.3.2). Cicero/Scipio's definition is fundamental for the distinction between the two. All that Grotius can make of *de civ. Dei* IV.4 is: the spoils of kingship, if unjustly acquired, are no different from the booty of brigands.

16. Cf. Y.M. Duval, "L'éloge de Théodose dans le Cité de Dieu", *Recherches Augustiniennes* iv (1966) pp. 135-79.

17. P.R.L. Brown, "Political Society", in R.A. Markus (ed), *Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays,* New York 1972, p. 319.

conclusion to Augustine to depict the Christian emperor at the head of a gang of terrorists. He had to provide some account of what he thought had been changed with the dawning of a Christian regime. What continues to impress the reader in the end is how modest that account is: the Christian emperor superimposes upon the government of his dominions a kind of "justice" that it can function very well without, and which consists principally in his perpetual readiness to ask and receive forgiveness for his sins.

Before we conclude, however, that Augustine simply allowed too little to political justice and paid too high a price in political theory for a unified account of *iustitia*, we must reckon with what he had on hand to put in its place. For having severed the connexion between civil society and virtue, he takes a very different direction from the early modern theorists who attempted to re-found society on passion.[18] What he did, on the contrary, was to reformulate something like the traditional concept of society and morality in new terms which would give due recognition both to the reality of the moral order which makes social existence possible and to its fundamentally flawed character. Augustine embarks on the radical, but not revolutionary policy of characterising all polities in terms of their moral *dis*order, which itself provides an explanation of their political *order*, since, in Augustine's firmly Platonic view, disorder is nothing but a failure in an underlying moral order. When we read that famous statement in Chapter 25, "The virtues which they think they have . . . are in fact vices rather than virtues", we should not, certainly, make the mistake of dismissing it as empty rhetoric; nevertheless, we should set it alongside the characteristic affirmation of Chapter 12: "Even what is perverted must of necessity be in, derived from, or associated with — that is, at peace with — some part of reality in which it has its being, or of which it consists. Otherwise it would not exist at all." A vice, in other words, is a perversion of *a virtue*; it is a *dis*order which is predatory on some *order*. In the twelfth chapter of Book V Augustine has written that the Romans "checked their other lusts with a single huge lust for this one thing", i.e. glory. From this sprang their "moral qualities" and "good arts", everything valuable about a civilisation, in fact, apart from "real" virtue. This theory has evoked some notable echoes in the modern period:

> This burning desire to be talked about, this yearning for distinction which keeps us almost always in a restless state is responsible for what is best and what is worst among men,

18. For what follows see the discussion by Ernest L. Fortin, *Political Idealism and Christianity in the Thought of St. Augustine*, Villanova 1972.

> for our virtues and our vices, for our sciences and our mistakes, for our conquerors and our philosophers — that is to say, for a multitude of bad things and very few good things. [Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* (p. 133, Penguin tr.)]

It is a remarkable theory, combining strengths of both ancient and modern political thought. It allows us to understand how manifestly vicious communities can function, and apparently function well, as organised societies; and yet permits us an absolute point of moral criticism from which we can say, as Augustine does in Chapter 24: "the better the object of its agreement, the better the community". Not the least striking feature of it is its capacity to take terrorist-groups seriously as political communities and understand their functioning in terms relevant to politics. Peter Brown has drawn our attention to a telling remark in one of the sermons, where Augustine remarks that it is love that enables a terrorist to endure torture rather than reveal the names of his accomplices.[19] "Love", we must note, is not passion. Although the objects of a community's life are as various as sin itself, love is still directed to the good, even if not always to the supreme good. What Augustine's reader carries away with him in the end is not a denigration of the role of virtue in politics (though there is a fair amount of deflation of pretension) but an ability to discern shadows cast by virtue in surprising places.

III

This brings us to the second feature of Augustine's political thought, in which it appears least conformable to modern assumptions: it lacks a theory of progress. A generation ago H. Richard Niebuhr implanted it in the mind of every freshman student of Christian Ethics that Augustine stood for a "transformation" of human culture by Christ.[20] For this interpretation there is, on the face of it, less than no evidence in Book XIX of the *City of God*. Many modern heads have been shaken sadly over the complacency with which he views the institution of slavery in Chapters 14-16.[21]

The context of that discussion is important. Augustine's theoretical foundation, laid in Chapters 11-13, has been that, while every community seeks some peace, the City of God seeks the heavenly peace and refers its use of all provisional goods to the enjoyment of that eternal society. What form does this "use" take

19. *Sermon* 169. 11.14, cited in Brown, *loc. cit.* p. 317.
20. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture*, New York 1951, pp. 206-18.
21. For example, the head of my friend Richard N. Longenecker, in *New Testament Social Ethics for Today*, Grand Rapids 1984, pp. 63-6.

with respect to the temporal peace of the earthly city? To justify his starting-point, that the City of God can actually interest itself in that temporal peace, he quotes, as so often, the twofold command of love to God and neighbour. Neighbour-love must take a form, which is inescapably conditioned by the order of society in which the believer is situated. This is illustrated first by a discussion of the household and second by a discussion of the next order of society on a scale of expanding size, the city. The household occupies Augustine in Chapters 14-16, and he discusses it as a *Christian* household, that is to say, with a believer at its head, seeking to love his neighbour within the social context it affords. At the beginning of Chapter 17 a mere sentence or two about the non-Christian household leads him to the city, which he treats the other way round, speaking of how the earthly city establishes its peace, and then of how the heavenly city makes use of it. It is a reasonable inference from the different approaches Augustine makes to the two levels of society that he thinks of a Christian household as achieving a concrete form in a way that a Christian city does not.

By "household" (*domus*) he means something political, "an ordered harmony about giving and receiving commands among those who live in the same house". It is the "incipient form, or component part, of the city" (16); and consequently "it takes its laws from the laws of the city". That is to say, it is a sphere of punishment and a sphere of command: not only do masters command servants but parents command children and husbands wives. The distinctive feature which Augustine discerns in the Christian household is that commands are given "not from lust for dominion but from dutiful concern for others' interests, not in pride of precedence but in compassionate care" (14). And if he had stopped there, we would have concluded simply that the Christian household differs from any other only by the motive for which the authority-structure is maintained. But he goes on: "This [compassionate care and dutiful concern] is what the order of nature (i.e., creation) requires, for that is how God made mankind" (15). Creation-order allowed no place for dominion: the patriarchs were shepherds who ruled flocks, not kings who ruled subjects. And that is why before the time of Noah there were no slaves. In this almost offhand way Augustine reminds us of the patristic tradition that government and slavery were a provision of providence for a fallen world and no part of the order of creation; with it he conveys the message that the distinctive motive of the Christian householder is in fact subtly subversive of these institutions in that it reasserts the primal equality of every human being to every other. So easily missed is Augustine's allusion to the patristic tra-

dition here that early modern political thinkers such as Althusius could cheerfully quote his words about the morale of the Christian householder in support of the Thomist doctrine that *imperium* was neutral and for the benefit of all (*Politica* ch. 1). The righteous fathers, he remarks, distinguished between their slaves and their children in respect of temporal goods; but in respect of eternal goods they loved their slaves no less than any other member of their family. "This", he repeats, "is what the order of nature requires" (16). The Christian householder thus emerges in a form reminiscent of the Christian emperor: strangely detached from the earthly privilege of his position and longing for the heavenly rest where the burden of command will be taken from his shoulders, he makes himself the servant of others — and has more need of patience under his burden than his slave does under his.[22]

This seems to me to fall considerably short of what is meant if we speak of the "transformation" of cultural institutions. The authority-structure of the householder will not change before the coming of Christ's kingdom. What the Christian householder achieves is to superimpose another meaning on the relationships that arise within it, very much as the Christian emperor superimposes the righteousness of his conduct upon the tasks of dominion. They are the sign of God's purpose to restore created innocence, but not the substance of it. And we may, not unjustly, wish to excuse Augustine for going no further than this by pleading that his political experience did not extend as far as ours. We have seen slavery abolished — albeit slowly and with difficulty over the course of half a millenium or more — and he had not. His foreshortened historical perspective prevented him from seeing what kinds of revolution are possible in social structures.

Such an excuse, which, however courteously meant, concedes the right to modernity against Augustine, does not get to the root of the opposition between his expectations of politics and ours — which are based, to one degree or another, on an optimistic view of history and a belief in social malleability which derives from the revolutionary traditions of the Enlightenment. For the truth is, not that Augustine had no sense of historical development, but that he had a strong sense of it, and found it inherently ambiguous. The history of the earthly city, for Augustine, is the history of the growth of empire. There is an important chapter in Book XVIII (ch. 2) where he claims that the earthly city has taken form in "a great number of empires", of which two have emerged as the central

22. "Quo donec veniatur, magis debent patres quod dominantur, quam servi tolerare quod serviunt." Again G. Combès has understood the idiomatic deferred infinitive: "les pères doivent avoir plus de patience à supporter de commander que les esclaves de servir" (p. 125).

empires of world-history, Assyria (in which he includes the subsequent Mesopotamian empires) and Rome. "All other kingdoms and kings I should describe as something like appendages of those empires." To write the history of the earthly city is to write of a destiny of world-government given to Rome. "It was God's design to conquer the world through her, to unite the world into a single community of Roman commonwealth and Roman laws, and so impose peace throughout its length and breadth" (XVIII.22). But this, we say, is nothing other than the Vergilian ideology of Roman empire! Quite — but with one significant difference, which turns it into a kind of photographic negative of Vergil, in which white is black and black is white. Guided by the prophets of Israel and the seer of the Apocalypse, Augustine sees this design of God as one which is fulfilled by the growth of Rome's overweening love of glory. God's purpose is achieved by his allowing evil to wax great. Within the first lines of the *City of God* he finds an opportunity to quote the famous tag of Aeneid VI, *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*, and to comment: "This is God's prerogative; but man's arrogant spirit in his swelling pride has claimed it as his own and delights to hear this verse quoted in his own praise" (I. *pro.*).[23]

World-history, then, has a shape, and the evolution of a pacified and civilised world-government is the key to it. Augustine is to this extent a historicist: there are no general questions of political theory left unaccounted for when he was given us his account of the growth of Rome.[24] But this history turns out to be a demonic history, which expresses the divine purpose only as providence, following its own hidden course, uses it to higher ends.[25] Augustine's problem, then, is not to conceive of progress within the political realm, but to distance himself from it, to retain the perspective that God brings the pretensions of the proud to nought. What appears to be civilisational progress is, in fact, on the moral and spiritual level, self-defeating. Let me conclude this lecture by illustrating how he shows this from the most haunting chapters of Book XIX, Chapters 5-9.

The purpose of these chapters is to introduce the claim that the final good is social, by elaborating in social terms the argument

23. Augustine's love of Vergil has influenced much of the *City of God*, despite the severity which his polemic required of him. Vergil's great virtue, in Augustine's eyes, was that he could not suppress a "shudder of compassion" at the brutal deeds which made the empire great (III.16).
24. Against Barrow, *op. cit.* p. 249.
25. Cf. IV. 33: "ipse dat regna terrena et bonis et malis . . . pro rerum ordine ac temporum occulto nobis, notissimo sibi"; V.1: "divina providentia regna constituuntur humana".

advanced in Chapter 4, that the final good cannot be realised in this life. He reviews four spheres of society: the household, the city, the world and the universe. (That division, which I have not been able to trace, he attributes rather unspecifically to "philosophers".) He shows in each case that distress is inseparable from our experience of them, so that none of them can represent the end of human action. The household comes first (ch. 5), and since no one thinks that domesticity is the goal of all human endeavour, Augustine can begin lightheartedly with two characteristically cynical quotations from Terence about marriage and love. But he makes a serious point, on which he will build: "We experience [domestic] peace as an insecure good, because we do not know the hearts of those with whom we wish to establish peace." Far from lighthearted is the electrifying sixth chapter, about which enough could be said to fill a second lecture. It looks at the ills of the city from the point of view of the dilemmas of a judge. This choice of theme is itself striking, because far from obvious; yet it is marvellously characteristic of Augustine to see the life of the city as revolving around its judicial tasks (the hallmark of Roman imperial civilisation) and to conceive those tasks as virtually impossible for mortal men to discharge: "Those who pronounce judgment cannot see into the consciences of those upon whom they pronounce it." The judge's well-meaning ignorance is a calamity for the innocent accused, who may be tortured in order to secure valid evidence for the defence, only to die under the torture as though he had been condemned. We will miss the point of this if we content ourselves with observations on the barbarous laws of evidence which prevailed in the late empire. Augustine himself shows no sign of sharing the modern historian's view that Roman judicial process became more brutal as the empire grew old. For him it is a universal problem about all judicial process everywhere: it is a guess as to which party is lying and which telling the truth, and any inquisitorial process adopted to reduce the element of hazard may simply defeat its own ends. Yet not for that reason do we refuse to lend our best efforts to the judicial process, though we do so with a grim sense of our limitations and a prayer for deliverance on our lips.[26]

After the city comes the world (ch. 7), which gives Augustine the occasion to speak directly about empire. Differences of language between peoples create an infinity of misunderstandings, he remarks, and then envisages a reply which can be advanced

26. Although Augustine is still in dialogue with the philosophers here, and asking what the "wise man" will do, he is clearly anticipating the discussion of the relation of the City of God to the earthly peace in chapter 17.

on behalf of civilised world-government.[27] "I shall be told that the imperial city has been at pains to impose on conquered peoples not only her yoke but her language also, as a bond of peace and fellowship, so that there should be no lack of interpreters but even a profusion of them." To which he responds, "It is true: but at what cost in numerous and extensive wars, the vast slaughter of humanity, the spilling of human blood!"[28] The gain of world-civilisation he does not wish to deny; yet he will not permit us to forget how it was achieved. Wars, he continues in a seminal few sentences, are always dreadful, even when they are just; and then adds one last barb, directed at all complacent apologists for empire: "The person who can contemplate without grief of spirit such evils [as those by which the empire came to be] is in far more wretched a condition in that his satisfaction arises solely from his loss of all human sensibility!"

If we have followed Augustine carefully up to this point, we will not have the difficulty that many commentators experience in locating the next chapter (8) in his argument. It is about friendship, a theme which seems curiously to interrupt the sequence of outward-reaching concentric circles from family to universe. But the friendship of which Augustine writes is that which links persons in different continents, that unterritorial friendship which was (for Augustine) the most precious benefit of world-government with its invaluable network of communications, as every reader of his correspondence is aware. But the very possibility of communicaton means that our affections become engaged in ways that leave us most vulnerable to the anxieties which distance evokes. We learn that our friend's land has been overrun by invaders or stricken by famine. We learn that our friend has died. Or, much worse, we learn that our friend has forsaken the faith or has committed some moral offence which threatens death to his very soul — and we learn all this impotently, at the very other end of the world. Surely, anyone today who has lived in one continent and had friends in another knows what Augustine means. The very availability of communications (the telephone and the jet plane) crucifies us more perceptibly on the ineradicable fact of

27. The voice which speaks is apparently Cicero's Laelius from *de re publica*. Cf. 21.2: "Responsum est a parte iustitiae ideo iustum esse, quod talibus hominibus sit utilis servitus." Note the phrase "imperiosa civitas" in both passages.

28. Cf. III. 18: "Iam vero Punicis bellis, cum inter utrumque imperium victoria diu anceps atque incerta penderet populique duo praevalidi impetus in alterutrum fortissimos et opulentissimos agerent, quot minutiora regna contrita sunt! Quae urbes amplae nobilesque deletae, quot adflictae, quot perditae civitates! Quam longe lateque tot regiones terraeque vastatae sunt! . . ." etc.

absence, which infinitely heightens the hiddenness which casts a shadow over even the best and smoothest of our social relations.

Hiddenness: there for Augustine is the nub of the matter. No one, perhaps, until Kierkegaard was so vexed at the difficulties we have in displaying to others our hearts, and of knowing what lies in theirs. It is this — not the pride of original sin, not the dazzle of glory or the iron rod of power, not the lure of sense, and most certainly not the temptations of sex — that casts a shadow over all social relations: we can be deceived in one another. To follow Augustine to the fourth stage, the universe (ch. 9), is to see how this inexorable law applies also in our relations with spirits and demons. Empire, because it unifies us, tempts us to think that this constraint can be overcome; but in gaining ground for us at one point, it loses it at another. I do really think that Augustine preferred to live within the Roman Empire than outside it; yet he could accept none of its pretensions for itself, and therefore he had to conclude that the story of human progress which it represented was illusory. It did not overcome the privacy of the human heart and its resistance to mutual knowledge. A later political philosophy, represented by Kant, would draw the line between private and public spheres of communication, and make it the criterion of the truly political that it was capable of emerging into the daylight of public scrutiny, while the domestic sphere, being essentially private, could be dismissed as an irrelevance to politics.[29] If that is politics, we can imagine Augustine saying, then there never was a political community. For the privacy of our motives vitiate our communications at every conceivable level and form a prison out of which in this world there can be no route of escape. In a wonderful comment on the suicide of the chaste Lucretia (in the first book of Livy) Augustine observes that she sought death because "she was unable to disclose her purity of conscience to the world" (I.19).

I leave you reflecting on these chapters because they are a litmus test of whether you can live with Augustine's political thought. Either you find that they illuminate the constraints of our social existence as nothing else in Western literature can; or, like a Thomist friend of mine, you shake your head in bewilderment and ask "But why was he so gloomy?" If it does not trouble you that you are ignorant of what your children are thinking; that your wife may

29. Immanuel Kant, *On Perpetual Peace* (Prussian Academy ed. viii 381). The distinction between private and public realms belongs to the earliest phase of modern thought. Cf. Althusius, *Politica* ch. 2, who, however, claims the private also for politics. It is to Rousseau (*Discourse on Inequality* note Q) that we owe the doctrine that private morality cannot be the sujbect of public justice.

be sleeping with your best friend; that many inmates of our prisons may quite possibly be innocent of the crimes for which they are being punished; that all stable foreign relations are built upon a capacity to repel sudden and unforeseen attack; or if you think that there are alternative patterns of communal life available to us which are not vulnerable to treachery, stupidity or simple conflicts of viewpoint; then you will find Augustine's sombre rhetoric merely perplexing. But in that case, Augustine would certainly say to you, you are hardly fit to become a citizen of the heavenly city, in which each is transparent to all. *Patebunt etiam cogitationes nostrae invicem nobis* (XXII.29.6).

Christ Church, Oxford