

INNER GRACE

AUGUSTINE IN THE TRADITIONS
OF PLATO AND PAUL

PHILLIP CARY



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of Plato and Paul*

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*My thanks to Jack Doody
and the community of scholars
he has done so much to build*

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Preface

This book is the second in a series of three, all of which concern the inner and the outer in Augustine. The first, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist*, investigates the origins of inwardness or interiority (and by the way, I make no distinction between “inner,” “inward,” “internal,” and “interior”) and particularly of the new and distinctively Augustinian concept of a private inner space of the self, an inner world into which we may enter to look for what is higher and more divine than ourselves. In addition to its interest for the history of psychology, the Augustinian concept of inner self is of great importance in theology because it allows us to conceive of the divine Other as present within the self—acting, helping, speaking, and teaching inside us. This sets the stage for Augustine’s resolutely inward conception of divine grace, which is the topic of the present book.

The inwardness of grace in turn brings into focus what is at issue in the concept of sacraments as *external* means of grace, which is a key topic of investigation in the third book of the series, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Theology*. That book will follow closely on the heels of this one, which is why so many detailed references to it are found in the footnotes here. It argues that for Augustine neither words nor sacraments can convey to us a divine gift or grace, precisely because they are external. Augustine has much to say about how external things may serve as signs of what is inward or divine, but in contrast to later medieval theologians he does

not think such signs can be an efficacious means of conferring what they signify. The reason why parallels Augustine's explanation of why words can signify and express what lies within the soul but cannot convey or show it to other persons. For in fact (as Augustine argues, startlingly and explicitly, in his treatise *On the Teacher*) we do not learn anything from words. Thus both words and sacraments are powerless to convey what they signify. This powerlessness is built into Augustine's theory of signs, or semiotics, because it is a necessary consequence of the way he conceives the relation between inner and outer. Understanding this allows us to put disagreements between Catholics and Protestants about word and sacrament into proper perspective. This has been the goal of my writing on Augustine from the beginning, which is why the last volume contains the materials that I worked on first—almost fifteen years ago now.

The concern of the present book is with the concept of grace itself, and what difference it makes that for Augustine grace is essentially inward. Whereas concepts of grace are an inevitable part of Christianity, the notion that grace is inner, a kind of divine help bestowed inwardly on the soul, is not. I argue here that the inwardness of Augustine's concept of grace, like Augustinian inwardness in general, has to be understood against the background of his Platonism. This has a wider significance beyond the ongoing scholarly investigation of the nature of Augustine's debts to Platonism, because Augustine's Platonist inwardness is closely related to what is both lovely and problematic about his concept of grace.

To understand this concept, I tell a story. As in my previous book, it is a story about the way Augustine's thought develops through the course of his inquiries over many years, about how his concepts took shape as they helped him solve philosophical and theological problems but also inevitably led to new problems, which further shaped the concepts he was using. (Since the story is complex, involving many twists and turns and changes of mind, I have, as before, included a summary at the beginning of each chapter, and I have also included in the appendix a "Basic Narrative" of the development of Augustine's thought on the psychology of grace in the anti-Pelagian writings.) To bring out the point of the story, it might help if I say something about what I myself find both lovely and problematic in Augustine's doctrine of grace. Different readers have different problems with Augustine as well as different enthusiasms, and my problems and enthusiasms may not be the same as yours. So letting you know where I stand on a few theological issues up front ought to make the rest of the book a bit more accessible.

First of all, I follow Augustine in the belief that grace never undermines free will. What undermines free will is not grace but sin, and by combating sin

grace is the ally of every form of human freedom worth the name. This is one of the many lovely things about the Augustinian doctrine of grace: we can pray for God to change our will, strengthening it in all goodness—and when we get what we pray for, that enhances our freedom rather than undermines it. It seems to me this is just how Christian prayer, in one of its many forms, works. Christians are constantly asking God to change our hearts, to turn our will in new directions, to give us new delight and cause us to love as we ought. Praying this way and getting what we pray for is what I call, in chapter 4, the experiential matrix of Augustine’s doctrine of grace. People who pray like this will normally experience grace and free will as compatible with each other, as friends and collaborators rather than enemies or competitors.

But the compatibility of grace and free will goes yet deeper. For even Augustine’s doctrine of prevenient grace—the grace that comes before our prayers and makes them possible—relies on a kind of compatibilism about the relation of grace and free will, which in turn is founded on a fundamental conviction about the compatibility of divine and human action that is rather unfamiliar to modern thought. To use the terms that Thomas Aquinas made standard in the tradition (terms used also by Protestants in documents like the Westminster Confession) God’s activity as first cause does not undermine secondary causes such as our free will, but rather creates and establishes them. So if the Creator of our free will chooses that we shall freely choose X rather than Y, then that is what we do indeed freely choose. God’s sovereignty over our free wills does not undermine our free wills.

Many people find this idea profoundly objectionable, but I do not. That is something to reckon with as you read these pages. The notion that God can choose how we shall *freely* choose seems to me a necessary constituent in any sound Christian doctrine of divine power, and is accordingly shared by theologians as diverse as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. The objections commonly raised against it today seem to me to rest on a characteristically modern failure to understand the distinctiveness of divine causality, thinking of God’s power as if it were somehow in competition with ours—so that the unlimited exercise of divine power would undermine the exercise of creaturely power. I think this is fundamentally impossible: the activity of the Creator inherently gives being and power to his creatures, as a novelist inherently gives being and power to her characters—the difference being, of course, that when God creates characters they are real. What never has to happen is for God to limit his power in order to make room for his creatures to exert real power. This is not a zero-sum game. The exercise of divine power creates and sustains all human powers, and the only way God could have limited the exercise of his power with regard to us would have been by choosing not to give us existence.

This does not mean I find nothing to object to in Augustine's doctrine of grace. But my objections are not about divine power or even predestination (if God can choose how we freely choose, then it does not make any difference if he does so from all eternity) but about the justice of the choices that, according to Augustine, God actually makes. In Augustine's treatment of divine choice (his doctrine of *election*, as the tradition has come to call it, using the Latin word for "choice") two lovely ideas combine and turn ugly: the biblical teaching that God has a chosen people and the concept of grace as a gift that causes us to delight in the good. Conceived within the experiential matrix of an individual person's faith, grace as an inner gift of delight is lovely; the problem comes when you look outside your individual experience and consider other people. Then you have to ask: why do some people receive grace rather than others? What makes the difference? Since no one can deserve the gift of grace, as is especially clear in the case of prevenient grace, you cannot explain the difference by pointing out any difference in what various human beings deserve, nor indeed by pointing out any difference among human beings at all. The only possible cause of the difference—which amounts to the ultimate difference between human beings, the difference between salvation and damnation—is the inscrutable choice of God, divine election in the distinctively Augustinian sense inherited by Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin. God has good reasons for choosing to give grace to some people rather than others, Augustine insists—for God always chooses wisely, not arbitrarily—but we cannot possibly know what these reasons are. Thus the divine choice is inscrutable, which means it is also terrifying—because it concerns which of us are to be damned forever. Perhaps worse, it concerns which of the people we love and pray for are to be damned forever.

And here is where the issue of justice comes in. Augustine argues that in granting grace to some undeserving sinners rather than others, God treats them unequally but not unjustly: the damned get no worse than they deserve, while the saved get undeserved mercy—so neither are treated unjustly. I am among the many theologians who do not buy this argument. Unequal treatment is a thing to rejoice in if it means some are treated more graciously than others (for why should we who receive grace be envious if others are treated even more graciously, as Jesus asks us in the wonderful parable in Matt. 20:1–16) but not if the difference is between grace and no grace, salvation and damnation.

At first I thought the root of this problem must be a kind of mismatch between Augustine's Platonist inwardness and the biblical notion of divine choice. When he first worked out his concept of grace, Augustine was thinking about the inward relation of the soul and God, not the question of why one soul


receives grace rather than another. The idea that God is the inner source of grace for the soul is lovely; the idea that God is the source of the difference between the saved and the damned is terrifying. What Augustine's Platonism had not prepared him for is a God who makes irreducible choices, not simply applying the same standard of judgment equally to all but differentiating some people from others on the basis of nothing but his gracious love. In Platonism God is like a sun shining inwardly upon all souls alike, so that only our own different degrees of inner darkness, opacity, and aversion to the light make a moral difference between one person and the next. But in the Bible, God chooses one person rather than another out of sheer unmerited love, like a father who has a favorite son. It is not obvious how these two conceptions of grace can be reconciled, and certainly a pagan Platonist like Plotinus would never accept the notion of the First Principle of the universe making *choices*. Choices are about particulars, and to choose to love one particular person rather than another—especially when there is no difference of merit between them—is to be a person in a far too anthropomorphic sense for Plotinus to accept.

What I came to see later is that there is also a problem with the earlier Christian tradition's understanding of God's choice, which Augustine inherits. Augustine assumes that God chooses one person rather than another for salvation, but the biblical doctrine of election always has God choosing one person for the blessing of others. The God of Israel does indeed have a favorite son, but as Karl Barth reminded us he is Jesus Christ, chosen for the salvation of the whole world. So the conceptual structure of the biblical doctrine of election is not simply that one is chosen *instead of* others, but that one is chosen *for the sake of* others.

I do not suppose Christian theologians will be in a good position to understand this until it is unmistakably clear to us that the same structure governs the biblical view of the relation of Jew and Gentile. Rather than regarding themselves as chosen in place of Israel, Gentile Christians should rejoice and thank God that the Jews are and remain, through God's faithfulness, the chosen people, the elect of God for the blessing of all nations. Once the doctrine of election is seen through the lens of this biblical rejoicing and thanksgiving, we will no longer find it terrifying that God chooses some rather than others for his own inscrutable reasons—for when we see that our salvation comes to us only through God's chosen ones, we will no longer be frightened or offended at being other than the elect. The inscrutability of divine election is not the inscrutable horror of a predestined damnation, but the inscrutable glory of God's choosing that the Gospel will be the particular story that it is, with Israel and Christ as its central characters and the rest of us reaping the benefits.

I still think there is a kind of mismatch between Platonist inwardness and biblical election, but it is different from what I thought at first—more deeply related, it turns out, to the theme of external means of grace, which is the subject of my next book. We find the grace and blessing of God only outside ourselves, in other creatures who are different from us and not found within our souls: Gentiles will only find it in a Jew, Jesus Christ in the flesh, and (according to Paul in Romans 11) the Jews will only find it together with the Gentiles. Hence whether Jew or Gentile, the election of God requires us to find grace by looking outside ourselves, in a kind of outward turn.

There is hardly a blessing worth having that does not come to us from outside, through others. The benefits of scholarship are no exception. It was a great blessing to me when I found myself for the first time in a self-consciously Augustinian community of scholars at Villanova University in the Core Humanities Program assembled by Jack Doody. I cannot say how much I owe to these colleagues, all starting out together and teaching one another what it meant to be teachers and scholars. But I will always be grateful for Margaret Connolly, Abigail Firey, Deborah Romanick-Baldwin, Felix Asiedu, Kevin Hughes, and Kim Paffenroth. Not all of them are Augustine scholars, but I could hardly have learned to think well about Augustine without them.



A Note on Quotations and Citations

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from primary texts are my own, as are all translations from secondary literature unless an English language edition is given in the bibliography. Italics in quotations are mine, introduced not for the sake of emphasis but simply to highlight the part of the quotation that is most important in my exegesis. Citations from ancient texts usually omit the chapter number where redundant: for example, *Confessions*, book 7, chapter 10, paragraph number 16 is cited “*Conf. 7:16*,” not “*Conf. 7:10.16*.” However, I have included the chapter number in citations of texts where the standard English translation has only chapter rather than paragraph numbers, as, for example, in Augustine’s treatise *On the Grace of the New Testament* (= Ep. 140).

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Inner Grace

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Introduction

Although the concept of grace is essential to Christianity, it will not do to treat it as uniquely or distinctively Christian, as if it were something no other religion or philosophy would think of, like Christology. Every religion expects its deities to be gracious, and the same is true of the deeply religious philosophy known as Platonism, which calls its most high God by the name of the Good. For Plotinus, the greatest of the Platonists Augustine studied, the Good is the inner source of all good and being, inspiring the soul's ecstatic love and longing for an ultimate happiness and wholeness. Augustine does not disagree: he conceives grace as the fundamental form of our inner participation in the Good. His most striking divergence from Plotinus on the issue of grace concerns how God chooses that some souls shall receive this gift of participation rather than others—a kind of selectivity that is quite foreign to Plotinus's conception of the Good.

Of course Augustine's doctrine of grace has roots outside of Platonism as well. The aim of this book is to show how it was formed from an epochal synthesis of Platonism and Paul, not as a departure from Augustine's Christian Platonism but as one of its most important and lasting accomplishments. The first three chapters in the book focus on Augustine's relations to Platonism, Paul, and Pelagius, respectively, following the chronological order in which Augustine had his decisive encounter with each. Pelagius comes last, because the fundamental convictions and conceptual structure of

Augustine's theology were established well before the beginning of the Pelagian controversy—though the arguments Augustine made in the course of the controversy gave his doctrine of grace its distinctive emphases and made it the very particular legacy that it is. Paul is at the heart of the exposition, because it was while wrestling with Paul that Augustine developed his distinctive convictions about grace. But Platonism comes first, because Augustine's Platonist ontological and epistemological commitments (on such matters as the immutability of God, the sensible/intelligible distinction, and the priority of inner to outer) were already in place by the time of his first sustained encounters with Paul, so that his Pauline convictions about grace and human nature were made to fit into an overarching Platonist framework. When the fit turned out to be imperfect, the result was a set of pastoral problems that are an integral part of Augustine's enduring legacy to the West and are examined in the final chapter.

Since readers who would like an overview of the story this book has to tell can read the summaries preceding each chapter, the most useful thing left for this introduction to do is to say a little more about the general issue of Augustine's Platonism, which is a perennially controversial topic. It will be helpful for readers to know that I am among those scholars who think Augustine is very deeply Platonist indeed. As a result, I avoid several strategies of interpretation that serve mainly to minimize the appearance of Augustine's Platonism, which are so common in modern writing on Augustine that some readers may be slightly confused by not finding them in this book. So let me mention these strategies, the absence of which contributes so much to the shape of what is to come. Oftentimes they are combined with an account of the development of Augustine's thought that portrays him as starting out too Platonist for our comfort but becoming more Christian as he goes—another story that is quite different from the story I am telling here.

One strategy is to portray Augustine discovering the necessity of faith as a deeper and more inward relation to God than intellectual understanding. This is exactly the opposite of what Augustine actually thinks. *Intellectus* in Augustine is the deepest understanding, the kind of insight that makes you shout, "Aha! Now I see it!" when you perceive something eternally true and understand it for the first time. Augustine thinks this is what our souls were made for, and eternal happiness is what happens when this kind of insight embraces the whole of eternal Truth and the "aha!" moment expands to become our whole mode of being forever. Faith, by contrast, means trusting in the word of an external authority, which is the best we can do when we do not yet see and experience the truth for ourselves. The fact that faith is less than, lower than,