Moral Paradox in Augustine’s View of Ruler-Subject Politics

This paper argues that Augustine’s perspective on the moral responsibilities of rulers and subjects in society is inherently incongruent. One of the foundational Augustinian claims is the depravity of all men, their inability to avoid a totally sinful nature apart from the grace of God. This depravity applies to rulers and subjects alike. As such, the dangers of Augustine’s moral perspective are revealed when he calls the citizenry both to be obedient to rulers, who will be largely unjust (due to their depravity), and to oppose injustice in all its manifestations. A second moral incongruence in the morality of Augustinian social politics is in the differing moral standard of rulers and subjects. In light of his call for opposition to injustice, it appears incongruent when Augustine advises subjects to act as an instrument of injustice in the hand of the authorities. Augustine blames the ruling regime, raising the moral standard for rulers while leaving the subjects comparatively innocent. In so doing, Augustine turns subjects into blunt objects, helpless to refuse submission to authority. He attempts to separate obedience from complicity, casting an inescapable shadow over his political morality.

In examining the competing moral obligations by which Augustine judges subjects, along with the varying moral standard to which he holds rulers and subjects, this paper will demonstrate the clash in Augustine’s political morality. This paper will draw from Augustine’s works, as well as critiques of those works. It will attempt to reconcile the seemingly incongruent aspects of Augustinian morality with his larger view of the human position in a world of flawed social and political institutions, by drawing from his own writings on morality and politics, and on his own experience. Out of this reconciliation, an Augustinian moral standard that values justice over thoughtless obedience and acknowledges the moral accountability of all will be uncovered, in order that rulers and subjects will find a more egalitarian moral code, fitting with the justice and moral responsibility that Augustine endorsed and which ought to be endorsed in modern international politics.