For a number of years, in teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in the history of political thought, I have found that the problem of giving students an adequate grasp of the social and political ideas of St. Augustine presents unusual difficulties. In no single work by Augustine, comparable to Plato's Republic, Aristotle's Politics, Hobbes's Leviathan, or Hegel's Rechtsphilosophie, can his leading ideas about man, society, and the state be found. Nor can the student be sent to a work where Augustine expounds his entire philosophy, including his teachings on these subjects. He never produced a synthesis of his thought like the Summa Theologica of St. Thomas, which contains orderly, systematic treatments of such topics as law, justice, and obedience.

The usual recourse for the teacher is to ask the student to read Augustine's The City of God. This book, however, offers both too much and too little; too much, because it is a very long, discursive work, written over a period of thirteen years, which includes a great deal of material that is of only peripheral interest to the student of social and political ideas (e.g., the details of the polemic against pagan religion, or the frequent, extended discussions of purely theological issues); too little, because a number of crucial aspects of Augustine's thought, such as his views on the question of using the power of the state to punish heresy and schism, are not treated at all, or are treated only partially.

The key to the problem is, of course, the realization that St. Augustine, powerful and influential though his thought was, was...
not a system-builder. He wrote a great deal, and many of his writings, such as *The City of God*, the *De Trinitate*, the Commentaries on the Psalms, and the Commentaries on the Gospel and Epistle of St. John, are major works. But virtually everything that Augustine wrote—whether a very long, complicated work, a doctrinal treatise, a sermon, or a letter—was an occasional piece. Almost all his writings were polemical and controversial; as soon as an erroneous interpretation of Scripture or an heretical doctrine came to his attention, he immediately launched upon a criticism and a rebuttal. It is instructive to notice how many of his works bear the word "*Contra*" ("Against") in their titles; he produced treatises against the Manichaeans, the Donatists, and the Pelagians.

Never during the seventy-six years of his life was there a period of quiet and security, when, all the enemies of the Church having been vanquished, he could withdraw to write a non-polemical, systematic treatise expounding his theology as a whole or his views about human nature and the social and political order. However, even had such an opportunity presented itself Augustine probably would not have produced a *Summa Theologica* like that of St. Thomas. Genius he had in full measure, but system-building and architectonic skill were not his forte; he is the master of the phrase or the sentence that embodies a penetrating insight, a flash of lightning that illuminates the entire sky; he is the rhetorician, the epigrammist, the polemician, but not the patient, logical, systematic philosopher.¹

To gain an adequate understanding of the social and political doctrines of a discursive thinker like Augustine, the student would have to read most of his writings. For many students this would be an impossible assignment. It would take months to read only the works that have been translated into English—about fifty treatises, hundreds of letters and sermons—to say
nothing of the important works for which there are no English translations. Even if he were willing to undertake this task, the student of social and political thought might easily lose his way in the long stretches of Augustine's writings where little that is relevant to his concerns is discussed. These difficulties constitute the first reason for writing this book. Here the student will find in a single volume most of the important passages from the entire Augustinian corpus in which human nature, the social order, and the nature and functions of the state are discussed. To meet this need, as well as to give the reader a first hand acquaintance with Augustine's characteristic style of thinking, a large number of quotations from his writings have been included in the text and in the notes.

Yet I hope that the volume is more than an anthology, however useful such a work might be. Since Augustine possesses a powerful and markedly original intelligence, his views about man, society, and the state fall into coherent and consistent patterns, even though he is not a systematic theorist. The second aim of this book is, therefore, to organize the material from Augustine's writings and to elucidate the general point of view that permeates his reflections about social and political life. The danger inherent in this endeavor is the temptation to make his thought more systematic than it really is. Commentators have sometimes been drawn into this temptation by the striking manner in which he expresses his ideas; as a consequence, they have allowed themselves to reduce his complex insights to a simple, consistent theory.

Finally, this work is intended as a critical essay on Augustine's social and political doctrines. It seeks to demonstrate to the reader the connections between those doctrines and the general framework of his thought, to assess the coherence and validity of his ideas, and to call attention to the strengths as well as the limita-
tions of the Augustinian approach. As far as I know, there is no work in English which presents a full treatment of Augustine's social and political ideas or a critical examination of them. The valuable bibliography appended to the third edition of Étienne Gilson's *Introduction à l'étude de saint Augustin,* which lists the principal works written about Augustine up to 1943, refers, in the section on social and political doctrines, to only one book published in English, John Neville Figgis's *The Political Aspects of S. Augustine's 'City of God,* and I know of no volume that has been published since that time on this subject. Although Gilson describes this work by Figgis as "excellent et très pénétrant," it is quite inadequate as a summary and analysis of Augustine's political thought, since it deals with only a single work, *The City of God.* Moreover, of the book's one hundred and nineteen pages only thirty are devoted to the central topics, the State (Chapter III) and the Church (Chapter IV).

Probably the best-known twentieth-century treatment of Augustine's social and political doctrines is Gustave Combès's *La doctrine politique de saint Augustin,* which Gilson describes as "un répertoire systématique et détaillé des idées d'Augustin sur le 'gouvernement des nations.'" Combès's work strikes the reader at first glance as a highly useful study, since it gives references to the entire corpus of Augustine's writings and deals with a number of important topics, such as authority, law, justice, war, and the relations between Church and State. Its usefulness to the student is marred, however, by many inaccurate quotations and references. In addition, I find it difficult to accept many of the author's principal interpretations of Augustine's ideas. The value of Combès's book and of several other studies of Augustine's social and political ideas seems to me to be reduced because the authors give a Thomistic interpretation to his doctrines; as a
result, they minimize or even disregard the differences between his philosophy and that of St. Thomas.

One final word should be added. I have occasionally called attention to similarities and differences between Augustine's ideas and those of other important political thinkers where it seemed that such comparisons might be illuminating to the reader. Less often, I have noted the contemporary relevance, either for political theory or for practice, of one or another of his insights. Some readers may feel that I ought to have pointed out, more frequently than I have, the places where Augustine's ideas conflict with or are supported by modern social and political theories, and the extent to which they are applicable to contemporary political and social problems. The only excuse I can offer is the stubborn, and possibly mistaken, conviction that we demonstrate an unwarranted "smugness of contemporaneity" when we congratulate a great thinker of another age if his conclusions happen to agree with the ideas fashionable in our own day, or when we chide him for his failure to achieve the level of wisdom and sophistication that we ourselves have attained. I think that the reader will be able to see for himself the relevance—or irrelevance—of most of Augustine's comments to both the perennial dilemmas of political life and the peculiar problems of our age. My chief concern, I freely admit, has been to understand what Augustine said and to communicate that understanding, as far as I could, to others.