

Book Reviews

RETRIEVING AUGUSTINE'S DOCTRINE OF CREATION: Ancient Wisdom for Current Controversy by Gavin Ortlund. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020. 264 pages. Paperback; \$30.00. ISBN: 9780830853243.

With a long career (of some 40 years) and even longer paper trail (approximately 94 books with all but one surviving, between 4,000–10,000 sermons with approximately 950 available still, and nearly 300 letters extant), Augustine holds a central position as one of the most influential of theologians. He is quoted often—and too often as an authoritative proof text for one's favored position. Yet he is not often well understood. Enigmatic and difficult to parse at times, he inhabited a different world than our own. He even inhabited a different world than his own contemporaries, offering innovative and profound challenges that many could not comprehend. This was clearly the case when his great and arduous work, *The City of God*, was appropriated by Charlemagne's court in the eighth century to defend the creation of the Holy Roman Empire. Augustine's counterintuitive position and his difficult and drawn-out argument made it difficult for them to comprehend how that work not only did not support their position, it profoundly challenged its very foundations.

In some ways, Augustine's reflections on Genesis 1–3 present a similar challenge. Arguably, they are even more difficult to understand and the potential for misunderstanding is indeed high. Augustine's doctrines of creation evolves over his forty-year career and is found in five works (or major sections of works) dedicated to the subject, with numerous comments critical to unravelling his views found in diverse other works (including sermons, rarely read). Translating Augustine is not just a linguistic activity, it is a wholesale, conceptual challenge. Yet as much as he is employed and has had major impact, it is a necessity!

Gavin Ortlund has commendably thrown himself into this challenge and provided a work that is, in many ways, admirable and important. We ought to split his work into two parts, which the table of contents does not make adequately clear. The first chapter, quite long, serves as a prolegomenon attempting a synthetic overview of Augustine's cosmology. Readers here should note that cosmology is a term that one finds regularly in discussions of ancient and medieval approaches to the cosmos, but the term does not signify its current meaning. Cosmology for ancients was a theological and philosophical activity which reasoned through the underlying metaphysics, driving and defining the cosmos. The

subsequent chapters, two to five, focus rather on the book's main aim: offering lessons on impact and import for current concerns, as a form of "retrieval" per the title. The distinction between these two sections, that is, chapter 1 and chapters 2–5, is critical, though. For while I found multiple challenges and difficulties with the first section of the work, I would not want that to pre-empt the reader from looking closer as I have virtually nothing but commendation and praise for the major portion of the book, which I will address further down.

Chapter 1 seeks to outline Augustine's cosmology, which is complex, diffused, develops and alters over time, deeply embedded in the philosophical concerns and scientific views of his day without always self-evidently manifesting the views (for example, Stoic physics) and, as noted above, located across a vast corpus of writing and preaching. This is an ambitious task, and perhaps one that no single chapter can meet adequately. I suspect that Ortlund experienced distress over the magnitude of this challenge. However, the way in which he seeks to meet it belies a problem with the work. Who is it written for, the specialist or the student? If the latter, then why does this initial chapter use highly technical language and ideas that will not be readily accessible to those not trained in ancient metaphysics? Yet it is also not apparently written for the specialist, since it leaves out or fails to adequately emphasize core ideas that a specialist would expect to find. Specialists might also be frustrated by how his synthetic treatment relies in places on the work of other commentators and translators and, as a result, evinces some key misunderstandings. These include, for example, tying Augustine's doctrine of deification to immutability, misunderstanding some of the nuances of Augustine's Latin (such as *temeritas* on p. 88), depending on the translator's interpretive work (for example, presenting Augustine as naming the tree of knowledge of good and evil an apple tree, whereas the Latin is the generic "fruit tree"; it became an apple tree later in Medieval Europe), not sufficiently addressing ontology and privation—central to Augustine's theology—and thereby not appropriately addressing the building blocks of his cosmology, and not always accounting for forty years of personal development as if works from early in Augustine's career could readily be read beside those from late in his life, without sufficiently acknowledging Augustine's growth and development.

Yet, despite its technical shortcomings, the chapter also reads more like a doctoral dissertation written

for a narrow committee of specialists, focused on minutiae and using untranslated terms (such as *logos spermatikos*) that only scholars would value and easily grasp. For a work written apparently as an undergraduate textbook and for informed lay readers, it presents highly technical topics and uses scholarly traditions which make it harder for the nontechnically trained reader to easily approach the subject (such as using the Latin titles of Augustine's works in the footnotes). It lacks tools that would help students: there is no bibliography of works cited or a list of Augustine's relevant works or a substantial index (the brief index does not do his work justice, causing me to think, after an initial cursory glance, that he failed to address key issues which he does, in fact, address). Ortlund clearly wants to make Augustine accessible, but I fear this initial chapter, navigating between technical approaches and synthetic overview, in combination with these other weaknesses, does not readily accomplish that goal.

In addressing questions of concern to modern readers throughout chapters 2–5, however, Ortlund hits his stride. These address valuable, appropriate matters critical to numerous communities: Augustine's (surprising) model of humility on how one interprets Genesis 1–3 (in chap. 2 of the book); Augustine's hermeneutical management of the introductory chapters of Genesis (in chap. 3); the epic challenge of animal death and predation (in chap. 4); and the truly knotty problem of a historic Adam and Eve (in chap. 5). All offer depth, thoughtful engagement, and enrichment and are critical companions to the discussions that preoccupy readers of this journal and dominate many pulpits, church pews, classrooms, youth groups, and the like. The section is capped off with a conclusion which I found to be winsome and profound. It reiterates the key lessons Ortlund finds: the wonder at sheer createdness; humility concerning the doctrine of creation encouraging irenic behavior; acknowledging the complexity involved in interpreting the opening chapters of Genesis; the existence of different, rational intuitions about key matters which we should ourselves note, including the example here of animal death; resisting a tendency to choose in absolute terms between history and symbol, and thereby allowing for ambiguity and incompleteness (the opening of Genesis does not seek to answer every question we wish to pose). While I have noted concerns about the first chapter adequately making Augustine accessible in this book, Ortlund has certainly succeeded at demonstrating topics for which Augustine's thought and model is applicable and important.

Meanwhile, it is also critical that one attempt to translate Augustine's thought for modern readers. Ortlund reminds us of the import of bringing an author as influential and seemingly familiar—but really rather distant and difficult—as Augustine to a modern audience and, moreover, doing so without falling into the trap of simply appropriating the audience's ideas. By engaging Augustine's core set of ideas with integrity and appropriate attention to context, Ortlund helps identify and clarify Augustine's contemporary significance.

Reviewed by Stanley P. Rosenberg, Executive Director, SCIO/Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, UK, and VP Research and Scholarship, Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, Washington, DC. †

Letters

A Development Date to Consider for Ensoulment

I read your editorial in the June issue of *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* ("Part II: Evangelicals, Neural Organoids, and Chimeras," *PSCF* 73, no. 2 [2021]: 65). Nice article.

I'm forwarding to you a link, <https://www.vcrmed.com/fertility-treatment/monozygotic-twins/>, that shows data summarized by an organization located not far from you in Virginia. The bullet points in the link explain the timeline after fertilization for splitting of the embryo to form different types of monozygotic twins at different days. It is science-based and agrees with what I know from other sources.

As monozygotic twins age and live their adult lives, there is never any doubt that each individual twin is a separate person and presumably possesses their own soul, which had to be added after the embryo split. So, clearly ensoulment of the human embryo must not occur during the first week or so *after* the joining of the sperm and egg. At least that is the most straightforward interpretation.

This several days' delay in ensoulment would seem to make contraception (preventing uterine implantation, for example) and morning after pills immune to the criticism that those techniques are killing an ensouled embryo.

James Magner, MD
ASA Member
Woodbridge, CT