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### THE THEOLOGY OF AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS

This study of the *Confessions* engages with contemporary philosophers and psychologists antagonistic to religion and demonstrates the enduring value of Augustine's journey for those struggling with theistic incredulity and religious narcissism. Paul Rigby draws on current Augustinian scholarship and the works of Paul Ricoeur to cross-examine Augustine's testimony. This analysis reveals the sophistication of Augustine's confessional text, which anticipates the analytical mind-set of his critics. Augustine presents a coherent, defensible response to three age-old problems: free will and grace; goodness, innocent suffering, and radical evil; and freedom and predestination. *The Theology of Augustine's Confessions* moves beyond commentary and allows present-day readers to understand the *Confessions* as its original readers experienced it, bridging the divide introduced by Kant, Hegel, Freud, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and their descendants.

PAUL RIGBY is a professor in the Faculty of Human Sciences at Saint Paul University. He is the author of *Original Sin in Augustine's Confessions*.

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*To Maria*

*Peter, Jamie, Mireille, and Matthew*



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## Preface

Augustine's *Confessions* is my "magic book," a friend of mine remarked many years ago. I have been immersed in Augustine's *Confessions* for more than forty years. My interest in human time and the use of the confessional medium to regain time go back to 1969 and my reading of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and a complementary interest in Husserl's *Lectures on Internal Time Consciousness*. On the opening page of his influential lectures, Husserl says that Book 11 of the *Confessions* is the only serious reflection on the topic. I turned aside and read Augustine and have been reading him ever since. At the time I did not intend to study Augustine, but what in the long run held my interest was not only his ability to raise in an original way questions of contemporary interest but the reverse – the surplus latent in his strangeness.

In the intervening years, I have written a master's thesis and a doctoral thesis on the *Confessions*. I recall that at that time, on my way to the library, the theologian Bernard Lonergan announced to me in his apodictic and stentorian voice: "Remember, all a doctoral student must prove is that he can read one text." I have been trying to read that one text ever since. My 1987 book *Original Sin in Augustine's Confessions*<sup>1</sup> is the culmination of this earlier work, and its finding on dualism and original sin still finds an important place in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of the present work. Indeed, the present book can be read as a companion to and continuation of the earlier work. Note especially section 2 of chapter 1 of the 1987 book on "The Role of Theology in the *Confessions*."

An important advance over the earlier work has been the philosophical scaffolding and site, even a witness stand, provided by Paul Ricoeur for reinterpreting, interrogating, and cross-examining Augustine's "strange" testimony. My first attempt to deconstruct and recuperate Augustine's witness – "Paul Ricoeur, Freudianism, and Augustine's *Confessions*,"<sup>2</sup> – took advantage

of the many Freudian analyses of the *Confessions* to offer a non-reductionist reading – see Chapter 2 of the present book. At the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, I published an encyclopedia entry and two articles<sup>3</sup> – see some sections of Chapters 4–9 of the present book. They are the result of my struggle to understand what I regard as the foundational theology of the *Confessions* – the incarnation, original sin, electing grace, and predestination – using Ricoeur's theory of narrative universals.

But it was not until quite recently that the present book came together. Back in 1985, Donald Capps responded to my Freudian article with the claim that the Augustine of the *Confessions* is a narcissist.<sup>4</sup> Although I could respond to his challenge in terms of the *Confessions*, it was only with the article published in 2013<sup>5</sup> – see Chapter 3 – that the picture became clear and that the present book was conceived. I had long believed that Augustine discovered in Paul – *Ad Simplicianum*, written shortly before the *Confessions* – a bewildering ethics, in which one establishes one's own standard of judgment only to have it blown away in the scorn of divine laughter. I also knew that this anti-voluntaristic ethics is the pivotal theological insight of the *Confessions*. What I had not realized till now is that Augustine had heard the same divine laughter at his press-ganged ordination, and that this insight into the divine scorn lay behind his claim in the *Confessions*, which claim Capps had called into narcissistic question:

Terrified by my sins and the mass of my misery, I had pondered in my heart and thought of flight to the desert; but you did forbid me and strengthen me, saying: "And Christ died for all: that they also who live, may now not live to themselves but with him who died for them." (10.43.70)<sup>6</sup>

The people of Hippo literally stopped Augustine in his tracks. His confession, his bearing witness to his summons, his coerced call to responsibility "for all," is the testimony of his *Confessions*. What is striking is that coercion subserves freedom, freedom to serve all. Why the coercion then? Augustine recalls in the first eight books of the *Confessions* and the first twenty-three chapters of Book 10 the futile years of restless search for true happiness, only to discover that he had always been ineluctably bound in a fundamental hatred of the truth that could enlighten him and that only the divine laughter could set him free.

As the many intimate passages of the *Confessions* amply attest, divine derision is the gateway to freedom, to an amorous delight, to an irresistible joy that Augustine makes his own. But Augustine insists on the anti-voluntaristic nature of this prevenient call. Grace always goes before; it is coercive for its joy is awesome, and its irresistible delight is a *tremendum* leading him where

he would rather not go, whether it is to the continence of Book 8 or the ordination of Book 9.

Augustine uses the image of the song and the canticle to understand the prevenient and coercive force of this grace. In Book 12 of the *Confessions*, he says that the matter out of which God created was not prior in time or value to form but only in origin, in lowliness, as sound is to a song. So his free will is not prior in time or value. As sound is to song, so free will's current lowliness, its ethical bondage, is to the amorous delight in true happiness that sets it free. To the extent that the will is bound, the call to love must be a command. Ineluctable bondage requires coercive, irresistible delight. The song, recall, is awesome, a *tremendum*; as such it is a coercive force leading Augustine to unanticipated freedom in an ever deeper unknowing, an enlightened unknowing, a *docta ignorantia*.<sup>7</sup> The song can never be anticipated or preknown; it can only be an amorous delight in which the song has already moved on beyond its appropriation. The attempt to reify or to manipulate the song leaves only an involuntary trace in the divine laughter. The song's coercive power draws Augustine where he would not go.

The song is, of course, the Canticle of Book 11, Ambrose's *Deus Creator Omnium* timing the flux (11.27.35 and 11.31.41); it is the song of degrees, where "my love is my weight: wherever I go my love is what brings me there. By your gift [the Holy Spirit] we are on fire and borne upwards: we flame and we ascend. 'In our heart we ascend and *sing the song of degrees*.' It is by your fire, your beneficent fire, that we burn and we rise, rise towards the peace of Jerusalem" (13.9.10). It is the "songs of love" (12.16.23). In a remarkable passage, Augustine first evokes the formless earth to personify those, like his youthful self, who refuse to listen to his testimony.

If they refuse and repulse me . . . let me leave them outside breathing into the dust and filling their eyes with earth, and let me 'enter into my own chamber' and *sing my songs of love* to You, groaning with inexpressible groaning in my pilgrimage, and remembering Jerusalem with my heart stretching upwards in longing for it: Jerusalem my Fatherland, Jerusalem which is my mother. (12.16.23; emphasis added)

But, finally, the respite, the interlude in his chamber, is only a temporary pause on his pilgrim way in his testimony to the Manicheans and the Donatists, for the song goes before, it is an awesome joy, a *tremendum*, an amorous delight in which "Christ died for all."

Magic books give pleasure and we would not return to them again and again unless they did so. Augustine says in his *Retractatio*:

My *Confessions* ... are meant to excite men's minds and affections toward [God]. At least as far as I am concerned, this is what they did for me when they were being written and they still do this when read. What some people think of them is their own affair; but I do know that they have given *pleasure* to many of my brethren and still do.<sup>8</sup>

The *Confessions* must give pleasure. I adopt as my own what Charles Rosen says of music in general to describe my approach to Augustine's confessional song: "Without pleasure, there is no understanding. ... You cannot make sense of ... [Augustine's songs of love] ... without advocacy, and not to make sense of it is to condemn."<sup>9</sup> This book is my attempt to stand among the "brethren" and to hear what they heard in all its freshness and immediacy.

Talk of gratitude makes me turn first to the journals and their editors, especially Allan Fitzgerald at *Augustinian Studies*, and their anonymous reviewers, who, by publishing my first attempts to understand what I wanted to say, gave me the courage to proceed. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for Cambridge University Press, who gave me a renewed belief in what I was trying to say. The Press's two editors, Laura Morris and Alexandra Poreda, have been consistently knowledgeable, helpful, and enthusiastic. I am especially grateful to my friend and one-time mentor Herbert Richardson.

I have spent most of my academic life in the Faculty of Human Sciences, at Saint Paul University, Ottawa. I am grateful to the university for giving me generous sabbatical leaves for what T. S. Eliot calls "the necessary leisure for creativity" and, above all, for surrounding me with colleagues whose company I enjoy and whose standards I share: John van den Hengel and Paul O'Grady – we worked together on Paul Ricoeur's narrative theory – Gilles Fortin, Manal Guirguis-Younger, and the late Arthur Lacerte and Kevin Coyle.

My wife Maria and our four adult children, Peter, Jamie, Mireille, and Matthew, to whom I dedicate this book, are the blessing of my life.

## Abbreviations, Primary Sources and Translations

### ABBREVIATIONS: GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

ACW	<i>Ancient Christian Writers</i> , J. Quasten and J. C. Plumpe (eds.) (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1946)
AttA	<i>Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia</i> , Allan Fitzgerald (ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999)
BA	<i>Bibliothèque Augustinienne: Œuvres de Saint Augustin</i> (Paris: Desclée, De Brouwer, 1949)
CCL	<i>Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina</i> (Turnhout, Brepols, 1953)
CI	Ricoeur, Paul, <i>The Conflict of Interpretations</i> , Don Ihde (ed.) (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974)
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> (Vienna: Tempesky, 1865)
FC	<i>The Fathers of the Church</i> , R. J. Deferrari (ed.) (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947)
LCC	<i>Library of Christian Classics</i> , J. Baille, J. T. McNeill, and H. P. van Dusen (London: SCM Press, 1953–66)
LF	<i>A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church</i> , E. Pusey (ed.), 24, 25, 30, 32, 37, 39 (Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1838–58)
NPNF	<i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> (Oxford; repr.: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994)
PL	<i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus Series Latina</i> , J.-P. Migne (ed.) (Paris, 1844–64)

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WSA *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, J. E. Rotelle (ed.) (New York: New City Press, 1990–)

AUGUSTINE'S WORKS (ABBREVIATIONS, TITLES,  
AND TRANSLATIONS)

- civ. Dei* *De civitate Dei*, PL41, CSEL 40, CCL 47–48; *The City of God*, Henry Bettenson (trans.) (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972)
- conf.* *Sancti Augustini Confessionum libri XIII*, PL 32, CSEL 33, CCL 27: *Confessions Books I–XIII*, Frank J. Sheed (trans.) (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1943/1993)
- corrept.* *De correptione et gratia*, PL 44; *A Treatise on Rebuke and Grace*. Peter Holmes, Robert Wallis, and Benjamin Warfield (trans.), *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, NPNF (1956), 5:467–91
- doc. Chr.* *De doctrina Christiana*, PL 34, CSEL 80, CCL 32; *On Christian Doctrine in Four Books*, J. F. Shaw (trans), *Saint Augustine's City of God and Christian Doctrine*, NPNE, 2:512–97
- en. Ps.* *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, PL 36–37, CCL 38–40: *Exposition of the Psalms 73–79*, Maria Boulding (trans.), WSA 3/18:372–408; and *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, LF, Members of the English Church (trans.)
- ep.* *Epistulae*, PL 33, CSEL 34, 44, 57, 58, 88, FC: *Letters 1–99*, Roland Teske (trans.) 2/1 WSA (1990); and *Saint Augustine Letters* Wilfred Parsons (trans.), FC 32
- Gn.* *Litt De Genesi ad litteram*, CSEL 28.1; *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, John Taylor (trans.), 41 and 42 ACW
- gr. et lib. arb.,*  
*c. Jul. imp.* *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, PL 44  
*Contra Julianum opus imperfectum*, PL 45, CSEL. 85.1; *Against Julian, an Unfinished Book*, WSA (1999), 1.25
- Jo. ev. tr.* *Johannis Evangelium tractatus*, PL 35, CCL 36, *Homilies on the Gospel According to St. John and His First Epistle*, 26 and 29 LF. Members of the English Church (trans.)
- lib. arb.* *De libero arbitrio*, PL 32, CSEL 74, CCL 29; *On Free Will*, WSA

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<i>Persev.</i>	<i>De dono perseverantiae</i> , PL 45; <i>A Treatise on the Gift of Perseverance</i> . Peter Holmes, Robert Wallis, and Benjamin Warfield (trans.), <i>Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings</i> , NPNF, 5:521–52
<i>praed. sanct.</i>	<i>De praedestinatione sanctorum</i> , PL 44; <i>A Treatise on the Predestination of the Saints</i> , Peter Holmes, Robert Wallis, and Benjamin Warfield (trans.), <i>Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings</i> , NPNF, 5:493–519
<i>retr.</i>	<i>Retractationes</i> , PL 32, CSEL 36, CCL 57: <i>The Retractations, Augustine: Confessions and Enchiridion</i> , Albert Outler (trans. and ed.) FC 7 (London: SCM Press)
<i>s.</i>	<i>Sermones</i> , PL 38, 39, PLS 2, Dolbeau (1996), CCL 41
<i>Simpl.</i>	<i>Ad Simplicianum</i> , PL 40, CCL 44; <i>To Simplician: On Various Questions, Book 1</i> , J. H. S. Burleigh (trans. and ed.), LCC (1953), 6:370–406.
<i>Trin.</i>	<i>De Trinitate</i> . PL 42, CCL 50/50a; <i>The Trinity</i> . Stephen McKenna (trans.), 45 (1962)
<i>vera rel.</i>	<i>De vera religione</i> , PL 34, CSEL 77, CCL 32

For citations from the *Confessions*, I have used Frank Sheed's translation. I agree with Peter Brown: "There are innumerable translations, but the best is" Sheed's (*Augustine of Hippo* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967/2000] p. 185). Sheed's translation was reissued in 1993. On the back cover, Brown says that Sheed's translation has for three generations of students and readers given an appreciation of "the beauty and urgency" of the *Confessions*. This is so largely because Sheed has "caught not only the meaning ... but a large measure of its poetry. It makes Latin sing in English." He adds that Sheed's version is "not only modern: it is a faithful echo ... of its author's original passion and disquiet." On the same back cover, Alasdair MacIntyre says that, unlike most translations, Sheed's "still shows no sign of dating. It captures Augustine's extraordinary combination of precise statement and poetic evocation as does no other." James O'Donnell adds that "Augustine's sublime *Confessions* fairly sing with the music of a baroque eloquence, lavish and stately. Sheed's ear for that music makes this translation a memorable opportunity to hear Augustine's voice resonating down the years." In his introduction to Sheed's translation, Brown says, "It is a singular merit of this translation that Frank Sheed strove to retain the oratorical, even 'oratorio-like,' quality of Augustine's Latin by dictating his translation by word of mouth" (Peter Brown, "Introduction," *Confessions*, p. xii).