

Will and politics in Augustine: the constitution of a formal ethical-political paradigm in the Middle Ages

Vontade e política em Agostinho: a constituição de um
paradigma ético-político formal na Idade Média

Marcone Costa Cerqueira

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4539-3840> – E-mail: markantfilos@yahoo.com.br

ABSTRACT

Augustine is considered one of the great promulgators of the Christian tradition in the early Middle Ages; his works became one of the foundations for medieval Christian thought, influencing philosophers and theologians. Our objective in this article is to argue, and demonstrate, that Augustine, in view of his important work, established the bases of a formal ethical-political paradigm, having as pillars: I – his conception of will; II – his political theory of the 'two cities'; finally, III – the break with the classical model between individual and political body. This ethical-political paradigm highlights the formalism of the autonomy of the will to the detriment of material contingencies. In the political field, this perspective shifts the focus from the concrete needs inherent in political relations, establishing a predominance of the ethical over the political, of the formal over the material. In our itinerary, we will first present the foundations of the will in Augustinian thought, then his political theory based on the conception of 'two cities'; and finally, we will present how this Augustinian paradigm, predominantly formal, displaces the individual from political materiality to ethical formalism, breaking with the foundations of the classical tradition.

Keywords: Augustine. Will. Politics. Middle Ages.

RESUMO

Agostinho é tido como um dos grandes promulgadores da tradição cristã no início da Idade Média, suas obras se tornaram uma das bases para o pensamento cristão medieval, influenciando filósofos e teólogos. Nosso objetivo neste artigo é argumentar, e demonstrar, que Agostinho, em vista de sua importante obra, estabeleceu as bases de um paradigma ético-político formal, tendo como pilares: I – sua concepção de vontade; II – sua teoria política das ‘duas cidades’; por fim, III – a ruptura com o modelo clássico entre indivíduo e corpo político. Tal paradigma ético-político coloca em destaque o formalismo da autonomia da vontade em detrimento das contingências materiais. No campo político, esta perspectiva desloca o foco das necessidades concretas inerentes às relações políticas, estabelecendo uma predominância do ético sobre o político, do formal sobre o material. Em nosso itinerário, apresentaremos primeiro os fundamentos da vontade no pensamento agostiniano, em seguida, sua teoria política a partir da concepção de ‘duas cidades’, por fim, apresentaremos como este paradigma agostiniano, predominantemente formal, desloca o indivíduo da materialidade política para o formalismo ético, rompendo com os fundamentos da tradição clássica.

Palavras-chave: Agostinho. Vontade. Política. Idade Média.

Introduction

Augustine can be considered one of the thinkers who inaugurated the Christian Middle Ages. His work covers a huge selection of themes, mainly in view of the defence of the Christian faith that was at a disadvantage in a world that was still Roman. Important concepts and paradigms were formed from Augustinian writings, influencing philosophical and theological production to this day. Among these theoretical constructions, we can highlight the incipient notion of ‘will’, as well as an original ‘philosophy of history’, with ‘The City of God’ as its founding work. From these constructions, both the notion of will and the foundations of a political theory, developed in the conception of ‘two cities’, constituted an ethical-political paradigm that lasted at least until the Renaissance.

In this work, we will argue that this ethical-political paradigm, established from Augustinian work, places the formalism of ethics in predominance, through will, to the detriment of the materiality of politics, directly influencing the way in which the individual, belonging to a political body, will be thought of in the Middle Ages. To begin this work, a discussion will be necessary, even if brief, regarding the formation of the concept of will in the Christian tradition, its constitutive features, within a thought that can be classified as medieval philosophy. “What we know as medieval philosophy emerged in the late Roman Empire from a surprisingly complete adjustment between Christian faith and classical thought” (Marrone, 2008, p. 27).

This first movement will be made in conjunction with the demonstration of the very notion of will existing in Augustinian thought, thus, in the first topic, we will briefly present the aspects of the notion of will and its foundations in Augustine’s work. Our intention is to highlight the formal character of this theoretical construction, arguing that the will becomes a central conception in the ethical discussion of the Middle Ages, also being fundamental to the notion of free will in Augustinian work.

We will demonstrate how, in Augustine’s thought, the primordial process that gave clearly ethical-political contours to the theory of will at the dawn of medieval Christianity is based. The

ethical and political conceptions that unfold from a formal understanding of intention as an internalized will are most notably expanded in the thought of the bishop of Hippo. The scenario in which Augustinian thought emerges is, above all, a process of rupture between the Ancient and Medieval worlds. The political changes resulting from this process do not allow the Christian thinker to focus solely on theological questions; the very strengthening of religious foundations in the new political configuration demands an ethical-political construction that provides a new perception of the individual. This will be exactly the movement undertaken by Augustine, the construction of a theological-philosophical edifice that will bring together an anthropological understanding of the individual, a new arrangement of the conceptions of laws and political constitutions, and as a consequence, a new construction of political relations.

In our second movement, to be made in the second topic, we will demonstrate how Augustine could not neglect the necessary confrontation between the defence of the emerging Christian faith and the decadent Roman political tradition, which faced each other in a chaotic scenario from a political and cultural point of view. The need to build a doctrinal framework that could support his vision of the existence of 'two cities' led him to theorize the bases of a political thought coherent with his claims. Its intention is more to guide the believer who lives in the 'Earthly City' than to propose any political salvation for this decadent city, thus, its political construction focuses more on the individual than on the political body. It is possible that this is one of the keys to understanding the developments of his entire theory. As Brown (1972, p. 24) points out:

At this point it should be clear that what we call Augustine's political thought revolves around the problems of human behaviour in politics. The Christian subjects to whom he preached, and the Christian authorities to whom he wrote with advice, were not, for Augustine, "natural political animals"; they were men who were faced with a whole range of purposes and objects of love, which were only some of the many created by living in a political society.

What previously, in the classical tradition, was seen as the objectification of the material needs of political action, now becomes the subjectification of a formal adaptation to universal precepts, detached from any connection with the particularities of individuals' social experiences. What can be argued about the Augustinian attack on the entire political-cultural construction around examples of civic, heroic virtue, aimed at the exaltation of glory and the effectiveness of concrete action, expressed in education through literature and traditional Roman customs, indicates exactly the objective of this process of devaluing the active perspective of politics in favour of a contemplative and selfless perspective of ethical action.

Obviously, the ethical-moral basis evoked by Augustine is that developed in his theory of the will, in these terms, the safeguarding of 'good intention', whether in the formation of will or in action in the political sphere, must be the main motto of any and all guidance of the individual. The implication of this format is clearly seen from the perspective of a political construction that allows the individual to improve his spiritual virtues, enjoy relative peace and happiness in the worldly sphere of politics, but not conquering in this world the completeness of his 'Supreme Good', as his true happiness is in the 'Celestial City'.

Finally, in the third and final movement, we will demonstrate how the ethical-political construction inaugurated by Augustine places ethical formalism in predominance, mainly in view of the autonomy and purity of the will. In turn, the materiality of political action, arising from the concrete needs of social relations, becomes subject to ethical formalism. Politics begins to be seen as something fallen, corrupted by sin and an obstacle to spiritual development.

This Augustinian ethical-political paradigm will be the breaking point between the classical tradition, mainly Greco-Roman, which centred the life of the individual on the political relations of the city, and the incipient medieval Christian tradition. We hope to achieve the proposed objectives, with a view to executing the established itinerary.

1 A conception of will in Augustine

Initially, our purpose is not to establish a historical scheme that demonstrates how the medieval appropriation of ancient thought occurred, but it is necessary to argue that the concept of will, sophisticated in Christian thought, has developments coming from Stoic thought, developments that are completed with the originality of Augustinian thought. The subtleties involved in this process are too extensive to be discussed in detail, so we will focus on the procedure in a succinct explanation.

It is necessary to point out, in the first centuries of Christianity, the need to base doctrinal precepts on logical-philosophical bases, responding to an urgent need for theoretical organization, as well as the condition of a referential basis for all intellectual production in the West. We realize that the movement of appropriation of ancient thought by Christianity began at the beginning of the Church, with the so-called 'Fathers of the Church', and reached its peak in Scholasticism. Regarding the theme of will and the formation of its theoretical framework, it was no different, the beginning of the process of Christianization of ancient thought expanded what had already been established, mainly what came from Stoic thought, based on the notion of intention. However, the notion of intention, in isolation, did not yet correspond to a notion of will, especially in view of its autonomy and freedom. Based on these statements, we can focus on the central axis of the discussion concerning the conceptualization of a theory of will, understanding this process as a production that exists in its form initially outlined only in Christian thought.

The classical Greek tradition had known Socratic intellectualism, 'no one does evil knowing what is good', and Aristotle's virtue ethics, which took into account the desiderative factor of wanting. However, Christian doctrine did not agree with any of these perspectives. Thus, it was Augustine who began to construct the notion of will, as Vetö (2005, p. 39) points out:

The thinkers of the Patristic period expounded Christian teaching in an essentially Neoplatonic or Stoic conceptual framework, and these theologians did not yet present a true thematization of the will. It was only in the work of Saint Augustine that Christian intuitions and themes gave birth to a philosophy of the original and original will.

The theory of will is a construction that was forged by the works of various authors, receiving contours that made it follow an ascending path in relation to the search for a supposed ethical-moral freedom. We can say that this is the central issue, the search for safeguarding a freedom that allows human beings the autonomy that their dignity demands. Thinkers after Augustine, such as Duns Scotus, were preponderant in the sophistication of the concept of will and still reflected a classical heritage in their theorizing.

The concept of will in Scotus' work, as disinterested intentionality, will lead him to compose a thought guided by the constant search for the realization of a perfect formality in relation to the object of the will. Therefore, the will does not aim at satisfaction, or final action, and is not determined by external reasons, but rather, it aims to express its own intention, abstracted from external needs or purposes foreign to its own freedom. According to Cezar

(2010, p. 19): "For Scotus, the will is not a passive power, whose act is determined by something external to it. [...] It is an active power, capable of producing its act by itself, capable of self-determination".

The degree of dispute between the inclination that disposes the will to execute that which is pleasant, aimed at the physical well-being of the individual, in contrast to the inclination of what is fair, freely disposed by the internalized will of good intention, will be the level of the relationship between the prescription of the will and the description of the action. All medieval Christian thought subsequent to Scotus will still be permeated by this dichotomy that translates into an ethical-political perception of the individual's own relationship with the natural world and the social world.

However, as indicated, the presuppositions of the will in the Christian tradition are established by Augustine throughout his work, mainly in view of the need to discuss freedom and free will. The dispute between body and soul, good will and lust, glory of the world and glory of God, will be central to the constitution of a purely Christian ethical thought in the work of the Bishop. The theme of a new nature arising in the converted man, which goes back to the Pauline construction of 'two natures', an old and a new, is very marked in Augustinianism. Unlike Stoicism, which did not propose a new human nature, Christianity will have this movement. In Augustine, the theme of freedom of the will is intrinsically linked to a fierce internal struggle between the two human natures, a fallen one and one that must take its place, a redeemed nature. Let us look at the words of the Bishop:

The enemy dominated my will, and he forged a chain for me with which he bound me. Now, lust comes from the perverse will; as long as one serves lust, one contracts a habit; and if one does not resist a habit, a need arises. Thus it was that, by a sort of intertwined chains — that is why I called them a chain — he held me tightly in a hard slavery. The new will that was beginning to exist within me, the will to honour You freely and to want to enjoy You, O my God, the only sure contentment, was not yet able to overcome the other will, strengthened by concupiscence. Thus two wills, one lustful, the other dominated, one carnal and the other spiritual, fought each other within me. By disagreeing, they tore my soul apart (Agostino, *Confessioni*, VIII 5, 10).

The first step in establishing a good will, free in its adherence to the divine will, is liberation from the 'bonds of nature', the flawed state in which the human being finds himself. "The recognition of the essential non-naturalness of the will allows Augustine to establish the boundaries of a non-material morality in which the matter, the content of the action, does not yet prejudice its moral scope" (Vetö, 2005, p. 46). This characteristic has already been pointed out in Stoicism in its conception of intention, however, in Augustine the will is taken as good in its harmonization of intention with the will of God, an overcoming of ontological metaphysics by theology, something that is strongly marked in his work. In a broad sense, this Augustinian vision of a theocentric will brings a strangeness in relation to the notions of virtue and good, originating from non-Christian (pagan) civilizations, since any virtue that is not in agreement with the divine will cannot be considered good.

In Augustinianism, the search for an internalized will, which detaches the human being from his fallen nature and connects him to the perfect will of God, will further drive the construction of an idea of morality based on intentionality. This movement will directly imply the relationship between intention and action, the latter being judged only through the intention that gave rise to it. Let us take Rohmer's opinion (1939, p. 30): "Good intention is therefore the only source of the morality of virtues. [...]. Sooner or later, the Augustinian tradition would be successful". This construction of a relationship between the notion of

intentionality and the valuation of moral character is decisive in the Augustinian thesis, despite some commentators disagreeing with the radical view of it, as it introduces the condition of a will endorsed by an 'intention' freed by divine grace. Free from the obstacles of human fragility induced by the desire for material things, but articulated according to the good guidance of divine will. At this point something appears that we can point to as the direction towards a universalization that directs the determination of good will, or good 'intention'.

The unfolding of this Augustinian doctrine of moral dependence on the individual's will, in relation to adherence to divine will, will open up a wide possibility of criticism and devaluation of examples (*exemplum*) coming from classical stories, pagan myths and Roman culture itself. This movement will be strengthened by the deconstruction of literary classics and classical cultural foundations by Christianity. Vetö (2005, p. 45) again instructs us on this topic by demonstrating the foundations that supported the Augustinian movement of deconstructing the moral precepts of virtue of the classics:

Saint Augustine is a preacher of morality and Christian faith and enthusiastically professes that the truth of moral action and religious piety is a function of the soul's orientation towards the sovereign good, God (Trinity) as the object and principle of faith. Augustine identifies faith with the true will to believe: in the absence of this will, no human work can be good. The Romans sing the virtue of their heroes, of a Cato, of a Mucius Sevola, they praise the simple and frugal customs of the ancients, they extol the fidelity and chastity of honest spouses. In reality, all virtuous behaviour that is not born of faith is corrupt.

In these terms, what is established is the impossibility of an individual becoming virtuous only through his own intellectual qualities, or through his austere customs, as seen in Vetö's commentary, the need arises for a universalizing condition of a regulatory reference of the will. Although minimally drawn, here appears the necessary outline to think of a universal moral law, as said, a reference that universalizes the idea of good will. It is not enough to have virtuous customs, because habits are naturally corrupted by our carnal nature; it is not enough to have a good intention, because it must reflect the divine will, be in accordance with the will of God; and it is not enough to have free will; the will must be guided by the eternal divine law, given to man through his moral conscience.

Augustine refines the ancient concept of intention present in Stoicism, and also lays the foundations, albeit incipient, of an understanding focused on the inevitably universalizing moral autonomy, present in the individual based on his moral conscience. This universalizing character, detached from natural, political, social or intellectual constitutions, will be the cornerstone for constructing a theory of political action that guarantees the individual freedom in the face of his own political-social arrangement. It can be argued that Augustine lays the moral foundations, through the conceptualization of the good will centred on the moral law, of an idea that will provide a universal republic, the 'republic of the faithful'.

The basis for the unification of the citizens of this republic is precisely the eternal law, coming from God, which does not recognize earthly citizenships, and is conditioned only on the conversion of the individual. The individual's action is conditioned by his conscience, which in turn must be illuminated by the eternal law, which emanates from God and covers all converts. According to Gilson (2006, p. 247-248): "In Augustinianism there is a physical illumination and a moral illumination [...] Considered as a being endowed with knowledge, man receives natural light from God; considered as a being subject to the needs of action, man receives moral conscience, *conscientia*, from God". The classical ethics of virtues, the moral precepts of customs and habits, fundamental to the notion of social belonging in the classical political model, none of this can be taken into consideration in view of the search for good will.

The question of habit related to the theme of morality, something that is very present in classical Greek constructions, especially in Aristotle, will also be present in all medieval Christian discussions. However, the Christian view, especially Augustinian, will treat the habit as a limitation of man's moral freedom, something that prevents him from taking a redeemed 'new life'. Augustine establishes a standard that will be a reference for the entire Middle Ages: habit will always limit free will, a reflection of the fallen nature of human beings, as follows: "Therefore, it is no miracle to partly want and partly not to want, but rather a disease of the soul. In fact, the soul, weighed down by habit, does not rise up completely, despite being helped by the truth" (Agostino, *Confessiones*, VIII 9, 21).

The anthropological understanding of the foundations of the will established in Augustine a new vision of the human being and its purpose; the understanding of the relationship between the lives of individuals in a legislatively constituted body was also altered, the very constitution of origin and validity of laws was restructured; finally, the political arrangement was expressed in terms that supported the assumptions of the freedom of the individual's will, free from the contingent constraints that enact social life. These three axes or aspects are what we consider the constitutive structure of a theory of political action based on the construction of the concept of will in Augustine.

In view of what has been exposed so far, and following our itinerary proposed at the beginning of the work, we will now analyse a possible 'political theory' in Augustinian thought, mainly in view of his proposition of the dichotomy between 'two cities', which leads the converted individual to divide himself between 'two citizenships'.

2 Politics in Augustine

Starting by analysing the scenario in which Augustinian thought emerged, mainly in view of the profound civilizational change that occurred in the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, we must highlight some central aspects. In ancient traditions, mainly Greek and Roman, individual freedom is an intrinsic value of political life, which in turn is the composition of an entire religious and moral set, with diverse norms and conceptions regarding the individual. However, the movement for change takes place in a scenario in which cultural ties are weakened in all areas, political, social and especially religious. In this way, the individual's dependence on cultural ties is broken when the civilizational paradigm under which he or she is inserted undergoes an extreme rupture. This is indicated by the change in the relationship between the individual and society, the way in which the nature of the individual is conceived, and his or her role in the world and in society, occurring mainly from the superimposition of a new paradigm over the old one.

We can intuit that this was exactly the case during the period in which the concept of will began to take shape. The end of classical antiquity brought with it an extreme rupture between deep cultural ties and an irreversible split in the civilizational paradigm that marked this historical period. We are certainly not dealing only with political and historical factors, but rather, we seek to make clear the thesis that the concept of will arises exactly at the moment when a profound civilizational change occurs within Western culture. This profound change includes a new way of understanding the human essence and the political relations between the individual and society. We cannot, however, attribute this exceptional event to just one factor; we can list the main ones, namely, the decline of ancient empires, the fragmentation of European peoples and, mainly, the emergence of a religion detached from the cultural roots of a single people.

Given this scenario, we can see that freedom in the political sphere begins to be understood as freedom in the individual sense, that is, with the change in the old civilizational paradigm, individuals are not just extensions of their societies. From this perspective, the ethical-political freedom to be sought is not that which is tied to the cultural customs of a people; on the contrary, it means the individualization of the subject in relation to these same customs. It cannot be denied that Christianity is growing stronger in a period in which a profound civilizational crisis is underway.

The fall of the Western Roman Empire should not be seen as the sole cause of such a crisis, but rather as its consequence; in this sense, it is not just a matter of thinking of Christianity as the driving force behind the Roman collapse. The cultural foundations that supported ancient civilization are eroded and are being widely shaken by the new universal precepts of a religion that presents itself as the 'religion of humanity', not just of one people. As Labriolle (1942, p. 13) rightly argues: "Unlimited devotion to the state, taste for honours, respect for established worship, whatever its intrinsic truth, love of comfort, pride in life, none of these constitutive values of ancient civilization compromise the Christian spirit..."

From these statements, it is not difficult to initially find several refutations, by numerous commentators, about the discussion of a theory, or even a political thought in Augustine. However, the question is knowing how to distinguish what is a political discussion in modern terms and what is a systematic construction of a doctrine that permeates all aspects that touch on political discussion. This seems to be the case with Augustinian work, which builds a solid doctrinal system that certainly influences all intellectual discussion in the Middle Ages, and furthermore, postulates themes dear to politics, such as justice, peace and freedom. As Boyer (1970, p. 19-20) argues:

The love of the sovereign good is the cement of the City of God, while at the same time responding to the noblest inclination of the human soul, becoming the source of the universalism characteristic and outstanding of Augustinian thought. Truth, justice, charity, peace, these goods are truly the reflections of the face of God and this is because their search and possession unite men, instead of dividing them.

Augustine does not write a specifically political work, much less does he theorize the subject in a system along the lines of the tradition of political philosophy. As already indicated, the Bishop is more concerned with human redemption from his degraded situation of separation from the divine presence; his intention is to provide an ethical-political understanding that allows the convert to yearn for his true 'motherland'. In this sense, what is constituted in Augustine is not a discussion about political foundations, it is rather a defence of the possibility of building an 'earthly city' that is, in a certain way, an exercise for the believer who yearns for the 'heavenly city'.

This is not to say that Augustine only touches on the theme of politics when making a theological defence of faith in the face of the difficulties of earthly life. Much less is it a movement to defend contemplation as the only way out for Christian life. Augustine establishes a direct link between the Christian faith and the possibility of building a social organization minimally instructed by spiritual virtues. In this sense, the entire development of this bond will take place through a clear submission of social and political life to contemplative spiritual life, thus, it is possible to find in Augustine the defence of the possibility of building a republic, or a social life, that can minimally correspond to the foundations of faith. According to Costa (2009, p. 13):

From a political point of view, what Augustine presents to us are the Christian ethical-political foundations on which a just *Civitas* (earthly State) can be built, which, at the same

time, is capable of promoting man's temporal happiness – the immediate purpose of the earthly *Civitas* – and which, furthermore, leads him to 'True Happiness', to be achieved in Eternal Life – the supernatural purpose of man and the earthly *Civitas*.

We cannot classify Augustinian theory within the models of modern political theories, which would be at the very least anachronistic and unproductive. However, it is plausible and feasible to outline its concepts and perceive its developments in the discussion about the construction of an ethical-political model for the constitution of the actions of individuals in the political sphere, through the very understanding of the human being, through the constitution of laws and the political arrangement, which allows us to bring together such elements in a theory of political action.

Taking these guidelines for understanding the construction of an incipient theory of political action in Augustine, it does not seem correct to try to find, for example, terms and concepts that can simply be reproduced in authors from the Renaissance or the beginning of Modernity. In the long construction of the theory of will, we do not see Augustine speak only of intention, intentionality, however, the theoretical movement he initiated set the pace by which such understandings were formed and took root. The same can be inferred from several other concepts and understandings arising from his ethical-political construction. Even though it is not feasible to look for completely outlined political theories among Renaissance, modern, or even medieval thinkers, attributed only to Augustine, we can find a fundamental conceptual influence.

More than a theoretical or conceptual influence, the Augustinian paradigm indicates the beginning of a transitory understanding of political reality, a rupture, a process in which peace, justice, love, and freedom itself, are incomplete on the earthly plane. The possibility of constructing a social life precariously established by political institutions is justified only by the need to improve love, *Caritas*, as well as the exercise of the principle of *Justice* that moves the believer, namely, his adherence to the divine will. Thus, social life is mirrored by the definition of spiritual life, which will be fully realized only in the 'heavenly city'. By this understanding, the peace achieved in social life is only a shadow of the true peace to be experienced in eternal life. In the words of Augustine:

In the final peace, however, which must be the objective of the Justice we are trying to acquire on this earth, since nature will be endowed with immortality, incorruption, will be free of vices and we will feel no internal or external resistance, it will not be necessary for Reason to command the passions, since they will not exist [...] This state will be eternal and we will be certain of its eternity. Therefore, in the peace of this happiness and in the happiness of this peace will consist the sovereign good (*De Civ. Dei*. XIX, 27).

The corrupt sphere of politics for Augustine is the stage for the struggle between the 'two cities', and the individual is divided in this dualistic reality. The individual is split between the imposition of a natural citizenship, that of the 'earthly city', and a citizenship by choice, conversion, that of the 'heavenly city'. Given this reality, it is not possible to form an ordered society, focused on the enhancement of virtues and spiritual improvement, with individuals who seek fame, honour and purely earthly dignity as 'archetypes'. According to the Bishop of Hippo, it is precisely the search for glory, honour and worldly fame that originates and feeds greed in the 'earthly city', while love for God originates and feeds the 'heavenly city'.

It is extremely important to understand this distinction made by Augustine regarding the founding 'feeling' of the two antagonistic cities. Whether based on a love for the homeland, focused on its defence, the acceptance of its laws and customs, or on the restriction of the

various reasons and ways of founding different cities, Augustin's proposition breaks down the main connections that legitimized and sustained the political bases of ancient classical societies. In his view, the two founding loves cannot be reconciled, as follows:

Two loves, then, founded 'two cities', namely: self-love, led to contempt for God, the earthly one; love for God, leading to contempt for oneself, the Heavenly one. The first one glories in itself and the second in God, because the former seeks the glory of men, and this has as its ultimate goal the glory of God... (*De Civ. Dei*, XIV, 28).

The consequences of this dualistic conception of reality, an earthly political sphere and a spiritual sphere, are still perceived in the constitution of an original conception of laws and social arrangements. The Augustinian argument for the possibility of establishing an ordered political body with a view to guaranteeing, even in the 'earthly city', a certain peace and justice, brings with it the need to establish legislative bases for such an order. His formal understanding of the establishment of the ordering of laws led him to a theological-metaphysical construction in which the origin of laws is obviously in God and radiates to man in a spiritual way, in essence, then natural, consequently, finally, rational and positive.

In these terms, obedience to God, social concord in mutual love between individuals and political submission to the positive law of men constitute the three spheres in which Augustine will think of laws. According to the Bishop: "peace between man, a mortal being, and God is the obedience ordered by faith under the Eternal Law. The peace of men among themselves, their ordered concord [...]. The peace of the Civitas, the ordered concord between the rulers and the ruled" (*De Civ. Dei*, XIX, 13).

Augustine's main reference for an 'earthly city' is the Rome of his time and the stories of past glory. However, Roman history is not marked by spiritual virtues, self-denial or just concord. Even though it had an excellent code of laws, the basis of Roman legislation was a 'pagan' understanding of the world and relationships between individuals. The lens through which Augustine views Roman history is clearly Christian, however, his original vision leads him to have a historical-theological perspective. Starting from a linear construction of history, the bishop of Hippo interprets Romulus' action as one of the pillars supporting the distorted edifice of politics in the 'earthly city'. Once again, let us take his own words:

The founder of the Earthly City was a fratricide. Driven by envy, he killed his brother, a citizen of the Eternal City and a pilgrim on earth. Therefore, it is not surprising that such an example, or, as the Greeks would say, such an archetype, was imitated after so long by the founder of the City who in time would become the head of the Earthly City of which we speak and the lord of countless peoples. There too, as one of its poets says, the first walls were watered with fraternal blood. This is what happened at the founding of Rome, during which, according to History, Romulus killed his brother Remus, with the difference that here they were both citizens of the Earthly City (*De Civ. Dei*, XVI, 4).

Since the beginning of the antagonism between the 'earthly city' and the 'heavenly city', in the murder of Abel by Cain, the seed of evil has been planted in the hearts of human beings, the political dispute is the infinite recurrence of this struggle. The murder of Remus by Romulus, founding the city of Rome, serves to illustrate this scenario. Thus, even if there are the best laws in Roman legislation, they will never be an expression of true justice, love and peace. The antagonistic nature of the 'two cities' is the central pillar of Augustine's political thought, which, beyond the earthly sphere, is a reflection of the eternal spiritual struggle waged by human beings. The consequences of this characteristic, as well as of the other characteristics that we

have already indicated, are shown in the complete rupture between the 'ancient world', its political and social institutions, and the 'medieval world', with its Christian doctrine and its new disposition regarding the place of the individual in the political arrangement. From these statements, we will move on to the last topic of our work, still following our proposed itinerary from the beginning.

3 The formal ethical-political paradigm in the Christian Middle Ages: the developments of Augustinian theory

When we think about the beginning of the Middle Ages, as a break with ancient classical thought, we cannot limit ourselves to the simple historical question of the fall of Rome, the rise of Christianity and the end of a political mentality centred on the collective identity of the individual in the social body. The latter, the political-social identity, was impregnated in the religions, customs, laws, arts and literature that the people produced, reflecting their cultural construction. The identity character of this group comprised the formation arrangement of the individuals themselves with a view to assimilating and reproducing the established values. In this way, the change that occurred gradually from historical factors, the fall of Rome, the rise of the new Christian religion, as well as the cultural factor as a whole, was supported by a profound ethical-political change.

In general, this change occurred within a declining Rome itself, for several reasons, including the already 'cosmopolitan' and 'universalizing' character of the 'Latium Empire', which provided a broad basis for the acceptance of a new form of religion and culture. This phenomenon is linked to the history of the formation and expansion of the Roman Empire, bringing together and syncretizing fractions of culture and customs of all the peoples it conquered, as well as individuals of different nationalities, which was diametrically different from Greek practice, and would be a factor present in the formation of the incipient cities in the Middle Ages. According to Coleman (2000, p. 8): "One of the attitudes that the medievals absorbed from the Romans and not from the Greeks was the notion of a city open to outsiders who could be freely admitted and assimilated without the requirement of having been born a citizen. Citizenship could be acquired through service to the 'state'".

However, classical Roman culture was established on well-defined precepts, deeply permeated by the identity character of social and political belonging of individuals and reflecting a clear fierce spirit focused on the glory of the nation. This cultural construction profile brought with it a strong and clear system of moral, political, religious and artistic values. Although the process of formation of Rome was one of cultural agglutination and syncretism, the result of such a process generated a massive ethical-political arrangement of its own. So massive and profound was the construction of a classical culture and so resonant was its importance that many authors discuss whether it really came to an end with the emergence of the Middle Ages or whether it simply took on less central features in the process of formation of the medieval Christian individual and continued to inspire them.

Our perspective is that of a constant and gradual search for the nullification of classical culture by Christianity, mainly in view of the centrality of figures considered as examples of civic and moral virtue. However, it is necessary to understand that Christianity never completely erased the traces of such culture, proof of this is the very fact that classical authors were revived during the Renaissance. In the reading of some medievalist authors, the Middle Ages merely experienced a kind of 'Christianization' of the classical cultural bases, not completely erasing,

according to Marrou (1938, p. IV): "The historian of the Middle Ages invites us to pose the question in the opposite way. He notes that medieval civilization is not autonomous; to a large extent it does nothing more than continue and retake (in transformation, of course) the heritage of ancient civilization".

Augustine is the fruit of classical Roman and Greek culture; his entire intellectual formation took place under the instruction of great master rhetoricians and under the august shadow of Cicero, Livy, Sallust, Ovid and several other icons of Roman and Greek culture. His direction as a Roman man was guided by the same ideals at which he later threw deadly rhetorical and theoretical darts, casting doubt on the very nature of Roman customs and what he understood as their clear perfidy and fratricide from the beginning.

It is necessary to understand what Augustinian distensions are in relation to the ideal of Roman culture and how his theoretical movement in search of a premise of freedom, based on the concept of will, gives rise to a new conception of ethical-political arrangement in view of this premise. The question arises within the scope of the individual's formation in view of his/her political-social belonging, as we have indicated, such belonging is constructed through the sharing of ethical-political values through culture, customs and their expressions. More specifically, it was in the education of the individual, through stories, religious customs, literature, political and moral values, that the cultural traits of the individual's political-social belonging were sedimented.

Being a profound connoisseur of the methods and parameters of Roman education, Augustine was able to focus his attack on the core of the formation of the individual based on the most important elements for the transmission of the political and moral values of the Roman tradition. In our exposition on the constitution of the concept of will in the thought of the Bishop of Hippo, we revealed his attack on the traditional moral and religious precepts of Roman culture, which for him were, obviously, frivolities produced by pagan deception. We cannot forget the fact that Augustine was a Roman from the roots, his intellectual formation was solidly grounded in the classics and their theoretical instruments. There is no doubt that such instruments remained as a support for his own constructions, filled with a profound Christian fervour. Let us take the indication of Combès (1927, p. 42-43):

Brought up in the shouts of school, Saint Augustine was familiar with the foundations and rhetorical works of Cicero from the beginning. [...] It was mainly in the *Legibus*, the *Officiis* and the *Republic* that he drew his political ideas with both hands. Plato gave him the foundations of his doctrine. Cicero provided him with a wealth of materials and arguments.

It is necessary to point out that within a theory of political action, in view of the arrangement between the anthropological, legislative and political aspects, the character of the individual's dependence on the political body is intrinsically linked to the degree of commitment of the laws to an ethical-political ideal of citizen. In this way, by removing from the law a necessary character of centrality in the identification of the individual with the political body, the bond of commitment of the citizen with the very structure of the ethical-political organization of society is shaken. The Augustinian construction regarding a legislative structure, in a broad sense, offers precisely the possibility for the individual to constitute himself as an agent detached, in an ethical-moral sphere, from the political-social implications of laws that are not based on valid principles for conforming to his faith and spiritual desires.

The repercussion of this provision in the understanding of a social arrangement will lead to a complete predominance of the ethical over the political, in other words, the safeguarding of ethical intentionality, internalized in the will based on spiritual principles, calls into question

the urgency of an individual's commitment based on customs, laws and ideals purely established in favour of the materiality of political. Let us see what the Bishop says: "He is not concerned with the diversity of laws, customs or institutions, which destroy or maintain earthly peace [...] if it does not prevent religion from teaching that the one, true and supreme God must be worshipped" (De Civ. Dei. XIX, 17).

The link that sustains the ethical-political edifice in the classical tradition is precisely the individual's commitment to political institutions and their customs, as well as to their concrete action in the social sphere together with other individuals in society. It is precisely to this commitment that Augustine contrasts his understanding of the relationship between ethical intention and political action. In the political aspect, constitutive of a theory of classical political action, the individual's acceptance, participation and commitment to public life is essential to determine his or her degree of adherence and social engagement. Augustine implements a universalism that was unthinkable in the construction of the relationship between laws and national religion in the Early Classical period. Let us take Combes' opinion on the role of religions in the classical pagan peoples:

The essence of the law is to determine, in effect, in short and expressive formulas, what, in a higher order and in the interest of the country, all citizens, without exception, must do or avoid. Originally, since authority, as we have seen, is closely linked to worship, the law had a clearly religious character. All peoples believed that they had their code of gods. Minos was only the spokesman for Jupiter, Lycurgus for Apollo, Numa for the nymph Egeria (Combes, 1927, p. 119).

The issue is not to base laws and political obligations on the figure of a divinity, the great novelty, which puts an end to the classical paradigm, is to have only one divinity, which serves each and every individual of any nation. This process, which begins with the search for freedom and autonomy based on the will, inspired by divine will, is complemented by a political vision determined by the predominance of the formal over the material. This formal is imprinted on a universalism based on the justice of God; these are the foundations for a 'republic of the saved' on earth. The pilgrims of the 'heavenly city' who live in the 'earthly city' are part of a great kingdom whose capital is not of this world. Therefore, such individuals must follow the laws in force in their true homeland, the one that is established as eternal and has the true God as its leader.

In this way, both spiritually and politically, converted individuals are freed, they must seek true freedom in the intention of the will, inspired by God, as they must seek possible earthly freedom through unrestricted adherence to divine laws, those of their true homeland. The relationship between politics and freedom, as the ancients understood it, ceases to exist, as does the relationship between ethics and politics, since the two areas are now separated. Ethics now has a purely spiritual and formal foundation, while politics, which is material, becomes the expression of human evil and the pilgrimage of the believer in the world. The Augustinian paradigm would last until at least the beginning of Modernity, having its main counterpoint in Machiavellian thought.

Final considerations

The ethical-political paradigm inaugurated by Augustine in his extensive work will be the foundation of political doctrine in the Middle Ages, influencing, as said, countless thinkers, far beyond influencing the monarchical model itself that existed in this period. The core of Augustinian thought is freedom, provided by free will, and which can only be truly achieved in

the presence of God in the Heavenly City. The pilgrimage in the Earthly City is a test, a period in which the believer must exercise his faith, seek divine justice, allow his will to be shaped by divine will, not tying himself to any type of political or social bond that hinders this process.

The opposition between the ethical and the political will be the opposition between the formal and the material, between that which is merely internalized and that which must be expressed in clear and forceful actions. For the ancients, politics was a way of valuing the actions of individuals, establishing principles of honour, glory, recognition and social belonging. In the paradigm established by Augustine, neither honour, nor glory, nor worldly recognition could give individuals true freedom and peace; such things are empty compared to the glory that the believer will experience in the Heavenly City.

The civilizational rupture experienced by Augustine in his period seems to reflect the rupture he himself experienced when he converted, ceasing to be an exemplary Roman individual, to become a Christian, deeply committed to the faith. The world that Augustine knew was undergoing a drastic change and his theory was one of the foundations that helped this change to come about. Only in modernity, at its beginning, will we see a clear and frank challenge to the formal ethical-political paradigm founded by Augustine.

References

AGOSTINO. *Opera omnia di Sant'Agostino*. A cura di Franco Monteverde; collaborazione di Elena Passarini. Roma: Città Nuova, 2010. (Nuova biblioteca agostiniana).

BOYER, C. *Essais anciens et nouveaux sur la doctrine de Saint Augustin*. Milano: Marzorati Editore, 1970.

BROWN, P. *Religione e società nell'età di sant'Agostino*. Traduzione di Gigliola Fragnito. Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1972.

CEZAR, C. R. *Scotus e a liberdade: textos escolhidos sobre a vontade, a felicidade e a lei natural*. Tradução e introdução de Cesar Ribas Cezar. São Paulo: Loyola, 2010.

COLEMAN, J. *A history of political Thought: from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000.

COMBÈS, G. *La doctrine politique de Saint Augustin*. Paris: Librairie Plon, 1927.

COSTA, M. R. *Introdução ao pensamento ético-político de Santo Agostinho*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2009.

GILSON, É. *Introdução ao estudo de santo Agostinho*. Tradução de Cristiane Negreiros Abbud Ayoub. São Paulo: Discurso Editorial; Paulus. 2006.

LABRIOLLE, P. de. *La réaction païene: étude sur la polémique antichrétienne du I au VI siècle*. Paris: L'Artisan du Livre, 1942.

MARRONE, S. P. A filosofia medieval em seu contexto. In: MCGRADY, A. S. (Org.). *Filosofia Medieval*. Aparecida: Ideias & Letras, 2008.

MARROU, H.-I. *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*. Paris: E. De Boccard, 1938.

ROHMER, J. *La finalité morale chez les théologiens: de Saint Augustin à Duns Scot*. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1939.

VETÖ, M. *O nascimento da vontade*. Tradução de Álvaro Lorencini. São Leopoldo: Unisinos, 2005.

Sobre o autor

Marcone Costa Cerqueira

Doutor em Filosofia pela Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (2020), com período de pesquisa na Radboud University – Holanda (2017), com bolsa de estudos e fomentos da CAPES/NUFFIC. Mestrado em filosofia pela Faculdade Jesuíta de Filosofia e Teologia (2012). Professor do Instituto Federal de Educação Ciência e Tecnologia do Norte de Minas Gerais.

Recebido: 13/4/2025
Aprovado: 21/11/2025

Received in: 4/13/2025
Approved in: 11/21/2025