

IOWA DISTRICT EAST SYMPOSIUM

Saint Augustine
and the Doctrine of the Just War

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Introduction: Augustine as an Authority on “Just War”

Today Augustine is known for being a prime source for understanding the tradition of the Just War theory, and any undertaking of its consideration must include a familiarity with the African Father. By now you have probably realized that the principles of the Just War doctrine are valuable, and now it is time to move from the Scriptures to one of Christianity’s most brilliant, influential and prolific authors, to see what Augustine has given us for our use in applying the Law of God to the engagement of war. Your present familiarity with Just War thinking will come in handy as we review Augustine’s insights. Use what you know to ask some of these questions: What authority does Augustine actually have in the tradition of Just War thinking? Is it that his insights resonate with Scripture? Or, is it that they resonate more with good reasoning? Is it that Augustine was a bright light of Christian theology in general, his name bestowing, as it were, an authority to his arguments beyond the arguments in isolation? Or, is it that his comments are, in fact, more illuminating and faithful to Scripture than any who had disagreed with him? Finally, the question I wish I didn’t have to ask, but which is being opened among Augustine scholars in this decade: Did Augustine hold to the Just War doctrine?

A generally prevailing take on Augustine’s war thinking is given here, from Albert Marrin in 1971.

Not the least of his accomplishments was the synthesizing of Ciceronian and Christian ideas about war. To this day, his synthesis is at the base of both Roman Catholic teaching and the teaching of the leading Protestant denominations. Unfortunately, prolific writer that he was, he left no treatise specifically on the subject, scattering his conclusions throughout his writings. Moreover, certain ambiguities are introduced as a result of his juxtaposing considerations of private morality with those of society, and then shifting the terms of discussion from to the other without warning. But these difficulties are resolvable in accordance with a few basic concepts.¹

Augustine’s definition of *war*

Augustine’s definition of war is not limited to battle, but includes any time there is some kind of armed conflict. **“Keep in mind that war is not an uninterrupted successions of battles, but instead that they are sometimes frequent, sometimes rare, and sometimes there are none at all.”**²

Distinguishing Augustine from Pacifism

Now we go into the details. First of all, Augustine was no pacifist. Other Church Fathers previously were pacifistic, even including some fellow Africans, like Tertullian and Lactantius.³ But if we were to divide Christian thought on this topic into two camps, Pacifism and Just War Doctrine, most of the earliest Christian writers did not obviously fall into either category, because they did not explicitly address the concerns.⁴

¹ Albert Marrin, ed., *War and the Christian Conscience: From Augustine to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1971), 52.

² Augustine, *Quaestiones Heptateuch*, translated in Philip Wynn, *Augustine on War and Military Service* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 213.

³ Wynn, 168.

⁴ Darrell Cole, *When God Says War is Right: The Christian’s Perspective on When and How to Fight* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2002), 9.

Since the formulas of the Just War doctrine are not systematically outlined in Scripture, or in the Church Fathers, let's briefly note some of the notches along the way toward Augustine, for he was, in comparison, rather clear on war and justice. Clement of Alexandria remarked that soldiers, too, can remain soldiers and obey God. Origen is claimed by the pacifists, because he opposed Christians entering into military service, but he did not reject all warfare as immoral. Furthermore, he believed that Christians have the duty to pray for the soldiers.⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, as one of the first who wrote in a Constantinian context, said that a secondary kind of perfection could be attained by those who fight just wars for the emperor. Basil affirmed that killing in war was not murder, but suggested that those whose "hands were unclean" were to abstain from the Sacrament for three years.

Then we come to Ambrose, Augustine's mentor. If Imperial and Christian influences had begun to flirt with each other, Ambrose helped break the ice, and attended their marriage. He had held a high governmental office before being made bishop. He envisioned the name of Jesus Christ being now the banner at the head of the army in place of the Roman eagle, and expected God's majesty to grant protection and victory to the Emperor.⁶ While it would be fascinating to discuss Ambrose's writings on war, we need to move onto Augustine.

Now, the definition of pacifism is the belief that any violence, including war, is unjustifiable under any circumstances, and that all disputes should be settled by peaceful means. When Augustine attacked pacifism most directly, he did so in the context of attacking Manichaeism. The Manicheans accused that Yahweh of the Old Testament was a different God from Christ in the New, with the contradiction easily proven, given the wars which Yahweh directed for Israel, in contrast to Christ's command, "Do not resist the evildoer."⁷ Augustine had to show that Christ's teachings of meekness and non-retaliation did not mean God condemned war. We will say more about this later. For now, the point is that the pacifism which Augustine addressed was a Manichaean kind.

Another piece of Augustine's historical context was the fall of the empire. You remember this was partly the occasion for writing the *City of God*, as the heathen were blaming the empire's fall on its having abandoned the old gods and become Christian. Thus, Christ's teachings of meekness and non-retaliation were thought to have weakened the defense of the state, so that Augustine had to beat back not only the accusations of the Manichaean pacifists, but also those of the patriotic anti-pacifists! In this way, on both fronts, Augustine clarified his understanding of the right use of force, even in armed conflict, which could never be called pacifism.

Here you have Augustine's own summary, from Scriptural testimony:

Do not think that it is impossible for any one to please God while engaged in active military service. Among such persons was the holy David, to whom God gave so great a testimony; among them also were many righteous men of that time; among them was also that centurion who said to the Lord: I am not worthy that You should come under my roof, but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed: for I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goes; and to another, Come, and he comes; and to my servant, Do this, and he does it; and concerning whom the Lord said: Verily, I say unto you, I have not found

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷ Wynn, 219-220.

so great faith, no, not in Israel. Among them was that Cornelius to whom an angel said: Cornelius, your alms are accepted, and your prayers are heard, when he directed him to send to the blessed Apostle Peter, and to hear from him what he ought to do, to which apostle he sent a devout soldier, requesting him to come to him. Among them were also the soldiers who, when they had come to be baptized by John,— the sacred forerunner of the Lord, and the friend of the Bridegroom, of whom the Lord says: Among them that are born of women there has not arisen a greater than John the Baptist,— and had inquired of him what they should do, received the answer, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages. Certainly he did not prohibit them to serve as soldiers when he commanded them to be content with their pay for the service.⁸

Influences: Roman and Imperial

Augustine's reasoning on war sometimes reflected traditional Roman themes. Philip Wynn believes that Augustine's conditioning by "larger historical and geopolitical factors ... could act to override the scruples arising from the rigorist tradition."⁹ This sentence suggests Philip Wynn's assumption that Augustine probably would have been more pacifistic, had he not been so near to the military culture in his contemporary Africa. I think that is conjecture. There are, however, several places where Augustine obviously cites Roman precedent for illustrating his points.

The whole world remembers Rome for its great extension over many peoples, its imperialism. What did Augustine think of this? He has some nuanced layers of judgment for this question. Augustine valued Rome's imperial extension, but certainly not for the same reasons Rome itself valued it. While Rome was motivated by the attainment of glory, and in that pursuit, managed to secure peace along with it, Augustine believed everyone's true motive should have been peace all along. Thus, insofar as Rome's domination resulted in a greater degree of peace, Augustine was thankful. On the other hand, insofar as Roman assimilation spawned horrendous civil wars, this was evidence of the fragility of peace. It would have been better if the expansion had not been necessary. In his heart, I would say Augustine reveals both a hatred for the conditions generating Roman domination, and a love for the peace and justice which it was partly able to attain through that domination. Roman imperialism was God's imperfect tool. Though it could not have come about without this one nation's lust for domination, yet it was intended by God to be a punishment and curb for the worse vices of other nations.¹⁰

Here is a helpful quote:

Let them ask, then, whether it is quite fitting for good men to rejoice in extended empire. For the iniquity of those with whom just wars are carried on favors the growth of a kingdom, which would certainly have been small if the peace and justice of neighbors had not by any wrong provoked the carrying on of war against them; and human affairs being thus more happy, all kingdoms would have been small, rejoicing in neighborly concord; and thus there would have been very many kingdoms in the world, as there are very many houses of citizens in a city. Therefore,

⁸ Augustine, "Letter 189," trans. J.G. Cunningham, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 1., ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 4.

⁹ Wynn, 164.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 245.

to carry on war and extend a kingdom over wholly subdued nations seems to bad men to be felicity, to good men necessity.¹¹

Again,

[B]ecause it would be worse that the injurious should rule over those who are more righteous, therefore even that [to carry on war and extend a kingdom over wholly subdued nations] is not unsuitably called felicity. But beyond doubt it is greater felicity to have a good neighbor at peace, than to conquer a bad one by making war. Your desires are bad, when you desire that one whom you hate or fear should be in such a condition that you can conquer him.¹²

Influences: Neo-Platonic

Augustine was also influenced by Neo-Platonism, and even his definition of justice bears its mark. Accordingly, justice is that which orders the universe. A just war is one which restores order, and renders to each party what it deserves. If the universe is a hierarchy of being, God is at the top, with perfect being and perfect goodness. All other things are ordered under Him, sharing a degree of being and a degree of goodness. Injustice occurs, however, when there is an unwarranted disordering of things – when something is loved which should not be loved, or loved unequally which should be loved equally, etc.

This injustice is seen in every case where a man loves for their own sake things which are desirable only as means to an end, and seeks for the sake of something else things which ought to be loved for themselves. For thus, as far as he can, he disturbs in himself the natural order which the eternal law requires us to observe. Again, a man is just when he seeks to use things only for the end for which God appointed them, and to enjoy God as the end of all, while he enjoys himself and his friend in God and for God.¹³

For Augustine, everything that exists must have a degree of being, and thus must have some good component. War exists; therefore, war has a good component, and that good component is what we call the Just War.¹⁴ Mattox remarks that particular “wars may exist which are in some sense good – perhaps, even, on the balance, good.”¹⁵

Providence and Dispensations

We need to wax theological now. This has been hinted at already, but it deserves its place. Since God is in control of world events, and all things work together for the good of those who love Him, Augustine is certainly willing to grant that some wars are absolutely just. Moreover, every war God permits benefits His children toward their eternal salvation.

¹¹ Augustine, *City of God* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1950) IV.15.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Augustine, “Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon,” trans. Richard Stothert, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), XXII.78.

¹⁴ Cf. Mattox, 98.

¹⁵ Mattox, 99.

When war is undertaken in obedience to God, who would rebuke, or humble, or crush the pride of man, it must be allowed to be a righteous war; for even the wars which arise from human passion cannot harm the eternal well-being of God, nor even hurt His saints; for in the trial of their patience, and the chastening of their spirit, and in bearing fatherly correction, they are rather benefited than injured. No one can have any power against them but what is given him from above. For there is no power but of God, who either orders or permits.¹⁶

The acknowledgment of God's providence entails deference to His knowledge, which is inaccessible to us. **"...who can tell whether it may be good or bad in any particular case—in time of peace, to reign or to serve, or to be at ease or to die— or in time of war, to command or to fight, or to conquer or to be killed? At the same time, it remains true, that whatever is good is so by the divine blessing, and whatever is bad is so by the divine judgment."¹⁷**

There is, of course, a dividing line down the center of history for Augustine in the dispensational shift from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. The use of force in war was directed by God for Israel in the former days, while in the latter days, Christ enjoins us to submit to the force of our opponents. Augustine can explain that this is not a contradiction in God, but reveals the fullness of His doctrine.

Let no one, then, be so daring as to make rash charges against men, not to say against God. If the service of the ministers of the Old Testament, who were also heralds of the New, consisted in putting sinners to death, and that of the ministers of the New Testament, who are also interpreters of the Old, in being put to death by sinners, the service in both cases is rendered to one God, who, varying the lesson to suit the times, teaches both that temporal blessings are to be sought from Him, and that they are to be forsaken for Him, and that temporal distress is both sent by Him and should be endured for Him.¹⁸

It is remarkable, however, that on the question whether the temporal authority may coerce unbelievers into the visible Catholic Church, Augustine ultimately changed his mind from "no," to "yes," because he had seen evidence, with the Donatists, that such force may serve in the cause toward genuine conversion.

I have, then, yielded to the facts suggested to me by my colleagues, although my first feeling about it was that no one was to be forced into the unity of Christ, but that we should act by speaking, fight by debating, and prevail by our reasoning, for fear of making pretended Catholics out of those whom we knew as open heretics. But this opinion of mine was overcome not by the words of those who controverted it, but by conclusive examples.¹⁹

¹⁶ "Reply to Faustus," XXII.75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, XXII.78.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, XXII.79.

¹⁹ Augustine, "Epistle 93.2," trans. in Wynn, 181.

Just Cause

In explanation of this criterion Mattox wrote, “The reason for resorting to war must, itself, be a just reason.”²⁰ **“As a rule just wars are defined as those which avenge injuries, if some nation or state against whom one is waging war has neglected to punish a wrong committed by its citizens, or to return something that was wrongfully taken.”**²¹

Let’s look at Augustine’s understanding of vengeance as a just cause. In avenging injuries, as Augustine puts it, it may not surprise us that he views material restitution, when possible, as a just component in the return to the *status quo* before the war. Moreover, Augustine at times also approves compensation paid by the offender, which goes above and beyond a return to the *status quo*. This would be a sort of punitive damages, as a moral deterrent. Restitution cannot, however, be made for all injustices, and when that is the case, the offended party should waive their rights to an exact revenge.²²

Another noteworthy element in Augustine’s thinking is his understanding of an injury which ought to be avenged. Augustine has indicated that a nation’s sins against God are the kind of injury which that requires punishment through the undertaking of war.

The real evils in war are love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, the lust of power, and such like; and it is generally to punish these things, when force is required to inflict the punishment, that, in obedience to God or some lawful authority, good men undertake wars, when they find themselves in such a position as regards the conduct of human affairs, that right conduct requires them to act, or to make others act in this way.²³

Interestingly, with this passage, Mattox believes that Augustine approves the undertaking of war in response to serious enough sins of this kind, *even when the side undertaking war is not an aggrieved party*, since God Himself has been injured. A very significant conclusion! but one which, I believe, is not sufficiently upheld by that passage, given the immediate context of Augustine’s original argument on that page. Is Mattox’s assertion any more clearly supported in Augustine elsewhere? One is tempted to conclude not, as this passage was the only evidence given in support of that conclusion.

Augustine does not clearly discuss the distinction between an offensive and defensive war. Certainly, defense of the fatherland against invasion is permitted, and even necessary. Defense against offense is normally how Augustine conceived of wars coming into being. Moreover, the definition of victory, for Augustine, seems necessarily to include conquest. That is, if the defending side is strong enough, it will purchase as much peace as it can afford, by conquering the offender. That is the gift of God, and the only peace available to the earthly city. **“When victory remains with the party which had the juster cause, who hesitates to congratulate the victor, and style it a desirable peace?”**²⁴ This was generally true in the case of Rome. Augustine had mixed feelings regarding Rome’s expansion as resulting from its many

²⁰ Mattox, 9.

²¹ *Questions on the Heptateuch*, 6.10, quoted in Mattox, 46.

²² Augustine, “Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” trans. William Findlay, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 6. ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888), I.XX.62.

²³ “Reply to Faustus” XXII.74.

²⁴ *City of God*, XV.4.

defensive battles. They *were* defensive, by Augustine's reckoning, with a just cause, and yet they were not free from lust for power and glory. We will discuss this in more detail later.

Comparative Justice

There is always a strong moral presumption against going to war. The criterion of Comparative Justice has to do with comparing is met when "the claims of an aggrieved party are of such magnitude that the presumption against war is overridden."²⁵

In war, does Augustine view only one side to be just, while the other must be unjust? Generally, that is how he speaks of war. In the *City of God*, he says, "**It is the wrong-doing of the opposing party which compels the wise man to wage just wars...**"²⁶ The majority of just-war historians interpret Augustine as holding that there can be justice on only one side of a war. And yet there is minority interpretation, held by Mattox, for example, which sees Augustine allowing for a measure of justice on both sides. For Mattox, Augustine basically grants this in his broader scope, since there is no *absolutely* just man or state. Augustine even in one instance speaks of the prospect of one side having a *juster* cause than its opponent, in a quote which we heard above. "**When victory remains with the party which had the *juster* cause, who hesitates to congratulate the victor, and style it a desirable peace?**"²⁷

Darrel Cole holds that the entire idea of Comparative Justice is bunk – an invention of modern man that assumes we can never truly know whose side is right, and whose side is wrong. He sees this criterion as epistemologically dangerous. Cole believes present generations have abandoned the classical virtues of justice, prudence, courage, and temperance. Now, in their place, there is nothing left to curb wrongdoing but relativism. According to Cole, Comparative Justice, a.k.a. relativism, is an attempt in modern Just War theory to curb wrongdoing by blurring the distinction between who is right and who is wrong. That ambiguity can minimize violent impulses by preventing us from both over-glorifying the rightness of our own cause, and from dehumanizing our enemies into wicked brutes.

That point is taken. I think such a reaction misses the point of Comparative Justice. If I understand it correctly, I am compelled to acknowledge that it does harmonize with Augustine. War occurs between citizens of the earthly city, not of the heavenly city. And within the earthly city, you will only find imperfect justice. The criterion of Comparative Justice is not an epistemological conundrum, as Cole tries to make it, and it does not render just war impossible. It is simply met, as Mattox formulated it, when "**the claims of an aggrieved party are of such magnitude that the presumption against war it overridden.**"²⁸

Rightful Intention

Right Intention is different from Just Cause. Whereas by Just Cause, we mean the reason for resorting to war, by Right Intention we mean an inner purity of motives that accompany that decision. It is possible for a cause to be just, while the motives attending it, unjust. Hatred, love

²⁵ Mattox, 9.

²⁶ *City of God*, XIX.7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, XV.4.

²⁸ Mattox, 9.

of violence, cruelty, desire for domination or expansion, etc.: these wrong intentions would make an otherwise just war unjust. So, evidence of keeping right intentions will be seen in things such as efforts made to achieve peace and avoid war, and keeping demands within bounds of reason.

Augustine's understanding of justice made this theme very prominent in his writing. That is: the rightness of an external action depends on the rightness of the internal disposition. Augustine recognizes that the lust for domination utterly defiled the history of Rome, though its tradition was continuously to whitewash and mask the barbarism with the adulations of *glory* and *greatness* and *victory*.²⁹

An example of wrong intention which Augustine discussed was that of Rome's disposition toward its many defensive battles. Briefly stated, Augustine wrote, He relates that in the Empire's history, it was common for Romans to harbor a certain giddiness when it was time for Rome to fight defensive wars, for the outcome widely assumed was almost always correct – that by inevitable victory, Rome's territory would expand. Such a wrong intent, though the war be just in its cause, whether defensive or punitive, can, from within, invalidate its just status. In criticizing the Roman deities, Augustine uses an interesting turn of logic to ask, if Victory was to be worshiped as a goddess in the Roman pantheon, why not also that which generates Victory, namely, Foreign Injustice? For Foreign Injustice is what so consistently provoked wars, and led to Rome's conquest. Consistency would require that for a man of wrong intention, it is a good and lovely thing that Rome's neighbors be so wicked.³⁰ This absurdity reveals the corrupting potential of intention. Briefly summarized, Augustine writes **“Therefore, to carry on war and extend a kingdom over wholly subdued nations seems to bad men to be felicity, to good men necessity.”**³¹

So what should be the inner disposition of the general or the soldier, who must fight a just war? Anguish, Augustine says, and grief at war's necessity.

They say, the wise man will wage just wars. As if he would not all the rather lament the necessity of just wars, if he remembers that he is a man; for if they were not just he would not wage them, and would therefore be delivered from all wars. For it is the wrong-doing of the opposing party which compels the wise man to wage just wars; and this wrong-doing, even though it gave rise to no war, would still be a matter of grief to man because it is man's wrongdoing. Let every one, then, who thinks with pain on all these great evils, so horrible, so ruthless, acknowledge that this is misery. And if any one either endures or thinks of them without mental pain, this is a more miserable plight still, for he thinks himself happy because he has lost human feeling.³²

Again, in a significant passage, Augustine writes that sick intentions are often the very evils of war, while the righteousness of war is in the punishment of those intentions. He says:

What is the evil in war? Is it the death of some who will soon die in any case, that others may live in peaceful subjection? This is mere cowardly dislike, not any religious feeling. The real evils in war are love of violence, revengeful cruelty, fierce and implacable enmity, wild resistance, and the lust of power, and such like;

²⁹ *City of God* III. 14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, IV. 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, IV, 15.

³² *Ibid.*, IX. 7.

and it is generally to punish these things, when force is required to inflict the punishment, that, in obedience to God or some lawful authority, good men undertake wars, when they find themselves in such a position as regards the conduct of human affairs, that right conduct requires them to act, or to make others act in this way.³³

Sovereign / Competent Authority

The traditional definition of the criterion of Sovereign or Competent Authority is present in Augustine, and can be formulated thus: The decision to go to war can be made and announced only by those who are recognized with the authority, that is, without a political superior. Augustine derived this from natural law, or as he called it, natural order. He writes in the book against Faustus:

A great deal depends on the causes for which men undertake wars, and on the authority they have for doing so; for the natural order which seeks the peace of mankind, ordains that the monarch should have the power of undertaking war if he thinks it advisable, and that the soldiers should perform their military duties in behalf of the peace and safety of the community.³⁴

A number of things are said there, but we are interested now in Augustine's indication that the authority to undertake war resides in the office of the monarch.

There would be a great moral difference, then, between an act initiated by one with the authority, and the same act being initiated by one without the authority.

According to the eternal law, which requires the preservation of natural order, and forbids the transgression of it, some actions have an indifferent character, so that men are blamed for presumption if they do them without being called upon, while they are deservedly praised for doing them when required. The act, the agent, and the authority for the action are all of great importance in the order of nature.³⁵

(Side note: Again we hear the general appeal to natural order. This does not take the place of Scriptural appeal, as we'll see, but note that natural order forms a significant base for Augustine's apologetic approach to his unbelieving opponent.)

In order to demonstrate the ruler's authority to sanction soldiering, Augustine offers a catena of passages from the Gospels, which he interconnects.

Otherwise John, when the soldiers who came to be baptized asked, What shall we do? Would have replied, Throw away your arms; give up the service; never strike, or wound, or disable any one. But knowing that such actions in battle were not murderous but authorized by law, and that the soldiers did not thus avenge themselves, but defend the public safety, he replied, "Do violence to no man, accuse no man falsely, and be content with your wages." But as the Manichæans are in the habit of speaking evil of John, let them hear the Lord Jesus Christ Himself

³³ "Reply to Faustus," XXII.74.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, XXII.75.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, XXII.73.

ordering this money to be given to Cæsar, which John tells the soldiers to be content with. "Give," He says, "to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's." For tribute-money is given on purpose to pay the soldiers for war. Again, in the case of the centurion who said, "I am a man under authority, and have soldiers under me: and I say to one, Go, and he goes; and to another, Come, and he comes; and to my servant, Do this, and he does it," Christ gave due praise to his faith; He did not tell him to leave the service. But there is no need here to enter on the long discussion of just and unjust ways.³⁶

Certainly God is the Most High Sovereign, and, according to Augustine, when He orders men to undertake war, that war is just by definition. This forms an important argument Augustine had to take up against Faustus the Manichean. The Manicheans' inferior concepts of justice rendered them unable to grasp the righteousness of the wars in the Bible led by men like Moses. Augustine understands that because God had commanded these wars, it was not only right to fight them, but necessary. **"...the account of the wars of Moses will not excite surprise or abhorrence, for in wars carried on by divine command, he showed not ferocity but obedience; and God in giving the command, acted not in cruelty, but in righteous retribution, giving to all what they deserved, and warning those who needed warning."³⁷**

Our conversation on Competent Authority takes on a new urgency, however, when we push on Augustine, regarding the right of the authority, and find that Augustine offers some ambiguity. In what form(s) does the command of God come, that men must fight a war? Is such a command limited to the kind that came to Moses by direct revelation? Or can the demands of natural order, available to sanctified reason, sufficiently reveal God's will and become a divine imperative *on the same level* as that for Moses' wars? I know what I think, and maybe what you think too, but as to what Augustine thought, one can read him and make inferences in either direction. The closest we can get is to say that, for Augustine, if the one in authority is "a good man" (such as was emperor Theodosius in the battle of the Frigidus), then his decisions are certainly in accordance with God's will.³⁸ As Wynn said, "It would help had [Augustine] been clearer."³⁹

The ambiguity is demonstrated in a certain passage where Augustine says divine authority permits the taking of life in two exceptions:

...being justified either by a general law, or by a commission granted for a time to some individual. ... And accordingly, they who have waged war in obedience to a divine command, or in conformity with His laws have represented in their persons the public justice or the wisdom of the government, and in this capacity have put to death wicked men; such persons have by no means violated the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.'⁴⁰

Note that, here, while obedience to a direct command from God is somehow distinct from conformity with His general Law, the distinction is not explained.

³⁶ "Reply to Faustus," XXII.74.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, XXII.74.

³⁸ Cf. Wynn, 244.

³⁹ Wynn, 239.

⁴⁰ *City of God*, I.21.

Changing gears now, what *is* explicit in Augustine's take on legitimate authority is that obedience to an unjust command does *not* make one guilty of injustice, since the responsibility belongs to the one in authority. Not that this belief had any uniquely Christian character; it rather seems to be a customary legal assumption at the time. Augustine says:

...a righteous man, serving it may be under an ungodly king, may do the duty belonging to his position in the State in fighting by the order of his sovereign—for in some cases it is plainly the will of God that he should fight, and in others, where this is not so plain, it may be an unrighteous command on the part of the king, while the soldier is innocent, because his position makes obedience a duty...⁴¹

(It should be noted that this entire sentence of Augustine is buried in a larger sentence, and serves not as the subject of his argument, but merely as an *example* of generally accepted ethics. Augustine uses it as a premise in defense of the wars undertaken by Moses at God's command.) At any rate, in Augustine, there is no room for what we would call the rights of conscientious objection. Moreover, since you incur no guilt by obeying God's deputy, there is no need for them.

Last Resort

The criterion of Last Resort is said to be met when the situation obviously indicates that nothing short of war will suffice to restore justice to an injury. Augustine affirms this in general ways, saying it is better to achieve peace by diplomacy than by war.

Those warriors are indeed great and worthy of singular honor, not only for their consummate bravery, but also (which is a higher praise) for their eminent fidelity, by whose labours and dangers, along with the blessing of divine protection and aid, enemies previously unsubdued are conquered, and peace obtained for the State, and the provinces reduced to subjection. But it is a higher glory still to stay war itself with a word, than to slay men with the sword, and to procure or maintain peace by peace, not by war. For those who fight, if they are good men, doubtless seek for peace; nevertheless it is through blood. Your mission, however, is to prevent the shedding of blood. Yours, therefore, is the privilege of averting that calamity which others are under the necessity of producing.⁴²

Peace as Ultimate Objective

Just War also requires the criterion to be met which makes Peace the ultimate objective of war. Augustine says very eloquently:

Peace should be the object of your desire; war should be waged only as a necessity, and waged only that God may by it deliver men from the necessity and preserve them in peace. For peace is not sought in order to the kindling of war, but war is

⁴¹ "Reply to Faustus," XXII.75.

⁴² Augustine, "Letter 229," trans. J.G. Cunningham, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 1., ed. by Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 2.

waged in order that peace may be obtained. Therefore, even in waging war, cherish the spirit of a peacemaker, that, by conquering those whom you attack, you may lead them back to the advantages of peace...⁴³

Theologically speaking, there are for Augustine two types of peace – one heavenly, and one earthly, as reflect his doctrine of the two cities. Also, within the earthly peace, there are as many different types of peace as there are individuals, for everyone seeks what will bring *himself* or his own circle peace, even if that peace be downright unjust and demonic.⁴⁴ Men who pursue their own peace are acting in pride and in the desire to be like God, unable to allow that other men, who are created their equals, would be in any position save for in subjection to them. All earthly authority shares in this type of peace, even Rome, for there is no perfectly just state. Furthermore, because this peace is never perfectly just, it is fragile in the hands of whoever holds it, and will assuredly shatter soon. But there is no man who hates peace; rather, they love an unjust peace.

Proportionality (*in bello*)

Proportionality in war is defined as the criterion that “minimum force, consistent with ‘military necessity’, may be used – and even then, only with an eye toward bringing the conflict to a just conclusion as quickly as possible.”⁴⁵ In Augustine, this criterion is not easily untangled from our previous discussion on Right Intention. Even Mattox concedes that Proportionality can be derived from Augustine, not explicitly, but by way of suggestion. Here is a passage given in support.

For he whose aim is to kill is not careful how he wounds, but he whose aim it is to cure is cautious with his lancet; for the one seeks to destroy what it sound, the other that which is decaying. ... [W]hat is important to attend to is this: who were on the side of truth, and who were on the side of iniquity; who acted from a desire to injure, and who from a desire to correct what was amiss?⁴⁶

Discrimination

Discrimination in war is defined as distinguishing between combatants and non-combatants, “with the former normally constituting the only acceptable objects of violent action.”⁴⁷ Augustine said little about this, yet Mattox offers us this quote: “**As violence is used towards him who rebels and resists, so mercy is due to the vanquished or the captive, especially in the case in which future troubling of the peace is not to be feared.**”⁴⁸

Private Disposition and Public Peace

Augustine worked to reveal the harmony between the public necessity to seek peace by force or revenge, and the private disposition Christ requires in the heart, which makes no

⁴³ “Letter 189,” 6.

⁴⁴ *City of God*, XIX.12.

⁴⁵ Mattox, 10.

⁴⁶ *Letter 93.8*, quoted in Mattox, 61.

⁴⁷ Mattox, 11.

⁴⁸ “Letter 189,” 6.

resistance to the evildoer. Augustine flatly says that the desire for revenge is not sin, and that Christ does condemn the desire for revenge. Rather, “an eye for an eye” and “turn the other cheek” have this in common: a limit set against vengefulness in hatred.

The old precept as well as the new is intended to check the vehemence of hatred, and to curb the impetuosity of angry passion. For who will of his own accord be satisfied with a revenge equal to the injury? ... There is no injustice in asking back a debt, though there is kindness in forgiving it. ...though there is no sin in wishing for revenge within the limits of justice, the man who wishes for no revenge at all is further from the sin of an unjust revenge.⁴⁹

In expounding on Christ’s command to turn the other cheek, he says, “...a righteous and pious man ought to be prepared to endure with patience injury from those whom he desires to make good, so that the number of good men may be increased, instead of himself being added, by retaliation of injury, to the number of wicked men.”⁵⁰

The distinction Augustine makes is between the heart and the magisterial authority.

These precepts concerning patience ought to be always retained in the habitual discipline of the heart, and the benevolence which prevents the recompensing of evil for evil must be always fully cherished in the disposition. At the same time, many things must be done in correcting with a certain benevolent severity, even against their own wishes, men whose welfare rather than their wishes it is our duty to consult and the Christian Scriptures have most unambiguously commended this virtue in a magistrate.⁵¹

Augustine makes much of the image of the father who beats his son out of love, in order to rescue him. This must be the inner disposition of all who punish, including the magistrate.

...he should punish with the same goodwill which a father has towards his little son, whom by reason of his youth he cannot yet hate. For from this source the most suitable example is drawn, in order that it may be sufficiently manifest that sin can be punished in love rather than be left unpunished; so that one may wish him on whom he inflicts it not to be miserable by means of punishment, but to be happy by means of correction.⁵²

Therefore, the inward intention, along with the authority to carry it out, can make the use of force just or unjust. Against those heathen who accused the meekness and non-retaliation of Christ of having spoiled the defense of the empire, Augustine replies to the contrary, that this would be its greatest advantage:

⁴⁹ “Reply to Faustus,” XIX.25.

⁵⁰ Augustine, “Letter 138,” translated by J.G. Cunningham, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵² “On the Sermon on the Mount,” I.20.

Wherefore, let those who say that the doctrine of Christ is incompatible with the State's well-being, give us an army composed of soldiers such as the doctrine of Christ requires them to be; let them give us such subjects, such husbands and wives, such parents and children, such masters and servants, such kings, such judges—in fine, even such taxpayers and tax-gatherers, as the Christian religion has taught that men should be, and then let them dare to say that it is adverse to the State's well-being; yea, rather, let them no longer hesitate to confess that this doctrine, if it were obeyed, would be the salvation of the commonwealth.⁵³

Elsewhere he writes, “...if the commonwealth observe the precepts of the Christian religion, even its wars themselves will not be carried on without the benevolent design that, after the resisting nations have been conquered, provision may be more easily made for enjoying in peace the mutual bond of piety and justice.”⁵⁴

The disposition of the heart can be right even when lawful revenge is executed. Philip Wynn beautifully illustrates this theme of Augustine with an image of typology that brings in the entire narrative of the Scriptures. “Here the *praeperatio cordis* is to be understood as an aspect of typology. *Praeperatio* refers, as it were, to the potentiality of a seed, at first hidden in the recesses of the earth, which at the appropriate time will come into full bloom. It was the *ordo temporum* which required that this potentiality be originally hidden in the hearts of the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets and not manifested in exterior actions, so that they then were not only not pacifists but waged successful wars against their enemies.”⁵⁵

Conclusion: Re-examining Augustine’s Authority on the “Just War”

Having done this study I can attest that learning what the Just War Theory is, and reading the writings of Augustine are two very different intellectual experiences. On a certain level I think Phillip Wynn is correct, that the only way Augustine actually proposes what we have received as Just War doctrine is as through a kind of “optical illusion,” by which we see in Augustine what we now, perhaps permanently, *associate* with the Just War criteria, but in reading these same passages in his context, they appear in a bit of a different light.⁵⁶ The question whether it is possible to distinguish Augustine’s comments on war from the doctrine of Just War is only slowly beginning to manifest.

Philip Wynn, for his part, is hung up on proving that Augustine was not considered the originator of the Just War theory until the last century or so. He points out that though Gratian and Thomas in the 12th and 13th centuries rely almost exclusively on Augustine for their exposition of just war, they nowhere credit Augustine as being the original authority.⁵⁷ But I say, that is to be expected! Why would medieval Catholics attribute the “origin” of any Church

⁵³ “Letter 138,” 15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁵ Wynn, 224.

⁵⁶ Cf. Wynn, 30.

⁵⁷ Wynn, 9.

teaching to one Father? Alfred Vanderpol in the late 19th and early 20th century was most responsible for disseminating the opinion for Roman Catholics that the fundamental principles of Just War are defined in Augustine's writings. Moreover, it is the *only* doctrine of war the Catholic Church has, and nothing the canonists or scholastics wrote have ever contradicted Augustine. Some writers, such as Robert Regout in 1934, later proved there was no such unbroken chain of agreement; nevertheless, he too attributed the origination of the Just War tradition to Augustine. From then on, it became axiomatic that Augustine was the father of the Just War idea.⁵⁸

One of the problems is this: today we speak of criteria under headings of *ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello*. Today, these are thought chiefly to be restraints which prevent injuries in conflict. Circumstances are measured to see whether or not they reach a point which forces us to undertake war. But this is not exactly the standpoint from which Augustine writes about war. If I might paint with a brush that may be too broad: Augustine is descriptive, rather than prescriptive. He is more likely to credit God with the many things *He* does through war, than to offer advice to the magistrate who must choose what orders to give next.

Moreover, several historians agree that the topic of *ius in bello* was not discussed in Augustine or anywhere until the late Middle Ages, most of the interest being in *ius ad bellum*.⁵⁹ This might be significant, since the degree of destruction of which war is capable today is different than it was in Augustine's, and this is mainly a consideration in the realm of *ius in bello*. Let me jump to the chase: Can developments in military technology advance to such a degree as to make *ius in bello* impossible?

As I understand, this Spring, members of a Vatican counsel co-hosted by the Pontifical Counsel for Peace and Justice released an appeal that Pope Francis should issue a document reorienting the Catholic Church's teaching on war. In it, they claimed that there is no such thing as just war, that destruction is outdated, that to use military force in redressing injustice is to preclude several more desirable peaceful solutions. The "Just War" doctrine is suspect to these activists, since they believe it has been misappropriated too many times. Modern weaponry is too destructive, they say, and nonviolent activism has since proven itself effective in achieving peace. I would say that this movement is merely a historical development in the tradition of Just War, except that it is couched in terms altogether hostile to Just War. It is concerning. It would appear that the Western Church, with Pope Francis as its figurehead, is moving in a direction away from Augustine's doctrine of Just War, toward a preference for nonviolence.

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⁵⁸ Cf. Wynn, 22.

⁵⁹ Cf. Wynn, 24.

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