

Foreword

DESPITE AUGUSTINE'S ENORMOUS IMPACT on Western thought and his abiding popularity (or notoriety) in both Catholic and Protestant circles, modern scholarship has by and large paid scant attention or the wrong kind of attention to Augustine's earliest writings as a Christian: *Against the Academics*, *On the Happy Life*, *On Order*, and *Soliloquies*. Known collectively as the Cassiciacum dialogues because of their setting at a friend's villa somewhere north of Milan, these early writings abound in literary charm and philosophical maturity. Nonetheless, for the bulk of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, professional readers of Cassiciacum focused on a dry and narrow set of questions concerning Augustine's neo-Platonic (as opposed to authentically Christian) beliefs at the time of his conversion to Christianity in AD 386. Although the protracted debate that ensued from this topic was not without its merit, it came at a cost. To use a rough analogy, the Augustinian studies from this period more or less strip-mined the texts for evidence of Augustine's alleged neo-Platonism instead of respecting the delicate ecology of Augustine's compositional art by attending to his dexterous use of the dialogue genre, his pedagogical intent, and his often subtle engagement of the great authors of classical antiquity beyond that of neo-Platonists like Plotinus or Porphyry.

Fortunately, a new generation of scholars arose in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century with a more environmentally-sensitive set of questions, so to speak, and a greater respect for Augustine's own goals in writing the Cassiciacum works. Yet the new wave of secondary resources is not without its defects either. Whereas much of the earlier scholarship in the twentieth century tended to read the Cassiciacum corpus through the flattening lens of Enlightenment presuppositions or modern historical criticism, the more recent scholarship has tended to read it through the blurry lens of post-modern indeterminacy. Neither pair of goggles, at the end of day, quite captures the spirit of Cassiciacum.

It is in part because of this current state of affairs that Mark Boone's *The Conversion and Therapy of Desire* is such a valuable work. Boone clearly profits from the strengths of contemporary advances in Cassiciacum research but he is careful to avoid its infelicities. *Conversion and Therapy* returns us to the mind of a young Augustine who has spent over a decade wrestling with an astonishing array of philosophical, literary, and religious claims and is now ready to talk. It follows Augustine whither he goes through the distinct subjects of each work, and it catches one of the central threads tying not only the dialogues to each other but also to the great Western conversation from which it draws and to which it contributes: desire.

In the fourth century AD, a keen interest in the nature, value, and direction of human desire was hardly novel. As Boone aptly explains in the first chapter, it was divergent analyses of desire that, as much as anything else, distinguished the great philosophical schools of antiquity and the Middle Ages from each other. But Augustine's exploration of human desire places the Bishop of Hippo in a category all his own. Augustine's anthropology is so driven by the subject that it would not be much of an exaggeration to assert that for Augustine, man is the desiring animal, a unique creature consisting of an erotic intellect attached to animal appetites.

Augustine's analysis of human eros arguably reaches its apex in the *Confessions* and *On Christian Doctrine*, where Augustine pursues an understanding of human longing both in its turn away from its Ultimate Good and in its return. But one of the contributions of *Conversion and Therapy* is to demonstrate how the theme of desire was operative in Augustine's thinking from the very beginning. As Boone notes, each dialogue explores, or drives the reader to explore, what we ought to desire, what has gone wrong with our desires, and what we need to do to desire the right things.

Boone is also to be commended for drawing our attention to two aspects of Augustine's erotic anthropology: conversion and therapy. An important theme in each of the Cassiciacum dialogues is a conversion, or turning, of the subject. Augustine's goal for his pupils and his readers is to convert their minds to the true and their hearts to the good; indeed, as Joseph Pucci has pointed out in his recent book *Augustine's Virgilian Retreat*, he even endeavors to "convert" the words of classical *auctores*. This conversion process, which involves a reorienting or reordering of one's intellect and will, is essentially therapeutic in nature, and hence Boone rightly yokes his focus on conversion with a focus on therapy. The *Soliloquies* alone maintains a conspicuous therapeutic dimension of great psychological depth, but for the other three dialogues as well, a "healing" of wounds is never far from the surface.

For these reasons and more, Mark Boone's *The Conversion and Therapy of Desire* is required reading for anyone interested in the mind of Augustine at Cassiciacum.

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