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Augustine in Context and Augustine on Context

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Augustine has had a formative role for Christianity and Christian culture. Everyone who has something to do with western thinking and/or theology has been influenced by him in some way, either directly (through Augustine's works) or indirectly (through the works of those who have read Augustine). David Tracy has assessed, "In one sense, any western Christian thinker (and a good number of post-Christian secular thinkers) is a part of the history of the effect of the texts of Augustine."[1] Some 5 million words from Augustine's pen are extant, which is vastly more than we have from any other writer from antiquity. It is not to say that others have not contributed to the shaping of western Christianity but rather that only a few have been as influential as Augustine has been. As Phillip Cary once remarked, much of what people say or think as Christians carries a little tag, "Made by Augustine."

AUGUSTINE IN CONTEXT: SOME GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The very act of writing an introduction is creating a context – a context of convictions and circumstances that have generated the project *Augustine in Context*. To paraphrase a contemporary literary theorist, the idea or impetus behind this volume is "to map the contours of the discourse environment in which [Augustine's writings were] produced and consumed."[2] Thus a key assumption in envisioning this book has been that context, which relates

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[1] D. Tracy, "Charity, Obscurity, Clarity: Augustine's Search for a True Rhetoric," in W. Jost and M. J. Hyde (eds.), *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time: A Reader*, Yale Studies in Hermeneutics (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 254–74, at 260.

[2] G. Castle, *The Literary Theory Handbook*, in *Blackwell Literature Handbooks* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 122–3.

communicative actions and their surroundings to literary texts, is crucial for comprehending any text.

Cambridge's prolific series "Literature in Context" seems to be guided by certain interests and presuppositions in recent literary studies, such as those of New Historicism, which take texts to be inseparable from the context in which they were written (i.e., a "thick description"). That is, texts are perceived primarily as the products of the social circumstances of their creation. Consequently, historical contexts are not perceived as text-independent "backgrounds," some sort of external restrictions on linguistic utterances, but rather as part of the literary phenomenon itself. They are con-"texts" that help to determine the semantic coordinates of what has been said.

Extending this series, its underlying assumptions, and guiding principles to religious studies (in this case, to Augustine), certain parallels between the two respective disciplines, literary studies and patristics, can be detected. In the second half of the twentieth century and as far as methodology is concerned, first social history and then cultural anthropology dominated the field of patristics – hence the heightened attention to contextual studies (i.e., to social and religiohistorical rather than to theological research). Scholarly trends have emphasized the embeddedness of early Christian authors in the world of late antiquity, the interdependence of their discourse with the social forms of life, and their sharing of the common "presupposition pools" with the larger culture. Christian history and culture have been increasingly seen as part of and deeply situated in Roman history and culture. This means that recently the early Christian texts have been studied as literature – a particular medium of communication vis-à-vis a message with an extrasystemic reference – that provides a key to the social realities of the time.

Here is how *Augustine in Context* proceeds. Part I intends to introduce Augustine. The first question to be asked is, "How do we know about him?" and "What might be the implications of knowing him the way we do?" Most of Augustine's later biographies are based on his *Confessions* (his early life until becoming a bishop) and Possidius' sympathetic *Vita* (his life as a bishop and his controversies). Accordingly, Part I examines Augustine's life and public career from his birth and upbringing until his death. Although literary studies (e.g., New Criticism) have made it sufficiently clear that an author's biographical data are not absolutely necessary for understanding his or her texts – in fact, they might be quite irrelevant (see below) – various author- and context-oriented approaches have strongly disagreed with this contention.

Augustine was a man of words and, therefore, particular attention is given to language and literary contexts. Since Augustine is mostly known for his writings and ideas rather than for his personal qualities, Part II investigates the contexts that concern Augustine's literary activity and thought. For deeper understanding and better appreciation, his intellectual quests and pursuits should be understood in the light of the existing intellectual culture and his texts in the web of interrelationships with other writings of the period.

Part III attempts to remind the interpreters of Augustine that he always strived to "know God and the soul [*de Deo, de anima*]" (*Sol.* 1.2.7). So did many others, but with rather different results. Therefore, it is important to consider the contexts of competing worldviews without which it would be virtually impossible to understand certain (reactionary) emphases in Augustine's deliberations. Because his contribution to and impact on his contemporary and subsequent (philosophical) theology definitely outweigh his contribution to and impact on any other field of study, heightened attention is given to the religious contexts of his treatises. Such "privileging of religion" is justified, I believe, by Augustine's own privileging of religion. After all, most people are not reading Augustine to find a fourth-fifth century understanding of family and economics. Fewer still seek out Augustine's texts in order to get an idea about imperial correctional facilities or healthcare systems. Rather, most people are reading Augustine for the subject matter that he discusses, for certain "big questions" of theology and philosophy, that is, for religious insight. Yet the bishop of Hippo and his numerous religious writings have still to be located within a society/culture of late antiquity with everything it had to offer because particular circumstances definitely shaped his personality, convictions, and literary output. Social conventions and expectations just have to be in place for any meaningful communication to happen. Even the somewhat rebellious Augustine could not entirely free himself from such things or make his texts immune to what was going on around him.

In a sense, Part IV continues Part III by extending the investigation to some other aspects of the social reality of Augustine's time. No one escapes the impact of sociopolitical realities, no matter whether that impact is appreciated or dreaded. Augustine's activities, too, are inevitably embedded in the circumstances of his time.

Several previous volumes in the series "Literature in Context" have a section on reception history of a given author. Because of the recent publication of a major work on Augustine – *The Oxford Guide to the*

Historical Reception of Augustine[3] – it does not make good sense to attempt it again on a much lesser scale. However, because this megastudy does not say much about the very beginning of the reception history of Augustine,[4] *Augustine in Context* attempts to fill the gap and focus on the beginning of this complicated process. Accordingly, Augustine is placed alongside his contemporary friends and foes who read him either with great enthusiasm or with deep suspicion. Although by the sixth century and for many Augustine had become *Saint* Augustine, the early reception of him may provide an interesting corrective to the widespread but naive impression that his authority was never questioned. This volume attempts to assist its readers in moving away from a still widespread perception of the "canonical" Augustine as a self-standing, transhistorical intellectual giant who was somehow above the mundane realities of his time.

The essays in this volume are about the *context* of Augustine and not about Augustine per se. The "Guidance Notes for Volume Editors" says, "The volume should not focus on accounts of the individual's actual work, but instead offer accounts of contextual issues, bringing in the work as necessary for illustration purposes." That is, the goal is to provide a set of possible contexts that are reconstructed – with some obvious exceptions in Parts I and V – from sources other than Augustine's works and yet pertinent for understanding his works. This is deliberate. In many cases, it helps to avoid the tendency of circular reasoning, where a context is reconstructed from Augustine's works and then his works are interpreted in the light of the context thus reconstructed. (This happens frequently in the case of ancient texts, especially when little or no comparative material is extant.)

Augustine in Context is written by experts in their fields and is intended for the larger audience, yet without ignoring the many scholars and students of Augustine. It provides a set of "glasses" (i.e., various contexts) through which the works of Augustine can be seen or "spaces" in which one can ponder about Augustine. In other words, the intention is not to put together another improved *Companion to Augustine* for Augustinian scholars. Rather, the overall idea is to supply a set of possible (historical) contexts (none of which is the "master context," as the singular of the word "context" in the title might

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[3] K. Pollmann and W. Otten (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, 3 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2013).

[4] The unfortunate concept of a borderline, which is often employed for separating the "original text (or context)" from its subsequent reception, is critically assessed by B. W. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History*, Indiana Series in Biblical Literature (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014). Augustine started the reception of "Augustine," for his later writings were simultaneously both a "reception" and a new "original."

suggest) that are pertinent for understanding the literary output of the bishop of Hippo. In a sense, this book is a *prolegomenon* for reading Augustine's own works, that is, for a more nuanced reading of his works.

Perhaps it should also be clarified that neither the number nor the order of essays pretends to exhaust the possibilities. Neither do they suggest a hierarchy of importance or a claim to be comprehensive. Nevertheless, the organization of essays does have a rationale that moves from an introduction of the person (the so-called personal context) to the contexts of Augustine's works and ideas, starting from the intellectual setting and extending to the sociopolitical realm. The grouping of topics into Parts II, III, and IV should also not give an impression that these thematic sections are somehow self-standing and independent entities. To have a section on political and social contexts is not to contend that politics and social circumstances would exist apart from culture or, for that matter, religion[5] or nationality. The grouping also attempts to avoid, despite a separate section of religious contexts (e.g., Part III), a stark separation between "religious" and "secular" spheres, ideas, and material culture.

The essays, which at times inevitably overlap, are not edited for better coherence and consensus. Productive differences of opinion are deliberately allowed to stand because disagreement provides the necessary energy for generating further debate and research.

SOME FURTHER ISSUES

In the 380s, Ambrosiaster was adamant, "For to take things out of context is to sin" (i.e., it is to commit a hermeneutical "sin") (*comm.* on 1 Tim 8–9). Indeed, there is much to gain from contextual study of ancient texts. For example, it tends to eliminate various anachronistic readings and prevents forcing Augustine to answer the questions he never raised. It is believed to provide both constraints on and possibilities for the meanings of his utterances. Nevertheless, there are some issues related to the concept of context that deserve mention for further consideration.

First, among theorists, there is really no consensus about what context as such is. *Augustine in what*? "Widely accepted standard definitions or theories on the context are not on the market."[6] While everyone seems to

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[5] T. A. Lewis, *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion and Vice Versa* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 125–7.
[6] J. Meibauer, "What Is Context? Theoretical and Empirical Evidence," in R. Finkbeiner et al. (eds.), *What Is Context? Linguistic Approaches and Challenges*, Lingustik Aktuell/Linguistics Today 196 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2012), 9–32, at 9.

acknowledge that context refers to the various aspects that are relevant for understanding a text or an utterance, defining "context" is usually confined to mere listing of its component parts. Yet how many textual and extratextual component parts need to be considered in order to have a context? How do we select them from a wide spectrum of possible contextual cues and on the basis of what to determine their relevance? In brief, context proves to be a rather elusive concept when one attempts to define it.

Second, contexts – whatever they are taken to be – are never objectively given, fixed, and ready to be used for everyone who would like to operate with them. This means that at least contexts for ancient writings are always *re*constructions of later readers, and because of fragmentary evidence, they can never be reconstructed in their totality. As such, reconstructed contexts remain ever-mutable entities, already and inevitably contaminated with the presuppositions, biases, and interests of the one who reconstructs them for his or her own particular purposes. This amounts to saying that describing various contexts for Augustine's life and work may generate a false yet convenient feeling of assurance that finally one has found an objective interpretative device. However, such hermeneutical optimism needs to be tamed by careful acknowledgment of the provisional character of any reconstruction of a context.

Third, how much weight should be given to *historical* contexts for construing a meaning of a text? Although contextual interpretation has been emphasized, practiced, and highly praised for quite some time, it rests on certain philosophical assumptions about how meaning is constituted and raises, for example, the issue of the hermeneutical normativity of "original contexts." Yet an "original context" is arguably not some sort of super criterion for interpreting ancient texts because what an utterance meant in its historical context is not all that a given utterance can and has to mean. If one is to follow Grice, texts have context-independent semantic meanings and context-dependent pragmatic meanings.[7] This distinction helps, at least, to understand the irrefutable fact that there are a whole lot of utterances and texts that communicate extremely well, although no one knows and will never know what their "original context" was. Is it not the case that Augustine's *Confessions*, for example, can be deeply meaningful even for the readers who know absolutely nothing about the text's provenance and the historical circumstances of its composition? This text "speaks to" and

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[7] H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in H. P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 22–40. Pragmatics is a subdiscipline of linguistics that assesses the context-dependent aspects of meaning.

mesmerizes its readers even if they do not know the very century in which it was composed or by whom it was composed. "Classical" texts are particularly prone to multicontextualism. In short, finding a text meaningful does not necessarily presuppose the knowledge of the "original context" or the provenance of the text. Searching for the meaning of a text on a postcompositional level can yield equally remarkable results. Breed remarks, "The truth is that texts always leave their contexts, especially their putative original contexts, and contexts never seem to do anything to stop them. Actually, the situation is even worse: original contexts simply disappear into the mists of time while the texts romp around in the present."[8]

Furthermore, the "original context" is often believed to offer an important clue about authorial intention, and authorial intention is believed, in turn, to govern the meaning of a text or utterance. Yet again, literary studies have strongly questioned the age-old conviction that authorial intent always controls the meaning of a text. It has been proposed that what matters are the intrinsic and structural aspects of a literary work rather than its intended meaning and extratextual reference (e.g., Formalism). Augustine, for example, knew very well that often it was impossible to appeal to authorial intention. He wondered in *civ. Dei* 20.19, "We, who do not know what they [i.e., the addressees of the Book of Revelation] knew, are not able to arrive at the apostles' meaning even with an effort, and no matter how much we desire to do so." Again, "Which of us can discover [the meaning of the text of Genesis] with such assurance that he can confidently say, 'This is what Moses meant and this was his meaning in that narrative' . . . I cannot see in Moses' mind that this is what he was thinking when he wrote this" (*conf.* 12.14.33). While Augustine never questioned the hermeneutical priority of authorial intention or the fact that texts referred to something, he was very much aware of the complications that these notions entailed.[9] Whether one likes it or not, often an appeal to what is taken to be the authorial intent in the historical "original context" proves to be nothing but guesswork.

Fourth, the series "Literature in Context" also seems to give a definite preference to the contexts of a given author. Yet various possible contexts of readers may prove to be equally important. Even Augustine knew that the context of a reader mattered for discovering the meaning of an utterance. For example, in *s. Dom. mon.* 2.7.26, he argues that for eastern Christians the designation "daily bread" (Mt 6:11) cannot mean the Eucharist because they

[8] Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 93.
[9] T. Toom, "Was Augustine an Intentionalist? Authorial Intention in Augustine's Hermeneutics," *Studia Patristica* 70(18) (2013), 185–93.

just do not celebrate the Eucharist daily. In this case, the context of the readers/interpreters restricts the semantic realm of a phrase. Likewise, the meanings of Augustine's own texts always evolve in the particular reading process and by particular readers, who carry their own interpretative contexts with them and consequently approach texts with their concerns and questions. Thus the contexts of an author are not the only ones that matter. The contexts of readers, too, have a determinative role for establishing meaning(s). "Understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well."[10]

AUGUSTINE ON CONTEXT

Although not sharing the ideologies behind New Historicism or any other modern "school," Augustine likewise emphasized the importance of context(s) and contextual interpretation. True, his deliberations concerned mostly the interpretation of Scripture, but they can also be applied to the reading of any ancient text, including his own.

First, Augustine advises an interpreter to consider the *literary* context of a word or an utterance. "The context of the scriptures customarily illuminates a given passage, when the words adjunct to the text in question are carefully examined" (*div. qu.* 69.2). Likewise, in *doc. Chr.* 3.2.2, he admonishes the interpreter to consider "the preceding and following passages" in case a statement is unclear or ambiguous – just like Cicero had instructed him, "[I]t must be shown that from what precedes and follows in the document the doubtful point becomes plain" (*Inv.* 2.40.117). For example, in *doc. Chr.* 2.12.18 and in order to determine how the particular word "calf" needs to be translated in Wisd 4:3, Augustine investigates the "words that follow." Or, in *s. Dom. mon.* 1.16.44, the meaning of the designation "the rest" in 1 Cor 7:12 is ascertained by the next sentence. Again, detecting a contradiction between 1 Jn 1:8 and 3:9, he takes the phrase "He who has been born from God does not sin" as referring to a particular sin – a violation of charity (*ep. Jo.* 5.1–2, 7) – because the whole epistle "commends charity" (5.4; cf. 6.4).

For reading Augustine's own treatises, this means that his statements, too, have to be considered in their immediate literary setting (i.e., in the intratextual context or cotext). Progressively, they have to be considered also in the ever-enlarging settings of the particular treatise (i.e., in the infratextual

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[10] H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn., trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989; reprint, New York: Continuum, 1995), 296.

context), Augustine's other treatises, Latin Christian literature, the literature of late antiquity, and so on (i.e., in the intertextual contexts) and finally also in the extratextual contexts (if these are not already bracketed together with a text).

Second, an interpreter also has to consider the *situational* context of an utterance. The larger life setting – or as the rhetorical manuals called it, *circumstantiae* – may provide a key for a more adequate understanding of what is said. For example, if one hears the words, "Quit pulling my leg!," one needs to know the life situation of this utterance for comprehending the request. One needs to know whether someone wants someone else to quit teasing him or her, whether people are wrestling, or whether there is an ongoing rescue operation. Situational context makes an utterance semantically specific and indicates how it is to be understood at that moment. In *s. Dom. mon.* 1.20.65, Augustine contends that the punishments mentioned in the Old Testament cannot be understood unless one becomes aware "of the mentality and the particular times that marked these deeds." Similarly, he urges, "We must pay careful attention to what befits places and times and persons, in order not to judge behavior rashly as infamous" (*doc. Chr*. 3.12.19).

Third, a *personal* context proves to be important as well. Because the intention of an author was given such importance for determining the meaning of a text, for adequate interpretation, ancient rhetoricians urged consideration of the whole life of an author. They stressed the importance of what can be called "personal context." Cicero wrote, "One ought to estimate what the writer meant from his other writings, acts, words, disposition, and in fact his whole life" (*Inv*. 2.40.117). He elaborated, "For it is easy to estimate what is likely that the writer intended from the complete context and from the character of the writer [*ex persona scriptoris*], and from the qualities which are associated with certain characters" (*Inv*. 2.40.117). Augustine, for example, knew, on the basis of other canonical texts what Jesus, the evangelists, or Paul was likely to say, and often this helped him to make a decision about the intended meaning of an utterance. Obviously, the more information one has about the author and the greater the number of available writings, the easier it is to determine the author's "personal context."

Perhaps a special difficulty with (ancient) written texts should be pointed out here as well. Namely, there is a certain immediacy to oral communication – the context is present at hand, and the way something is said directs the hearers' understanding. Participants in a conversation construct context in the process of communication. Even if misunderstanding occurs, they can always ask for a clarification. Just as Augustine says, "[Moses] is not now

before me, but if he were, I would clasp him and ask him" (*conf.* 11.3.5). That is, in oral communication, the linguistic medium is never separated from the person using it. There is no such thing as a living discourse that would exist independently of the speaker and the context of the utterance. But things are rather different in the case of written texts, where everything, including life situation, authorial intention, tone of voice, and other such interpretative clues, is not easily accessible and sometimes not available at all. This posits an extra difficulty for interpreters of written texts, especially anonymous and ancient texts. Periods, commas, question marks, and grammatical constructions can be of some help here, but in the case of written text, an interpreter does not have the help of the supplementary "illocutionary acts" (i.e., the nonlinguistic communication devices). Augustine realizes that when authorial intention is not explicitly stated and when contextual clues, such as phrasing (*doc. Chr.* 3.2.2–4.8), intonation (*civ. Dei* 16.6; *doc. Chr.* 3.3.6), and gesticulation (*en. Ps.* 34[2].11) happen to be unavailable, an interpreter cannot have any extra help from such illocutionary acts.

For *Augustine in Context*, the first, the literary context, is relatively less important because the current volume does not assess Augustine's works (except some essays in Parts I and IV). The second, the situational (or historical) context, is the center of attention in Parts II, III, and IV. The third, the personal context, is reconstructed in Part I.