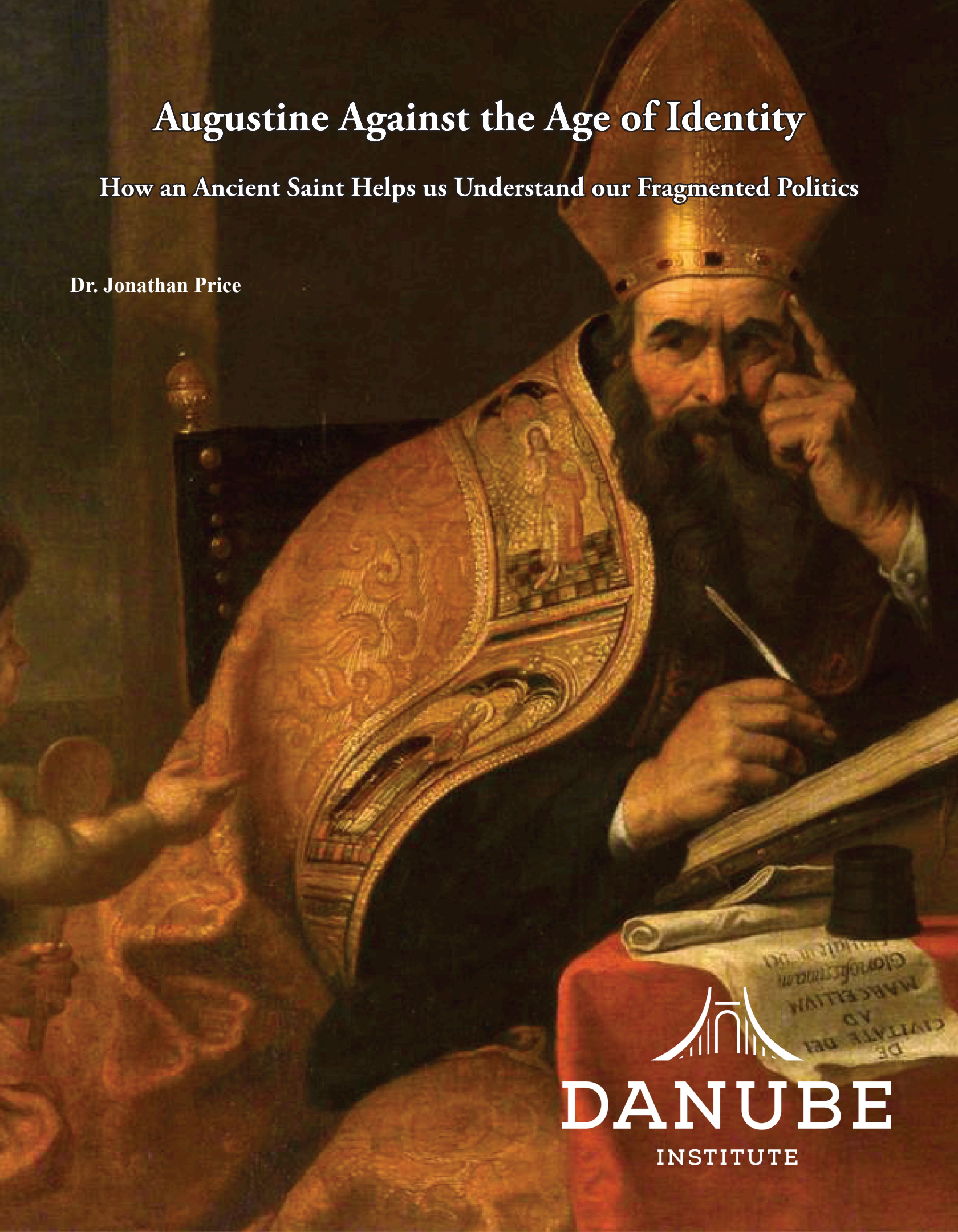
# Augustine Against the Age of Identity

## How an Ancient Saint Helps us Understand our Fragmented Politics

**Dr. Jonathan Price**



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## About the Author

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# Introduction: Why Identity is Now the Battleground of Politics

Few concepts dominate contemporary politics more than 'identity'. From the debates over gender and sexuality that preoccupy EU courts, to regionalist or nationalist movements in Catalonia and Scotland, the sprawling DEI bureaucracies that have colonised universities and workplaces, to the pro-Gaza and Islamist movements in Britain, to the 'Christian nationalist' movement in the United States.[1] We increasingly argue not about tax rates or trade agreements, but about 'who we are' usually over and against who others are or were. The stakes are high: which groups deserve recognition, what moral weight our personal or collective identities should carry, and who gets the cultural, political, and financial spoils.

This shift has bewildered the champions of post-war liberalism, who have assumed that the language of universal human rights provides a durable framework for common political life under democratic citizenship. The Universal Declaration speaks the language of the "human being" in the abstract, stripped of the trappings of race, sex, nationality, religion, history, or desire.[2] For decades, that abstraction seemed enough. It no longer is. The grammar of universal rights has proven too thin to explain why people care so fiercely about their particular identities, or why these identities have become the primary contest.

Beneath this turmoil lies an older and far deeper question: what is the human being? Our present politics is not, at root, a clash of policies or programmes. It is an anthropological crisis—a struggle between rival visions of the self, rival accounts of where our moral authority comes from, and rival understandings of what it means to be free. Remarkably, this struggle was anticipated sixteen centuries ago by Augustine of Hippo, who distinguished between two forms of inner life. One interiority—the life of reason turned toward God—draws human beings together in their outer lives through shared loves and common purposes. The other—the fallen inwardness of self-absorption—splinters the soul and, eventually, the society around it by drawing each person back into himself. Augustine saw that the structure of the inner life inevitably shapes the structure of politics.

Modernity rediscovered Augustine's interiority and then radically transformed it. It was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who took Augustine's "inner self" and turned it into a kind of personal sanctuary: a private domain where the individual discovers not God, but the authentic self.[3] For Rousseau, this inner sanctuary becomes the source of moral knowledge, dignity, and political legitimacy. What begins as spiritual introspection becomes the philosophical engine of identity politics, first in its romantic and nationalistic flavours during the nineteenth century and then in its lifestyle and ideological modes in the twentieth century. Our current debates similarly echo a much older argument about the self: where it resides, what it desires, and how its loves shape the world we build together. To understand identity politics—and its implications for the modern liberal order—we must therefore return to the origins of Western interiority in Augustine, and to its radical modern reworking in Rousseau.

1. Michael Keating, "Nationalist Movements in Comparative Perspective," in The Oxford Handbook of Scottish Politics, ed. Michael Keating (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 145–167; Anwen Elias, "Nationalism and Secession," in Handbook of Territorial Politics, ed. Klaus Detterbeck and Eve Hepburn (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2018), 184–200 (nationalist movements); Matias Lopez, "Gender Recognition at the Crossroads: Four Models and the Compass of Comparative Law," International Journal of Constitutional Law 21, no. 3 (2023): 987–1022; Mieke Verloo and Emanuela Lombardo, "Backlash and the Politics of Gender in European Union," Social Politics 28, no. 3 (2021): 539–563 (legislation on sexuality); Amna Khalid and Jeffrey Aaron Snyder, "The DEI Bureaucracy Has Peaked, but the Damage Is Done," Chronicle of Higher Education 70, no. 9 (2024); Fabio Rojas, "From Ideology to Bureaucracy: The Growth of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in American Universities," Sociological Forum 38, no. 3 (2023): 789–812; Erin Bartram and Eric K. Kaufmann, "Academic Freedom in Crisis: Punishment, Conformity, and Institutional Change," Society 60 (2023): 225–241; Musa al-Gharbi, "DEI Programs Are Administrative Bloat," American Affairs 7, no. 4 (Winter 2023) (DEI).

2. Universal Declaration of Human Rights: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf

3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Confessions, in The Collected Writings of Rousseau, vol. 5, trans. Christopher Kelly (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), Book I, 5. See also Joshua Mitchell, "Rousseau and the Origin of the Politics of Authenticity," *Political Theory* 24, no. 4 (1996): 663–89.

# Two Kinds of Politics: Universal Right vs. Identity

Modern politics is torn between two competing visions of the human person. One sees the individual primarily as a bearer of inalienable universal rights—an abstract "human being" whose dignity is identical everywhere and for everyone. The other sees the individual as the expression of a particular identity—defined by culture, history, language, desire, or some deep sense of inner selfhood. These two visions coexist uneasily in Western democracies, and their friction explains much of our current turbulence.

The post-war order was built on an ideal articulated most clearly in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: that all people possess equal dignity regardless of "race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status." In its noble simplicity, this vision strips human beings of all particularity. It asks us to see only the universal core we share—our reason and conscience—and to treat everyone as equal participants in a common moral universe.

The promise of this model is immense. It offers equal protection under the law, equal dignity in civic life, and a principled basis for opposing discrimination and oppression at the hands of authorities. It attempts to lift politics above tribalism, passion, and prejudice. Yet the same strength is also a weakness. The "quality-less human" at the center of universal-rights discourse is a being who exists nowhere in the real world. Humans experience themselves through culture, place, history, faith, and desire–in each case, as a 'people'. They do not relate to one another as floating abstractions but as members of families, nations, languages, and traditions. A politics that ignores these attachments struggles to understand why people fight so fiercely for recognition and belonging.

This strand of liberalism built a political order on what cannot be seen or verified but which also is purportedly universal: the invisible interior of "reason and conscience". But when laws and institutions appeal to an inner faculty which is never directly observable, they risk appearing bloodless, procedural, and detached from everyday life. The more society fragments, the more that abstraction struggles to bind people together.

Identity politics arises from precisely the opposite impulse of rights politics. Instead of abstracting away differences, it foregrounds them. Modern societies have witnessed political mobilisation around ethnicity, language groups, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious minority status, and historical injustice. These identities are not merely intellectual categories; they are charged with emotion, desire, fear, and longing for recognition. They express how people see themselves and how they wish to be seen by others.

This is why identity politics is so powerful. It operates not through universal duty but through personal desire: the desire for visibility, affirmation, safety, dignity, and belonging of the self. It does not ask citizens to leave their particularities at the door of the public square; it demands that these particularities be acknowledged and protected. For this reason, identity politics cannot be dismissed as a passing fad or a fringe ideology. It speaks to something deeply human. People care about the communities and stories that give shape to their lives. They care about how they are named, seen, and recognised. When universal-rights language fails to capture these concerns, identity politics steps in to fill the void.

Beneath the political conflict between 'rights' and 'identity' are two rival understandings of the human person. Universal-rights politics imagines a stable, rational agent whose identity is secondary to their humanity. It treats individuals as interchangeable bearers of the same rights, capable of rising above personal attachments for the sake of the common good. Identity politics rests on a different anthropology. It tends to see the human being in an historicist mode: as vulnerable, impressionable, and shaped by experiences of recognition or neglect, advantage or disadvantage. This self seeks expression and protection; it demands to be affirmed for what it uniquely is, not absorbed into an anonymous universal.

Rather than conceiving of humans as 'anti-fragile', capable of being strengthened by hardship, identity politics sees humans as essentially delicate, molded chiefly by external influences rather than personal decisions. Rights language seeks to free people; identity politics seeks to protect them. These two visions cannot be fully reconciled because they start from different answers to a single, fundamental question: Where does the true self reside? If it lies in our universal rational nature, then politics can and arguably should be built on rights and equality. If it lies in our inner experiences, desires, and identities, then politics must be built on recognition and therefore on particularities. The clash between these anthropologies is the hidden engine of our current political crisis—a crisis neither side can resolve without first understanding the self that stands at the center of the debate.

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# Augustine's Two Interiors: The Roots of the Modern Self

Long before modern philosophers spoke of psychology, selfhood, or identity, Augustine of Hippo gave the West a powerful metaphor that would shape its entire moral imagination: the interior life. For Augustine, the most important events of human existence take place within—in the movements of desire, the act of understanding, and the encounter with God. Yet this interior is not simple. Augustine describes two inner worlds, two ways of being within oneself, and two possible trajectories for the human soul. One leads upward into communion with God; the other collapses inward into isolation. These twin interiors form the ancient backdrop against which modern identity politics now unfolds.

In the Confessions, Augustine famously turns away from the world of external spectacle and seeks God in the depths of the self. "Do not look outside," he writes, 'return into yourself. Truth dwells in the inner man.'[4] This interior forms the deepest and most universal part of human nature, the inner person shared by all, where the soul encounters its Creator. To turn inward, in Augustine's vision, is to rise: to ascend from the shifting world of appearances into the intelligible realm where truth, goodness, and beauty reside.[5] It is a movement toward a common source, a journey that all rational creatures can undertake. Thus began the Western tradition of inwardness—not as a sanctuary of self-expression, but as the shared ground of understanding, communion, and divine encounter.

But Augustine is too honest a diagnostician to leave matters in this ideal state. The same inwardness that should open us toward God is, in our fallen condition, bent back upon itself. He describes the sinner as inclinatus ad seipsum—curved inward, folded onto the self.[6] The interior that should be transparent to truth becomes a private, shadowed chamber. This fallen interiority is a kind of negative image of the true inner life. It fractures the soul, shuts out God, and walls in the self in a prison of endless self-justification. This darker inner space is the ancestor of what we now call identity—the sense of a private, incommunicable core of selfhood, known only to the one who possesses it. The modern language of "authenticity," "my truth," and "inner identity" bears unmistakable resemblance to Augustine's fallen inwardness. For Augustine, this is not the inner world we were made for. It is the interior produced by pride and disordered desire.

Augustine's account of the inner life flows directly into his political vision. A society, at root, is shaped by the interior loves of its members. "A people," he writes, "is a multitude united by the sharing of common loves.[7] A city is not defined first by borders, laws, or institutions, but by what its citizens care about—what they desire, honor, and seek together. This leads Augustine to his famous distinction between two cities, each rooted in a different interior orientation. Love of God forms the heavenly city, marked by humility, communion, and a shared orientation toward

4. '*Noli foras ire, in te ipsum redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas*.' Augustine of Hippo, Confessions, Book VII, chapter 10, §16 and Book X, chapter 27, §38; Augustinus, Confessionum Libri XIII, ed. James J. O'Donnell, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) (Latin). Augustine, Confessions, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) (English). See also Brian Stock, *Augustine's Inner Dialogue: The Philosophical Soliloquy in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–20; Phillip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

5. Augustine. *Trinity*. In *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, part I, vol. 5, *The Trinity*, translated by Edmund Hill, O.P., introduction and notes by John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), 326–27 (Book VIII, chapter 3, §§4–5) (English). Augustine. *De Trinitate libri XV*, edited by W. J. Mountain, with the assistance of Fr. Glorie, 2 vols., Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 50–50A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 1:271–73 (lines 34–78) (Latin). Augustine. *The Free Choice of the Will*. In *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, part I, vol. 19, *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, translated and annotated by Roland J. Teske, S.J. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2010), 65–69 (Book II, chapters 16.42–17.45) (English). Augustine. *De libero arbitrio libri tres*, edited by W. M. Green and K. D. Daur, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 29 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1970), 263–67 (II.16.42–17.45) (Latin).

6. *Confessions* II.ii.2.

7. Augustine, De civitate Dei XIX.24: *Populus est coetus multitudinis rationalis rerum quas diligit concordi communione sociatus*. ('A people is the association of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of their love.') Augustine, City of God, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 962; Augustine, De civitate Dei libri XXII, ed. Bernhard Dombart and Alfons Kalb, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 48 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1955), 2:695 (lines 53–55).

higher goods. Love of self builds the earthly community, marked by rivalry, domination, and the attempt to secure meaning in the created world rather than in the Creator. Societies hold together in one of two ways: by a shared love (a genuine common good that unites the inner lives of citizens) or by a negative peace (a mere suspension of conflict, held together by law and fear rather than shared purpose). The latter form is fragile, because it cannot harmonize the desires that churn within each person. The former is resilient, because it orders interior lives toward something that transcends the self.

Augustine's double account of inwardness offers a warning that speaks directly to our age. When interiority becomes self-absorbed—when each person retreats into their own private chamber of identity—the larger community splinters. Competing desires begin to clash; the common good dissolves into a battlefield of self-assertions. But when interiority is oriented toward something higher than the self—toward truth, God, the shared good—then social life becomes coherent again. Unity forms around what citizens mutually love, not around what they privately demand. This is Augustine's deepest alternative to identity politics: not the suppression of interiority, but its reorientation. A society cannot be held together by universal abstractions alone, nor by a proliferation of private identities. It is held together by shared loves, which elevate the individual without isolating him and bind people together without erasing their differences. Identity politics is what happens when the fallen interior becomes the norm. Augustine invites us to imagine what might happen if the luminous interior—an interior open to God and to others—were reclaimed.

# Rousseau: How Augustine's Interior Became a Sacred Self

Jean-Jacques Rousseau marks the great turning point in the history of Western inwardness. If Augustine taught generations of Christians to "return into yourself" in order to ascend toward God, Rousseau invites modern men and women to descend into themselves in order to discover themselves, meaning their true selves. The movement looks similar, but the destination could not be more different. Rousseau retains Augustine's language of depth and interior wealth, but he empties that interior of its divine inhabitant. Into the space where Augustine found God, Rousseau installs "conscience"—a voice he describes in unmistakably religious terms, yet treats as wholly internal to the individual. "Conscience! Divine instinct," he exclaims, an "immortal and celestial voice" that speaks with infallible authority.[8] What was for Augustine the encounter with a transcendent reality becomes, for Rousseau, the inner oracle of the self. The shift is subtle in form but radical in content: the inner life is no longer a place of divine illumination but the seat of moral judgment. The self, rather than God, becomes the ultimate source of ethical authority.

This reconfiguration of the inner space reshapes the moral psychology of modernity. Where Augustine had warned against the soul's collapse into itself, Rousseau valorizes this inward turn as the path to authenticity. He distinguishes sharply between two kinds of self-love: amour de soi, the natural and healthy love of one's own being, and amour-propre, the distorted love that seeks the approval of, praise of, and ultimately domination over others.[9] The former is innocent and stabilizing; the latter corrupts the soul and deforms society. Crucially, Rousseau insists that only by resisting the demands, expectations, and conventions of society can a person preserve authentic self-love and escape the corrosive effects of comparison. In his view, the self is not formed by tradition, custom, or inheritance; it is discovered by peeling away the layers of social influence that obscure its true nature. Authenticity thus requires a kind of moral excavation. The individual must ignore the eyes of others and listen instead to the voice that speaks within. The moral life becomes an act of inner fidelity—a purity of self-relation that refuses to be shaped by external norms.

Yet Rousseau's transformation of interiority extends beyond the moral sphere into the political. What begins as a psychological shift becomes the foundation for an entirely new conception of legitimate authority. If conscience is the infallible guide for each individual, then a just political order must somehow arise from the collective expression of these inner sanctums. The result is Rousseau's theory of the "general will," the sovereign will formed not by aggregating private interests but by discovering, through collective deliberation, what each person would will if guided solely by amour de soi rather than amour-propre.[10] In this scheme, citizens submit to no external authority—neither tradition, nor custom, nor ruler. They obey only themselves, collectively understood. The political community becomes an extension of inner conscience, and obedience to law becomes a form of obedience to oneself. Rousseau's citizen is thus the modern sovereign self: internally authoritative, morally unique, demanding recognition of its inner reality, and fundamentally incompatible with the classical or Christian idea that virtue requires submitting the self to a shared moral order.

The consequences of this new interiority reach far beyond Rousseau's immediate context. Once conscience is relocated from the divine to the human, and once authenticity becomes the ground of both morality and political life, the interior self gains a sacred status that cannot be violated. Self-definition becomes not merely a personal project but a

8. "Conscience! conscience! instinct divin, immortelle et céleste voix; guide assuré d'un être ignorant et borné, mais intelligent et libre; juge infaillible du bien et du mal, qui rend l'homme semblable à Dieu" Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile ou de l'éducation,* in Œuvres complètes, vol. IV, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1969), 506 (French). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or On Education,* trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), Book IV, 253–254 (English).

9. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité," in Œuvres complètes, vol. III, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964), 137–138 (French). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,* in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings,* ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 150–151 (English).

10. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract,* in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings,* ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 52–61 (Book II, chapters 1–4) (English). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social,* in *Œuvres complètes,* vol. III, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964), 360–372 (French).

political claim. To challenge someone's self-understanding becomes, in Rousseauian terms, to challenge their access to moral truth. Recognition becomes a right; authenticity becomes a demand; identity becomes something society must affirm. The inner sanctum of Rousseau's psychology becomes the engine of identity politics, where the truest self is always interior, always self-interpreted, and always in need of public validation. Without intending it, Rousseau set in motion a new political anthropology in which the deepest moral conflicts of society would no longer revolve around external goods or public virtues, but around the inviolable interior worlds of individuals who seek political recognition for who they are within.

# Liberalism's Dilemma: Why Identity Politics Both Needs and Destroys It

If we bring Augustine and Rousseau into conversation with the present, a revealing pattern emerges: contemporary liberal democracies contain both of their anthropologies at once, and the resulting tension is no longer sustainable. On the one hand, the universal-rights framework inherited from the post-war settlement resembles Augustine's notion of a negative peace. Augustine acknowledged that even the earthly city must maintain a kind of peace—"the peace of the household, the peace of the city, the peace of the heavenly city"—but only the last of these expresses a true harmony of loves.[11] The earthly forms are provisional and fragile. Liberalism offers precisely this kind of provisional peace: it secures procedural fairness, provides equal standing before the law, and restrains conflict without demanding deep moral agreement. Its strength lies in its neutrality. Citizens are asked not to love the same things, or even to share a vision of the good, but merely to restrain their desires enough to coexist under a common legal order. This is a technical triumph but a spiritual weakness. A society built on universal rights asks people to see one another chiefly as abstract persons capable of reason and conscience, but it provides no shared purpose beyond the bare fact of peaceful coexistence. It can prevent conflict, but it cannot generate unity.

Rousseau's anthropology fills this vacuum with a very different kind of politics—one that forms not a societas but innumerable populi. Identity politics arises wherever groups of people discover, or believe they discover, a shared inner truth that demands public recognition. Each group curates its own story, its own symbols, its own vocabulary of success, injury, pride, and resentment; each becomes, in effect, a micro-people. These new communities mirror the logic of Rousseau's "general will," which he defined as the collective expression of individuals purified of private interests and guided by an inner moral voice.[12] For Rousseau, the citizen expresses his true self only when he contributes to a community unified by this inner orientation. Modern identity groups borrow that aspiration but not its discipline. They seek political recognition for the authenticity of their inner life—whether that inner life is expressed through gender identity, historical grievance, ethnic or national revival, or cultural self-understanding. The result is a political landscape that resembles a patchwork of competing populi, each claiming a quasi-sacred status for its defining experiences and desires. Each having its own history and, regrettably, thereby its own perspective, which it understands as 'the Truth'.

Because identity politics operates on the terrain of inwardness, it is both inevitable and dangerous. It is inevitable because human beings are not content to be treated merely as bearers of abstract rights. They long for recognition and belonging, for communities that mirror their loves and validate their sense of self. Augustine understood this anthropological truth well: "a people," he wrote, "is a multitude bound together by the common objects of its love."[13] No amount of legal neutrality can extinguish the desire for such shared loves. But identity politics is also dangerous, because the identities at its core are rooted in the inward, private, and often incommunicable depths of the self—more like Rousseau's sacred conscience than Augustine's luminous interior. When a group's defining identity is grounded in such a private interiority, its demands cannot be satisfied by mere tolerance. It requires public or even private affirmation. Simply leaving people alone is not enough; their inner self must be acknowledged, validated, and often institutionalized. Liberal neutrality cannot satisfy these demands, because neutrality suspends judgment while identity requires it. The natural consequence is fragmentation: each group pulls the political order toward its own priorities, its own vocabulary, its own claims on public life, leaving the others without representation or recognition. What begins as an appeal for recognition becomes a zero-sum competition of inwardnesses.

Seen through Augustine's lens, this fragmentation appears as something close to a political prophecy. A society governed by multiple, conflicting self-loves—each curved inward upon itself—cannot hold together indefinitely. Augustine

11. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIX.13–17, in Dyson 939–949.

12. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract,* II.3, in Gourevitch, 56–59.

13. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIX.24, in Dyson 964.

warned that the earthly city is characterized by the love of self "to the point of contempt for God," a love that isolates individuals and divides communities.[14] Modern liberalism has attempted to function as a societas, a community held together by negative peace, while accommodating scores of populi formed around disparate loves. The strain is beginning to show. As identity groups compete for recognition, the legal and cultural neutrality that once enabled peaceful coexistence turns into a battleground of conflicting moral claims. The tensions within liberal democracy—between universal abstractions and particular identities, between neutrality and recognition, between procedural fairness and substantive demands—cannot last indefinitely. Augustine would not be surprised. A society cannot remain cohesive when its citizens do not share even a minimal agreement about what is lovable. And Rousseau, in his own way, would also see the problem as an inevitable consequence of treating the inner self as sacred and politically authoritative. When inwardness becomes the primary currency of legitimacy, politics becomes not a forum for deliberation but a contest over whose self-understanding must prevail. Politics then becomes what Hobbes tried to avoid it being: war by another name.

14. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIV.28, in Dyson 632.

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## Augustine's Alternative: A Politics of Shared Loves

If Augustine helps us diagnose the crisis of modern politics, he also gestures toward what a more stable political life requires. His deepest contribution is not a set of policy prescriptions but an anthropological truth: human beings naturally gather around what they love. No political order can thrive unless it takes this basic fact seriously. A populus is not created by parliamentary procedure or legal neutrality; it is created by shared devotion to certain goods, practices, and ideals. Augustine understood that people are united not by abstract principles but by the things that capture their hearts—what they find admirable, desirable, or sacred.[15] The attempt to build a coherent community on procedural norms alone asks human beings to ignore their actual psychology. Likewise, the attempt to construct a political order on nothing but self-chosen identities cannot work either. These identities arise from inwardness, but they remain too narrow, too small to sustain large-scale communal life. They may bind together small groups, but they cannot generate loyalty strong enough to anchor a nation. Even identities that are national in character and might involve, say, ethnicity, language and a shared literature, seem to account only for a part of what makes political life possible.

Between these two inadequate models—neutral procedures and proliferating identities—lies the missing middle of modern politics. Identity groups have grown in strength not because they possess a new kind of moral force, but because the wider liberal order has supplied no thicker bonds to hold citizens together. Liberalism's thinness leaves an empty space that identity politics rushes to fill. For this reason, identity politics did not create the West's fragmentation; it merely revealed it. The crisis was already present whenever political community was reduced to a framework for individual rights without any account of the shared loves that could give substance to that framework. Augustine's vocabulary allows us to describe this absence. A community needs not only peace but a set of common goods capable of shaping its inner life. These include the moral ideals a society esteems, the cultural inheritance it treasures, the conceptions of justice it upholds, the vision of human nature it affirms, and the spiritual horizons that give meaning to its existence. Without such shared loves, the political order remains brittle. Citizens become fellow occupants of a legal structure rather than members of a people.

Augustine's analysis bears special relevance for the nations of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE, henceforth). These societies experienced, in living memory, the imposition of a universalist ideology that demanded conformity to a political abstraction. Under Communism, identity was supposed to dissolve into the collective subject of history; particular loves—national, religious, cultural—were treated as obstacles to progress. After 1989, these loves resurfaced with startling power. Nations that had been told for decades that their histories and loyalties were irrelevant reasserted them almost immediately once the ideological pressure was lifted. This historical experience gives CEE societies a clearer instinct that the West sometimes lacks: universal claims that ignore local loves eventually collapse, not because the ideas are necessarily false, but because they are anthropologically thin. People do not surrender the attachments that make their lives meaningful.

Augustine offers a conceptual framework for understanding this tension. He does not oppose universal truths to local loves; he simply insists that the latter must be rooted in goods that genuinely elevate the human soul. His distinction between the two cities is not a contrast between cosmopolitan ideals and communal attachments, but between disordered and rightly ordered love.[16] The potency of identity, patriotism, Christianity, and communal belonging in the post-Communist world is not accidental. These forms of solidarity respond to the human need for shared meaning—something that purely procedural liberalism cannot supply. Augustine helps explain why these attachments endure and why they often re-emerge with force after periods of suppression. They are not artificial constructs but natural expressions of the human desire to belong to a community defined by common goods.

Seen through Augustine's eyes, the task for CEE is not to reject either universal ideals or particular identities, but to find a way of binding them together through shared loves that both transcend and include the local. In this respect, Augustine's thought provides not a blueprint but a compass. It reminds us that a flourishing society requires neither ideological homogeneity nor a marketplace of competing identities, but a coherent vision of the good around which citizens can rally. Without such shared loves, political life becomes a contest of isolated inwardnesses; with them, it becomes a genuine commonwealth.

15. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIX.24, in Dyson 964.

16. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIV.28, in Dyson 632.

# Conclusion: What Augustine Teaches the Age of Identity

The arc of this argument returns us to the insight that motivated it: identity politics reveals something true about human beings. We do not experience ourselves as abstract carriers of universal rights, floating free from history, culture, or desire. People crave recognition, belonging, and meaning; they seek communities that reflect the loves embedded in their inner lives. The post-war liberal dream of a purely procedural order underestimated this fact. Rousseau's legacy shows why. By sacralizing the inner self—by treating conscience as "the divine instinct, immortal and celestial voice… [and] infallible judge of good and bad"—he laid the groundwork for a politics in which every inwardly experienced identity becomes a matter of public concern.[17] The result is a proliferation of miniature moral communities within the liberal state, each demanding its own symbols, protections, and affirmations. What Rousseau intended as a path to collective freedom becomes, in practice, a competition among rival interiorities, each claiming the authority of a private revelation.

Augustine points in a different direction. He does not treat interiority as an enclave of the self but as a space ordered toward a good beyond the self—a luminous interior oriented toward God, truth, and the shared goods that draw people into genuine communion.[18]

Augustine's anthropology suggests that the problem with identity politics is not that it turns inward, but that it turns inward improperly. It asks the inner life to bear a weight it cannot support. When the self becomes the final measure of meaning, the interior fractures into countless private chambers; when the self is ordered toward something greater, the interior becomes a source of unity rather than division.

Political life rises or falls on the basis of its loves. A society without shared loves fragments; its members inhabit parallel moral worlds with no common point of reference. A society ordered by the wrong loves turns inward, seeking satisfaction in the shifting desires of individuals or the competitive ambitions of groups. Such a society—Augustine would say—is weighed down by its own self-love, "curved inward upon itself" until it can no longer see the goods it once held in common.[19] But a society grounded in rightly ordered loves becomes capable of stability, loyalty, and freedom. These are not merely theological claims; they describe perennial features of political psychology. People unite around goods they can admire together.

This, finally, is Augustine's lesson for an age torn between universal abstractions and proliferating identities. The answer to identity politics is not less interiority—not the suppression of the inner life in the name of neutrality or uniformity. The answer is truer interiority: an inwardness that recognizes its orientation toward shared goods, common virtues, and a horizon of meaning that transcends private preference. Augustine does not offer a political program; he offers an anthropology that helps explain why certain political programs endure and others fail. A society that hopes to survive must cultivate shared loves strong enough to bind its citizens together. For without such loves, we remain a collection of inward solitudes; with them, we may yet become a people.

17. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), Book IV, 253–254.

18. Augustine, *Confessions*, VII.10; *De Civitate Dei*, XIX.24.

19. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XIV.28, in Dyson, *City of God*, 632.


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