



MARIUS MENKE

University of Münster, Germany | Faculty of Catholic Theology

ORCID: 0009-0006-1253-5477

Revitalizing Liberal Democracy Within the Framework of Augustinian Liberalism

ODNOWA DEMOKRACJI LIBERALNEJ W RAMACH AUGUSTIAŃSKIEGO LIBERALIZMU

Streszczenie

W artykule dokonano analizy koncepcji liberalizmu Augustyńskiego oraz jego funkcji jako teologicznego i etycznego wkładu w odnowę demokracji liberalnej. Wychodząc od pasterskiego charakteru myśli etycznej św. Augustyna, autor wskazuje, że nie proponuje ona sztywnego systemu normatywnego, lecz dostarcza wskazań dla ludzkiego dążenia do dobra poprzez właściwie uporządkowaną miłość (*caritas*). W opozycji do niektórych nurtów współczesnego liberalizmu, które kładą nacisk na proceduralną neutralność i powściągliwość moralną, teologia Augustyńska eksponuje relacyjny i społeczny wymiar ludzkiego istnienia. *Caritas* jawi się nie tylko jako prywatna cnota, lecz jako centralna orientacja egzystencjalna, oferująca normatywne impulsy wykraczające poza sferę moralności indywidualnej i obejmujące życie społeczne oraz polityczne.

Liberalizm Augustyński podejmuje krytyczny, lecz konstruktywny dialog z tendencjami obecnymi we współczesnych demokracjach liberalnych, które skłonne są ujmować wartości takie jak godność, wolność, równość czy sprawiedliwość głównie w kategoriach formalnych norm prawnych lub abstrakcyjnych zasad, nierzadko pozbawionych głębszej wizji ludzkiego spełnienia. Liberalizm Augustyński proponuje perspektywę komplementarną, reinterpretując fundamentalne wartości liberalne w świetle *caritas* – miłości, która porządkuje relacje międzyludzkie ku dobru.

Z tej perspektywy wolność i równość jawią się nie tylko jako indywidualne prawa, lecz również jako wyraz wzajemnej odpowiedzialności oraz wspólnego powołania do budowania sprawiedliwego i pokojowego ładu społecznego. Ujęcie to stanowi konstruktywną alternatywę wobec zarówno postliberalnych, jak i antyliberalnych krytyk, które postulują porzucenie projektu demokracji liberalnej. W przeciwieństwie do ich negacji, liberalizm Augustyński

opowiada się za jej wewnętrzną odnową, postulując włączenie personalistycznych i wspólnotowych aspektów, rozwijanych w ramach chrześcijańskiej etyki społecznej, do pluralistycznego i partycypacyjnego porządku politycznego. W ten sposób odświeża on etyczny fundament demokracji liberalnej i usiłuje ocalić jej obietnicę w obliczu współczesnych wyzwań politycznych i kulturowych.

Słowa kluczowe: liberalizm Augustyński, teologia miłości, partycypacyjna etyka polityczna, liberalna demokracja

Introduction

This article explores the concept of Augustinian liberalism as a theological and ethical framework for revitalizing liberal democracy. In contrast to certain strands of contemporary liberalism, which tend to emphasize procedural neutrality and moral restraint, Augustine's theology and derived from that Augustinian liberalism also highlights the relational and social dimensions of human existence. It is argued that Augustine should be interpreted not solely as the *doctor gratiae*, but also—and potentially more significantly—as the *doctor caritatis*. In his work, love functions not merely as a spiritual or pastoral category, but as a hermeneutical key to central concepts of theological anthropology, such as freedom, equality, and justice. It can be argued that these concepts are not only fundamental to theological discourse but also possess a high degree of applicability to the domain of normative political ethics in pluralistic societies. This contribution thus seeks to provide a theological rereading of Augustine's conception of *caritas* as the basis for a subsequent examination of its political implications for political action in liberal democracies.

Here, an interdisciplinary approach is adopted, integrating historical-contextual, systematic-theological, and political-ethical perspectives. The initial section provides a concise overview of Augustine's intellectual and socio-political milieu, a factor that proved instrumental in the evolution of his concept of love. In the second part, a reconstruction of the understanding of love is provided, exploring its conceptualisation as a pastoral and ethical-political concept. Finally, from a normative perspective, the question is raised as to whether and how Augustine's notion of love can contribute to the revitalisation of political action in liberal democracies in times of social polarization, populism, and ecclesial transformation. The argument is guided by three central theses:

- In essence, Augustine's ethical approach is best understood as pastoral in nature rather than being regarded as dogmatic.

- The theological concept of *caritas* is of pivotal significance in Augustine's theology, superseding the concepts of sin and grace.
- Augustine's concept of love retains the potential to serve as a normative principle for political action in the present day.

1. Reading Augustine beyond dogmatic narrowings

A proper understanding of Augustine's conception of love requires a nuanced examination of his intellectual and cultural milieu. Augustine was initially a philosopher who was profoundly influenced by the *artes liberales*, the "liberal arts" of antiquity. These arts did not refer to individual liberty in the modern sense, but rather to the virtue of *liberalitas*: a disposition of generosity and social responsibility characteristic of an educated free citizen who places his learning in the service of the *res publica*.¹ The classical education of young men was designed to equip them with the capacity to participate meaningfully in public life through virtue, rhetorical aptitude, philosophical contemplation, and social dedication. However, Roman society was structured upon a hierarchical social order, in which *liberalitas* also implied patronage, intended social dependency, and the pursuit of honour and prestige within a tightly woven network of mutual obligations.²

At this point, Christianity—and Augustine as one of its early great thinkers—introduces a profound paradigm shift, whereby the criterion of action evolved from social prestige predicated on inequality to the love of neighbour, particularly towards the vulnerable. Instead of societal dominance, the new guiding virtues include humility, mercy, recognition, and care. The heightened tension between Christian and Roman communities, especially after 410, is a key factor in understanding Augustine's education and socialisation. His conversion therefore marks not merely a personal religious transformation but, for his theological reflection, an anthropological turning point: love becomes the central measure of human existence.³

Despite this fundamental reorientation, Augustine was received throughout the centuries of Western theology primarily as a dogmatic thinker: as the *doctor gratiae*, the "Doctor of Grace", the "Church Father of original sin", and a polemical opponent of Pelagianism, Donatism, and Manichaeism. His theological works

¹ Cf. Cicero, *De officiis* I, 14–15.

² Cf. P. Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ/Oxford 2012, pp. 127–130.

³ Cf. R.W. Dyson, *St. Augustine of Hippo. The Christian Transformation of Political Philosophy*, Continuum: London/New York 2005, pp. 8–88.

were canonized, systematized, and placed at the core of theological discourse.⁴ Conversely, his other writings, by contrast, underwent a process of selective “dogmatization”. Medieval monks who copied his manuscripts frequently preserved only those passages that carried clear dogmatic significance. For instance, consider the Epiphany sermon *Sermo 374 auct.*, which for centuries was known only in a two-verse abridgment.⁵ It was not until its rediscovery by François Dolbeau in 1996 that the sermon’s full scope of 23 verses became known.⁶

This selective reception resulted in a restricted approach with extensive ramifications for the history of theology. For instance, during the Reformation and in the controversies over grace in the early modern period, Augustine was invoked primarily as an unassailable dogmatic authority on grace, and appropriated by various theological schools.⁷ His role as a theologian whose anthropology and ethics were grounded in the concept of love was largely neglected. The result was a “hyper-Augustinianism”⁸ that shaped Western theology well into the twentieth century.

Yet it is precisely Augustine’s pastoral impetus that opens the depth of his theological thought in its existential reality.⁹ Following his episcopal consecration in 395, Augustine served as bishop of Hippo Regius, a prominent coastal city within the Roman province of Numidia. As bishop in a pluralistic community facing military threats, socio-political tensions, and religious conflicts, Augustine understood his theological task primarily as a response to the concrete challenges of ecclesial and social life. This practical orientation remained present even in his more speculative and philosophical works.¹⁰ His theology of grace, for instance,

⁴ Cf. E.L. Saak, *Augustinian Theology in the Later Middle Ages. Vol. 1: Concepts, Perspectives, and the Emergence of Augustinian Identity*, Brill: Leiden 2022; E. TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, Burns & Oates: London 1970, p. 19.

⁵ Cf. H. Müller, *Textkritische Bemerkungen zu den Sermones Dolbeau*, “Wiener Studien” 112 (1999), pp. 143–152, p. 151.

⁶ Cf. Augustine, *sermo Dolbeau 23*, 1–23; Cf. F. Dolbeau, *Die in Mainz wiederentdeckten Predigten Augustins*, in: G. May/G. Hönscheid (eds.), *Die Mainzer Augustinus-Predigten. Studien zu einem Jahrtausendfund*, von Zabern: Mainz 2003, pp. 1–19.

⁷ Cf. J. Rohls, *Geschichte der Ethik*, 2nd ed., Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 1999, pp. 152–165; V.H. Drecoll, *Die Entstehung der Gnadenlehre Augustins*, Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 1999, p. 94; J. Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology*, Oxford University Press: Oxford/New York 2013, pp. 1–16.

⁸ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA/London 2007, pp. 105, 227–231, 319.

⁹ Cf. R. Markus, *Saeculum. History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge/New York 1970, pp. 1–132.

¹⁰ Cf. M. Hollingworth, *Saint Augustine of Hippo. An Intellectual Biography*, Oxford University Press: Oxford/New York 2013, pp. 1–37, 85–104, 142–170.

can only be appropriately interpreted in the context of the lived realities of his era and not without the hermeneutical key of love as a theological guiding principle. Within this pastoral framework, his sermons, letters, and catechetical writings were composed: texts intended not as speculative systems but as instruments for the spiritual formation and encouragement of people in his diocese and beyond.

This perspective underwent a reaccentuation in the twentieth century with the advent of the *Nouvelle Théologie*. Theologians such as Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, and Yves Congar, in addition to philosophers such as Étienne Gilson and the church historian Henri-Irénée Marrou, initiated the practice of reading Augustine within the totality of his work and in the context of his time.¹¹ This involved considering him as the author of spiritual and pastoral writings, as a bishop, and ultimately as a mystagogue of love.¹² In Germany, theologians such as Joseph Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar, inspired by the Ressourcement movement, contributed to a renewed understanding of Augustinian theology.¹³

These sources reveal compelling arguments with regard to his pastoral and catechetical orientation, yielding a portrait of Augustine that supplements – and in some respects corrects – the image of the dogmatic teacher with that of the pastor whose practice was centred on a particular understanding of love.

2. Augustine's concept of love

The following argument posits that the conceptualisation of love as *appetitus* and *caritas/cupiditas*, in conjunction with the notion of *ordo amoris*, is not a static system or purely speculative doctrinal construct. Instead, it is a dynamic order that must be continually realised anew in the concrete life of Christians. This process is sustained by grace, guided by reason, and realised in the active will of the human person.¹⁴

¹¹ Cf. e.g. H.-I. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, De Boccard: Paris 1938.

¹² Cf. B. Daley, *The Nouvelle Théologie and the Patristic Revival: Sources, Symbols and the Science of Theology*, "International Journal of Systematic Theology" 7, 4 (2005), pp. 362–382; G. Flynn, *The Twentieth-Century Renaissance in Catholic Theology*, in: G. Flynn/P. D. Murray (eds.), *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, New York 2011, pp. 2–19.

¹³ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche* (1954), in: J. Ratzinger: *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche* (= Gesammelte Schriften 1), Herder: Freiburg i. Br. 2011, pp. 43–550; H.U. v. Balthasar, *Patristik, Scholastik und wir*, "Theologie der Zeit" 3 (1939), pp. 65–104.

¹⁴ Cf. D. Didberg, *Saint Augustin et la première épître de saint Jean. Une théologie de l'agapè*, Beauchesne: Paris 1975; D. Didberg, *Caritas*, in: Cornelius Mayer/Robert Dodaro (eds.), *Augustinus-Lexikon*, Schwabe: Basel 1994–2024, Vol. 1, pp. 730–743; G. Outka, *Agape. An Ethical Analysis*, New Haven, CT/London: 1972.

Appetitus

In order to gain a more profound understanding of the nuances and implications of this concept, it is imperative to delve into the intricacies of Augustine's conception of love.¹⁵ A paradigmatic approach is provided by a passage from the *Confessiones*, which, through dense imagery, aims to illustrate the quality of the love of God:

But what am I loving when I love you? Not beauty of body nor transient grace, not this fair light which is now so friendly to my eyes, not melodious song in all its lovely harmonies, not the sweet fragrance of flowers or ointments or spices, not manna or honey, not limbs that draw me to carnal embrace: none of these do I love when I love my God. And yet I do love a kind of light, a kind of voice, a certain fragrance, a food and an embrace, when I love my God: a light, voice, fragrance, food and embrace for my inmost self, where something limited to no place shines into my mind, where something not snatched away by passing time sings for me, where something no breath blows away yields to me its scent, where there is savor undiminished by famished eating, and where I am clasped in a union from which no satiety can tear me away. This is what I love, when I love my God.¹⁶

To comprehend the theological subtleties of this passage, it is necessary to make a conceptual differentiation. Three central terms structure Augustine's conception of love: *appetitus*; *caritas/cupiditas*; and *ordo amoris*.¹⁷ It is important to note at the outset that Augustine employs a wide range of expressions (in addition to those already mentioned, such as *amor*, *desiderium*, and *dilectio*) to denote what is often rendered rather undifferentiated as "love" in modern languages. This semantic diversity poses a challenge and calls for systematic clarification.¹⁸

The starting point is the term *appetitus*. In the initial stages of his discourse, Augustine defines love in a formal sense, eschewing any material value, as the desire or striving intrinsic to every human being. This desire, in itself, is morally neutral. In his early work *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, he states: "For love is indeed a certain kind of desire; and we see that desire also exists in the other parts of the soul, which, if it agrees with the mind and reason, will be free in such peace and tranquility for the mind to contemplate that which is eternal."¹⁹

15 Cf. P. Bright, *Book Ten: The Self Seeking the God Who Creates and Heals*, in: K. Paffenroth/R. P. Kennedy (eds.), *A Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY/London 2003, pp. 155–166.

16 Augustine, *Confessiones* 10,8, CCL 27, 159/7–19.

17 Cf. in general R. Williams, *On Augustine*, Bloomsbury: London et al. 2016, pp. 191–206.

18 Cf. for the following remarks M. Menke, *Die Zwei Welten des Augustinian liberalism. Der augustinische Liebesbegriff als Prinzip des politischen Handelns im liberal-demokratischen Rechtsstaat*, EOS: Sankt Ottilien 2023, pp. 45–152.

19 Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 35,2, CCL 44A, 52/51–60. (Translation M.M.)

In this passage, Augustine builds upon the philosophical insights of Cicero, which posit that human endeavours are fundamentally oriented towards achieving happiness. This notion is further elaborated in *De beata vita*: “Beatos nos esse volumus, inquam.”²⁰ Yet, on the basis of both his biographical experience and his theological reflection, Augustine concludes that such happiness—if it is to be truly lasting and untroubled by any future threat—cannot be found in the transient things of this world. Since all created things are subject to change, true happiness can only be found in that which is eternal: the unchanging vision of God.²¹ The human being thus strives at first out of this world, toward that which does not pass away.²² But how does he reach it?

Caritas/cupiditas

Augustine distinguishes, in a second step, the direction of human desire both formally and materially through an ethical lens, thereby identifying two opposing orientations. On the one hand, there is *caritas*, defined as a form of love in which all actions are directed towards God as the highest good (*summum bonum*).²³ Conversely, *cupiditas* represents a distorted, self-centred form of love that is characterised by an insatiable pursuit of satisfaction, manifesting in an unrelenting desire for possession and domination.²⁴ For this latter form, Augustine frequently employs the phrase *libido dominandi et possidendi*, the lust for domination and possession.²⁵ The consequences of this distinction are articulated by Augustine with incomparable density in his work *De civitate Dei*:

Two loves therefore have given origin to these two cities, self-love in contempt of God unto the earthly, love of God in contempt of one’s self to the heavenly. The first seeks the glory of men, and the latter desires God only as the testimony of the conscience, the greatest glory.

20 Augustine, *De beata vita* 1,10, CCL 29, 70/85. Cf. further Augustine, *De trinitate* 13,8, CCL 50A, 393/1; *Sermones* 306,3, PL 38, 1401/22–25; Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes* 5,10,28.

21 Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* 10,29, CCL 27, 170/1–4; *Confessiones* 10,32, CCL 27, 172/4–5.

22 Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* 1,1, CCL 27, 1/6–7: „Tu excitas, ut laudare te delectet, quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te.” (Emphasis M.M.)

23 Cf. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 35,2, CCL 44A, 52/61f.; *De trinitate* 8,14, CCL 50, 290/1–291/6). Cf. A. Dihle, *Ethik*, “RAC” 6 (1966), pp. 646–796, 790–791.

24 Cf. Augustine, *De libero arbitrio* 1,10,31, CSEL 74, 11/12–14; *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 112,2, CCL 36, 634/1–19); *De civitate dei* 5,14, CCL 47, 147/1–10. On the distinction between *caritas* and *cupiditas*, cf. *De trinitate* 9,13, CCL 50, 304/1–11.

25 Cf. Augustine, *De civitate dei* 14,7, CCL 48, 422/39–40); *Epistulae*, 199, 22, CSEL 57, 263; *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 123,5, CCL 36, 678; *Sermones* 330,3, PL 38, 1457); *Sermo Lambot* 9, PLS 2, 791.

That glories in itself, and this in God. [...] That boasts of the ambitious conquerors led by the lust of sovereignty: in this all serve each other in charity, both the rulers in counselling and the subjects in obeying.²⁶

The distinction between *caritas* and *cupiditas* is of fundamental importance for Augustine, as it is the basis of the moral rightness of action, which is dependent on both the internal form and its material orientation. What matters, therefore, is not merely *that* one loves (the formal *appetitus*), but *how* one loves (whether in a caritative or cupiditive form) and towards *what* one loves (whether a caritative or a cupiditive object).²⁷ The quality of love is thus determined by two factors: firstly, the manner in which desire is exercised is intrinsic to the quality of love; secondly, the object towards which this desire is directed is also integral to the quality of love. It is only in the unity of both dimensions—the form of loving and the aim of love—that *caritas* comes into full realization.²⁸

For Augustine, the ethical problem does not lie in *appetitus* as such—that is, not in striving or desiring as an anthropological constant. Conversely, this dynamic force is precisely what is required for human beings, in their distance from God, to long for the highest good. *Appetitus* becomes problematic only when it is directed exclusively towards finite things, that is, objects which do not in themselves represent the highest good and thus distract from the goal of the love of God. In this perspective, *cupiditas* emerges as a distorted form of love that does not lead the human being beyond themselves, but rather turns them back upon themselves. *Cupiditas* is defined as self-curvature (*inclinatio ad se ipsum*),²⁹ and for Augustine, it signifies an existential isolation that simultaneously brings about alienation from God, from fellow human beings, and from creation.³⁰

From this perspective, the world is no longer perceived as a place of divine knowledge, but rather as a “desert”, where sustainable interpersonal relationships are impeded or rendered unfeasible.³¹ According to Augustine, this existentially experienced reality requires healing and meaningful transcendence through

26 Augustine, *De civitate dei* 14,28, CCL 48, 451/1–3.

27 Cf. E. Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love. An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*, Chicago University Press: Chicago, IL 2008, pp. 30–74.

28 Cf. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 1,22–1,23, CCL 32, ed. Simonetti M., 42/1–44/27; 1,25–1,27, ed. Simonetti M., 46/17–50/19. For further reference see R. Canning, *The Distinction between Love for God and Love for Neighbour in St. Augustine*, “Augustiniana” 32 (1982), pp. 5–41.

29 Cf. Augustine, *De civitate dei* 14,13, CCL 48, 434/27.

30 Cf. M.M. Keys, *Pride, Politics, and Humility in Augustine’s City of God*, Cambridge 2022, pp. 152–158.

31 Cf. Augustine, *Sermones* 88,13, RB 94 (1984), 87–330–346.

a turning towards *caritas*. The communication of divine love (*communicatio dilectionis*) is said to take place pneumatologically through the Holy Spirit, who, according to the Gospel of John, is promised and given to the disciples as the Paraclete (παράκλητος).³² In this context, the Trinitarian relational structure of divine love, as revealed in the Logos, is not merely a one-time historical phenomenon in the Incarnation of Christ; it is a perpetually operative force in the world through the agency of the Spirit.³³ *Caritas* is therefore not merely an abstract concept or an ethical ideal, but a concrete reality, inscribed into the very structure of the world, creatively present in the Spirit, and experienced in loving relationships with God and with one's fellow human beings.³⁴

Accordingly, in his preaching Augustine exhorts the faithful in his sermons to adopt this spiritual disposition. This dynamic relationship with the divine is characterised by the act of turning towards one another in a spirit of active, selfless love. According to Augustine, this transformation manifests through a dual speech act, embodying the quintessence of love: The expression of affection "I love you" can be interpreted as implying the desire for the other person to exist, to be recognised and affirmed. Conversely, it signifies "I will that you be good"—that is, that one's true vocation is to find fulfilment in the love of God.³⁵ In this disposition, the ideal of *caritas* is concretely realized, constituting the pilgrim city of God (*civitas dei peregrina*).³⁶ For Augustine, then, love is not merely an inner emotional state or a moral-philosophical principle, but a structuring foundational force of human existence. But how does it develop from the transcendent experience of the inner self into the immanent world and influence the way we relate to each other? At this juncture, the concept of the *ordo amoris* must be considered in a third step.

Ordo amoris

Augustine expands the distinction between *caritas* and *cupiditas*, which had previously been understood primarily in individual-ethical terms, by adding a social-ethical dimension. This dimension is developed within the framework of his concept of the *ordo amoris*. The community of Christian believers (*ecclesia*)

32 Cf. Augustine, *De trinitate* 9,13, CCL 50, 304/1–11.

33 Cf. Augustine, *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 32,8, CCL 36, 304/1–4.

34 Cf. Augustine, *De natura boni* 1, CSEL 25,2, 855/3–26.

35 Cf. Augustine, *Sermo Lambot* 27, 3, PLS 2, 833/7–27); *In epistulam Iohannis ad Parthos tractatus*, 8,10, PL 35, 2041/50–2042/50).

36 Cf. Augustine, *De civitate dei* 1,35, CCL 47, 33/1–12); *Sermo Dolbeau* 22,19, (Dolbeau, Vingt-six, 571/456–460); *In epistulam Iohannis ad Parthos tractatus* 8,10, PL 35, 2042/7); *Sermones* 336,2, PL 38,1472/27–44.

constitutes the basis for a society characterised by *caritas*.³⁷ It transcends the private and familial domains, necessitating its embodiment in the public sphere to actualise a comprehensive manifestation of love. Christians manifest themselves as a community that exists and acts in the mode of love.³⁸ It is on the basis of the *communicatio dilectionis* that they shape their mutual relations. These relations are not only defined within the community of believers, but must also extend to their relationships with all members of the public.³⁹

The objective of the *ordo amoris* is to establish a moral order characterised by the well-lived relationship between God, humanity, and creation.⁴⁰ As such, it cannot be realised in purely inward piety or in mere ethics of disposition (*vita contemplativa*), but must be demonstrated concretely through active engagement with one's neighbour. This love, typified by its capacity for freedom (*vita activa*), manifests in a situational context. Consequently, it necessitates a recurrent examination and realignment of one's own willing and acting towards its ultimate objective in each distinct circumstance of life.⁴¹ The moral quality of an action, therefore, is measured by the following factors: the outward deed itself, the intention and motivation behind it, as well as the specific circumstances of the situation in question. In the context of Augustine's thought, these phenomena are rendered possible by the grace of God, ultimately finding their fulfilment in the act of turning towards God through an act of selfless love.⁴²

For there is not one love by which we love our neighbor and another by which we love God. It is therefore not a different love. With the very same love with which we love our neighbor, we also love God. But because God is one thing and the neighbor another, they are loved with one and the same love, yet those who are loved are not one and the same: therefore, the love of God, being the greater, must be commended first, and the love of the neighbor second; yet it begins with the second, so that one may arrive at the first. 'For if you do not love your brother whom you see, how will you be able to love God whom you do not see' (1 Io 4,20)?⁴³

37 Cf. Augustine, *De spiritu et littera* 29, CSEL 60, 183/2–3.

38 Cf. O. O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love. Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge 2002, pp. 1–24.

39 Cf. M. Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope. Augustine's Political Thought*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ/Oxford 2022, pp. 1–18, 32–46.

40 Cf. Augustine, *De civitate dei*, 15,22, CCL 48, 488/33–34.

41 Cf. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 144,13, CCL 40, 2098/39–44.

42 Cf. Augustine, *De ordine* 1,27, CSEL 63, 139/4–31.

43 Augustine, *Sermones* 265,9, PL 38, 1223/22–31. (Translation M.M.)

The responsibility for a specific action rests solely with the individual person. Responsibility for a deliberate action cannot be delegated or transferred institutionally; rather, it is the expression of a participatory, personal ethics of responsibility, in which the individual human being acts autonomously in relation to God and to fellow human beings. To a certain extent, the normativity of the biblical double commandment of love (*dilectio dei et proximi*) contains a foundation for the autonomy of human action. Although Augustine's theistic concept of autonomy differs from the modern, especially Kantian, understanding of the term, human rational capacity is the precondition and instrument for recognising the moral good, shaping the will accordingly, and acting in conformity with it.⁴⁴ It is, then, only through the ordered love of one's neighbour (*dilectio proximi*) that one can properly love God (*dilectio dei*).

However, Augustine's perspective differs from the notion of perceiving this capacity as a purely natural or self-sufficient power. Instead, it persists as an enduring element within his cognitive processes, facilitated and sustained by divine grace. The concept of divine grace is said to align with the human will, corresponding to the endeavour to liberate oneself from the entrapment of *cupiditas* and to attain the correct orientation in *caritas*. Reason, in turn, serves to recognise what is morally required in each situation, with its capacity for judgment.⁴⁵

In the philosophical framework of Augustine, this ethical responsibility encompasses not only the immediate neighbour within the social proximity of family or Christian community, but also extends to the global community. Despite the evident imperfections of the world, stemming from moral deficiencies, it is not forsaken by God. Instead, it always remains the good creation of God.⁴⁶ This perspective entails humanity's mandate to refrain from destroying creation, which is deemed incomplete and vulnerable to human action. Instead, the mandate is to preserve and cultivate creation.⁴⁷ This mandate is applicable in two distinct areas: firstly, within the communal life of the *civitas Dei*, and secondly, within the political and societal spheres of the *saeculum*. In these domains, Christians, both, as faithful members of the church and as citizens and members of the public, assume a responsibility to promote the common good in concert with other political actors.

⁴⁴ Cf. Augustine, *Confessiones* 7,11, CCL 27, 100/17–35). Cf. S.C. Byers, *Love, Will, and the Intellectual Ascents*, in: T. Toom (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge et al. 2020, pp. 154–174.

⁴⁵ Cf. Augustine, *De vera religione* 39,72, CCL 32, 234/12–14.

⁴⁶ Cf. Augustine, *De natura boni*,= 1, CSEL 25, 2, 855/3–26.

⁴⁷ Cf. Augustine, *De spiritu et littera* 29, CSEL 60, 182/14–183/7.

3. Augustine's concept of *caritas* as a principle for political action in relation to freedom, equality, and justice

For Augustine, *caritas* is both a normative criterion and an existential driving force behind every successful human relationship. This constitutes the benchmark against which personal conduct, as well as communal and social action, is to be evaluated. The question that arises from this is that of the relevance of *caritas* as a normative principle for political action.

Political Action

This question is further explored in the ensuing discussion, which examines the idea that politics, in its fundamental nature, is a relational practice characterised by intersubjectivity.⁴⁸ This dynamic interaction is not merely the exercise of power or the administration of resources, but rather a multifaceted process involving persons and communities. The objective of political action is the collective establishment and continuous organisation of a just and peaceful society. This objective is predicated on a specific conception of politics, one that is founded on normative ethical principles that have developed in Europe over time from Christian theology and liberal philosophy.⁴⁹ In essence, this concept of political action is predicated on the premise that every human being is created in the image of God, endowed with inherent dignity and inalienable rights.

These normative preconditions form the anthropological foundation of Western democracies. The provision of a shared ethical framework is of paramount importance in the establishment, maintenance, and continual reform of political systems.⁵⁰ From this standpoint, politics is not considered to be an autonomous sphere detached from moral considerations; rather, it is a domain of human responsibility that must be shaped in accordance with the dignity of the person and the demands of justice and peace.

In this way, Augustine's concept of *caritas* finds a contemporary resonance: the order of social and political life is not an end in itself, but is directed toward the flourishing of human beings in community, toward a common life marked by mutual recognition, solidarity, and peace. Consequently, the structures of the political

⁴⁸ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL/London 1958, pp. 181–188.

⁴⁹ Cf. in general L. Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual. The Origins of Western Liberalism*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA 2014; E. Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism. Political Philosophy and the Justice of God*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA/London 2019, pp. 1–72.

⁵⁰ Cf. J. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ 2004, pp. 225–245.

order must be evaluated not solely in terms of their efficiency or stability, but also in relation to their ability to promote human dignity and safeguard the most vulnerable members of society.

Augustinian Liberalism

Concurrently, Augustine's approach to both political and ecclesiastical institutions is characterised by profound scepticism, particularly in instances where these institutions assert the capacity to establish perfect justice on earth through the implementation of a theocratic order or secular authority.⁵¹ In opposition to such conceptions of immanence as utopias, he proposes an eschatological reservation: all earthly orders are considered provisional and must be critically accompanied by autonomous reason, understood in secular terms, and by *caritas*, understood theologically.⁵² In that regard, Augustinian liberalism "is anti-utopianism: it is principled opposition to utopian politics. All illiberal movements are utopian because of the boundless faith they invest in some leader or group of leaders."⁵³

From a theological perspective, a more profound comprehension of the concept of political community is evident, one that is aligned with the fundamental principles of liberalism.⁵⁴ In this regard, Augustine's concept of *caritas* offers a pivotal complement. The central argument of this paper is that Augustine's theology of *caritas* does not constitute an inherent opposition to the liberal ideals of freedom, equality, and justice. Instead, it can offer a necessary deepening and renewal of these principles, helping to guard them against both internal erosion and current ideological challenges.⁵⁵

51 Cf. Augustine, *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 124, 5 CCL 36, 685/82–102.

52 Cf. Augustine, *De perfectione iustitiae hominis* 8, CSEL 42, 8/2–5; *De natura et gratia*, 84, CSEL 60, 298/21–26).

53 P.D. Miller, *Just War and Ordered Liberty*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK 2021, p. 161. Miller employs his approach to Augustinian liberalism to address the question of just war. However, in that specific regard, his understanding of Augustinian liberalism remains limited, drawing exclusively on Herbert Deane's and Reinhold Niebuhr's respective versions of political Augustinianism as "Augustinian realism". This approach has undoubtedly exerted a significant influence on contemporary notions of Augustinian liberalism, yet it has also undergone further development in recent years as will be demonstrated here. Cf. additionally J.B. Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*, Notre Dame University Press: Notre Dame, IL 1995, pp. 89–112.

54 Cf. M. Menke, *Die zwei Welten des Augustinian liberalism*, EOS: Sankt Ottilien 2023, pp. 355–456.

55 For an epistemological approach to the relationship between Augustinian ethics and liberal politics, see B.J. Wood, *The Augustinian Alternative. Religious Skepticism and the Search for a Liberal Politics*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN 2024, pp. 55–92.

Liberalism, in its optimal manifestation, is predicated on the conviction of freedom and the equal dignity of every human being, principles that necessitate the mutual recognition and tolerance of diverse conceptions of the good life within a shared private and public sphere. These core values reflect a profound anthropological thought, one that Christian theology likewise affirms: every person is created in the image of God and therefore possesses an inalienable worth that transcends all social, political, or cultural differences.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, liberalism is frequently susceptible to the reduction of these convictions to merely formal or procedural principles, divorced from a substantive understanding of the good life and the relational nature of human existence.

Liberalism has achieved great moral and political gains, even in terms of its focus on the impartiality of procedural rules. By simply abandoning love as part of its political psychology, however, liberalism provides little by way of vocabulary or conceptuality that might organize the disordered loves it rightly fears and that are perpetually expressed in political societies.⁵⁷

This tendency is rooted in its basic approach to politics: liberalism seeks to establish a neutral framework within which individuals can pursue their own ends without the political system endorsing any particular vision of the good. However, this aspiration to neutrality is confronted with practical limitations. It is evident that, especially in a liberal democracy, political decisions are made by individuals who, while operating collectively, are nonetheless influenced by normative commitments and ethical convictions.

This phenomenon becomes particularly evident in politically sensitive moral questions. To illustrate this point, consider the decision-making process of a representative tasked with deliberating on contentious issues such as bioethics or questions of war and peace. Despite any claims of neutrality on the part of the state, it is apparent that individual decision-makers are compelled to draw on underlying values—encompassing life, human dignity, and personal responsibility—that inform and guide their judgment. This prompts a fundamental question: how can the liberal ideal of a value-neutral state be reconciled with the inescapable moral commitments of individuals operating within its political structures?

Rather than denying or suppressing these convictions, Augustinian liberalism would suggest rendering them transparent and subject to public reasoning.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Cf. P.J. Weithman, *Toward an Augustinian Liberalism*, in: G. Matthews (ed.), *The Augustinian Tradition*, University of California Press: Berkeley, CA/Los Angeles, CA/London 1999, pp. 304–322.

⁵⁷ E. Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL 2008, p. 158.

⁵⁸ Cf. R.W. Dyson, *St. Augustine of Hippo*, Continuum: London/New York 2005, pp. 142–179.

The objective is not to abolish the plurality of ethical foundations from political discourse nor to dictate religious norms to the whole of society. Rather, it is to cultivate a shared civic space in which different value commitments—grounded in *caritas*, human dignity, or secular approaches to autonomy and subjectivity—can and must encounter one another in respectful deliberation. Consequently, the liberal paradigm is not abandoned, but furthered: transcending its mere procedural character, it strives to become a living community shaped by freedom, equality, and justice aimed at the pursuit of the common good.

Freedom

Within the conceptual framework of Augustinian liberalism, the notion of freedom is not confined to the absence of external constraints—what Isaiah Berlin termed “negative freedom”.⁵⁹ While such freedom from coercion and oppression remains essential, it is merely the precondition, not the fulfilment, of human freedom. Freedom, therefore, is relational and purposive; it is not merely the state of absence of constraints, but rather a state in which individuals are enabled to pursue their full potential. That is to say, it is the freedom to find meaning in life. This corresponds to what Berlin termed “positive freedom”, understood not in a collectivist or paternalistic sense, but as the empowerment of the individual.

From a Christian theological perspective, this understanding of positive freedom ultimately points toward union with God, the fullness of human flourishing in eternal communion. However, it is important to note that this eschatological fulfilment is not disconnected from temporal realities. In contemporary society, the concept of freedom is realised through the capacity to establish meaningful relationships, contribute to the betterment of society, and nurture virtue in both personal and communal life. Catholic social teaching, therefore, speaks of “integral human development”, which includes not only material well-being but also moral, cultural, and spiritual growth.

Accordingly, the notion of freedom in the context of Augustinian liberalism does not entail a permissive stance towards egocentric individualism, nor does it inherently align with the collective.⁶⁰ From a political standpoint, this necessitates the establishment of a liberal order that remains committed to its ethical foundations. This approach is crucial in ensuring that the order does not devolve into a mere

⁵⁹ Cf. I. Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1958.

⁶⁰ Cf. E. Gregory, *Augustinians and the New Liberalism*, “Augustinian Studies” 41 (2010), pp. 315–332; C.T. Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2007, pp. 10–23; C.T. Mathewes, *Augustinian Christian Republican Citizenship*, in: M.J. Kessler (ed.), *Political Theology for a Plural Age*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2013, pp. 218–249.

procedural neutrality or the imposition of a singular conception of the good life. Instead, it engenders the conditions for people to seek truth freely, to build just relationships, and to contribute to a common good that transcends individual interests.

In summary, the approach of Augustinian liberalism integrates negative and positive freedom within a broader ethical and theological framework. It is important to note that freedom is not considered an end in itself; rather, it is understood as the condition for actions grounded in *caritas*, which manifests itself socially and politically as justice and the protection of human dignity.

Equality

In the theological framework of Augustinian liberalism, equality is conceptualised as a fundamental moral principle, rooted in the shared createdness of all human beings as *imago Dei*. This moral equality is predicated on the premise that every individual possesses intrinsic dignity, irrespective of their social role, economic status, or personal achievements. This affirmation of worth is regarded as being of universal significance. It is not earned or granted by society, but rather bestowed by God's love.⁶¹

Beyond this foundational moral equality, Augustinian liberalism recognises the necessity of social and political equality. The concept of social equality refers to the structures that ensure fair access to essential goods and opportunities, including education, healthcare, decent work, and social participation. The concept of political equality signifies the principle of all citizens being equal before the law and their collective responsibility in contributing to the common good through democratic participation. These forms of equality are not merely abstract or procedural; rather, they are to be realised concretely in just social and economic conditions, guided by solidarity and the universal destination of goods.⁶²

Accordingly, the concept of equality as outlined in this particular vision does not entail the eradication of differences or the imposition of uniformity. The objective is to ensure that diversity—of talents, responsibilities, and social roles—does not result in domination, marginalisation, or exclusion. It is imperative that all differences are viewed within the framework of mutual responsibility and shared humanity. In contrast to libertarian models, which reduce equality to formal legal status, and to egalitarian models, which risk suppressing legitimate diversity, Augustinian liberalism proposes a relational view: equality as the shared responsibility for one another's flourishing.

⁶¹ Cf. R. Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2004, pp. 27–71.

⁶² Cf. M. Menke, *Die zwei Welten des Augustinian liberalism*, pp. 55–59.

Justice

This perspective on freedom and equality carries direct implications for social and political structures. In the context of Augustinian liberalism, justice is not merely the balancing of competing interests or the procedural fairness of neutral rules.⁶³ Instead, justice can be defined as the social expression of *caritas* made effective in public life. It is imperative that societies not only ensure the protection of negative liberties through the rule of law, but also facilitate the realisation of positive freedoms through the creation of conducive social, economic, and cultural conditions.⁶⁴

In this sense, justice is characterised by both relational and distributive dimensions.⁶⁵ It is vital to ensure not only the protection of individual rights but also the active shaping of the social and political order, thereby facilitating access to the goods necessary for a dignified life for all people, particularly those marginalised. These include the provision of fair wages and working conditions, social security, access to education, and environmental stewardship. The conceptualisation of justice within Augustinian liberalism is one that resists the liberal tendency to reduce justice to negative liberties and formal equality, as well as collectivist ideologies that sacrifice the individual for the collective.⁶⁶

An Augustinian liberalism, therefore, seeks to integrate the personalist foundation of Catholic social teaching into the structures of a free and pluralistic society. In the context of Augustinian liberalism, it can be argued that justice is not in opposition to love, but rather its social and institutional manifestation. Whereas love orders human relations on a personal level, justice orders them on a social and political level. The concept of justice is pivotal in ensuring the establishment of an environment conducive to the responsible exercise of both freedom and equality, grounded in the principles of individual respect and collective solidarity within the community.⁶⁷ It ensures that the relational character of human beings—created for communion—is reflected in the political, social, and economic structures of society.

63 Cf. T.P. Jackson, *Political Agape. Christian Love and Liberal Democracy*, Grand Rapids, MI 2015, pp. 59–151.

64 Cf. in general for this passage N. Wolterstorff, *Justice. Rights and Wrongs*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ 2008, pp. 135–148; N. Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K. 2015, pp. 21–49, 75–84, 142–157.

65 Cf. J. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, pp. 270–286.

66 Cf. N. Wolterstorff, *Justice*, pp. 180–207.

67 Cf. N. Wolterstorff, *Justice*, pp. 342–361.

Conclusion

This article aimed to develop the concept of Augustinian liberalism as a theological and ethical revitalization of liberal democracy. It argues that Augustine's ethical thought is fundamentally pastoral, oriented toward guiding human beings in their striving for the good, as opposed to the prescription of rigid moral laws. Central to Augustine's theology is the concept of love consisting of the threefold aspects *appetitus*, *caritas* and *ordo amoris*, culminating in the greater scheme of *caritas* which surpasses sin as the decisive state of human life. This love is not merely a private virtue but carries normative significance for political life today.

Against the backdrop of contemporary liberalism's tendency toward procedural formalism and ethical neutrality, Augustinian liberalism proposes a renewed anthropological foundation for politics. Human dignity, freedom, equality, and justice—core liberal values—are not abandoned but reinterpreted through the relational and social character of *caritas*. Love becomes the guiding principle that orders political action towards the common good, sustaining a pluralistic, yet ethically grounded society.

In this manner, Augustinian liberalism offers an inner renewal of liberal democracy. It responds both to internal crises of liberalism—such as ethical emptiness, egocentric individualism, or moral relativism—and to external challenges from post-liberal or illiberal movements that seek to dismantle liberal principles altogether. Rather than replacing liberal democracy, Augustinian liberalism integrates the personalist and relational ethics of Christian thought.

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REVITALIZING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF AUGUSTINIAN LIBERALISM

Summary

This article explores the concept of Augustinian liberalism, and its function as a theological and ethical contribution to the revitalisation of liberal democracy. Building on the pastoral character of Augustine's ethical thought, it suggests that Augustine does not offer a rigid moral system but provides guidance for human beings in their pursuit of the good through rightly ordered love (*caritas*). In contrast to certain strands of contemporary liberalism, which tend to emphasize procedural neutrality and moral restraint, Augustine's theology highlights the relational and social dimensions of human existence. *Caritas* emerges not simply as a private virtue but as a central orientation for human life, offering normative insights that extend beyond personal morality into social and political life. Augustinian liberalism engages critically but constructively with tendencies in contemporary liberal democracies to frame values such as dignity, freedom, equality, and justice primarily as formal legal norms or abstract principles, sometimes lacking a more profound account of human flourishing. Augustinian liberalism offers a complementary perspective by reinterpreting these core liberal values in the light of *caritas*, the love that orders human relationships toward the good. From this standpoint, human beings are called to freedom and equality not only as individual rights but also as expressions of their mutual responsibility and their shared task to build a just and peaceful common life. This perspective offers a constructive alternative to both post-liberal and illiberal critiques, which seek to abandon liberal democracy altogether. In contrast to the repudiation of liberalism, Augustinian liberalism advocates a reinvigoration from within, incorporating the personalist and communal dimensions conceptualised in Christian social ethics into a pluralistic and participatory political order. In doing so, it revitalizes the ethical substance of liberal democracy and seeks to sustain its promise in the face of contemporary political and cultural challenges.

Keywords: Augustinian liberalism, theology of love, participatory political ethics, liberal democracy

Author's note

Marius Menke – Doctor of Theology, postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Münster. E-mail: marius.menke@uni-muenster.de.

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