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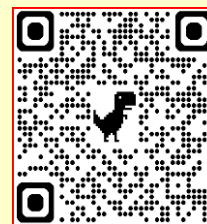
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Conflict and Conflicting Justice in Augustine's *City of God*

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ABSTRACT

Augustine's City of God offers political insights far beyond its common portrayals as a defense of Christianity against pagan accusations or a response to the Roman Empire's crisis. The paper discusses Augustine's political concept of justice through the lenses of conflict, slavery and domination as presented in the City of God. It reveals a world perpetually shaped by conflict by providing an understanding of slavery in its historical context of its times. It further explores humanity's unending quest to understand 'justice'. The paper highlights the interconnectedness of the said themes within Augustine's dualistic vision of the earthly city and the City of God. It argues that pervasive conflict is rooted in the human pursuit of domination and manifesting through the institution of slavery. This symbolises the inherent flaw in earthly conceptions of justice. The earthly conception of justice is in conflict with true 'justice'. Conflict is an inevitable aspect of the human condition. True 'justice', for Augustine, is only attainable when human wills align themselves towards God.

KEY WORDS: Conflict, Justice, Slavery, Augustine,

1. Introduction

Augustine's *City of God* is usually portrayed as a defense of Christianity against pagan accusations (Marrou, 1957) (Gilson, 1960) or as a response to the crisis of the Roman Empire (Markus, 1970; O'Meara, 1972). Such portrayals are not completely untrue. However, there are other political thoughts that are worth investigating that Augustine presents in his work. The *City of God* investigates and discusses the fabric of human existence on earth, and shows that the world is perpetually shaped by conflict. It also provides an insight to the complex reality of slavery for its times, and human beings' never-ending pursuit of understanding justice. This paper follows the discussion of the themes of conflict, slavery and domination, and the idea of justice in Augustine's *City of God*. It shows their interconnectedness within his dualistic vision of the earthly city and the *City of God*, which reveals the human condition. The discussion shows that conflict is inevitable in the human

condition, and it symbolises the flaw in the earthly conception of justice.

2. Human Condition in the City of God

Augustine projected man to be a creation out of nothing by God. God created everything out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) but out of all of God's creation man is unique. Man is only a single creation. He is unique because God created man in his image and likeness. Unlike other living creatures, God does not create human in pairs. However, man being alone was not pleasing to God's sight. "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper suitable for him'" (Sadler, Genesis 2:18). Woman gets created out of man's body and so is the rest of human kind. Although God did not create man in large numbers like He did with other beings and things, he instilled in man the gregarious instinct according to Augustine:

“For there is nothing more contentious by virtue of its fault than the human race, but also nothing more social by virtue of its nature. Nor is there anything more appropriate for human nature to do to counter the vice of contentiousness, whether to keep it from arising in the first place or to heal it after it has arisen, than to recall our parent. For God chose to create him as one for the propagation of a multitude precisely for the purpose of admonishing us that we should maintain unity and concord even when we are many.” (Augustine, 2017, 66)

God created man as a social animal. But He entailed within man's nature a flaw which Augustine called the vice of contentiousness. Disagreements and litigations become inherent in man's nature. There is nothing so social by nature, so unsocial by its corruption, as the human race. God purposely created man as one so that man should learn the importance of living in unity and harmony with one another as and when they multiply and continue to multiply. There is a perpetual conflict between virtues and vices internally in human nature. This is especially true of the virtue which the Greeks called *sophrosyne* and the Latins called temperance, which reins in the desires of the flesh to keep them from gaining the consent of the mind and drawing it into every sort of degrading act (Augustine, 2017, 273). The passages from the Bible “the flesh lusted against the spirit” and “the spirit lusted against the flesh” (Gal 5:17) as we can see are the representation the conflicting nature of human condition, so that human beings are unable to do anything we will to do. At the same time Augustine maintains the relevance of God in human nature. God is the only way out for man for avoiding or defeating the vices present within himself. Man has to turn to God for him to be able to be happy and achieve anything good. In man's nature a duality of viciousness and virtue is apparent – being social and unsocial at the same time. Human nature is a site of constant conflict.

From the dual conflicting nature of man two societies, like two cities in the human race are tacitly reflected in the first man, according to Augustine – the basis for the human condition becomes the basis for societies too. Augustine stated thus “...let us merely say that in this first man, who was created in the beginning, there was laid the foundation, not indeed evidently, but in God's foreknowledge, of these two cities or societies, so far as regards the human race” (Augustine, 2017). The two cities are the earthly city and the city of God. Human beings exist in two realms – two cities - at the same time.

3. The Household and the City as a Site of Conflict

Human being is a social animal. The household is the basic unit of society. Augustine presents the household to be a site of conflict. “A man's foes are those of his own household.” This was the saying that underlie Augustine's picture of the household. There is enmity pervading at the level of the household. Marriage is a misery because it only increases your cares and fears. And out of wedlock sprang forth children which became an extra worry. However, Augustine does not condemn the act of marriage. He lauded it, stating, “And the fact that woman was made from his own side also signifies just how precious the union between the husband and wife should be” (Augustine, 2017, 66). At the same time, Augustine is weary of human relationships like love, friendship, and family relations. He holds that human relationships are not dependable, and should not be relied upon. Yet with knowledge, human beings tend to bank on such relationships and got cheated. After this, they

became all the more miserable. Augustine painted a totally inverse picture of human life compared to the Greeks philosophers before him. He despised the philosophers attempt to find permanent happiness and content in life. Human life rather is filled up with tribulations and trials. There is nothing certain in this world, let alone permanent. One cannot seek peace and rest in the world of trials and tribulations. Peace is doubtful because we cannot know the heart of a friend. Yet, even as we can know it, there is no certainty that what we know today will be the same tomorrow.

The city is a bigger place of conflict than the household. If the household represents the facet of trials and tribulations then the city with its many lawsuits and criminals represents a magnified version of the turbulence faced at the household. It is never free of the fear of outbreak of sedition, civil war and bloodshed (Augustine, 2017, 277). On top of all these, the world at large is seen as a place of futile existence by Augustine. The different languages that exist in the world are but barriers for us to communicate with one another. The similarity in our nature is of little use when we cannot communicate. And to group together men who cannot communicate, what can be a more futile act than that? Augustine is referring to people who attempted to bring the world under one group or dominion. It is but a futile attempt because it comes with a price; it involves war and the loss of life (Augustine, 2017, 277).

We can see that Augustine presented the human condition in a dark and dreary fashion. He portrays it as such because he wants to show that all of human endeavour to achieve something worthwhile in life is all but a futile act. It is obvious to point out that Rome was the object of Augustine's reference. But Augustine does more, he bemocks the world at large and its futile state of existence. This is to say that civil life is a life of futility for the bishop of Hippo. Augustine can be seen as advocating or showing in different light about a pessimistic end inherent in human nature. He sees the household as a place of conflict, the earthly city as a bigger space for trials and tribulations and the world as an even bigger place of nothing but misery. He states, “But, if it takes the human condition and its entire vicissitudes into account and is more distressed by the adversities that may occur than elated by its present prosperity, then its victory at best is short lived” (Augustine, 2017, 142). The three circles of civil existence are the household, the city and the world. They belong to the earthly city. Anything related to earthly human life or the earthly city is fleeting. The concept of justice, of right, of equality, of anything which is elements of the civil life cannot be fully realized in the earthly realm.

But, just because the earthly civil life is futile and not worthwhile should men rebel against them? Rebellion is outside the purview of the Augustine conception of civil society. For Augustine, the state is a necessary repressive instrument of order (Deane, 1963). He accepts the existence of the state as a necessary instrument to maintain mortal life on earth. There must be no qualm to obey the laws of the earthly city, whereby the things necessary for the maintenance of this mortal life are administered (Augustine, 2017, 293). It preserves and follows them as long as these instruments of the earthly city do not thwart the activity of the religion that lay down for them the means to worship the one true God. Man must not rebel but is rather compelled to obliged to the laws of the civil state of affairs.

Augustine speaks of a natural order of things in which God's creations are arranged. According to such order man is allowed dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creeping thing that creeps on earth (Genesis 1:26). In other words, God did not allow man to dominate over his fellow rational

creatures. He only allowed man to dominate over irrational creatures or creatures of lesser rationality than man – animals (Augustine, 2017). As such slavery is not something natural in the order of things according to God's plan. Slavery is not by birth as Aristotle claimed it to be so. However, Augustine admits the reality of slavery. Slavery is due to the frailties of human nature. He asserts that slavery is the punishment for a sinning man. This was justified in the instance of Noah and his son Ham, the former curse the latter with the position of slavery (Deuteronomy 9:3-1 "...Ham will become a slave in the household of his brothers"). Although, Augustine was sympathetic to the plight of slaves, he did not condemn the possession of them as sinful, and he counseled slaves simply to endure this hardship (CHAMBERS, 2010, 17). In one instance we can also find that masters should treat their slaves well and urges slaves to embrace their lot (CHAMBERS, 2010, 19).

Slavery and domination seem to have been used interchangeably by Augustine. On the one hand we see Augustine advocating man to only dominate over other lesser rational creatures and not over other men. On the other hand, we see slavery as a kind of domination by the masters over slaves – man dominating over other man. If one man can dominate another then this implies that all men are not rationally equal to one another? This in fact is against the natural order of things. Katherine Chambers is of the view that slavery and domination in Augustine has a two-fold character. She separates the idea of slavery and domination in Augustine at the level of the domestic and political sphere. The origin of the Latin word for slave is supposed to be found in the circumstance that those who by the law of war were liable to be killed were sometimes preserved by their victors, and were hence called servants (Augustine, 2017). This can give us the understanding for slavery as a kind of just domination. It implies servitude and the existence of a man under the mercy of another man. Another explanation for slavery as a kind of just domination, mentioned before, was due to man's fault in sinning. Chambers asserts that Augustine shared the same view with neo-Roman political theorists when it comes to the meaning of domination and servitude – to exist in a state of dependence on the will of another. She further claimed that Augustine concurred with them that such a state of dependence was injustice (CHAMBERS, 2010, 15). Augustine however averted the dilemma of defending unjust political relations by giving a new definition of what it meant to be 'enslaved' and dominated within the political realm.

In the domestic sphere, Augustine uses the term 'domination' as the state of dependence on another's will. This clearly applies to women's servitude and men's domestic slavery. Here, we can see that slavery imply an arbitrary power of a man over another (Augustine, 2017, 19). In the political sphere, Augustine uses 'domination' in the context of the relation between the political rulers and their subjects. In Book 5, chapter 19, Augustine stated the difference between the tyrant and the king in terms of domination; both of them 'dominated' but the tyrant lusted with domination which is sinful while the king only long for glory. Chambers, however, claims that the kind of domination exercised by the king in Augustinian conception in the political sphere is not tantamount to a discretionary power. This implies that placing one man in dependence of another is unjust. The only way to justify the existence of the state of dependence on another is to posit that inequality in reason naturally existed: hence, domination as state of dependence on another man can justly exist only in the domestic sphere between women and men, and between children and parents (CHAMBERS, 2010, 25).

4. Justice, love of God and Peace

The term 'just' has often been used, and it demands an explication as well. Just above, we saw that unequal relations – in the form of domination - between men in the political sphere as unjust. This would imply that a just relation would mean the equal relation of men in the political sphere. It is intriguing to note that Augustine, who only painted and weaved gloomy pictures of the civil world, cares to navigate along the lines of the concept 'just'. Or could this point towards the fact that Augustine has altogether a different understanding of the words 'just' and 'justice'? In book XIX, chapter 21, Augustine stated that a republic cannot be maintained without justice. This was in response to Scipio who defined the republic as the common good of the people. Augustine maintains that a people is a multitude joined together by common sense of right and a community of interest. So, wherever there is no right, there is no justice and wherever there is no justice, there is no republic. More importantly, Augustine maintains that justice is that virtue which gives everyone their due. For Augustine, justice begins from within. For the public order of just transactions to be possible within man, there must first of all be just men. Augustine tells us that the man 'with God in his thoughts' is the man becoming just (Clark, 1963, 87-88). This hints to us the relevance of a personal order – an attitude of subjection to God – modeled upon an order which exist between the soul and the body. Only when there is order, can a man act justly (Augustine, 2017, 298).

Augustine's idea of justice is tied up with love of God. Justice demands the obligation to love God. Loving God, however, does not erase the room for love of oneself. When you love others you should draw out the good in them. This is why Augustine says "you cannot be said to love your neighbor as yourself if you cannot draw him to the good you are pursuing" (Clark, 1963, 88). By rooting the idea of justice in the love between God and men, Augustine unites all men into the society. A just society is the society form with God as the common object of love. For when men are rightly related they enjoy personal harmony and social peace (Clark, 1963, 99). Clark argues that such a conception of society based on common love does not hinder the need for the existence of different political states. But it can create the space for what is called brotherly love between one state to another (Clark, 1963, 89). One contribution of Augustine to the understanding of justice, according to Clark, is justice as the respect for the rights of God. For where respect for the rights of God does not exist, justice does not prevail. And where no justice prevails, there can be no commonwealth (Clark, 1963, 91). In all, love is inevitable for the realisation of justice for Augustine.

To attain temporal peace order is needed. But there can be no order without justice. Therefore, justice is pertinent even for attaining temporal peace on the earthly realm. However, the final good which is human happiness (ultimate peace) can only be attained in the city of God – the eternal realm and it is foolish as well as folly to look for eternal happiness in this earthly life. Augustine makes a distinction between ultimate good and ultimate evil – eternal life and eternal death. The key to attaining ultimate good is through right living.

There is however, a condition as to why right living cannot be attained in this earthly life. This earthly life is characterized by uncertainties and tribulations. Amidst all these uncertainties and tribulations all we have to do is put our faith in God. Right living can only be attained through faith – all we have to do is believe in God and not rely on our own understanding. Proper functions of the Stoics would not lead us to anything better for our human condition, for Augustine. Peace is at the center of the good life. However, even

this peace is under the mercy of uncertainty and unpredictability of the earthly life (Augustine, 2017, 359). Trying to achieve peace on earth comes with a heavy price; men have to wage war to achieve peace. Temporal peace on earth is possible by living a good life but this happiness is found to be sheer misery when compared to the ultimate happiness (peace) to be gained in the City of God.

5. Conclusion

Augustine's *City of God* has a lot more political insights to offer than a simple apologetic response of the crisis of the Roman Empire or the defense of the Christian faith. It offers an understanding of the human condition for its time through the lens of conflict, slavery and domination, and justice. There is perpetual conflict within the human being and her immediate relations that plays out at the level of the city and the world. This conflict is linked to the human pursuit of domination which finds its most dehumanising expression in the institution of slavery. For Augustine, all these conflicting earthly realities are not anomalies, but direct symptoms of a fundamental flaw in human nature, that has roots stemming from a misdirected love of self rather than God. The existence of conflict and the reality of slavery points to the earthly city's inherent inability to attain true 'justice'. True 'justice' and lasting peace is only possible when human wills orient themselves towards God.

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