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LOCATING AND RELOCATING THE WILLFUL SELF:
A REVIEW OF MICHAEL HANBY'S
AUGUSTINE AND MODERNITY

Review of Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (Routledge: London, UK/New York, NY, 2003); Paperback, xii + 292 pages. \$90.00 (cloth); \$27.95 (paper).

OVER THE COURSE OF THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS, intellectual historians have sought to genealogically establish and assess the role of Augustinian thought in the emergence of the modern self. In particular, the crux of the debate in the literature tends to turn on interpretations of the role and nature of the will as understood by Augustine. Although many of the voices in this debate locate Augustine and his work as the genesis point in what would become the modern and willful self, Michael Hanby, in his *Augustine and Modernity*, relocates this debated philosophical construct. While Hanby does not dispute the emergence and presence of the modern and willful self, he sees the origin of such an understanding residing with the efforts of figures such as John Cassian and Pelagius instead of residing with Augustine. As a result of this effort, Hanby frees the Augustinian self, a self participating in a trinitarian economy, to serve as a paradigm for a movement emerging in philosophical theology known as Radical Orthodoxy.

In order to understand the significance of Michael Hanby's effort, one must come to terms with how his argument concerning Augustine fits within the larger movement of Radical Orthodoxy.¹ On one level, Radical Orthodoxy is a series of works in philosophical theology published by Routledge. This series was inaugurated in 1999 with the publication of an edited volume of essays entitled *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*. Over the course of five years, the number of volumes in this series has grown to eleven volumes and range in critical interest from economics to social theory. Along with Robert C. Miner's *Truth in the*

¹ See also B. Keith Putt's assessment of Graham Ward's *Cities of God* in *JCRT* 5.1 (December 2003), 149-154.

Making: Creative Knowledge in Theology and Philosophy, Hanby's effort is amongst the latest in this series. On another level, Radical Orthodoxy is a movement making headway not only in the academy but also the Church. As stated in their introductory essay in the inaugural volume, series editors John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward argue, "The central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is 'participation' as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God."² Michael Hanby contributed an essay to this original volume. Along with this essay, Hanby's *Augustine and Modernity* stands as an effort to continue the larger project of Radical Orthodoxy by establishing a notion of the self within such an understanding of participation.

However, before one can offer an overview of *Augustine and Modernity*, a fuller explanation of the term participation, and how participation is linked to the term economy, proves to be necessary. True to the larger context of Radical Orthodoxy as a series and as a movement, Hanby makes consistent references to this notion of participation and then links it to a more general notion of economy than is currently in use. Participation is essentially one's presence in common worship or amongst the body of Christ. As a result, Hanby argues that Augustine "views the economy from the first person perspective, which is to say, as a participant." (16) As a result, the term economy, or the structuring of one's desires, is defined by virtue of its relation to the ongoing presence and efforts of a trinitarian God. Participation in common worship establishes what becomes an inextricable place for individuals not only within the body of Christ but also within this economy. According to Hanby's understanding of Augustine, the self is not constituted by its own efforts but by its presence in the larger efforts of a trinitarian God. In other words, Hanby argues that the Augustinian self is doxological.

While the essence of Hanby's book is vested in the argument he launches concerning an Augustinian self that is doxological in nature, he makes this argument primarily through his genealogical exploration of the past fifteen years of related scholarship. The foreclosed nature of this type of research concerning Augustine practically precluded anyone from making an argument such as the one made by Hanby, at least initially. In terms of the willful self, a straight line was drawn between the work of Augustine and the work of René Descartes. Unless proven otherwise, this straight line stands definitive. Hanby realizes this phenomenon in Augustinian scholarship. He opens by cautioning his audience that "retrospective anticipation is dangerous." (10) Scholars tend to see the qualities in the work of their predecessors which they most prize. Hanby's

² John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. "Introduction: Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy" in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London/New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.

genealogical exploration exposes this danger in the work of others and subsequently establishes the discursive space he needs to make his argument for an Augustinian self that is doxological in nature.

Hanby's genealogical exploration of various interpretations of Augustinian selfhood begins with Charles Taylor's work *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Hanby recognizes that this text has become the definitive text on the modern notion of selfhood and its inheritance from its pre-modern predecessors. In particular, Taylor's work describes various moral sources and how these sources came together to form what he inevitably identifies as the modern self. Taylor claims that his effort is best classified as an "essay of retrieval"³ because ontological attempts to identify these sources were previously subsumed by epistemological attempts. For Taylor, Augustine's work is the crux between ancient and modern understandings of selfhood. However, according to Hanby, Taylor mistakenly sets future scholarship on a course by which the Augustinian self would serve to anticipate the Cartesian self. Driving this sense of anticipation is an element of radical reflexivity or an inward turn in terms of one's identity. While Hanby acknowledges the significance of Taylor's work, he also maintains that "Absent from the soul and god in Taylor's Augustine is anything either particularly theological or, indeed, particularly Christian." (9) As a result, Hanby commits himself to demonstrating how the influence of this flawed beginning has precluded particularly theological, and more particularly Christian, assessments of Augustine from emerging.

The work of Etienne Gilson is also underneath the various assessments of Augustine's work from which Hanby must genealogically extract a particularly theological or particularly Christian Augustine. Since Gilson's scholarship concerning Augustine predates Taylor's *Sources of the Self*, Gilson's work is free of the influence of Taylor's work. However, the influence of Taylor's thought casts an interpretive shadow over those who have more recently read Gilson's work concerning Augustine's understanding of the good or moral life. According to Gilson, "To lead a good life means precisely striving to possess God. A continuous appeal is being sent out to us, so to speak, from the source of truth, an appeal that calls to our mind the memory of God, invites us to seek him, makes us thirst for him."⁴ The depth of Gilson's work, and especially his assessment of the relationship shared by Cartesian and Augustinian thought, calls for interpretation. As a result, Hanby identifies how various scholars interpret Gilson's work and how such interpretations demonstrate the powerful

³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 10.

⁴ Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L.E.M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960), 6.

influence offered by Taylor and his reading of Augustine.

Ultimately, Hanby spends the majority of his text genealogically assessing and evaluating the range of work offered by philosophers such as Stephen Menn, James Wetzel, and Eric Alliez. While this list is in no way an exhaustive representation of the scholars who capture Hanby's attention, they do provide a symbolic representation. According to Hanby, The most prolific proponent of the "Augustinian-Cartesian continuity" may prove to be Stephen Menn. (150) For Menn, "The question of Descartes and Augustine is an old one."⁵ However, he also does not believe this question has yet to receive an adequate response. In opposition to Gilson, Menn comes to the conclusion that what Descartes received was not so much a set of metaphysical theses but a sense of discipline and a "series of intellectual intuitions produced by this discipline."⁶ Hanby's primary concern with this assessment is that he finds Menn's reference to discipline as willful in nature yet distinct from desire. "[T]he issue is whether that essence is understood as Trinity and whether 'will' is conditioned by that understanding to express a relation of love between Trinitarian *personae*." (157) For Menn, the origin of a willful sense of discipline resides with the individual and thus raises the specter of Pelagianism. By contrast, for Hanby, the origin of a participatory sense of discipline resides with God.

James Wetzel's scholarship concerning the relationship shared by the works of Augustine and Descartes poses another set of concerns in relation to the development of a participatory sense of discipline. Unlike Menn, Wetzel affirms Gilson's work by asserting that at whatever level it exists the discipline of will is in fact not free from desire. Wetzel believes that "Whenever we act, Augustine would contend, we act under some representation of the good. . . . There is no faculty of will, distinct from desire, which we use to determine our actions."⁷ While Hanby is more sympathetic to the argument made by Wetzel than the argument made by Menn, he still finds it insufficient in terms of the establishment of a theological or particularly Christian assessment of Augustine's work. Hanby's underlying concern is that Wetzel's characterization of Augustine's relationship to stoicism is problematic because is understood to control the passions. "Insist upon reason's control of the passions and one ends up, as we shall see, with an incoherent account both of how the self lives in time and how we are moved to action." (95) Although more palatable than Menn's proposition, Wetzel's proposition still falls short of a theological or Christian

⁵ Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), ix.

⁶ *Ibid*, 393.

⁷ James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press), 8.

understanding of an Augustinian sense of selfhood that is ultimately participatory in nature.

Ironically, the understanding of an Augustinian sense of selfhood that Hanby finds most palatable is the one offered by Éric Alliez. This is ironic because Alliez's employment of a Marxist metaphysical analysis "does not occlude the specifically Christian features of Augustine's thought for a broader continuity with Neoplatonism." (19) The intention behind Alliez's work is to demonstrate how key features of Augustine's work, especially in relation to time, reveal "the metaphysical figure of capitalism." (19) According to Alliez, "What is determining for the development of Christianity is not so much the certitude of salvation (*certitudo salutis*) than the certitude of oneself as subject."⁸ Inherent in such a move is a sense of separation between time as understood in relation to the soul and time as understood in relation to the larger cosmos. This sense of separation generates the possibility that each individual is free to contractually enter into agreement with other individuals for exchanges of goods and services. While Hanby finds Alliez's work to be more credible, he still argues that Alliez is guilty of suppressing other understandings of Augustine's work. He also contends that Alliez's work is guilty of circularity. In the end, Alliez misses Augustine's point that the story of the soul is only intelligible when cast against the larger story of the cosmos or, better stated, the redemptive work of God.

Hanby's ability to offer an alternative form of selfhood in relation to the work of Augustine is methodologically predicated upon the success of his genealogical efforts. While Hanby's work contains engagements with more than just the scholarly contributions of Éric Alliez, James Wetzel, Stephen Menn, Etienne Gilson, and Charles Taylor, perhaps the contributions of two other authors merit Hanby's consideration. First, the work of Philip Cary on Augustine, particularly Cary's *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist*, almost entirely escapes Hanby's critical examination. Hanby addresses this work by Cary in an early footnote and argues that he would take issue with quite a number of Cary's points. However, Hanby fails to hold these points up to the same level of scrutiny he offered to similar points made by several others concerning the Augustinian-Cartesian continuity. Second, the work of Gareth B. Matthews on Augustine (*The Augustinian Tradition and Thought's Ego in Augustine and Descartes*) entirely escapes Hanby's critical examination. To be fair, Hanby cannot explore the breadth of scholarship concerning Augustine. However, Matthews references the Augustinian-Cartesian continuity by as the "first-

⁸ Éric Alliez, *Capital Times: Tales from the Conquest of Time*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 90-1.

personalization of philosophy.”⁹ Perhaps this connection as observed by Matthews also merits Hanby’s consideration.

Hanby spends the majority of his impressive work genealogically probing how various definitions of Augustine’s work have precluded other definitions from emerging. However, by severing the perception of continuity that previously connected the work of Augustine to the work of Descartes, theological interpretations, particularly Christian theological interpretations, of Augustine’s work become possible. As a result, Hanby is able to launch his argument concerning his interpretation of Augustine’s work and the significance of his work for projects such as Radical Orthodoxy. Augustine proves to be essential in the development of an understanding of humanity as participants in an existence created, redeemed, and sustained by God and God alone. The economy in which humanity finds itself is one ordered by God. In the end, Hanby seeks to offer “an alternative form of desire which is also an alternative truth, a desire and a truth that cannot be separated from its sacramental embodiment.” (178) Ultimately, the willful self is eclipsed by a self finding rest in God alone.

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⁹ Gareth B. Matthews, *Thought’s Ego in Augustine and Descartes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), xi.