

**Nothing New Under the Sun: Augustine and Cicero's Visions of How Human Nature
Relates to Justice, Virtue, Biblical Wisdom, and the State**

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Social issues today stand at the forefront of civil discourse, global injustice abounds, and the average citizen seems to be more invested in molding a better future than ever before. In the 2020 presidential election, nearly two-thirds of America voted, a percentage that has not been reached since 1900.¹ In recent years, social media has become a primary avenue for rallying support and spreading ideas that range from domestic policy to new notions of justice. Yet, where passionate debate has erupted, levels of polarization and division have risen as well. Where one finds genuine concern for the state of American culture and its current trajectory, one must also wade through a plethora of proposed solutions and grapple with the gridlock that comes with navigating between them. There is a better way forward than this cultural moment's trek towards a new, vague semblance of justice that struggles to unite a nation divided on what its foundational values ought to be.²

When it comes to ascertaining the depravity of human nature, the fallibility of human reason, and what true justice actually entails, much clarity can be gained by studying ancient political ideas. History often unfolds in patterns and as the writer of Ecclesiastes 1:9 puts it, "there is nothing new under the sun." And so, despite today's cultural bent towards a progress that is gained by shaking off the past, the writings of philosophers Augustine and Cicero lend beneficial guidance to statesmen and attentive citizens today. Per Augustine's understanding of history, there is persistent warfare between the city of man and the city of God. He characterizes these on both an individual and state level, describing them as the ongoing tension between a love of self and a love of God—which ties the issue back to human nature. In a similar vein, Cicero wrote that man must align his reason with natural law because of his innate fallibility, and that citizens should strive to act virtuously—even if he did not advocate for a particular religious conviction to drive that virtue. Nevertheless, Cicero believed that "above all, the search after truth and its eager pursuit are peculiar to man," believing that the desire to rightly reason is miraculously unique to humans.³ Thus, within pages of aged writings one can find ancient truths that spring from biblical principles. Augustine and Cicero both elucidate on proper governance, justice, and the state within their writings, helping to define the terms for later generations and emphasize the importance of virtue within the private sphere that then flows into the public sphere.

In his work, *The City of God*, Augustine details what he calls the city of man, a term used to describe any place where man has disordered priorities that result in his eventual decline—a concept that Cicero had previously written upon. Foundationally, Augustine believed that "none is pure from sin...not even an infant of one day upon the earth."⁴ That idea of original sin, rather than the Enlightenment belied in man's inherent goodness and perfectibility, caused him to view every society skeptically, regardless of its material achievement. For example, in many sections of *The City of God* Augustine criticizes Rome for being a prideful city that lost sight of virtue due to its elevation of independence and dominion over servitude. Augustine does not champion their high view of self, but rather sees it as a handicap that tainted their own perception of themselves.

¹ Drew DeSilver. "Turnout Soared in 2020 as Nearly Two-Thirds of Eligible U.S. Voters Cast Ballots for President," *Fact Tank*, (Pew Research Center, January 28, 2021), Accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/28/turnout-soared-in-2020-as-nearly-two-thirds-of-eligible-u-s-voters-cast-ballots-for-president/>.

² Pew Research Center, "In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions," *U.S. Politics & Policy* (Pew Research Center, December 17, 2019), accessed February 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/in-a-politically-polarized-era-sharp-divides-in-both-partisan-coalitions>.

³ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis* (Bamberg, Germany: Bayer. Verl-Anst., 1984), 1.13.

⁴ Aurelius Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1955), 6.11.

With pride as their downfall, Rome serves as an example of a city in which man's priorities terminally stayed in a state of disorder—with a love of self replacing a love of God and thus hindering a love of others. Since Augustine believed that love and justice are inextricably linked, the city of man is additionally marked by the fact that it is “devoid of true justice” because its self-orientation violates man's intended relational, restorative nature.⁵ Cicero's writings contain the same general principles as well. He believed that societies rise and fall according to man's action and virtue or lack thereof, asserting that wealth and power can be destructive and thus must be deemphasized in favor of virtue to ensure social stability. Cicero does not go so far as to tie virtue to true justice and a love for God, like Augustine, but he does believe in the power of right action to help stabilize the state.

Both men go beyond a recognition of the value of general virtue to focus in on how justice is distorted in societies where man's self-interest is left unchecked. Going beyond the scope of the individual, Augustine was convinced of man's depravity and vehemently believed that justice is central to government's purpose. He writes that “justice being taken away...what are kingdoms but great robberies?”⁶ In other words, if the state is not ensuring proper justice, its existence is illegitimate. In other places, Augustine describes justice as the unifying cornerstone of civil society because it allows for each to get their due.⁷ He begins with what man owes God—total devotion—and then moves to the idea that man should receive what he is owed as well, within the confines of an orderly justice system.⁸ Ideally, Augustine writes that this ancient view of justice should be coupled with the Romans 13:8 ideal in which each person gets to a point where only love is owed and only love is given. But in light of society's inability to properly esteem God, Augustine espouses the role of government in helping order man's actions and establish a system of temporal justice—even if it is fallible.

Likewise, Cicero theorized that justice needs a stronger foundation than human reason, asserting that it ought to be traced back to natural law—a law that Augustine thought to be established by God.⁹ Cicero held that if human opinion disagrees with natural law, humanity is in error because “true law is right reason in agreement with nature,” suggesting that he believed in a transcendent moral code that human reason must align with, rather than correct or replace in an attempt to solve modern problems.¹⁰ To Cicero, human society's ultimate goal is true justice. He writes that “we are born for it” and can feasibly achieve it based on our unique ability to reason.¹¹ In Cicero's high view of justice, he concludes that individuals should avoid unnecessary violence, be true to their word, honor property, and be charitable when it is within one's means—this is an extreme distillation of his writings, but each component can be applied to today's cultural moment in an attempt to align human reason with natural law. In this way, Cicero believed that the corrupt city of man, to use Augustine's term, could effectively be elevated by loving one's neighbor through a channel of justice, both privately and publicly, in a way that spills out into societal structure, success, and stability.¹² Now, Augustine would disagree that justice and reason are ends in and of

⁵ Aurelius Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. Marcus Dodds (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), 19.24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.4.

⁷ Ernest Fortin, “St. Augustine,” in *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd ed., eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 181.

⁸ Augustine, *The City of God*, 19.4.

⁹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Re Publica* (Bamberg, Germany: Bayer. Verl-Anst., 1962): 3.22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.33.

¹¹ Marcus Tullius Cicero and Rainer Nickel, *De Legibus* (Darmstadt, Germany: Wiss. Buchges., 2002): 1.28.

¹² Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.62-63.

themselves, because he saw them as ways in which man can—and therefore must—obey God. Augustine’s is a theological approach: that true justice must begin with a love of God that is expressed by a love for others, and virtue in any context ought to serve that higher purpose. Cicero, however, is content with a virtuous society that exists for the sake of each individual’s wellbeing.

Both men do agree that, left unchecked by virtue, society will spiral into a toxic love of self that tries to attain peace through an exorbitant enjoyment of temporal, earthly pleasures. This would be a sidestepping of true justice in favor of comfort and harmony. Biblical wisdom acknowledges this tendency for excess and encourages every individual to embody moderation in verses like 1 Corinthians 6:12, which says “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything.” Paul’s instruction here is given in a spirit of prudence rather than one of legalism, but it is given nonetheless—and both Cicero and Augustine advocate for this principle of moderation in condemning the city of man’s society which prioritizes pleasure above all else. They are fixed by the conviction that there is something better that unifies rather than tears apart: true justice coupled with love.

Turning to the city of God, the eternal ideal in which God sits in his proper place as highest in society, Augustine writes that while man can strive to perfect his own notion of justice, “true justice has no existence save in that republic whose founder and ruler is Christ,” and so apart from a citizenry wholly devoted to Christ, man’s solutions fall short.¹³ This principle applies to the other core virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, mercy, and temperance as well, which the righteous man leverages in his pursuit of peace. But again, that pursuit is fruitless apart from Christ due to man’s sin nature and bond to self-interest.¹⁴ Thus, according to both Cicero and Augustine, society’s success cannot be found in dominance and independence like the ancient Romans thought, or in having philosopher-kings as rulers, like the ancient Greeks thought. Rather, to be successful on earth as a member of society is to love God and other people through one’s actions, to be richly rooted in biblical principles and devotion to Christ—the one in whom “we live and move and have our being” as it says in Acts 17:28. The recognition and embrace of this allows man to order his own desires as originally intended, subordinate to God and his natural law.¹⁵ Man does not love and embody goodness or justice by default, as history has proven, but to try to is to love God, one’s neighbor, and one’s nation well. As Augustine writes,

It follows that justice is found where God...rules an obedient City according to this grace, forbidding sacrifice to any being save himself alone; and where in consequence the soul rules the body in all men who belong to this City and obey God, and reason faithfully rules the vices in a lawful system of subordination; so that just as the individual righteous man lives on the basis of faith which is active in love, so the association, or people, of righteous men lives on the same basis of faith, active in love, the love with which a man loves God as God ought to be loved, and loves his neighbour as himself. But where this justice does not exist, there is certainly no ‘association of men united by a common sense of right and by a common interest.’ Therefore there is no republic.¹⁶

And so, according to Augustine and Cicero, societies succeed or collapse not chiefly by their economic output or relativized notions of justice, but in accordance with whether they value what

¹³ Augustine, *The City of God*, 2.21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.23.

biblical wisdom espouses, which can only be done if a love of Christ drives and enables one's pursuit of right action. Ultimately, Augustine effectively asserts that justice is an act of love that should reflect the love of God, and in this way, love and justice are incomplete without each other.

Today, many claim that social justice is the modern embodiment of the above view on love and justice, and that it is a compassionate response to the culture's evils. There are numerous definitions for social justice—it is an abstract concept—but a widely cited one from *Social Injustice and Public Health* details that social justice “embodies the vision of a society that is equitable and in which all members are physically and psychologically safe. It demands that all people have a right to basic human dignity with their basic economic needs met.”¹⁷ Equity, in this case, means distributing resources based on perceived need rather than distributing evenly, as is sought in equality. Thus, how to accomplish equitable redistribution is where the real divergence in opinion begins, as it is so dependent on one's perception of where need exists in society. Proposed solutions range from altering the economic system to increasing public funding to enacting entitlement programs to legalizing affirmative action initiatives, and more. This kind of justice is enacted outside of the justice system and seeks to overhaul society based on the desires of those with power to effect change. It is defended as the compassionate action necessary to create a better world, in light of individual need, systemic oppression, and cultural history, but it works with no frame of reference for what that better world ought to look like.¹⁸ And so, social justice's idealism makes it an unworkable framework by which to see and solve today's cultural evils. Thus, it is not an appropriate outworking of Cicero and Augustine's vision of justice—one that is anchored in a proper view of man's limits.

Further, Cicero explicitly criticized the subjective sense of justice reliant on human reason that social justice depends upon—because man cannot feasibly play God, and when he tries, he does not do it well. Cicero and Augustine recognized, where social justice does not, that man is limited in knowledge, goodness, ability, et cetera. And so, their ancient coupling of love and justice cannot be reconciled with the modern view that some segments of society can act as judge and determine who is deserving of resources or unfairly privileged, who is not, and how the government is to compassionately enact an equitable solution. This view skews the biblical teachings for individual charity and personal responsibility and applies them to government, when its role is not to fulfill the moral duties that individuals are called to—indeed, it cannot, and to expect it to is setting up our systems for failure. Thus, moving forward we ought to adhere closely to a traditional sense of justice that enables fair treatment under the state's law, prohibits harm from one citizen to another, and creates a culture in which individuals can fulfill their moral duties to their neighbor—should they choose to do so. This biblical justice is achievable and entails impartial processes, fair procedures, legal codes that align with the laws of nature, and virtuous citizens that practice self-government and charity in their daily lives. In this way, wrong action is dealt with, tyranny is avoided, and freedom is preserved for the individual to be as moral as they desire.

Because of original sin, it is impossible to right every evil in society, and arbitrary attempts to eradicate all inequality in the name of love often result in injustice due to man's inability to judge what is best. Social justice works from an idealistic framework of equal standing and outcome that does not correlate with what is possible—or even ascertainable. To this point,

¹⁷ Barry Levy and Victor Sidel, *Social Injustice and Public Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁸ Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, Diane J. Goodman, and Khyati Y. Joshi, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, 3rd edition (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3.

economic scholar Thomas Sowell of Stanford University writes that “we must begin with the universe that we were born into and weigh the costs of making any specific change in it to achieve a specific end. We cannot simply 'do something' whenever we are morally indignant, while disdaining to consider the costs entailed.”¹⁹ To Sowell, social justice fails in its method: it starts with the world it wants to create without considering the world as it is and goes outside the laws of nature to create a better system without considering the cost of creating a path around those laws. In other words, a moral end is commendable but unachievable if the means used to get there spring from unrealistic assumptions or idealistic visions of the world. And so, while social justice is our modern attempt at compassionate action, fair structures, and proper justice, economists Milton and Rose Friedman assert that “a society that puts equality—in the sense of equality of outcome—ahead of freedom will end up with neither equality nor freedom... The use of force to achieve equality will destroy freedom, and the force, introduced for good purposes will end up in the hands of people who use it to promote their own interests.”²⁰ Cicero and Augustine identified this bent towards self-interest centuries ago, and so while their writings are ancient, their elevation of a justice made possible by a virtuous citizenry is a better path forward than social justice, which remains yet another attempt by the city of man to achieve what only the city of God can.

Man’s loves are often disordered and his ability to reason is fallible, and so true justice requires the firmer foundation of moral virtue. Cicero and Augustine both assert that the end goal of the state is peace achieved through justice in an effort to protect the citizenry’s life, liberty, and overall wellbeing. This directly contrasts the selfish ambition and lust for power found in the turned-inward city of man. The state would be unnecessary if man’s nature could be trusted on its own, yet both Cicero and Augustine rightly identify that because of man’s fallen condition, he must be led to virtuous action by a love of God and a justice system that provides necessary guardrails in societies that often spiral due to skewed priorities. Ultimately, man cannot achieve a perfect state on earth, but he can try until mankind once again walks with the Lord on paths of “mercy and truth” where Augustine says that “neither can His grace be unjust nor His justice cruel.”²¹ Only Christ perfectly strikes the balance between grace and justice, gentleness and judgment—but as long as man is on earth, may he constantly grow towards wiser courses of action rather than fall into ancient pitfalls that have been examined for centuries proven inadequate at perfecting human nature and societal structure.

Adams, Maurianne, Lee Anne Bell, Diane J. Goodman, and Khyati Y. Joshi. *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*. 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 2016.

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¹⁹ Thomas Sowell, *The Quest for Cosmic Justice* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 16.

²⁰ Milton and Rose D. Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (New York: Harcourt, 1980), 148.

²¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, 12.27.

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