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Augustine's Aspirational Imperfectionism: What Should We Hope for From Politics?

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Looking at the Glass

Is the glass half empty or half full? A person's answer, we are told, can tell us something about her disposition and outlook. But interpreting this answer is not always as simple as it appears. My father explained to me at an early age the irony that answering "half empty" reflects true optimism, since it assumes the normal state of the glass is to be *full*, from which the removal of half is a privation. It's the "half full" folks, he told me, who begin from the bleak starting point of an empty glass.

In conventional terms, political liberals can be optimistic, aiming at improved political orders in which government efforts can help communities enjoy greater justice, equality, freedom, health care, security, prosperity, etc.—seeing the glass as half full. In contrast, conservatives can be wary of state powers to improve things, counseling a "half empty" politics of restraint and limits. As Lord Salisbury (Robert Cecil) is reputed to have said: "Whatever happens will be for the worse, and it is therefore in our interest that as little should happen as possible." In light of my father's wisdom, perhaps we might say that political conservatives are optimistic about the present and pessimistic about the future, whereas political liberals are pessimistic about the present and optimistic about the future.

How are faithful Christians to approach the proximate and imperfect nature of politics? Ought we to be more hopeful or more cautious about what political institutions and power can accomplish? What scope of diverse views about the good should we anticipate in politics? That is, is the relative justice that is possible in politics closer to *true* justice (suggesting a narrower range of plurality), or further removed from it (suggesting a broader range)? The Bible's story of redemption clearly affirms aspects of both the liberal and conservative visions: the present involves both creational goods and fallen distortions, and the future includes a call for humans to act redemptively, but with expectations tempered by the persistent impact of the Fall until Christ returns. Creation is good, Christians are

called to work redemptively to alleviate suffering and injustice, the impact of the Fall is lasting in this ‘time between the times’, and power is always dangerous. How then can we shape our political paths?

St. Augustine, the fourth and fifth century North African bishop whose magisterial *City of God* explores the relation of redemptive history to secular history, can help us start to answer these questions with an outlook I summarize as “aspirational imperfectionism.” This is more a third way than a middle way—a way deeply shaped by enduring tensions that resist collapsing in either direction and which retains key features of pluralism. In a time of political polarization and overstated political promises on all sides, we do well to dwell in such tensions and reflectively explore third ways. While I focus here on applications to politics, Augustine’s vision carries important implications that extend well beyond the political realm.

Learning from Augustine’s Politics

Modern readers of Augustine often see his political vision in fundamentally pessimistic terms. Reinhold Niebuhr’s political realism drew heavily from Augustine’s thought (see his essay “[Augustine’s Political Realism](#),” for example). Indeed, Edward Portis goes so far as to title a chapter on Augustine “[...\[T\]he Politics of Sin](#).” In one sense, these rather gloomy readings are accurate. It is true that Augustine takes sin very seriously and accounts for this in his politics. But this is far from the end of the story, and it certainly isn’t the beginning for Augustine. Part of what sets Augustine apart from the Platonists with whom he is sometimes associated is his embrace of the goodness of creation – particularly the goodness of human embodiment and affections – not to mention his belief in a deeply hopeful eschatological future. The way in which he relates creational goodness, fallen reality, and Christ’s redemption provides an instructive template for cultural engagement that transcends the dichotomies of standard categories.

In one sense it is Augustine the *pessimist* that is most helpful for grounding aspects of political freedom and plurality, especially as regards religion. His theology of two cities anticipates the basic insight of confessional pluralism in the Kuyperian tradition. The City of God, composed of those who love God, stands in marked contrast to the terrestrial city, composed of those who love themselves. Augustine has no expectation that politics can overcome the gap between the two, as they have divergent final ends. Instead, Augustine casts politics as brokering a limited peace between the two cities. It is the irreducible division between the two cities that leads Augustine to reject the more perfectionist account of the political commonwealth offered by Cicero, the influential ancient Roman statesman and philosopher. Cicero focused on a “shared sense of right” defining a people, but Augustine insists that divergent *teloi* of the two cities render this impossible: *true* right requires true justice, which must include rendering to God his due (*City of God* XIX: 21), and that is not what citizens of the earthly city (those who are defined by self-love) aim to do. Thus, as long as political society is composed of two cities with its citizens pulling in two opposing directions, political justice and the goods of earthly peace must always be proximate rather than final. This theological insight lays the groundwork for religious liberty and for aspects of the more general liberty that flows from confessional pluralism.

Nevertheless, Augustine’s vision for politics remains deeply *aspirational* and hopeful. That is, his account of political justice is not solely defined by its limits (the antithesis between the two cities, imperfection, eschatological waiting, a plurality of ultimate loves, etc.). Instead, Augustine offers a substantive account of political goods, including justice, which Christians should pursue. Echoing

Jeremiah 29, Augustine exhorts Christians, like Israel in its Babylonian captivity, to *seek* and *defend* the earthly peace that politics provides. What exactly is this earthly peace? Augustine describes it in terms of temporal goods: “the peace that consists in bodily health and soundness, and in fellowship with one’s kind; and everything necessary to safeguard or recover this peace—those things, for example, which are appropriate and accessible to our senses: light, speech, air to breathe, water to drink, and whatever is suitable for the adornment of the person,” (*City of God* XIX:13). Augustine’s aspirations for politics reflect a fundamental affirmation of creation’s goodness and does so by an understanding that human well-being is made possible by the right ordering of these goods.

Earthly peace is grounded on the objective goodness of the created order, including material goods, shareable truths that are accessible to human knowledge, and a common moral order. Augustine is confident that all humans, no matter which of the two cities they belong to, can aspire to know more about reality, to act increasingly in accord with the virtues, and to profitably engage with the goodness of material creation. His aspirations for politics reflect these shared dimensions of the created order and are largely consistent with later Christian emphases on the “common good.” In Kuyperian terms, the goods of politics are goods of common grace—objective creational goods that obtain for *all* members of a political community. Contrary to his more pessimistic interpreters, Augustine offers a hopeful vision of politics as striving for greater justice and for improvements in the conditions of human flourishing. Put differently, Augustine does not cede unlimited scope to the antithesis of the two cities; both cities continue to operate in the context of a shared material, moral, and epistemic order—such that Christians can and should seek improvements in the earthly peace that consists of these goods. Significantly, such aspirations serve to constrain *moral* pluralism, since greater justice means placing limits on injustice. That is, Augustine’s eschatological commitment to confessional pluralism (the uncollapsible distinction between the two cities) does not translate into an absolute moral pluralism. Political justice can and should be pursued and improved as part of the common goods of earthly peace.

Of course, these aspirations for greater justice—of increasingly rendering to each what is due—are tempered by the divergent loves that define the two cities that comprise political communities. But Augustine is adamant that the creational goods of which earthly peace consists cannot be obliterated. Indeed, Augustine is confident that political communities—what he calls “commonwealths”—can be better or worse. When a people’s “shared objects of love” are better, the commonwealth is a better one. When shared objects of love are worse, the commonwealth suffers (*City of God*, XIX: 21). Thus, the range of moral plurality in a commonwealth will vary according to the people in it: a strikingly democratic construction. Augustine exhorts Christians to seek earthly peace in politics with an expectation that improvement is possible in terms of real, objective goods—both material and moral. Societal unity can be increased, basic human needs can be better met, and wars and coercion can be reduced. Augustine’s vision for politics is a far cry from only restraining sin and making life bearable while waiting for eternal life. Rather, Augustine’s politics aim at greater earthly peace: the common creational goods that make human well-being possible.

It is here, amidst the proximate goods of politics, where we can locate Augustine’s well-known account of coercion. Sin makes coercion necessary for human communities to live in peace, but the justice of such coercion is always imperfect. Even a just judge cannot know guilt with certainty; he is always running the risk of *violating* justice amidst his efforts to *do* justice. Augustine maintains that the wise ruler will still do his duty and rule but insists that he cannot be truly happy, given the miseries associated with finitude and sin (*City of God*, XIX: 6). In short, the eschatological tension of

one's location in redemptive history tempers what one can expect of political goods. Sin must be restrained, but it cannot be eradicated; all of our efforts to restrain it are also marred by sin. Political justice can be pursued, but it will remain imperfect. Even "good" commonwealths will never, inside of time, have a fully shared sense of right in terms of theological justice. Thus, while fundamentally aspirational, Augustine's politics reflects the "not yet" of the eschatological moment. Overpromising political visions—of both fulfillment and restraint—cannot help but participate in pagan idolatries as opposed to a clear-eyed Christian hope.

Applied and Expanded

So, what does Augustine's aspirational imperfectionism look like in practice? That is, how can one pursue real creational goods in the context of proximate plurality, the durable but bounded antithesis of the present? My experience years ago as a distance runner at my university gives an example. Even though I knew I would never be a particularly good runner, I nevertheless trained hard. I aspired to improve in terms of real, objective criteria (faster times), despite a knowledge that my best efforts wouldn't take me terribly far as a college athlete. I had to plan and execute in light of attainable goals: I couldn't run the first mile of a five-mile race at a record-breaking pace, or I'd never finish. But I still ran. And I improved.

Like my experience as a runner, an aspirational imperfectionism in politics—along the lines of what Augustine suggests—respects confessional pluralism but seeks real improvement in terms of earthly peace, albeit with tempered expectations. That is, it seeks to foster communities of growing justice and peace where human dignity is increasingly honored, needs are met, and the integrity of societal institutions respected—without presuming that perfection (or perfect agreement) can be attained or that teleological orientation can be shared. What undergirds this sort of approach? While I'm sure this list could be expanded, I suspect *humility* (a prominent virtue for Augustine) about our knowledge, goodness, and abilities is key. Likewise, *prudence*—and with it a commitment to incremental change, accountable power, a suspicion of perfectionism, and compromise (an oft-neglected feature of Augustine's political thought that fundamentally respects a plurality of views)—seems vital. Moreover, a certain *detachment* from outcomes (implicit in ethical commitments that take means seriously) is essential. That is, we have to trust God will accomplish his purposes in history rather than succumb to the temptations of what Augustine called the *libido dominandi*—the lust for power—in which we try to take control and exercise god-like power over other humans and historical events. To the point, the throne has a King, and it is not us.

Humility, prudence, and detachment are all well and good, but there must be something toward which one aspires. These qualifiers require a *telos*. Thus, despite the discomforts of making such claims in increasingly relativistic contexts, *conviction* about goods (both material and moral) and a *commitment* to seeking those goods for others are indispensable to the "aspirational" side of the equation. For example, this approach would counsel a relentless pursuit of justice in regard to human dignity, whether injustices are broadly recognized (as with racism or human trafficking) or not (as with abortion). Rooted in a creational theology and motivated by a redemptive vision, "earthly peace" must have content in terms of real goods, both material and moral—content that helps to secure the conditions in which human flourishing is possible.

Of course, these concepts have broader applications than politics. Aspirational imperfectionism is why, as a father helping my child with schoolwork, I may accept the long-embattled essay as "good

enough” rather than forcing my relationally weary son to do it again, even though I know he is capable of better. There’s a real standard that we’re chasing, but more than one good is at stake. Forcing the issue may do more harm than good; there’s always next time. It is why my wife, whose graduate training includes biblical counseling, often reminds me that a Christian should never be shocked by sin, even when grave. Grieved? Yes, but never shocked. This refusal proceeds from an honest assessment of the time in which we live—the time between the times—and the realities that shape it. Thus, neither the confessional pluralism produced by the existence of two cities with divergent loves (which does not lie with us to solve) nor some degree of moral pluralism (partially divergent visions of the good life which we can seek to improve but not finally resolve) should surprise us. This perspective offers no concession to sin; no acceptance of its place in human behavior. The grief is real and is fully compatible with an earnest striving after holiness. But it is also compatible with prudent safeguards against any anticipated recurrence. Many related applications might be fruitfully explored.

In short, Augustine points us to political faithfulness in light of the full scope of redemptive history. Our hopes for politics include pursuing real goods (could love of neighbor counsel anything less?), but with the recognition that these goods remain tempered, limited, and proximate inside of time. We might describe this as the drive of liberals and the expectations of conservatives (or something like this). For Augustine, it is captured by the image of the pilgrim or sojourner who invests deeply in his current context, but without mistaking it for home.

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