

**Sarah Catherine Byers, *Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine. A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, ISBN 978-1-107-01794-8, £ 64.99.**

Sarah BYERS' (= B.) book devoted to the intersection of Augustine's psychology, ethics and philosophical therapy consists of seven chapters, the first of which is a detailed analysis of basically two chapters from the *Confessions* (VIII 11, 26 f.). Byers treats this short passage from the famous garden scene, in which Augustine recalls the image of his "old loves" trying to persuade him not to choose a celibate life on the one hand, and the image of Continence on the other, as a departure point for asking a question about the exact nature of the Augustinian psychology of moral acts. B. understands the "images" that Augustine talks about as metaphors of Stoic "hormetic impressions" which perform a motivating function. She also suggests that Augustine's ethics is more dependent on Stoic sources than has been recognized<sup>1</sup>.

In the second chapter B. deals with the Stoic idea of motivating impressions as well as showing how Roman Stoics such as Cicero and Seneca translated key philosophical terms and what language they used to express a Stoic view of human moral activity. B. also proves that Augustine uses this Ciceronian and Senecan view and language to a considerable degree in his *Confessions*, but she also points out that there are some un-Stoic elements, mainly Neoplatonic and Christian. She claims that there is a coherent synthesis of those often contradictory views in Augustine's philosophy.

In the next chapter the author analyzes the bishop of Hippo's view of emotions, showing his basic adherence to the Stoic view of emotions as (effects of) value-judgments as well as to a division of emotional states into immoral (*pathe*) and moral ones (*eupatheiai*). B. also demonstrates that Augustine diverges from Stoicism in claiming that the highest good is not virtue but God (a Christian Neoplatonic view). She gives an interesting account of the relationship of the emotions to the will in Augustine's ethics, carefully analyzing the use of *voluntas* in the writings of the bishop of Hippo. According to her, even though Augustine un-Stoically equates will (*voluntas*) with love (seen not only in Platonic, "eretical" terms, but also, obviously, in a Christian, biblical context), he is nonetheless able to create a harmonious synthesis with the Stoic account of emotion and motivation by saying that "omnes [scil. affectus] nihil aliud quam voluntates sunt" (*De civ.* XIV 6). B. understands this not to mean that *voluntas* and emotion are interchangeable, but that emotions are particular effects of a more general attitude towards various goods. Emotion in Augustine is always linked to a particular situation and action, whereas the will (love) is a more fundamental orientation towards the supreme good.

The fourth and fifth chapters deal with preliminary emotions, both morally negative and positive. In the fourth chapter B. shows how Augustine depends on the Stoic account of the first stage of emotion, which has not yet received the assent of the mind and thus is not a fully-fledged emotional state subject to moral evaluation. Augustine fully accepts this well-known Stoic view of the development of emotional states, but B. shows also in what way he applies Stoic concepts to interpret scriptural passages (such as, for example, the one about the speck and the beam) in his "non-philosophical" works, *Sermones* and *Enarrationes in Psalmos*. Of particular interest is B.'s reading of Augustine's use of biblical passages (e.g. Sarah and Abraham, Mary and Zachary) to convey his idea of preliminaries to good emotions, because Pagan Stoics, for various reasons, did not develop this specific issue.

---

<sup>1</sup> The problem of Augustine's relations to Stoicism has been previously studied by M. COLISH, *The Stoic Tradition From Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, vol. II: *Stoicism in Christian Latin Thought through the Sixth Century*, Leiden 1985, pp. 142–238.

In chapter six B. writes about Augustine's "cognitive therapies". She proposes a classification of spiritual exercises into four categories: "prerehearsal" (*praemeditatio, cogitare de futuris*), "recalling" (*recordari*), "continuous meditation on the law" (*meditari*) and "referring" (*referre*), namely, to the teleological hierarchy of being (especially the division between God as the absolute good and lesser goods).

Chapter seven is devoted to the great theological problem "grace vs. free will" and B. focuses here not only on Augustine, but also on his modern followers, especially on Domingo Bañez (representing the Dominicans) and Luis de Molina (speaking for the Jesuits). She suggests a new approach to the problem based on her previous analyses, particularly on the Stoic theory of the two phases of the development of emotions: the non-volitional development of a hormetic impression and a volitional assent to it (which results in a fully-fledged emotion). According to B., original sin for Augustine is basically a deeply rooted, morally bad habit (*consuetudo*) causing the soul to give consent to morally wrong hormetic impressions, while grace is divine help, enabling the soul to overcome this powerful habit. The author sees grace as operating on two levels: first, "breathing" a good impression into the soul, and second, helping to give consent to this impression.

This two-level view, B. argues, enables Augustine to leave some space for human moral choice. Good impressions are given by God, but then the soul chooses whether it wants to give consent or reject those impressions. Because the soul cannot give consent by its own powers (due to the sickness of original sin), it has to ask God for help, by such means as prayer, repentance, invocation etc. God willing, the impression is given consent by the soul and a morally good act results. The space for moral choice is, then, in between the two phases and consists in asking for help. Moreover, B. argues that Augustine came to his conclusions twice, in two separate periods of intellectual activity (394–400 and 411–421, starting anew the second time) and abandoned the idea towards the end of his life, in his polemics with the Pelagians (ca 426). B. calls this twice developed and then abandoned view the "dialogue model of conversion".

The book ends with two Appendices. The first one is merely a Latin text of two chapters of the *Confessions*, which were a departure point for the whole book, together with an English translation. The second one is an analysis of Augustine's use of key notions linked with the Stoic concept of impressions and emotions, on the basis of certain passages from the *De civitate Dei*, the *Confessions*, *De libero arbitrio* and *De Genesi ad litteram*.

In general terms, B.'s book can be placed among a still increasing number of books dealing with Augustine's theoretical and practical ethics<sup>2</sup>. It is a successful work, contributing significantly to our knowledge of both Augustine's use of Pagan sources and of the coherence of his philosophical thought. It is particularly interesting that the author uses Augustine's non-philosophical works, such as *Enarrationes in Psalmos* and *Sermones*, and that she does this by means of methodology grounded not only in the analysis of the philosophical content, but also in rhetoric and Greek and Latin philosophical terminology.

There are, however, some objections to be made. First of all, B. – quite understandably – focuses in her analysis on Stoicism, which makes her emphasize "Augustine the Stoic" over "Augustine the Platonist". Given the disproportion between those two "Augustines" in the secondary literature, B. can to some degree be excused, but at times her concentration on Stoicism seems to distort Augustine's views. His philosophy is a seamless whole, even though we should not expect what in modern times is called a "philosophical system".

---

<sup>2</sup> See for example: P. BURNS, *Augustine's Distinctive Use of the Psalms in the "Confessions": the Role of Music and Recitation*, *Augustinian Studies* XXIV 1993, pp. 133–146; T.F. MARTIN, *Paul the Patient. Christus Medicus and the "Stimulus Carnis" (2 Cor. 12:7): A Consideration of Augustine's Medicinal Christology*, *Augustinian Studies* XXII 2001, pp. 219–256; A. STALNAKER, *Overcoming Our Evil: Human Nature and Spiritual Exercises in Xunxi and Augustine*, Washington 2006; P.R. KOLBET, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal*, Notre Dame 2010.

This excessive “Stoicizing” of Augustine is most clearly visible in B.’s account of grace and sin (pp. 172–214). Whereas her analysis of grace as giving the soul impressions and allowing consent is valid, the overall picture of this whole process is so mechanical and un-Augustinian that one wonders whether Augustine himself would accept this. Of course, it is not a mere issue of language and terminology. B. first shows that Augustine combines Stoic and (Christian) Platonic views (pp. 45–54), but later seems to ignore the latter aspect, perhaps because her book is aimed primarily at showing the influence of the Stoa.

The second problem is B.’s account of Augustine’s spiritual exercises (pp. 153–171). It is by no means exhaustive, but the author seems to suggest that it is. The reader would be rightly surprised that “prayer” is not really counted among those exercises and that there are only four, whereas other scholars enumerate at least a dozen<sup>3</sup>. But the main issue is that B. almost completely ignores Augustine’s emphasis on *confessio* (even though it is mentioned briefly in the chapter on grace – pp. 197–206), humility, prayer and love, concentrating on a cognitive process of giving consent to impressions. This is surprising, since B. herself shows that this cognitive process is only useful for Augustine to describe reactions to particular situations and not to God, self and the world in general.

The author seems to be trying to give an artificially “areligious” image of Augustine and her “Augustine” seems to have little to do with the bishop of Hippo who, in his *Confessions*, so powerfully and intimately converses with God as “Thou”. Sin for B. is no longer something that happens in a relationship between the Creator and its spiritual creature, but it is considered psychologically, as a bad *consuetudo* (pp. 176–179). The “I–Thou” relational perspective which has been rightly recognized as absolutely fundamental to Augustine’s philosophy<sup>4</sup> is also neglected by B. and when she tries to admit its existence, describing one of the four spiritual exercises, namely meditation on the divine Law, the effect is (unintentionally, I suppose) humorous: “for a Jew or Christian who knows that God is the ground and source of both laws [natural and biblical], the exercise also *includes a dimension of personal communication* with God, provoking ‘delight’” (p. 169; my emphasis). Yes, certainly, for Augustine of Hippo, Christian philosophy does include such a dimension...

The third problem is B.’s occasional reference to contemporary cognitive psychology and psychotherapy. It is merely occasional and not a consistent point of reference, but B. never deals with the problematic nature of this linking Augustine to contemporary psychology (e.g. pp. 57, 138, 152). Elsewhere I argued that this is at least controversial and may be based on a complete misunderstanding, seeing “cognitive therapy” in ancient philosophy without an initial definition and delineation of crucial concepts<sup>5</sup>. Psychology is simply not comparable with philosophy, either in its method, or in its terminology. The use of psychological jargon in analyzing ancient philosophy gives the impression that B. is convinced that Stoic ethics is somehow the same as cognitive psychotherapy of emotional disorders. Sometimes B. sounds again hilarious due to the absolute seriousness of such statements as this: “frequenting the religious services of the Church is singled out [by Augustine] as a lifestyle that supports this affective therapy” (p. 169). Augustine was probably

---

<sup>3</sup> See STALNAKER, *op. cit.* (n. 2), pp. 197 f.

<sup>4</sup> E.R. DODDS, *Augustine’s “Confessions”*: A Study of Spirituals Maladjustment, *Hibbert Journal* XXVI 1927–1928, p. 171; G. MADEC, *Une lecture de “Confessions” VII.9.13–21.27. (Notes critiques à propos d’une thèse de R.J. O’Connell)*, *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* XVI 1970, p. 88; R. McMAHON, *Augustine’s Prayerful Ascent: An Essay on the Literary Form of the “Confessions”*, Athens–London 1989, p. 3; T.F. MARTIN, *Book Twelve: Exegesis and Confessio*, in: K. PAFFENROTH, R.P. KENNEDY (eds.), *A Reader’s Companion to Augustine’s “Confessions”*, Louisville–London 2003, pp. 199 f.

<sup>5</sup> See my *Filozofia jako terapia w pismach Marka Aureliusza, Plotyna i Augustyna*, Poznań 2014, pp. 7–9 and 228–233.

completely unaware that he promoted a “lifestyle”, not mentioning the fact that he would be probably perplexed to hear that the sacrament of the Eucharist “supports affective therapy”.

However, despite those weaknesses, B.’s book is an important contribution to our knowledge of Augustinian ethics, convincingly showing Augustine’s considerable reliance on Stoicism.

*Mateusz Stróżyński*  
*Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań*