

## BOOK REVIEW

*Saint Augustine of Hippo: An Intellectual Biography.* By MILES HOLLINGWORTH.  
New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xix + 312. Hardcover, \$29.95.  
ISBN 978-0-19-986159-0.

St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo and pre-eminent church father, stands firmly in the first ranks of history-makers and culture-changers. This much is agreed upon by biographers. Where they differ is in how they trace out the history and culture-changing aspects of his thought. Hollingworth's new "intellectual biography" does this in a stylistically novel way. He aims to tell Augustine's story as Augustine himself tells it—passionately and theologically—while highlighting and embodying the theological ideas that Hollingworth takes to be at the center of Augustine's thought. This is a book designed not simply to illuminate Augustine's life and thought, but to light the reader on fire with Augustine's thought, so that the reader can, if only briefly, see the world as Augustine's sees it. Despite the book's many merits, in my estimation it fails to achieve this goal.

Hollingworth wants to show that Augustine is not merely a man of his times, but that his thought engages with universal and contemporary concerns. He begins in chapters 1 and 2 by explaining the historical context of Augustine's life—the nature of life in Roman Empire Africa and Hellenistic philosophical movements. Hollingworth emphasizes how some philosophical ideas, which he takes to express universal concerns, set the stage for the Augustine's thought. These include that "reality is susceptible to rational investigation" (33), that "the human race is marked by a compulsion to call things right and wrong and to act on the right," (24) and that the things of our changing world point to something real, stable, and normative (e.g. Plato's forms). This part of the book may be most interesting and useful to the readers of this journal, as Hollingworth makes a compelling (if perhaps overly brief) case that Augustine's mature Christian thought fits nicely with and incorporates these ideas.

After chapter 3's discussion of Augustine's comments on his parents, chapters 4–9 follow the narrative of books I–VIII of the *Confessions*, beginning with Augustine's reflections on infancy and ending with his conversion. One of his most interesting claims in this core section of the book is that Augustine's virtual silence

about his lover has the rhetorical effect of an “abrupt and discordant note” (146), suggesting that it may be a deliberately placed sign of the injustice and superficiality of his parting from her.

The book concludes in chapters 10 and 11 with Hollingworth’s account of the core of “Augustinianism” and his explanation of why Augustine’s writing style evolved. “Augustinianism” has two elements: first, an utter contempt of idols, especially the idol of the self. Throughout the book, Hollingworth makes the case that Augustine views the primary human sin to be self-consciousness—an excessive reflection on who one is, who one wants to be, and how one stands in society, and what one loves. We must break out of this self-consciousness and self-love, and we do this by turning our gazes to God. The second element of Augustinianism is the idea that we cannot create truly original things; God is the author of all originality, and so we are at our most original when we are most in tune with God. These two elements explain why he turned away from his earlier more straightforwardly philosophical writing style to his later style, most prominent in the *Confessions*—a story of the self, absorbed in itself (yet still guided by God, although sinful), trying to find truth and eventually finding it by turning his gaze to God. The narrative of scripture—God’s original production—is embodied in how Augustine continually re-tells the story of Adam and Eve in his own life.

Hollingworth’s reading of Augustine is compelling, although I think he overplays his hand a bit on self-consciousness; in book X of the *Confessions* Augustine argues that it is through reflection on the nature of the self that we are able to discern our divine origins. Although self-consciousness can drive us away from God, it can also drive us to seek God. The main problem with the book, however, is that Hollingworth’s prose often obscures rather than illuminates and embodies Augustine’s theological ideas. His word choice is sometimes puzzling (e.g. “decline” in the sentence, “the pre-Socratics sought to decline diverse reality from the single *arché*” (23)); he occasionally makes bold unsubstantiated philosophical claims or interpretations (e.g. that predestination has never “offended us *intellectually*” (244) and that Tarski endorses some sort of subjectivist view of the nature of truth (21)).

The book is also rife with metaphorical language that is very difficult to parse (e.g. pages 149–157, and ‘quantum’ in chapters 10–11). It is risky business to try to out-metaphorize Augustine. Augustine’s metaphors often do what good metaphors should: like clear Caribbean water, enable one to clearly see things that are deep. Sadly, Hollingworth’s metaphors are often rough and churning. Although, in this reviewer’s opinion, Hollingworth fails in his goal of embodying the

spirit of Augustinianism in his writing, his account of Augustine's thought will engage the scholar, teacher, and ambitious reader of Augustine.

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