

AUGUSTINIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Interior intimo meo

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ABSTRACT

Our appreciation and appropriation of Augustine's thought is hindered by assumptions which serious engagement with his thought makes both visible and dubious. His account of the dynamics of human knowing seems, at first glance, a jumble of confusions, but, once better understood, it helps transform both the terms and the framework of our epistemology. His account of human agency seems similarly confused, but also works, once rightly understood, to transform our vision of what agency is. Furthermore, Augustine's different anthropological and metaphysical assumptions provide not only a platform for criticizing what modernity takes for granted but also resources for reconstructing three important issues in Christian ethics. A proper appreciation of Augustinian anthropology offers benefits, then, beyond the merely exegetical.

KEY WORDS: *Augustine, agency, autonomy, epistemology, freedom, knowledge, sin*

TWO APPARENT PARADOXES OBSTRUCT THE FULL APPRECIATION and appropriation of Augustine's thought by contemporary theology and ethics. The first concerns the nature of mind or human knowledge. This paradox is captured in his claim that all knowledge is mediated by self-knowledge and that self-knowledge is itself mediated by knowledge of God; thus, to realize objective truth one must turn inward to the subject and thereby outward to God. The second paradox concerns the nature of will or human agency, and it is captured in his claim that the self is most free when it is determined by God; thus, true freedom is found not only

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through but even *in* the divine imposition of prevenient grace. Many people find both claims difficult to understand. How can subjectivity lead to objectivity? And how can freedom be realized in servitude? My purpose in this article is to argue companion theses: that our sense of paradox arises from errors in our anthropology rather than in Augustine's, and that, in fact, his account better captures the truth about human beings.

The difficulties vexing our understanding of Augustine's position are related to difficulties in understanding ourselves, for both sets of difficulties are rooted in a common, but flawed, conception of autonomy. We commonly understand autonomy to mean the subject's independence from outside influence or formation; thus, we take human knowing to be a matter of matching subjective mental constructs with the "outside" world, and human freedom to be a matter of subjective spontaneity. On this model, priority in human existence rests with the subject—our believing and desiring are ultimately due to what we do, not what the world does to and through us. Complaints about this model are nothing new; it has been criticized as conceptually incoherent, morally and politically problematic, and theologically suspect.¹ The point, though, is that we must go beyond complaint and offer an account that depicts us as *us*—thinking, willing, and acting beings *within* the world. As Gary Watson puts it, we must find "room in the world for ourselves" (Watson 1982b, 14).

Augustine's theological anthropology is ideal for this project, for it not only resists many of our present assumptions but also offers an alternative to them. Against subjectivism, a properly Augustinian anthropology understands human agency as always already related to both God and the world; thus, it chastens modern predilections for absolute autonomy while still affirming the subject's importance. I therefore suggest that Augustine's two troublesome statements in fact affirm important truths about the human, truths that we must acknowledge. In part 1, I argue this in terms of Augustine's epistemology; in part 2, I argue this in terms of Augustine's understanding of agency. In the concluding part 3, I indicate how an appropriation of Augustine's thoroughly theological anthropology can reshape some old quarrels in theological ethics.

1. Augustinian Epistemology

Augustine's epistemology and philosophy of mind are simultaneously deeply interesting and deeply perplexing. Augustine's basic epistemological move is inward; he emphasizes the interiority of the subject in a

¹ See Murdoch 1970; Nagel 1986; Wolf 1990; Levinas 1961/1969; Sandel 1982; Tanner 1988; Schweiker 1995.

way that seems to undermine the importance of the external world. Yet he also sharply criticizes skepticism, affirming our power to know truth. Augustine, thus, can seem to be everywhere at once: equally the discoverer of the individual's interiority and the great apologist for the necessary role of dogmatic communal authority in inquiry.² Accordingly, the texts seem, to the modern reader, to be rife with contradictions that cannot be explained by conscious changes of mind or patterns of development. His treatment of human knowing seems primitive, if not simply confused.

1.1 *Mind's relationship to world*

Our perplexities here arise because we read Augustine as if he alternately advocated one or the other of two positions that contemporary epistemology treats as mutually exclusive—positions that I will here call, somewhat technically, epistemological “internalism” and “externalism.”³ The modern debate between advocates of these positions centers around the question of epistemic justification or warrant for our beliefs (although the issues involved are ultimately not simply epistemological but also metaphysical—concerned, that is, with the relation of mind and world, subjectivity and objectivity). Internalists argue that individuals are responsible for their epistemic standing in the world; the mind, that is, must somehow establish its relation to the world, typically by constructing some inner “picture” of that world. Externalists, by contrast, argue that an individual's epistemic standing is, by and large, determined by external factors; rather than creating the world, the mind is somehow created *by* it. Each has legitimate concerns about the other: Internalists accuse externalists of reductionism, of annihilating subjectivity in favor of a scientific reduction of agency to nomological causality. Externalists accuse internalists of idealism, of so bloating subjectivity that it cannot accommodate a concept of “world” outside itself. Both express an acute anxiety about the proper place of the mind in the world, about finding room in the world for our minds.

The debate, for all the ties that can be drawn between both sides and various discrete elements in Augustine's writings, would, of course,

² For contrasting accounts, see Taylor 1989; MacIntyre 1988. For a more historical analysis, see Crouse 1976.

³ For good discussions of this debate, see Foley 1993; McDowell 1994. In modern philosophy, René Descartes and John Locke are regarded as exemplars of epistemological internalism, while Thomas Reid seems one of the few externalists. Kant, on the other hand, seems to have been an internalist who tried to be an externalist, or vice versa. See Wolterstorff 1995.

seem like utter nonsense to Augustine himself. Understanding why that is so may serve to inspire a fruitful and transformative discomfort with the modern options. Augustine argues, with the externalists, that our beliefs are largely beyond our control and that our minds are therefore deeply embedded in the world. At the same time, he argues, with the internalists, that our mental existence cannot be reduced to material-nomological causality and that we thus remain importantly responsible for shaping our beliefs. (Epistemic) justification, according to Augustine, does take place within the autonomous space of subjectivity, but such justification proceeds only by affirming that an irreducible otherness stands at the heart of subjectivity—the otherness of God. Augustine anchors his realism in the inwardness of our minds discerning God. Objectivity, that is, is realized through subjectivity, only because subjectivity holds, at its heart, an objective reality. A sketch of his epistemological development will help illuminate these claims.

1.2 *Intelligence subjoined to the intelligible*

Augustine first formulates his position in his arguments against the Manicheans and the academic skeptics. He tries to steer a middle course: Against the Academics' epistemic despair, exhibited in proposals for the total suspension of belief, Augustine affirms that epistemic commitment is necessary and legitimate and that real knowledge is possible (*Contra acad.*). Against the Manichees' epistemic complacency, Augustine argues that real knowledge is difficult to achieve and requires commitment to complex disciplines of belief formation and evaluation (*De util. cred.*). In Augustine's view, we begin with innumerable beliefs, including some that we cannot doubt, but our epistemic abilities are perverted by sin. We are responsible for reforming our epistemic faculties in order to be positioned properly to secure true knowledge.

This understanding of our epistemological project implies a picture of the human inquirer that is, then, basic to the elaboration of his anthropology. Augustine understands the human epistemological project to be part of the larger soteriological project—the way to acquire salvific knowledge is to participate in a community seeking salvation, and this participation reveals to us what we have “really” wanted all along. Thus, what begins as a critique of epistemological skepticism is revealed to be, ultimately, a rich picture of the self as broadly “determined” as to its loves—and through its loves, its beliefs. Augustine's account of knowledge leads him to develop a systematic account of the agent's creation and affective existence in and for the world, both soul and body (*De Gen. ad litt.*, bks. 6–7).

Augustine most closely approaches epistemological externalism in his critique, in *De Trinitate*, of the Platonic doctrine of *anamnesis*, or

recollection, which he takes to advance the claim “that the souls of men had lived here even before they wore these bodies, and therefore learning things is more a remembering of things already known than a getting to know new things” (*De Trin.* 12.24).⁴ Augustine argues that knowledge due to precognition by the soul in some preexistence does not resolve the epistemological problem; it merely moves the problem one step further back, where the question arises again: How do we come to know *in the first place*? Augustine’s response is telling:

The conclusion we should rather draw is that the nature of the intellectual mind has been so established by the disposition of its creator that it is subjoined to intelligible things in the order of nature. . . . It is not because the eyes already knew the difference between black and white before they were created in this flesh, that they can tell the difference now without being taught it [*De Trin.* 12.24].

Our most basic epistemic relation to reality is not a matter of agential activity, not even via “recollection”; rather, our minds are “created to be receptive of” reality, and God has “subjoined” the knower to the known.

Augustine rejects more than Plato’s picture of how the mind relates to the external world; he makes parallel arguments in discussing the self’s interiority. He argues that the mind is created by God in a way that entails its direct (if partial) acquaintance not only with its world, but with itself and its God. While this claim makes its appearance as early as *De magistro*’s discussion of Christ as the “Inner Teacher,” Augustine also affirms it in his discussion of self-knowledge and *memoria* in books 10 and 11 of the *Confessions*, and also in *De Trinitate*.

Augustine explicitly rejects the belief that there was a time when *memoria* was empty, wholly “potential,” and in need of actualization. If *memoria* were initially mere potential, a *space* for memories, then it could not serve as the ineradicable basis for the self, the inescapable self-presence on which Augustine anchors his critique of the academic skeptics (*Contra acad.*; see also Kirwan 1983; Matthews 1992). He holds that, on the contrary, *memoria* is not a capacity but an actuality, a *presence*, the necessary presence of the self to itself: “The mind, after all, is not *adventitious* to itself,” Augustine argues; “from the moment it began to be it never stopped remembering itself, never stopped understanding itself, never stopped loving itself” (*De Trin.* 14.13, italics added).⁵ The

⁴ This is not the place to explore the relation of Augustine’s representation to Plato’s actual epistemology. Suffice it to say that Plato’s account may be closer to Augustine’s than is usually recognized; see Plato 1992, bk. 3, 412e–413b, on voluntary and involuntary belief.

⁵ For the argument that Augustine held *memoria* to be inclusive of *anima*, see Burke 1970, 134.

mind's self-awareness cannot, according to Augustine, be eliminated, and it is this necessary presence that allows the self to act. So while Augustine's analysis of *memoria* may appear to warrant an internalist account of the mind, in fact it entails that the self is *externally* determined even in self-knowledge—that the self, in knowing itself, no more epistemically bootstraps its way to cognition than it does in knowing the outer world. The self's epistemic reality is fundamentally *given* to it, and the self is "warranted" in believing in those realities because it cannot find a way to disbelieve them.

While the reality of this ineradicable self-presence seems to establish a special *sui generis* space for the mind, in fact it entails that the mind is *not* its own self-enclosed reality. Talk about the self's interiority is misleading if we imagine it (as is usual) as a sort of inner private chamber (like a room in a house); interiority is rather a way of conceiving the fact that the self is, at its base, always facing the reality of God. The mind is not in the Cartesian *cogito's* nowhere, uncertain of what to trust and able to sever all epistemic relations with the "outside" world; rather, the self knows itself as already, indeed as *always* already, a self in a world (Matthews 1992). According to Augustine, we must trust in *interior* realities as much as we rely on exterior ones; before exerting any effort, the mind cannot help but know itself and the world and God—for, as Augustine says, "God is closer to me than myself" (*interior intimo meo*) (*Conf.* 3.6; see also *Conf.* 10.16, 10.27). Augustine's putative internalism is turned inside out, and it turns out to look a lot like what I have called epistemological externalism; but this "externalism" is warranted by ontological arguments about the nature of the mind's interiority. One conclusion one might draw from this odd situation is that modern distinctions, reflective of the advances of modern philosophy, simply cannot be workably applied in Augustine's world of thought. However, one might also conclude that this distinction, so popular in modern epistemology, falsifies (or at least oversimplifies) the complexly interwoven features of human experience that Augustine so meticulously details; one might conclude, that is, that the terms themselves need to be transformed, if not transcended.

This epistemological lesson (about the self's epistemic apprehensions as externally warranted) is part of a larger lesson we should learn: the ineradicable relation between the person and God. Our intellectual nature is just as created as our material nature; and it is not the human's action into the world, but God's action on the soul, that is the fundamental fact that epistemology should acknowledge. This relationship is seen not only in the givenness of epistemic self-presence—in the presence of the self to itself in reflexive self-knowledge of the "I know that I am thinking" sort—but also, and perhaps more fully, in the ontological and axiological givenness of the self's loves—in the always already present

claim on the self of some value-creating and sustaining commitments to the world. *Memoria* is thus only part of the story; we must also acknowledge the self's *amor*, love, or "attunement," and through *amor* the orientation of the self's *voluntas*, or will. Augustine's epistemology turns into ontology, and this ontology finally turns out to be theology. For Augustine, epistemological relations are in some sense finally reducible to theological ones.

1.3 Augustine's relevance today

Augustine's epistemology thus offers a way to account for what is good and true in both internalism and externalism. Internalists are often accused of subjectivist relativism, but Augustine's account understands subjectivity as always already involved with an objective reality that it cannot ignore, but at best (and at worst) deny. (This is why the primordial epistemological problem for Augustine is not simple mistakeness, but *self*-deception.) On the other hand, externalists are often accused of being fideists, whose theories of purely external warrant win only a Pyrrhic victory because they apparently eliminate any legitimization beyond the simple fact of belief; they thus reduce our epistemological responsibilities in ways that make us epistemologically indistinguishable from thermometers, merely charting changes in our environment (Audi 1986, 165; McDowell 1995, 882). Augustine points the way out of this box. Because he acknowledges the agent's responsibility for the agent's own epistemological proper functioning (not through what William Alston has described as "direct voluntary control" over belief, but through acknowledging what Alston calls the agents' "indirect voluntary influence" over the conditions which produce their beliefs [Alston 1989]), his account commends certain introspective activities, activities that help reconstruct certain (religiously and morally significant) epistemic modules.

Nonetheless, while these activities have as an indirect benefit the creation of warrant—by influencing our epistemic modules in ways that shape what we are warranted in believing—that is not their main end, nor is it of salvific importance. Augustine argues that epistemology is not an *a priori* necessary prelude to positive inquiry; we use it to get to God. Furthermore, Augustine's acknowledgment of individual responsibility for, and participation in, the reconstruction of one's epistemic framework does not subvert the broader picture of the self as determined in its beliefs by things beyond its control. Our lives' meaning is found not in the production of true beliefs (were it so, we might happily pass our lives adding numbers together), but in loving relation with God.

One might say that we work out our epistemic responsibilities in fear and trembling. For Augustine, the fact of our responsibility does not

deny the relevance of external determinants. While we need (and are responsible for) some voluntary introspective practices to reform our ways of believing, Augustinian anthropology avoids epistemic voluntarism because we need such practices (and are so responsible) only insofar as we are sinful. Sin introduces us to epistemology's discipline—or, better, sin introduces its discipline *into us*: Our corruption in the Fall affects our minds by disordering our wills, and we must engage in voluntary practices to recover our epistemological openness to God and the world. With St. Paul, Augustine thinks that our present vision is only partial and that our voluntary believing will be transformed into indubitable (hence involuntary) knowledge.

2. Augustinian Agency

Augustine thus commends our cultivation of epistemological practices for ultimately practical purposes. This shift from a concern with knowledge to a concern with action can seem simply to flip us out of the frying pan and into the fire, for like his epistemology, Augustine's account of human action seems both deeply interesting and deeply perplexing, and for the same reasons.⁶ His fundamental claim is that human freedom is achieved in the imposition of divine sovereignty—that true liberty is realized in servitude.⁷ How can this be? Most scholars think that Augustine's account fails necessarily, because his absolutist account of grace is simply incompatible with true human freedom (Brown 1972; Burnaby 1938; Knowles 1962). Other thinkers, most prominently and recently James Wetzel, argue that Augustine's work is actually a subtle and complex form of Stoic compatibilism refashioned in Christian terms (Wetzel 1992; Djuth 1990). Both sides agree that Augustine's position is not intelligible—that he cannot correctly affirm genuine libertarian freedom and genuine divine sovereignty.⁸ This is the claim I want to dispute. Augustine's account does not, despite received theological wisdom, utterly reject human freedom in favor of grace;

⁶ As will become clear in part 3, there is an indirect relation between these debates and current epistemological debates; cf. Mele 1995, 173, where he argues for a “negative historical constraint” on autonomy which he takes to be analogous to Hilary Putnam's claim that “meanings' just ain't in the head.”

⁷ See *Conf.* 10, and the discussion of *latreia* in *De civ. Dei* 5.15, 7.32, 10.1. I thank John von Heyking for drawing my attention to Augustine's discussion of *latreia*.

⁸ “Libertarian” is used here in the technical sense it has in analytic philosophy in debates about free will: “libertarian” is the label for any position that rejects the “compatibilist” account of freedom (in which the agent is determined to an end but “goes along” with it, even if the agent cannot help going along with it) as reductive and false to what freedom means, but equally refuses outright fatalist determinism. See van Inwagen 1983 for what is probably the best presentation of a libertarian position.

on the contrary, grace *is* freedom. But to understand this requires reconceiving freedom and, through it, grace.

2.1 *The problem of agency*

Just as the apparently conflicting elements in Augustine's treatment of knowledge could be correlated with the positions of the contending parties in twentieth-century epistemological conflicts, our confusion about Augustine's account of agency is interestingly related to contemporary philosophical debates about the nature of action and free will, especially the debate between so-called "compatibilist" and "incompatibilist" accounts of free will—that is, between those who claim that human agents are effectively autonomous (in some sense spontaneous springs of action) and those who claim that humans are simply parts of a larger causal framework that begins and ends outside of them.⁹ This debate is ultimately about the place of human agency in human nature, the role of freedom in our personhood. It seems impossible, on our typical picture of agency, to reconcile freedom with our existence in the world. In part, this problem is due to misconstruals of what it is to exist in a world, as has been ably shown by philosophers of both the "continental" and the "analytic" persuasion (see, respectively, Dreyfus 1992 and Lear 1990). But it is also due, in part, to misconstruals of freedom.

A satisfactory account of agency would combine broadly voluntarist intuitions about "the importance of what we care about" in making our willing genuinely ours, with broadly rationalist intuitions about the coherence of our motivational affections and our evaluational judgments.¹⁰ The best such account has been set out by Susan Wolf in her 1986 article "Asymmetrical Freedom" and her subsequent book *Freedom within Reason*. Wolf acknowledges that the world plays an important role in free agency, but she does not explain precisely *how* that fact should change our understanding of agency. She acknowledges that the world has a normative structure of right and wrong, and that that normative structure can be seen as determining the character of some human action—human action that is reasonable, intelligible, and hence good. Freedom, then, is *asymmetrical*: explanations of bad actions can appeal only to the fact of human choice, while explanations of good actions can appeal also to the way the world is. Bad action is finally inexplicable and indeterminate, while good action can have a legitimate explanation—the agent sees the good and wills it—and hence can be

⁹ Cf. Mele 1987, 1995; Watson (ed.) 1982; Elster 1985; and McLaughlin and Rorty 1988.

¹⁰ For the voluntarism, see Frankfurt 1988a; for the rationalism, see Watson 1982a.

seen as determined.¹¹ While Wolf properly points out the asymmetry in freedom, she does not develop the obvious implication of her insight, namely, that human agency is bound up in important ways with an external “natural” structure.¹² Her reluctance to flesh out this asymmetry in a richer anthropology is connected to her inherited half-faith in the subject’s capacity completely to revise its vision of the normative framework. The self that she describes is still burdened by an implausible picture of the subject’s independence from the world; so while she rightly points out that we need to rethink autonomy, she does not do so herself.¹³

Thus, Augustine’s treatment of agency is not only more coherent than his modern critics suggest but it, together with the anthropology in which it is embedded, can also show us a way out of the impasse in which even the best modern treatments of freedom seem to stall. His anthropology allows us to accommodate the best of what modern concepts of autonomy offer without obliging us to believe our agency to be as unmoored as many moderns think.

2.2 *Augustine, sin, and freedom*

Augustine conceives of freedom and autonomy in terms of integrity, indirectly implicating the external world in the achievement of freedom. In Augustine’s view, freedom is a matter of having an integrated and hence intelligible will—a will that is yours because you can make sense of its commands. This condition of intelligibility relates freedom to extrasubjective reality through the object-directed nature of desire. On Augustine’s model, true freedom obtains when an agent’s will is the integral expression of the agent’s basic desires, desires that are not under the agent’s control (as if an *ad infinitum* regress ending only in the voluntaristic fiat of “decisiveness” were a form of control)¹⁴ but are

11 “[T]he explanation for . . . morally bad action[s] must be . . . incomplete” (Wolf 1986, 238), for we are moral insofar as our actions are determined by a normative structure outside of us—namely, the true and the good (1986, 234–35)—but we are immoral insofar as we are *not* so determined.

12 Wolf’s sense of “determined” equivocates between *hard* determinism (that the good governs some of us some of the time, but not all of us all of the time) and *soft* determinism (that we determine *ourselves* to be governed by the good) in a way that leaves untouched the questions of so-called “metaphysical” freedom. But surely the will *now* may be psychologically determined to do the good—morally incapable of doing otherwise—only on the assumption that at some prior point the will *freely chose* to act in such a way that it would *become* so determined. I rely here on Williams 1995 and van Inwagen 1989.

13 The closest she comes to this is in “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility”; Lear has some telling criticisms of Wolf on these lines (see esp. Lear 1990, 189).

14 I thus think Harry Frankfurt’s recent emphasis on “decisiveness” simply misses the point (Frankfurt 1988b, 168–70).

hard-wired expressions of the agent's nature. Without such integration, the will's irrationality forbids us from seeing it as in any important way *our own*. Augustine's account depicts us as free, and hence autonomous, not simply when our wills take a certain shape, but when we love (and thus will) a certain end.

Augustine's faith that the world, as God created it, is good allows him to make two basic claims about our present state of disintegration—one about its cause and one about its cure.

First, the introduction of evil into a wholly good creation is fundamentally a *negative* act—ontologically privational and hence intellectually incomprehensible. That such an act is, strictly speaking, inexplicable need not, however, render it incredible; rather, it tells us something about the nature of wicked acts themselves. They are, at heart, purely negative, a nay-saying to the world, and they are, thereby, ultimately unthinkable. Such acts are done not simply out of *bad* reasons, but rather out of *no* reasons at all. Having asked, “[H]ow can a nature which is good, however changeable, before it has an evil will, be the cause of any evil, the cause, that is, of that evil will itself?” (*De civ. Dei* 12.6), Augustine could only answer that the human capacity for irrational revolt was simply part of what it means to have free will.¹⁵ Sin is the perverse manifestation of our godlike faculty of freedom, the *ex nihilo* that stays *nihilum*. There is no efficient cause, only a *deficient* one:

One should not try to find an efficient cause for a wrong choice. It is not a matter of efficiency, but of deficiency; the evil will is not effective but defective. For to begin to have an evil will, is to defect from Him who is the Supreme Existence, to something of less reality. To try to discover the causes of such defections—deficient, not efficient causes—is like trying to see darkness, or hear silence [*De civ. Dei* 12.7].

Augustine concludes that there is “no efficient natural or (if we may so call it) ‘essential’ cause of evil choice, since the evil of mutable spirits arises from the evil choice itself, [which] diminishes and corrupts the goodness of nature” (*De civ. Dei* 12.7). This *causa deficiens*, this deficient causality, has its own proper description wholly in what it is not, in its failure to be a good act: “And this evil choice consists solely in falling away from God and deserting him, a defection whose cause is deficient, in the sense of being wanting—for there is no cause” (*De civ. Dei* 12.7).¹⁶

¹⁵ Augustine treats of original sin at length in a number of places; for the most thorough, see *De civ. Dei*, bks. 12–14, *De Gen. ad litt.*, bk. 10; *Conf.*, bk. 2. For a good account of the Fall as an act of will, see Chappell 1995.

¹⁶ I here describe it as lacking a “proper” description because it does have a subsidiary description, in terms of the lesser good it does affirm, namely, as a deficient *perversion* of some true good; but the fact that it has this reality—its only reality, in fact—outside of its own attempted self-definition tells of its own self-*distensio*.

To seek a “cause” for sin is to try to render it intelligible, and to render it intelligible is to render it explicable; that would tie it back into the explanatory fabric of the cosmos, the violation of which is what sin quite literally is. As T. D. J. Chappell argues in *Aristotle and Augustine on Freedom*, the act that originally divides the self, and leads to the self’s habituated sinful desires, is built finally on *folly*, on no good reason at all.¹⁷ But its consequences are disastrous; the act alienates us from ourselves and destroys the integrity of desire and will with which we were created.

This argument about sin’s effect is connected to a second point: Sin is a one-way street. Good action is the action of an integrated self while wicked action is not; but whereas an integral self can, by its own will, will itself into chaos, once the self falls, its integrity is lost, and it cannot reintegrate itself. The self’s decision to love the wrong end can never succeed, for the self is hard-wired to seek right relationship with God;¹⁸ yet if it attempts to return to loving the right ends, it finds that its continued attraction (or addiction) to wrong loves prevents such a conversion.¹⁹ In this state of disintegration, the self still possesses freedom of choice, but its loves are in internal conflict and so the will, enslaved by its own free choice, cannot will anything coherently. Augustine vividly depicts this in his *Confessions*, book 8: the will guides the agent according to what the will loves; however, in a fallen state, the will’s loves conflict, and the self is perpetually torn apart by its divergent loves.

The soul (*animus*) commands the body, and is obeyed at once; the soul commands itself and meets resistance. The soul commands the hand to move and there is such readiness that you can hardly distinguish the command from its execution. Yet the soul is soul, whereas the hand is body. The soul commands the soul to will; the soul is itself, but it does not do it. . . . The trouble is that it does not totally will, nor therefore totally commands. Insofar as it wills, it commands; and insofar as it does not will, to that degree it commands not. Will is commanding itself to be will . . . but it does not fully give the command, so that what it commands is not done. For if the will were full, it would not command itself to be full will, for it would be so already. It is therefore . . . a sickness of the soul to be so weighed down by

17 Cf. Chappell 1995 and Babcock 1991. For the view that evil action can be intelligible, see Stocker 1979. Stocker does not so much argue this directly as he argues that other accounts cannot explain human wickedness. I think Stocker does not see that the important differences between his account and Augustine’s are not really *psychological* at all, but rather *ontological*. For an argument that Aristotelian accounts of agency rely on a distinct ontology of plural and conflicting basic values, see Wiggins 1980, esp. 262.

18 “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (*Conf.* 1.1).

19 For two different but interestingly similar accounts here, see Rahner 1963 and Davidson 1982.

habit [*consuetudine*] that it cannot wholly rise even with the support of truth. Thus there are two wills in us, because neither of them is total; and what is lacking in the one is present in the other [*Conf.* 8.9].

In this situation, the will for integrity and purity of heart cannot realize its longed-for integrity because to do so it would have to be the full will already—and if it were the full will, it would already be integrated. The dissenting will is not an alien force, but as much part of the self as is the properly desiring will. It cannot be eliminated or evaded, but must be converted. You cannot fully identify with part of yourself against another part of yourself; you are helpless before the dis-integrity of your loves. In this context, you are never fully free, because you cannot will what you want to will. No bootstrapping techniques will help here; what has been thus put asunder only God can put together. What needs correction is not, according to Augustine, something you control; what needs correction is you yourself.

We must resist, however, the temptation present in language about the “divided will.” The struggle that takes place in the self does not take place solely “inside” the self, let alone only in some distinct *faculty* called “will.” As Wetzell rightly argues, Augustine does not posit any autonomous faculty of will at all—to do so would be Pelagian (Wetzell 1992, 7–8). The problem is thus not with some faculty of the will inside the self (on this model grace would be a sort of steroid); rather, the problem lies in the whole agent’s total active relation to God and the world.²⁰ Humans have the capacity to choose, surely, but we do not choose in a way unconnected to our evaluations, and our evaluations are importantly determined by the world. Thus, the debates about free will mentioned earlier are best framed as *metaphysical* debates, arguments about the nature of the world and the person’s place within it, rather than anthropological debates about the internal coherence of the agent. We should focus not on the causal *origin* of this reintegration (which retains, as Peter van Inwagen argues, an aspect of mystery), but rather on its *nature*; we should ask not about what causes this change, but about what constitutes it.²¹

²⁰ See Principe 1982 for a discussion of Augustine’s emphasis on active terms for all the self’s various activities (such as thinking, willing, loving); this reveals the degree to which common claims about Augustine’s “static” picture of existence are careless caricatures.

²¹ We see here what van Inwagen labels the *mystery* of agency and what Augustine labels grace: We act, at certain times, in ways we ourselves cannot have conceived; our lives may change in ways our histories do not predict (van Inwagen 1993, 197; 1983, 188, 216). Donald Davidson also recognizes the mystery in some forms of action and describes it as a kind of “mental causality that transcend[s] reason . . . a special kind of second-order desire or value” that comes “from an independent source, and is based on further . . . considerations” that are “partly contrary” to those that we ourselves can conceive (Davidson 1982, 305). But because this mysteriousness apparently cannot be eliminated, I pass over it here.

For Augustine, the way up is the same as the way down. Agents recover their freedom in the reintegration of their affective structure, through their loves' conversion back to congruity with their natural desires. His libertarian account of freedom still implicates extrasubjective realities in the recovery of free will. Through the human's desires, the objective world is always already within the subject; the agent has certain desires for reality that the agent cannot completely deny. The "objective world"—which in this case is the purely formal notion of what is *not subjective*—determines the shape of the subjective, orients it toward certain ends, by being already within the subject; thus, the conversion of the subject's affective structure is simply the recognition and affirmation of the self's existence in this world. Basic human desires are good and to be trusted; our failure lies in our inability firmly to trust them. Accordingly, the recovery of our freedom requires our deep reappropriation of those desires. Contrary to common opinion, Augustine's concern with the body derives not from an obsessive hatred of it, but rather from his sense that the felt dissonance in our bodies reveals the central theological problem of agency's dis-integrity with nature (Miles 1979). The human fault lies in attempting to deny our nature; to be fully (and properly) natural beings would be to return to a state of grace. Like the knowing subject, the acting subject finds its place in the world and before God because it finds the world and God at its heart.

Augustine's account of agency offers an account of asymmetrical freedom similar to Wolf's, but he develops it within a richer metaphysic and reverses her asymmetry. According to Wolf, we are responsible for good action even if we are determined to it, while were we psychologically determined to bad acts, the determination would exculpate us. According to Augustine, in contrast, we are never ultimately responsible for our good action because it has a reason, and hence cause, beyond ourselves in God, but we are ultimately responsible for bad action—for we are the final, if irrational, cause of it:

Now if we conclude that a good will also has no efficient cause we must beware of giving the idea that the good will of the good angels is uncaused in the sense of being co-eternal with God. In fact, since the angels were themselves created, it follows that their will must also be created . . . [and thus] as soon as they were created they adhered to their Creator with that love with which they were created. And the rebellious angels were separated from fellowship with the good [angels], by [their] act of will (which was evil in the very fact that they fell away from that good will); and they would not have fallen away, had they not willed to do so [*De civ. Dei* 12.9].

The implication of human freedom in sin is itself a perverse index of humanity's true greatness.

2.3 *The origins of voluntary sin*

Seen in this light, the title, and general project, of James Wetzel's book *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* may be slightly misleading: There are limits to human agency and virtue for Augustine, but simply to know that limits now exist ignores what is, for Augustine, the human's most tragic capacity—our power to transgress all limits, in sin. Wetzel's groundbreaking study helpfully articulates a position with many affinities with, but also significant differences from, the one presented here. A brief discussion of the differences will provide a clearer sense of what the position here proposed entails.

Wetzel finds in Augustine's work a lucid and forceful articulation of a compatibilist account of human freedom. This is especially evident in the anti-Pelagian writings, and particularly, for Wetzel, in the debates about the resistibility of grace. Arguing that "the issue of resistibility is a nonstarter for explicating the appropriation of grace," Wetzel insists:

Augustine does not say . . . that we have no capacity to resist [grace], but for him the source of that capacity is not some special reserve we maintain to protect our autonomy, but our will held back in mortgage to its past. . . . From Augustine's point of view, our reserve towards grace must be eliminated altogether before we can be said to be genuinely liberated [Wetzel 1992, 201–2].

As he later says, "freedom' to resist grace is not . . . genuine freedom but bondage to sin"; it is the "illicit autonomy of sin" and not the genuine freedom of human beings in loving relation with God (Wetzel 1992, 206, 212). Our autonomy, like everything else about us, is not finally ours; it is given to us. However, it is still real freedom, and we must acknowledge both its reality and its givenness.²² All of this is right and good, so far as it goes, and Wetzel is surely right that our freedom is asymmetrical in the way he suggests.

His interpretive work is less helpful and less convincing when he turns to the question of how we came to be in this condition—how our wills came to be "held back in mortgage" to the past. In his judgment, original sin poses intractable problems within Augustine's account because it must be *voluntary*, which means, in this case, spontaneous, uncompelled by any external causal power (because the only possible such force would be God's will, and God does not will for humans to fall).

²² The influence of the Stoics on Augustine, mentioned by Wetzel, is particularly apparent in his account of freedom. Compare Cleanthes's remarkable claim in his *Hymn to Zeus*: "nor is any deed done without you, God, not on earth nor in the divine fiery heaven nor on the sea, *except deeds done by bad men in their folly*" (cited in Inwood 1985, 70–71). My understanding of the Stoics is deeply informed by Inwood's excellent work on them.

Thus, he writes:

“Voluntary sin” remained a highly problematic conception for [Augustine]; for unless compulsion were involved, sinning seemed to violate the principle that acts of will must be motivated by reasons the agent would find compelling. If acts of sin were in fact unmotivated or at least insufficiently motivated by how their agents perceived the end of acting to be good, then by virtue of his own critique of Pelagianism, Augustine would seem forced to conclude that voluntary acts of sin are not intelligible as actions and therefore cannot be attributed to agents [Wetzel 1992, 213].

Wetzel concludes that “Augustine is at a loss to account for the origination of voluntary sin,” but he adds that he is not convinced that “this weakens [Augustine’s] position.” Unfortunately, he does not defend this view, but simply sets the problem aside, saying, “the problems raised by sin’s origination are, to say the least, far from resolved, but I will say no more about them in this book” (Wetzel 1992, 217 n. 116).

The problems here, however, are Wetzel’s, not Augustine’s. For, as we have seen, Augustine did in fact conclude that while voluntary sin, in the case of the Fall, is *not* intelligible *qua* voluntary sin, it is still real, because it can be seen as the perverse affirmation of some lesser good over a greater, if it is to be seen as intelligible, and hence as an action at all. Voluntary sin is, then, possible, albeit under the guise of affirming some other, lesser good—as can be seen in the example, in the *Confessions*, of the delight the young Augustine took in the community of thieves stealing the pears in the garden. Voluntary sin can exist, though never primarily as itself, but always under some more primordial guise. We can define it as any act that fails to be itself.

The fact that we cannot comprehend such an action does not reflect the failure of Augustine’s conceptualization of action; rather, as I argued above, it reflects the extent of our originary freedom, a freedom which is (or at least at one point was) so real that we can use it to violate ourselves. (Augustine speaks of this as freedom *posse peccare*, the freedom of the possibility [but not the necessity] to sin.) This freedom is not something in which we should glory, but rather something we should handle with fear and trembling. Humans are able so to violate the order of things that the violation is a *genuine* violation, that is, one that violates not only the order of existence and moral law but also the order of intelligibility. Thus, it cannot be understood; it can only be described. This freedom is not in any straightforward way an unalienable part of us. We had this freedom, this potentiality, before the Fall, and we lost it in becoming chained to sin. Grace does not operate to “restore” this capacity to us; rather, grace is our decision not to use this capacity to revolt anymore. (Properly speaking, this freedom is not a permanent faculty or “capacity” at all, but rather a possibility we had, and which we

exercised, and which still now constitutes the basis of our sinfulness.) Wetzel's account misses or ignores this "historical" element of our freedom—how, in Augustine's account, our freedom has changed across time. In eliding this aspect of Augustine's analysis, Wetzel subtly alters the overall picture that Augustine proposes. It is simply not the case that grace—conceived as the absolute love of God and hence not finally distinct in form or content from the original love offered to (and at that time accepted by) Adam and Eve before the Fall—is totally determinate. If it were, human beings could not have fallen as they did—unless God willed their sin. Thus, there is a significant "libertarian" (in the sense described above) leaven to be kneaded into Wetzel's compatibilist dough, at the lowest level, and it is a leaven that changes the whole in significant ways.

Augustine's account refashions our understanding of the place of agency in the world and before God, and thereby refutes characterizations of his account of divine sovereignty as heteronomous. The account is not heteronomous because there is no self, strictly speaking, apart from, and primordially independent of, God.²³ Again Augustine's theological intuitions are central: We are most fully free when we assent to being the sorts of things we already are, and though we are allowed freely to dissent from God's plan, we are not allowed *wholly* to dissent from it—God's support of us forbids us to annihilate ourselves so totally as that.²⁴ Furthermore, this picture affirms that God's goodness, as manifest in the world, should be met by an "active gratitude" that responds, in its microcosmic integrity, to the integrity of the world.²⁵ What Augustine teaches is that we must trust both the world and our desires—that we must, in fact, trust the world *through* and *in* our desires.

3. Augustinian Anthropology and Theology: A Partial Map

In this effort to recover and rehabilitate Augustine's thought, I have tried not only to refute accusations that his argument is incoherent but also to suggest how it helps us reassess our understanding of ourselves. In this concluding section, I want to unpack some of the implications for our self-understanding. We typically conceive of ourselves as *ex nihilo* agents, subjects originally alone and outside the world and intervening in it, bootstrapping ourselves into knowledge and pulling ourselves into

²³ "Without any distance or measure of space, by His immanent and transcendent power He is interior to all things because they are all in Him" (*De Gen. ad litt.* 8.26; see Tanner 1988 for a good general account of this).

²⁴ There is an important question here about our understanding of the doctrine of Hell; I am indebted to Paul J. Griffiths for conversations that helped me to realize this.

²⁵ For this formulation of the idea, I am indebted to Derek Jeffreys.

existence by the hair. Augustine does not share this faith, and for good reason. This concluding section explores this skepticism more directly, by offering a partial (in two senses) map of the ways in which his thought can reshape our own.

3.1 *Constructing and reconstructing freedom*

The sorts of worries Augustine's thought elicits from us reflect deep confusions about the nature of our existence in the world, confusions rooted in our understanding of autonomy. We typically picture autonomy in terms of total self-determination, but ultimately this picture is totally alienating. It not only immunizes humans against any worldly influence but also subverts our faith in our own intelligibility. On what grounds can the self determine itself? Perhaps we are willing to say that "so I willed it" is the best one can do for an explanation, and that such is the price of freedom. But this misses the point, which is that as a reflective agent, I have no reason to identify with this "I" who stands at the root of all my actions. Indeed this "I" seems to be less *me* than an alien thing at the base of my agency. Thus, the picture of autonomy outlined above does not secure me against outside interference, but just the opposite: it transfers my agency to an unintelligible, hence effectively external, voluntary power. In securing the self's reality against determinism, this picture of autonomy goes too far, and leaves the self a gilded bird in an iron cage (Taylor 1979; Pippin 1991; Nagel 1986).

Furthermore, this picture makes it easy to see Augustine's account as either a subjectivist, indeed solipsistic, egoism or an objectivist determinism. The modern empiricist misses the way in which Augustine anchors the self in the created world by placing the Other at the desiring heart of the created self and thus mistakes Augustine's anthropology for a *solipsistic egoism*, both because it seems that Augustine's eudaimonistic ethic allows self-interest to elbow out all genuine concern for the other (though the word "genuine" shows already how very tenuous this worry is), and because it seems that Augustine's concern for the inner depths of the mind turns the world into merely interesting intellectual stimulation of only secondary importance (though note how "importance" still stubbornly factors in here) (O'Donovan 1980). The modern voluntarist misses the way in which Augustine grounds the limits of agency and virtue in the very character of agency and virtue and thus mistakes Augustine's anthropology for an *objectivist determinism*, because it seems that Augustine's account of grace subverts the role of true human agency in the account, reducing us to puppets, whose strings are the vectors of "vertical" causality emanating from God. In brief, the worry is that on Augustine's account either the self obliterates all otherness, including God, or the otherness of God obliterates the self.

I hope I have successfully shown that these worries are misplaced and arise, we might say, as a result of Cartesian vertigo. If one begins with the uprooted Cartesian *cogito*, not only is one stuck with Descartes's problem of getting from the mind to the world, but anything outside the mind will be alien to the mind and thus a threat to the mind, a contender against it. My point, of course, is that there is no reason we should begin with the Cartesian *cogito*. A small chorus of modern philosophers are beginning to make just this point. As John McDowell insists in his essay "Putnam on Mind and Meaning," mind "is not in the head" (McDowell 1992, 39). Mind is already in the world, always already related to "other" realities, inner as well as outer. It has its existence, and its presence, given to it from "outside" the mind. For that reason, Charles Taliaferro has recently argued in *Consciousness and the Mind of God* that the best ontological account of human consciousness that we can give is one that places it within a thoroughly theological context. For Augustine, mind is *from God*. The very features of his anthropology that Augustine's modern readers, in their resolute Cartesianism, find contradictory are the features that, rightly understood, could model a way to overcome the dichotomies that make it so difficult for us to think and will and act confidently and responsibly.²⁶

3.2 *The problem of otherness: Three versions*

It is noteworthy that a number of recent debates in Christian ethics seem to be more decisively stamped by Descartes's understanding of the self's relation to the world than by Augustine's. For that reason, I want to close with an examination, necessarily brief and schematic, of several such areas of contention. The three that seem most revealing are the debate about moral and religious rationality, the debate about the nature of politics and the relation of individual and community, and the question of the relation between human nature and divine supernature.

First, the question of moral rationality, and of the cognitive status of religious claims, seems to be, at its heart, a question of how our subjective experiences of valuing can be legitimated in a world of plural subjectivities. The worry here seems to be captive to the wobble between what has been labeled objectivism and relativism, between the desire to defuse subjectivity by scientistically reducing subjects to objects, and

²⁶ An Augustinian anthropology offers metaphysical support for accounts that affirm agency's fundamentally theistic ground, such as the account of "theonomy" in Tillich 1954, the account of responsibility to God's primary action in Niebuhr 1963, and the account of responsibility before God as self-constitutive in Schweiker 1995. It may help us develop Kant's work as well; see the discussion of Augustine's relation to the Kantian "ought implies can" in Hare 1996, esp. 26–27.

the affirmation of “pluralism” as a simple capitulation to difference (Bernstein 1983). That we have had so little success overcoming a dichotomy that most recognize as misleading, if not downright pernicious, reflects the fact that within an ontology that pictures the world as an archipelago of alterities, each negotiating its way around the others, one seems remiss if one does not worry that the imposition of one belief framework on others really is nothing but an imposition.²⁷ (This is one good reason why the best recent accounts of political liberalism and pluralism, such as Judith Shklar’s *Ordinary Vices* and Jeffrey Stout’s *Ethics after Babel*, are grounded on fear.) Suppose, though, that we undertake to “get at” moral and religious rationality from the platform provided by Augustine’s theological anthropology, which assumes that otherness is already at the base of the self. This would seem to me to alter the case in two important ways: To begin with, it suggests that the attempt to engage one another most fully *as particular and historical persons*—up to and including “rational” debate (whatever that may turn out to be)—may yet allow us to have an account of genuinely universal moral and religious reason. In the interim, we are in no way required to give up our own local rationalities (as if it were some mark of neighborly respect to put everyone at an equal disadvantage).²⁸ Furthermore, Augustine’s account understands reason not as an autonomous critical-transcendental evaluative device (which would have all the problems of modern conceptions of autonomy discussed above), but rather, most basically, as a form of *attention*, attending to the ends that the agent desires, and deciding how best to pursue those ends.²⁹ Reason really is, or truly ought to be, the slave of the passions.³⁰

The second question, the explicitly political question of the relations between individuals and the community, is like the question of moral

²⁷ These concerns may be related to deep ontological suspicions about the possibility of what are called “internal” relations.

²⁸ For more on this, see Mathewes 1998.

²⁹ Thus, I agree with Wolf’s rather broad construal of reason as “whatever faculties are properly thought to be most likely to lead to true beliefs and good values” (Wolf 1990, 56). N.B., when Wolf talks about “the ends that the agent desires,” the concept of desire enters into this moral psychology without subsuming all other motivational concepts. For more on the importance of this, see Scheffler 1992, esp. chap. 5.

³⁰ To assume that, in saying this, I am aligning Augustine with David Hume is to misconstrue the point of the argument; rather, I intend to challenge Hume’s notion of the passions as fixed and unquestionable sources of motivation. While our practical reasoning capacities may be guided by our passions and interests, and so be “enslaved” to them, we are ourselves not the slaves of the passions, both for compatibilist reasons (namely, that we *are*, in some sense, the passions) and for libertarian ones (namely, that we can *alter* our passions). To think otherwise is to assume that we are somehow more aligned with our (immaterially conceived, “internal”) reason than with our (typically materially conceived, “external”) passions—which is just the sort of subjectivist assumption I am disputing.

and religious rationality in two ways: (a) Attempts to address the question reflect the typical modern either/or dichotomization of the external and the internal, and (b) here again the problem of otherness reappears at a basic level. The question of individual and community is simply the materialization of the question of moral and religious rationality, the question of how we should accommodate otherness—though this time within our own community. In such debates, Augustine plays a crucial role as a straw man: radical communitarians accuse him of promoting a “Constantinian” ethic, while Enlightenment thinkers accuse him of authoritarianism and anti-individualism in politics. Both groups worry that Augustine’s emphasis on communal authority can elide true otherness, whether that otherness be a smaller community or an individual person. Historically, both have warrant; but should we respond to the fact that society is immoral by suggesting that smaller groups, or individuals, will be somehow more upright? Or should we surrender political power to some extrahuman institution or text, whether that is Scripture or the Constitution? Augustine thought not; indeed, for Augustine the political problematic is a deeply theological problematic, one that can be neither resolved by the liberal’s public/private distinction nor avoided by the radical communitarian’s inside/outside dichotomy. Augustine’s anthropology, depicting us all as always both inside and outside the community—because we are inside and outside ourselves—can lead to strong claims about the importance of politics (Lovin 1995).

The third issue in current theological ethics that deserves attention here is the relation of this world to another, “higher” world. One of the ongoing criticisms of Christian ethics is that it can verge on “otherworldliness”—either in the shape of a naive idealism, of the sort Reinhold Niebuhr perpetually criticized, or in the shape of a *ressentiment*-generated utopianism unmasked by some hermeneutics of suspicion. These debates continue today in the “political theologies” of Jürgen Moltmann, Johannes Metz, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, and in the very different project of thinkers like Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank. One problem they share is how to put into practice what seems to many to be an essentially “otherworldly” ethic. Augustine’s anthropology can help here by arguing that nature is a remainder concept—that there is no way in which this world is finally enclosed. Grace is not a *superadditum* to nature, but rather an integral part of the natural order (TeSelle 1970).³¹

In their various ways, these disparate worries all expose the disjunction between Augustine’s thought and our own intuitions. At issue is the (for modern thinkers) problematic relation between selfhood and otherness. Modernity, blinded by its partial vision of this issue as the

³¹ For a very different discussion of this, one not entirely consonant with my own, see De Lubac 1969.

strictly political problem of pluralism, cannot see how the challenge of otherness, while manifest in politics, is also connected to profound philosophical and theological questions (Mathewes 1998). It is this connection that Augustine opens to our scrutiny as he addresses the problem of self and other, mind and world, theologically. The ground of his anthropology is his conviction that at the core of the self is an other, God. As Denys Turner has argued, for Augustine “the language of interiority is self-subverting” (Turner 1995, 69). To go deeply into the mind is to go *beyond* it; to turn inward and descend into the self is simultaneously to reach outward and ascend to God (*De vera relig.*; Cloeren 1985). Augustine’s basic anthropological and theological moves—especially his arguments about human knowing and acting, and the place of the human thinker and agent in the world—begin from this insight. This is a picture few moderns share; but if what I have argued has merit, then this insight may be the place, or the depth, at which we should begin—not just to appreciate Augustine’s anthropology as a coherent whole, but also to realize, and to overcome, the oddities and obscurities riddling our own.

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<i>Contra acad.</i>	=	<i>Contra academicos</i>
<i>De civ. Dei</i>	=	<i>De civitate Dei</i>
<i>De Gen. ad litt.</i>	=	<i>De Genesi ad litteram</i>
<i>De Trin.</i>	=	<i>De Trinitate</i>
<i>De util. cred.</i>	=	<i>De utilitate credendi</i>
<i>De vera relig.</i>	=	<i>De vera religione</i>

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