Abstract

From the Circular Soul to the Cracked Self: A Genetic Historiography of Augustine’s Anthropology from Cassiciacum to the Confessiones

This dissertation is about Augustine of Hippo’s conceptions of the human person – both theoretical and prescriptive – and the philosophical resources he called upon to construct (and reconstruct) them from the period immediately following his conversion to his production of the Confessiones.

My primary intention in investigating these twin foci has been to produce a genetic account of his anthropology. In other words, I have followed Augustine’s anthropological thought with the specific issue of internal development in mind. In so doing, I have asked which resources does he call upon – both from within his own prior thought and from external sources – to produce his novel forms? And, what philosophical dynamics press him to respond in this theoretical manner?

In tracing developments within Augustine’s applied anthropology, two methodological distinctions have proved most helpful. First, I employ Pierre Hadot’s distinction between an ancient philosophic school’s chosen form of life and the specific spiritual exercises employed to conform the self to that life form. Roughly identical spiritual exercises or therapeutic modalities can be employed in service of strikingly different ways of life. Second, Christian mystagogy constitutes a mode of induction into a specifically ecclesial form of life wherein the initiate increasingly understands himself and all his experiences as attaining meaning in relation to the divine secret. Mystagogy,
in the mature Augustine’s work, provides the overarching frame and direction for an ecclesial subspecies of therapeutic modalities or spiritual exercises.

With this methodology, I turn in chapter one to Augustine’s Cassiciacum writings and argue thus. Augustine, having imbibed Plotinus’ mythic presentation of the fallen soul, conceives the body primarily as an encumbering hindrance to the soul. The soul is preexistent, divine or structurally inviolable and designed only for contemplation. But internal tensions are immediately evident. Augustine’s attempt to provide a philosophical demonstration of the soul’s immortality manifests an odd admixture of incompatible Middle-Platonic and Neo-Platonic axioms. As a result, Augustine performs a terribly important, non-Plotinian modification wherein the lower soul proves ontologically more stable than the higher soul.

At this stage, Augustine’s applied anthropology consists in a thoroughly cognitive account of blessedness achieved through contemplation. His prescriptive program begins with a study of the liberal disciplines and rises from there to the contemplation of intelligible reality.

Chapter two examines the anthropological developments following Augustine’s reception of the catechism and baptism, but preceding his ordination to the priesthood. Therein I argue that humanity’s original state of creation turns out to be a soulish sort of existence, which correlates to the lower functions of soul. Subsequent illumination by God elevated these primordial humans to spiritual existence in Paradise from which their fall constituted a relapse to their original soulish state. In distinctively Augustinian fashion, the lower functions turn out to be more ontologically stable than the higher.

In examining this bottom up state of existence, Augustine finds both action and contemplation as inverse possibilities of human intentio. Thereby Augustine lifts his
first key anthropological concept from the Roman Stoics and uses it to describe how the soul twists from contemplation to action and thus falls. A cognitive stain, in the form of turbulent mental images named phantasms, now plagues the soul that fell by indulging in action.

Augustine’s applied anthropology at this stage consists of a program to uproot memorial phantasms and grow toward intelligible contemplation. But the earlier resources for ascent in the liberal disciplines have been largely replaced by the milk and meat of Christian scripture and its transmission within the church’s teaching.

In chapter three, my focus shifts to Augustine’s early priesthood. I trace Augustine’s first philosophical concept of the heart as it emerges entwined with his first positive account of intentional action. His reading of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount necessitated both. The Platonists offered no viable psychology of action and passion to adapt, so Augustine turns to Stoic accounts. Therein Augustine describes the heart as the totality of present self-awareness that produces the *intentio* previously found underlying human action and contemplation.

Augustine’s applied anthropology at this stage focuses on producing the purity of heart Jesus counsels. In action, purity of heart comes through a Christian adaptation of the Stoic spiritual exercise of προσοχή. The Stoics’ exercise centered on retaining precepts in mind and referring every action to the end of fulfilling precept. Purity of heart follows from retaining Jesus’ precepts and referring every action to eternal rather than temporal ends.

In chapter four, I analyze Augustine’s later priestly Pauline exegeses and argue that Augustine produces an intricate reading of Stoic psychologies of action and passion in terms of Paul and Paul in terms of the Stoic theories. Therein, Augustine finds a
human body-soul complex so thoroughly integrated that only a transformed, resurrected body can fully overcome internal division within the soul. In the present, the human being labors under a disintegrated capacity for assent and dissent. Two laws, or sets of normative propositional content, and two simultaneous yet contradictory capacities to assent or dissent stir within the human person. The self has cracked.

Augustine’s shocking conclusion is that only an act of God can render one direction of assent and its propositional content stronger than its internal opponent within the person. A new doctrine of election, rather than an applied program for spiritual exercise, emerges from this anthropological realization. Only the congruent call of God, in keeping with wholly unmerited election, can turn a person and set him on the path to blessedness.

In chapter five, I turn to the *Confessiones* and argue that Augustine presents therein his first mature synthesis of his Paulinizing Stoic psychology of action and his (originally) Platonising penchant for contemplation. Chapter five begins this argument by focusing on Augustine’s analytic depiction of the lower soul as the root of human action presented in *Confessiones I*. Augustine incorporates the Roman Stoic accounts of *commendatio* and *peruersio* with a handful of crucial alterations. *Confessiones I* describes the sequential emergence of a threefold *commendatio* already perverted by sin. The Roman Stoic account of *peruersio* by social echoing is further employed to describe the social perversion perpetrated by late Roman schools, the remnants of the *cursus honorum*, heretical religious teaching and the pretensions of pagan philosophy. These perverting factors are presented specifically as parodies of a mystagogic program of human formation intimated allegorically in the hexaemeron.
In the sixth and final chapter, we consider the anthropological dimensions of contemplation in the *Confessions*. Augustine envisions a distinctive form of ecclesially indigenous contemplation rising from scripture and marked off from a presumptive form of contemplation in pagan philosophy. Two key distinctions enable this differentiation in modes of contemplation. First, the *direction* of epistemic mediation differs in the two forms of contemplation. Second, the two directions correspond to differing *sources of capacity* for contemplation. Augustine’s conceptual source for these distinctions is a creative use of Rom. 1:20 found consistent in his interactions with pagan philosophy.

Christian contemplation does not exist as an isolated or stand alone phenomenon. But, as one pole within the larger mystagogic program of human transformation, contemplation can be theoretically isolated through a maneuver of conceptual precision. Christian contemplation emerges as a patterned descent to the scriptures that results in being lifted by God’s grace to a full-souled (upper and lower soul) focus on God.

First, one submits to a multilayered mediation of God through the scriptures and of the created order, including the scriptures, through God’s Spirit. Second, affective engagement draws the whole soul (not just the intellective aspect) into interaction with scripture and God. Third, ascending distinctions ensue carrying the devoted practitioner through a process of differentiating sensible from intelligible, temporal dispensations from God’s underlying eternal plan, and finally the interplay of unity and trinity in God and self. Fourth, in the process of contemplation, past memories as cordial distractions are temporarily obliterated. Fifth, this allows a complete focus on God with the heart or the totality of present awareness. As distinguished from the partial
Engagement of intellectual vision, Augustine describes this total focus of awareness (intellective, desiderative, affective together) in terms of the heart touching God. In the process of this total engagement of the soul with God, the perverse mediatory direction of Rom. 1:20 is reversed. God’s spirit now mediates interaction with creatures. The Christian transformation of contemplation and action find fruition in a doxological orientation of the grace-integrated self.

I draw three conclusions. First, Augustine’s concept of the human being undergoes clear developments from a Platonizing account of the circular soul, always already divine, to a post-Plotinian account of the creaturely embodied self. Second, Augustine’s applied anthropology develops from early cognitive ascents aimed at contemplative fulfillment to his mature account of human fulfillment through the integrally graced mystagogic journey initiated by descending to Christ’s flesh in order to ascend with his divinity. Third, Augustine’s philosophical resources and strategic alliances are much broader than most 20th century accounts have acknowledged. In particular, Augustine made much more extensive use of Stoic conceptualities and argumentative strategies than heretofore considered. The epicenter of his borrowings and adaptations in the period under evaluation was the construction of a suitable psychology of action. However the consequences also extended, through motivating his characteristic doctrine of election, into the realm of dogmatic theology proper.