

Recent Work on Saint Augustine

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The secondary literature on Saint Augustine is enormous. The annual bibliography of new work on Saint Augustine in the *Revue des études augustiniennes* runs anywhere from 75 to 100 pages, which means that a mere list—not a discussion, just a list—of everything written on Augustine in the last ten years would fill two good-sized books. No one could read all this material, most of which is utterly without value anyway. The present essay is a guide to the essentials; it covers what anyone beginning to study Augustine seriously should read and what any librarian should take care to acquire. Given that goal and intended audience, I have limited myself to considering books written in English in the last ten years that have been widely read or (in the case of more recent books) seem likely to be of enduring value. Given the nature of this journal, I have also concentrated on philosophical books and excluded those whose focus is primarily biographical, bibliographical, historical, or theological. I consider the selected books under four headings: general surveys, specialized studies, editions and commentaries, and translations.

GENERAL SURVEYS

In *Augustine*, Mary T. Clark, R.S.C.J., aims to “introduc[e] general readers and students to the main teachings developed by Augustine in response to the intellectual and religious challenges of his day.”¹ Given this aim, it is unfortunate that Clark sometimes presupposes familiarity with Aristotelian terminology, Gilsonian dichotomies, and other technical notions that do not get explained. There are spots where a general reader may not have the resources to follow her. There are structural problems as well. Clark has the customary first chapter on Augustine’s life and then repeats a good bit of it in what should be the first substantive chapter; to devote 16 pages of a 130-page book on Augustine to biographical matters seems excessive. Similarly, the chapter on neo-Platonism near the end of the book largely repeats what has already been said. It is not clear why she placed it where she did instead of scattering comparisons to Plotinus throughout the book and

¹Mary T. Clark, R.S.C.J., *Augustine* (Georgetown University Press, 1994), p. viii.

leaving it at that. Clark shows a surprising concern with scholarly disputes for so short a work, as in her discussion of illumination and her treatment of grace. Still, the combativeness is neither unwelcome nor injudicious; it gives the reader a sense of where some of the most common interpretive difficulties and disputes lie. She offers a very sane and sober discussion of illumination, and her treatment of grace and freedom is usefully attentive to the historical setting. (Philosophers are advised to skip the chapters on “Church and sacraments” and “Monasticism,” but the chapter on “Christ and Trinity” is not without philosophical relevance.) Clark occasionally falls into the language of sermon rather than that of philosophy—but this seems to reflect the spirit of Augustine. On the whole, this is a useful, reliable, and accessible overview of Augustine’s philosophical and theological views.

Beginning students of Augustine might do well to read Clark in conjunction with Gerard O’Daly’s overview of Augustine in the Routledge History of Philosophy.² Although one might have wished for more about the metaphysics of God, O’Daly offers a good survey of Augustine’s philosophy. Regrettably, he repeats standard but, I think, mistaken views about Augustine’s theory of illumination and philosophy of language. O’Daly takes illumination to be a function of grace rather than an ordinary part of the human mind’s natural functioning; here Clark offers a useful corrective. Regarding the philosophy of language, O’Daly says Augustine held that all single words are names, whereas I take the argument of the *De magistro* to call that view into question by showing it leads to various dead ends. I also wonder whether what he says about weakness of will³ is consistent with what he says about virtue,⁴ and I would not agree that the will is value-neutral in *De libero arbitrio*.⁵ In spite of these disagreements, however, I find O’Daly’s essay a very useful overview of Augustine’s thought. He goes further than most in appreciating Augustine’s originality, especially in those areas in which he himself has written at length.⁶ He

²Gerard O’Daly, ‘Augustine’, in David Furley (ed.), *From Aristotle to Augustine*, vol. ii of G. H. R. Parkinson and S. G. Shanker (eds.), *Routledge History of Philosophy* (Routledge, 1999), pp. 388-428.

³O’Daly, p. 399.

⁴O’Daly, p. 400.

⁵O’Daly, p. 403.

⁶Most notably in Gerard O’Daly, *Augustine’s Philosophy of Mind* (University of California Press, 1987).

also offers a good bibliography.

Easily the best general survey of Augustine's philosophy written in the last ten years is John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*.⁷ The study is organized around general themes: words, signs, and things; certainty, belief, and understanding; soul, body, and personal identity; will, love, and right action; individuals, social institutions, and political life; and evil, justice, and divine omnipotence. As one might suspect from the sub-title, Rist is perhaps too interested in Augustine's debt to his predecessors to give him full credit for his considerable originality. Nonetheless, Rist is too sympathetic and learned a student of Augustine not to offer us much that is new and interesting, setting familiar topics in unfamiliar contexts so as to reveal, as if in spite of himself, the consistency and power of Augustine's philosophical vision. If anyone wants to read just one book on Augustine, this is the one.

SPECIALIZED STUDIES

In *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*,⁸ James Wetzel focuses on Augustine's account of the relations among knowledge, desire, and volition. I find the book highly unsatisfying. For example, in his introduction Wetzel makes a great show of setting himself against "the conventional wisdom that Augustine rejects the sufficiency of knowledge for personal transformation,"⁹ and yet throughout the book he acknowledges a number of instances in which knowledge clearly is *not* sufficient for personal transformation.¹⁰ In his effort to collapse volition into cognition Wetzel commits Augustine to a number of wildly unlikely theses that he pretty clearly did not endorse: that depraved desire is identical with inadequate self-knowledge,¹¹ that volitions are "perceptions of order,"¹² that whenever agents have conflicting desires they cannot fully "rationalize" their actions

⁷John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁸James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁹Wetzel, p. 6.

¹⁰For specific examples, see the perceptive review by William E. Mann, *Philosophical Review* vol. ciii (1994), pp. 574-576.

¹¹Wetzel, p. 42.

¹²Wetzel, p. 85.

and therefore act involuntarily and unfreely.¹³ Blatant misreadings of Augustine are frequent. One of the strangest comes on p. 23, where Wetzel quotes a passage from *City of God* in which Augustine claims that God would not have created the world had he not known it would be good. Augustine's claim implies that the objective order of values precedes creation; there is a standard of goodness that God knows in advance of creation, and his creative act is governed by that standard. Wetzel, however, uses the passage to make just the opposite point: "Unlike human agents, who act in the context of an objective order of values, God acts (logically) prior to the formation of the objective order, and therefore no external standards of value can inform divine willing."¹⁴ This mistake is all the more puzzling in light of Wetzel's earlier insistence that a "theory of will as the power of choice, informed by but independent of desire, makes every action to some degree unintelligible, for if the theory were true, no action would ever be sufficiently explained by its motives."¹⁵ If Wetzel were right about human freedom, it would surely follow that every action of Augustine's God is unintelligible, not merely "to some degree," but wholly, since God, lacking any values in light of which to choose, would never have any motives whatever.

In *Augustine the Reader*, Brian Stock argues that Augustine's combination "of philosophical, psychological, and literary insights gave birth to the West's first developed theory of reading."¹⁶ Part I is devoted to "Augustine's narrative of his progress as a reader in *Confessions* 1-9";¹⁷ Part II investigates the theories of "mental representations, memory, emotion, cognition, and the ethics of interpretation"¹⁸ that Augustine developed out of his reading.

Stock makes both too much and too little of Augustine's reading. He makes too much of it in two ways: by giving reading too high a place in Augustine's esteem and by straining gracelessly to make the most unpromising episodes tell us something about reading. One striking example of

¹³Wetzel, p. 217.

¹⁴Wetzel, p. 23.

¹⁵Wetzel, p. 8.

¹⁶Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 1.

¹⁷Stock, p. 21.

¹⁸Stock, p. 1.

the first fault is Stock's extraordinary claim that Augustine's "mature view [was] that . . . the chief means at our disposal for reorienting our ethical lives has something to do with the recreation of subjective literary experience."¹⁹ Perhaps if "the recreation of subjective literary experience" is Stock's hyper-secularized way of referring to Bible-reading, the claim is not such a great stretch after all; but then on Augustine's view, the more our study of Scripture helps reorient our ethical lives, the less literary our experience of Scripture has become, since no properly literary experience could have such an effect. As an example of the second fault, consider his treatment of *Confessions* 6.9, where Alypius is accused of a theft. Stock takes the episode to show "the act of reading as an agency of change,"²⁰ but no one actually reads anything in that chapter, and the memorized lines that Alypius was repeating to himself play no causal role in the story.

Stock also makes too little of Augustine's reading by ignoring Augustine's exegesis. He avoids the exegetical parts of the *Confessions* and seldom even alludes to Augustine's many commentaries on Scripture. By focusing on the process of reading and largely ignoring the texts Augustine read and the truths he professed to find there, Stock has allowed the means (reading) to usurp its proper end (the discovery of truth). Ironically, this mistake is the very error against which Augustine warns in *De doctrina christiana*, a text Stock considers in detail.

In *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine*,²¹ Carol Harrison argues that Augustine "overcomes the theoretical dualism of corporeal and incorporeal, body and spirit, so common in his thought, by viewing the world in an aesthetic way."²² The "alliance of beauty and matter"²³ can be seen in two ways: as a snare and an enticement to sin, or as bodying forth and signifying the ultimate, immaterial Beauty. In his earlier work, Harrison argues, Augustine saw material beauty primarily as a snare; in his later work, however, he emphasizes the ways in which material beauty can be a sign and thus a means of revelation. Harrison attributes this salutary

¹⁹Stock, p. 49.

²⁰Stock, p. 78.

²¹Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Clarendon Press, 1992).

²²Harrison, p. 130.

²³Harrison, p. 271.

development to Augustine's mature understanding of three central Christian doctrines. First, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* implies that "[t]he material realm and its beauty are . . . inseparably related and both derive from, and most importantly, reveal, their transcendent Creator."²⁴ Second, the doctrine of the Fall implies that "man no longer has a direct and intuitive grasp of truth . . . but rather needs temporal revelations of God to reconvert and reform him. Most effective are those revelations in which man grasps God as beautiful—for these serve to attract his attention and inspire his love and desire to attain their source."²⁵ Third, "and most importantly, God's entry into time and history and his assumption of a human body in the Incarnation absolutizes and gives ultimate value to those aspects of earthly existence to which Augustine the spiritualizing philosopher might have been tempted to give a secondary place."²⁶

There is certainly a good deal of truth in all this, but it is hard to see whether Harrison has quite made her case. Since part of what she wants to establish is a conclusion about the *development* of Augustine's thought, it is unfortunate that she can be so careless about citing texts from very different periods of Augustine's career, all jumbled together without attention to their chronology. But a more fundamental problem is that she writes in snippets. The book is parceled out in small sections (about three pages, on average) that rarely seem to add up to any big synthesis or connected argument. Harrison thus flushes out many interesting lines of thought but seldom runs them to ground. Still, there is much in this book that deserves attention. Harrison ranges widely in Augustine's writings and suggests many promising lines of thought that merit further development.

There are two recent works on Augustine and Descartes: Gareth B. Matthews's *Thought's Ego in Augustine and Descartes*²⁷ and Stephen Menn's *Descartes and Augustine*.²⁸ The books have very different aims: Matthews disclaims any interest in tracing influences, preferring instead "to

²⁴Harrison, p. 272.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Harrison, pp. 272-273.

²⁷Gareth B. Matthews, *Thought's Ego in Augustine and Descartes* (Cornell University Press, 1992).

²⁸Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

consider what Augustine and Descartes have to show us about *doing* philosophy from an insistently first-person point of view²⁹; Menn's goal, by contrast, is precisely "to understand how Descartes *used* Augustine's thought in his own philosophical project."³⁰ Here I will comment on their work only as it bears on Augustine.

Matthews is interested in Augustine's answers to six questions that make use of the first-person pronoun 'I' in its reflexive use, that is, where 'I' picks out the speaker "from the individual subject's own point of view, and not under any particular name or definite description either."³¹ Following Hector-Neri Castañeda, Matthews indicates the reflexive use of 'I' by the symbol 'I*'. The six questions are as follows: "(i) Can I doubt whether I* exist? (ii) What can I know, or be certain, that I* am? (iii) How do I know whether I* am now dreaming? (iv) How do I know that not all life is my dream, that is, that not all life is a dream I* am having? (v) Am I morally responsible for what I* think and do in my dreams? (vi) How do I know, or how do I come to believe, that there are minds in addition to my own, that is, in addition to the one I* have?"³² In patiently excavating Augustine's answers to these questions, Matthews develops a detailed and nuanced account of crucial aspects of Augustine's epistemology that are generally treated with the utmost superficiality. Comparisons to Descartes help make clear what Augustine was, and was not, interested in showing.

Although Menn's primary interest, as I have said, is in what Descartes took from Augustine, he does not merely consider detached fragments of Augustine (such as his anticipations of the *cogito*) that may have influenced Descartes. For he believes that "the core of what Descartes took from Augustine was not any particular doctrine, but a hope and discipline of drawing the mind away from the senses, through a special kind of contemplation of itself, to a special kind of contemplation of God"; he must therefore look "at Augustine's project as a

²⁹Matthews, p. xi, emphasis in original.

³⁰Menn, p. x, emphasis in original.

³¹Matthews, p. 4.

³²Matthews, pp. 6-7.

whole.”³³ And since, in turn, “Augustine’s dependence on Platonic philosophy is such that the only reasonable way into understanding Augustinian wisdom is through studying Platonic philosophy,”³⁴ Menn begins by exploring what Augustine took from Plotinus. He makes a strong case that “[t]he philosophical foundations of Manichean cosmology . . . are precisely the peculiar doctrines of Stoicism as Plotinus presents them: that everything is corporeal, especially God and the soul; that the soul is a fragment of God; that God is totally mixed with matter in every part of the world, and capable of acting everywhere in it for this reason.”³⁵ Plotinus’s strategy of intellectual ascent was developed as a defense of Platonism against these Stoic doctrines; Augustine took that discipline from Plotinus and used it to overcome the intellectual limitations that had led him to Manicheism. But as Menn shows, Augustine took from Plotinus more than simply “a method for understanding God and the soul”; he also accepted “a great deal of the doctrine that comes from this way of understanding them.”³⁶ Augustine did not merely parrot Plotinian doctrine, however, and Menn discusses how “Augustine’s Christianity modified his concepts of God and the soul” as well as how Augustine used the Plotinian method of ascent “to clarify and justify Christian”³⁷ doctrines. Although I think Menn sometimes understates or even underestimates the distinctiveness of Augustine’s Christian Platonism, his discussion of both Plotinus and Augustine is of the highest caliber and deserves careful study.

EDITIONS AND COMMENTARIES

In *Augustine: The Confessions*,³⁸ Gillian Clark provides an excellent short introduction to the *Confessions*. Clark helpfully fills in the literary, philosophical, and political background that provides the context for the work. A particularly accomplished chapter entitled “True

³³Menn, p. x.

³⁴Menn, p. 74.

³⁵Menn, p. 142.

³⁶Menn, p. 166.

³⁷Menn, p. 166.

³⁸Gillian Clark, *Augustine: The Confessions* (Landmarks of World Literature, Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Confessions? Narrative and memory” lets the air out of Freudian readings of the *Confessions*, acquits Augustine of hard-heartedness in dismissing his concubine, reflects philosophically on memory and distendedness of mind, pronounces on the historicity of the conversion story, and along the way says more interesting and sensible things about Augustine as reader than Brian Stock manages in 278 pages of obsessively end-noted text. Two chapters on Augustine’s rhetorical strategies, prose style, and ‘intertexts’ will equip any attentive student for an intelligent reading of the *Confessions*.

Whereas Clark aims at an introductory treatment of the *Confessions*, James O’Donnell’s three-volume edition and commentary³⁹ is meant for advanced students of Augustine. Volume 1 contains (besides O’Donnell’s new edition of the text of the *Confessions*) a long introductory essay discussing the *Confessions* itself, its place in Augustine’s life and literary career, and the textual tradition; volumes 2 and 3 contain detailed textual commentary. This immensely learned work puts all Augustine scholars, and not just those writing on the *Confessions*, in O’Donnell’s debt. The commentary ranges from careful explorations of the nuances of particular words (with copious quotations from other works of Augustine) to ‘excursus’ on general themes. O’Donnell has a compelling account of the structure of the *Confessions* as a whole, and his attention to the construction of the individual books is also revealing. He chronicles Augustine’s many debts to other thinkers (again, with copious quotations) but—and this is a rare accomplishment in the Augustine literature—without making Augustine’s work seem like an amateurish pastiche.

This admirable and indispensable work does present some difficulties for the reader. O’Donnell’s extensive quotations from ancient and modern writers alike are all (very properly) left untranslated, so in order to profit from the commentary one must be proficient in Latin, Greek, and the major languages of modern scholarship. O’Donnell is sometimes allusive and oracular, leaving one unsure just what the point of the comment is meant to be. The three-and-a-half-page general index is wholly inadequate for such a large work. (Fortunately, there are thorough indices of Augustine’s works, other ancient authors, and Scriptural passages, but a more ambitious topical index would have been extremely useful.) These minor shortcomings, however, do not diminish

³⁹ James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions* (Clarendon Press, 1992).

the stature of O'Donnell's masterful edition and commentary.

TRANSLATIONS

The Augustinian Heritage Institute is sponsoring a new English translation of the complete works of Augustine under the series title *The Works of Saint Augustine: A New Translation for the 21st Century*, published by New City Press. Roughly half of the planned 45-volume series is complete. The books are difficult to get hold of, and in any event space precludes discussion of each translation in the present essay. Of the more accessible translations produced in the last ten years, five deserve mention here. The first is Henry Chadwick's translation of the *Confessions*.⁴⁰ It has been generally well-received, but I find the style clumsy and some of the notes ill-considered. As an example of the clumsy style, consider 2.6.12, where Augustine wants us to know that the only tasty thing about the stolen pears was the pleasure of the theft itself. Chadwick translates, "If any of those pears entered my mouth, my criminality was the piquant sauce."⁴¹ A very curious note appears by way of commentary on the following passage (2.3.6):

Indeed, when at the bathhouse my father saw that I was showing signs of virility and the stirrings of adolescence, he was overjoyed to suppose that he would now be having grandchildren, and told my mother so. His delight was that of the intoxication which makes the world oblivious of you, its Creator, and to love your creation instead of you. He was drunk with the invisible wine of his perverse will directed downwards to inferior things.⁴²

Chadwick comments, "Augustine's father celebrated the signs of his son's virility by becoming

⁴⁰Henry Chadwick (trans.), *Saint Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁴¹Chadwick, p. 31. Compare the translations of Rex Warner (New American Library, 1963) and F. J. Sheed (Sheed and Ward, 1942/43; reprinted Hackett Publishing Company, 1993). Warner's translation reads, "what made it sweet to me was my sin" (47); Sheed's says, "it was the sin that sweetened it" (28).

⁴²Chadwick, pp. 26-27. Again, compare a translation by a more skilled writer (somewhat eccentrically punctuated, to be sure): "In fact when my father saw me at the baths and noticed that I was growing toward manhood and showing the signs of the burgeoning of youth he told my mother of it with great pleasure, as though he were already confident of having grandchildren; but his pleasure proceeded from that kind of drunkenness in which the world forgets you, its creator, and falls in love with your creature instead of with you; so drugged it is with the invisible wine of a perverse self-will, bent upon the lowest objects" (Warner, p. 43).

inebriated.”⁴³ But it could hardly be clearer that the “drunkenness” of which Augustine speaks here is entirely metaphorical, especially since the wine in question is said to be “invisible.” I find it hard to put my faith in a translator who can be so blind to the plain sense of the text he is translating.

Hackett Publishing Company has published two good and reasonably priced translations of Augustine in recent years. One is Peter King’s excellent translation of *Contra Academicos* and *De magistro*,⁴⁴ which offers useful notes, a fine introduction, and twenty-five pages of appendices containing related texts from other works of Augustine. The other is my own translation of *De libero arbitrio*.⁴⁵ It is also worth mentioning that in 1993 Hackett reprinted the F. J. Sheed translation of the *Confessions*, which many consider the best available.

R. P. H. Green’s new edition of *De doctrina christiana*⁴⁶ includes a lively and discerning translation on facing pages with the Latin text as well as an introductory essay and select bibliography. A much-needed new version of *City of God*⁴⁷ by R. W. Dyson will no doubt establish itself as the standard translation.⁴⁸

⁴³Chadwick, p. 27.

⁴⁴Peter King (trans.), *Against the Academicians; The Teacher* (Hackett, 1995).

⁴⁵Thomas Williams (trans.), *On Free Choice of the Will* (Hackett, 1993).

⁴⁶R. P. H. Green (trans. and ed.), *De Doctrina Christiana* (Oxford Early Christian Texts, Clarendon, 1995).

⁴⁷R. W. Dyson (trans.), *The City of God Against the Pagans* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴⁸I am grateful to William E. Mann for his helpful comments on this essay.