

Brian Dobell

Augustine's Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009.

268 pages

US\$90.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-521-51339-5)

In *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity*, Brian Dobell examines the intellectual and spiritual development of St. Augustine. It is widely held that Augustine's conversion from Platonism to Christianity occurred in the summer of 386. Dobell, however, argues that Augustine held firmly to Platonism well into the mid-390's. Dobell marshals evidence for this view from a number of Augustine's early writings, wherein, he argues, one finds a number of Platonist commitments. In particular, Augustine is thought to accept an account of Christ that is more consistent with the 'falsity of Photinus' than 'Catholic Truth'. The falsity of Photinus may be understood as a view where, even though Christ is considered to be an eminently wise and virtuous individual, Christ is not understood as the very Word of God and redeemer of humanity. Dobell's striking thesis, moreover, is that Augustine accepted something akin to the falsity of Photinus well after his conversion in garden at Milan, and, indeed, well into the mid-390's.

The evidence that Dobell offers on behalf of this interpretation is sufficient to make the thesis interesting. Needless to say, *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion* will attract the attention of those interested in the degree to which Augustine was influenced by Platonism. Dobell provides an interesting account of Augustine's early epistemology, and its relation to Plato's paradox of learning, as it is found in Plato's *Meno* (80d-e). According to this paradox, learning is impossible, both for one who knows and one who doesn't. Inquiry into what is known is unnecessary. Inquiry into what is not known is impossible, since because one does not know the thing in question one will not recognize it upon coming across it. Plato's own response to the paradox is sometimes thought to be that what appears to be learning is really recollection (*anamnesis*) of knowledge already within us. There is thus a sense in which one knows and a sense in which one does not know when engaged in inquiry. We know certain truths, in one sense, as they are within our souls, awaiting recollection. In another sense, we do not know them, as they are awaiting recollection. In any case, the truth about reality, it might be said, is not external to us. And this is a conclusion that Augustine seems to draw (*De Magistro* II.38): 'Concerning everything we understand, we do not consult a speaker making sounds outside of us. Rather we consult truth that is within us, presiding over the mind itself...' The idea that truth is within, however, conjoined to the idea that intellectual inquiry brings this truth out, presents a certain tension for the Christian. For one may be a good Christian without being intellectual. Dobell maintains that the early Augustine believed that there is a 'way of authority' and a 'way of reason'. The former comes in the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. The latter is available for those with the leisure or capacity for the liberal arts. In contrast, according to Dobell, the later Augustine of the mid-390's, heavily influenced by Paul, is not altogether sanguine about the way of reason.

In the course of developing this thesis, Dobell treats a number of philosophical topics that are interesting in their own right. For example, he argues that Augustine's solution to the problem of evil as it is found in *Confessions* 7.16.22 reflects Augustine's solution to the problem of evil as it is presented in *On the Free Choice of the Will*. (The latter is putatively imbued with Platonism.) Briefly put, the strategy in question is to maintain that evil is the privation of good, or the privation of being, and being is thought to be something that admits of degrees, much as Plato describes reality with the divided line, for example, in the *Republic*. Evil, insofar as it is a privation, is not something that is substantive. In this way, one avoids having to reconcile God's existence with evil, as evil, *strictu sensu*, does not exist. Dobell takes Augustine's commitment to the Platonist ontology as evidence that Augustine is still heavily influenced by Platonism at the time he is writing the *Confessions*. But his exegesis of Augustine's theodicy is interesting and penetrating in its own right. The discussion of the problem of evil issues in certain questions concerning the will, and how one might avoid a fatalistic outlook, in light of God's foreknowledge. This discussion, in turn, invites certain questions concerning the way that Augustine thought of the soul, and Dobell takes the reader through a number of interesting passages that trace Augustine's ontology of the soul in the *Confessions* to some of his early works—works thought to be, moreover, heavily influenced by Platonism. There is here an interesting discussion of the *si fallor sum* passage, from Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, and its precursor in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, where the author thoughtfully compares and contrasts the epistemic and psychological views of Augustine with those of Descartes. Dobell aligns himself with those who have thought Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* 'bears more than a superficial resemblance' to Augustine's *si fallor sum* (157). There is even a discussion of Hume's *reductio ad absurdum* of miracles, and Augustine's view in contrast.

The textual arguments that Dobell makes use of throughout are carefully drawn. One will find, for example, columns of text, whereby a passage from the *Confessions* may be read alongside a passage from *De Libero Arbitrio*, which, in turn, is adjacent to a relevant passage from *De Vera Religione*. This allows a reader to examine the connections between these texts without placing an elbow in one text, while reading another. Dobell's textual claims concerning Augustine's development can thereby be traced through different stages of his career. Dobell explains his views in contrast with those of other leading scholars on a number of key topics. His work will be of use to those who are, therefore, experts in the study and exegesis of St. Augustine, as well as those who would like to be introduced to the current state of debate. I believe that *Augustine's Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity* will appeal to a broad readership.

Jeremy Kirby
Albion College