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## Book Review: Augustine

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Augustine*, by Gareth B. Matthews. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. Pp. 148. \$19.95 (paper).

SUSAN BROWER-TOLAND, Saint Louis University

Matthews's new book, *Augustine*, is the second volume to appear in Blackwell's new *Great Minds* series. The series itself is designed to provide readers with "a strong sense of the fundamental views of the great western philosophers and . . . the relevance of these philosophers to the way we live and think today" (from the title page). Given the aims of the series one might expect Matthews's book to be synoptic in nature, providing an exposition of Augustine's major philosophical works, say, or perhaps offering a broad overview of his central philosophical doctrines and achievements. What Matthews delivers, however, is something rather different—something that by all means *does* achieve the stated aims of the series but, nevertheless, does so in unexpected ways. This is because, in introducing us to Augustine, Matthews does not adopt the usual "view from above" angle, but rather he approaches the material from the perspective of "events on the ground"—Augustine in the philosophical trenches. As a result, this book is best thought of not as a broad or systematic introduction to Augustine's *philosophy*, but rather as something more like a topical and thematic introduction to Augustine as *philosopher*.

The book is divided into 15 chapters, each of which is brief (typically between 9 and 11 pages), largely self-contained, and fairly narrowly focused on a single philosophical puzzle and (in most cases) on just a few select texts. One of the benefits of this approach is that each chapter includes fairly extensive quotations from and commentary on the texts in question. Thus, rather than summarizing Augustine's arguments and ideas on a given topic as most introductory texts do, Matthews proceeds by presenting and working through the texts themselves. Insofar as one of the most distinctive features of Augustine's philosophy is the style in which it is written, there seems no better way to introduce Augustine's philosophical ideas and arguments than to allow readers to consider for themselves the texts containing them. It should be emphasized, however, that the book is not primarily exegetical in nature. Rather, the bulk of each chapter consists in Matthews's critical, philosophical engagement with the arguments and ideas he draws from the texts. In what follows, I offer a



brief summary of the chapters' contents, hoping to give a sense of the richness of this approach.

The book's 15 chapters can be usefully thought of as dividing into three parts: the first (chaps. 1–2) provides a brief introduction to Augustine's life and thought; the second (chaps. 3–9) considers Augustine's treatment of various topics in metaphysics and epistemology (broadly construed); the third (chaps. 10–15) focuses on an assortment of issues in philosophy of religion and ethics.

In chapter 1, Matthews begins by introducing Augustine as "the first thinker in Western philosophy . . . to do philosophy from a genuinely first-person point of view" (p. 3). According to Matthews, it is Augustine—not Descartes—who must be credited with being the first to appreciate the philosophical value of working from such a perspective. It is this feature of Augustine's philosophy that structures the second part of the book. Each of the seven chapters comprising the second part are designed to "bring out philosophically interesting lines of reasoning in Augustine . . . informed by a first-person point of view in philosophy." (p. 4) Thus, after providing (in chap. 2) a brief overview of Augustine's life and intellectual influences, Matthews turns (in chaps. 3–9) to trace Augustine's first-person approach through a variety of topics in language, epistemology, mind, and metaphysics.

The first two chapters in this second part of the book focus on questions in epistemology and philosophy of language, respectively. In chapter 3, Matthews examines Augustine's response to skepticism. This chapter, which focuses solely on Augustine's early work, *Against the Academicians*, calls special attention to the role of "inner knowledge"—that is, truths regarding our phenomenal experience—in Augustine's defense against global skepticism. According to Matthews, Augustine's early attention to the phenomenal world introduces and prefigures his focus in subsequent writings on "the mind and what it can know about itself." (p. 21) When, in chapter 4, Matthews turns his attention to Augustine's discussion of language, he focuses mainly on Augustine's account of language acquisition. Here, Matthews highlights two features of Augustine's account: its emphasis on the point of view of the speaker (and language learner) and the way in which critics, such as Wittgenstein, have habitually misconstrued the role Augustine assigns to ostension in the overall process of language acquisition.

The next three chapters (chaps. 5–7) take up various issues in Augustine's philosophy of mind: the "Augustinian *cogito*," his arguments for Dualism, and his solution to the Problem of Other Minds. In chapter 5, Matthews presents Augustine's version of the *cogito*, comparing and contrasting it with its Cartesian counterpart. In chapter 6, he provides a detailed reconstruction and evaluation of Augustine's various attempts to argue from claims about what the mind knows of itself to the conclusion that the mind is immaterial. Finally, in chapter 7, Matthews examines Augustine's treatment of the Problem of Other Minds, arguing along the way that Augustine is the first Western philosopher not only to explicitly state the problem but also to attempt a solution.

Chapters 8 and 9, the final chapters in the second part of the book, address two additional topics in Augustine's philosophy—both of which further reflect his attention to the first-person point of view. Chapter 8 traces Augustine's treatment of three different "philosophical dream prob-

lems": Epistemological (*how do I know I'm not dreaming right now?*), Meta-physical (*how do I know whether all of life isn't just my dream?*), and Moral (*am I immoral if I do something immoral in a dream?*). The chapter focuses mainly on the third of the three—the one that vexed Augustine the most and to which he found no easy solution. Chapter 9 deals with Augustine's account of the nature and creation of time. Here Matthews calls particular attention to Augustine's development of a subjective, first-person account of time. According to Augustine, time is—at least in part—"the measure of something mental," and, hence, is something that "you and I have in our minds, simply by virtue of being conscious" (p. 84).

In the third and final part of the book Matthews turns from his thematic focus on the first personal aspects of Augustine's philosophy to examine some of Augustine's most distinctive contributions to discussions in both philosophy of religion (chaps. 10–12) and in ethics (pp. 13–15). In chapter 10, Matthews explores Augustine's account of the relationship between faith and reason—attempting, in particular, to make sense of the famous Augustinian slogan: "faith seeking understanding". In the following two chapters, he traces Augustine's attempt to work through two important problems in philosophical theology: the problem of foreknowledge and freedom (chap. 11), and the problem of evil (chap. 12). In each of the two chapters, Matthews surveys a variety of different solutions he finds in Augustine. Thus, in connection with the problem of foreknowledge and freedom, Matthews identifies no less than four different solutions, all of which occur in Augustine's brief discussion in the opening chapters of Book III of *On Free Choice of the Will*. Again, in chapter 12, Matthews traces three different solutions Augustine offers in response to the problem of evil: a Free Will Defense, and two others (which he labels "The Imperfection Solution" and the "Necessary Contrast Solution", respectively).

The last three chapters of the book deal with topics in ethics and moral psychology. Chapter 13 is a careful study of Augustine's famous account of the theft of the pears in *Confessions* 2—an account which, according to Matthews, embodies a wholesale rejection of the traditional idea that an agent desires (and pursues in action) only what she believes to be good. The next chapter, which focuses on Augustine's treatise *On Lying*, traces Augustine's various and, ultimately, unsuccessful attempts to identify necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for telling a lie. Matthews takes Augustine's treatment of this issue—and, in particular, his inability to resolve the issue to his own satisfaction—as testimony to Augustine's sensitivity to philosophical perplexity as well as to his philosophical integrity. Finally, in the last chapter, Matthews presents what he takes to be two very different conceptions of happiness present in Augustine's writings: an "experiential" conception and a "formal" conception. Matthews goes on to argue that Augustine's attempt to develop the formal conception is much more successful than his effort to provide an experiential concept, but concludes the chapter and the book by pointing out that it is "entirely fitting that the first important philosopher in the Western tradition to try to do philosophy from a first person point of view should have made the effort to say what it is like to be happy" (p. 145).

What the foregoing conveys, I hope, is something of the range and interest of the topics Matthews pursues in this book. This book is not only

philosophically engaging—even for the specialist or scholar—but also highly readable, written in a way that makes it accessible even to the beginning student of philosophy. As commentator, moreover, Matthews has a unique ability to both identify and draw out precisely those features of Augustine’s views which are (alternately) most puzzling, surprising, distinctive, or remarkable. He has a way not only of bringing Augustine’s philosophical ideas to life but also of calling attention to their philosophical interest and relevance to contemporary concerns and discussions. Indeed, one of the assets of the book is the way Matthews brings Augustine’s philosophical ideas into dialogue with more recent philosophical literature. Matthews draws fruitful comparisons (and contrasts) between Augustine’s and Descartes’s views in philosophy of mind, he subjects Augustine’s account of language acquisition and his treatment of the Problem of Other Minds to a number of Wittgensteinian critiques, he draws on McTaggart’s distinction between A-series and B-series terms in order to make sense of different strands in Augustine’s account of time, and puzzles over whether Augustine might be presupposing the KK principle in his account of self-knowledge—and these are but a few examples.

To be sure, there are inevitable costs associated with the kind of approach Matthews pursues in the book. If you want an introduction that is both broad in scope and fairly systematic in coverage—a “big picture” framing of Augustine’s central doctrines and texts—then Matthews’s book will likely disappoint. The book is, as I’ve indicated, topically organized and the choice in topics is not motivated—at least not principally—by a desire to provide exhaustive or systematic coverage of even those issues for which Augustine is best known. Thus, a number of more prominent elements in Augustine’s philosophy (his theory of illumination, his account of free will, his Platonism in metaphysics, to take a few examples) go unmentioned or figure only very minimally in Matthews’s discussion, whereas some less central, or in any case lesser-known, topics are given considerable attention (e.g., philosophical dream problems or puzzles about willing bad things). Not only this, but Matthews rarely attempts to situate the particular topics he does consider vis-à-vis Augustine’s broader views in the same area (say, Augustine’s response to skepticism vis-à-vis his broader views in epistemology, Augustine’s account of lying vis-à-vis his account of virtues/vices generally, Augustine’s account of wanting bad things vis-à-vis his broader views about the nature of the will). Of course, none of this owes to any particular failing or oversight on Matthews’s part; it’s simply to say that this book is not *that kind* of introduction.

*Kant and the Ethics of Humility: A Story of Dependence, Corruption and Virtue*, by Jeanine Grenberg. Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xi + 269. Cloth \$75.

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Jeanine Grenberg’s carefully crafted case in defense of humility as a central human virtue starts (Chapter 1) with an account of Kantian rational agency