Augustine the Theologian

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TeSelle's Augustine the Theologian surveys Augustine's entire theological achievement, viewing it not according to the rubrics of later systematic theology, as it's so often viewed to the detriment of both Augustine & theology, but as an inquiry progressing according to the problems with which Augustine was concerned & the historical challenges he faced. He sketches the broad outlines of Augustine's thought in six major periods, periods characterized by the basic orientations in the often perplexing variety of Augustine's writings. This comprehensive method delineates Augustine the theologian at work. It provides the framework of his problems, showing what is taken for granted, what options are at hand, what resources he has for affecting a resolution. It's a sourcebook of the nature of the theological enterprise, one which may aid the present generation to think problems thru once again with a measure of the breadth & originality Augustine exemplified. It's the inward history of a brilliant mind, a mind many complexities of which are still veiled by chronological unknowns, but which gains by careful estimations like TeSelle's. It's above all a reliable guide to the major themes in the constantly developing thought of this thinker, a codweller with us in an age of philosophical & theological uncertainty.

Augustine the Theologian Details

Date	:	Published 1970 by Herder & Herder (NYC)
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From Reader Review Augustine the Theologian for online ebook

Charlie says

TeSelle accomplishes what other scholars would not dare to attempt: a systematic survey of Augustine's theology that takes its categories from Augustine's own conceptual world rather than from the divisions of later dogmatic manuals. The price of TeSelle's erudition is that the book is extremely dense. A good deal of patience and a solid background in Augustine are prerequisites for taking up this tome.

Peter Coleman says

Eugene TeSelle’s Augustine: The Theologian is a survey of the breadth of Augustine’s development as a theologian. The purpose is not simply to describe the theology of Augustine but rather to appreciate the dynamic growth of a theologian’s mind as he participated in the flow of theology and philosophy that preceded him. The primary goal for this work is not simply to act as a reference to the many elements of Augustine’s theology but to investigate where Augustine may have learned his ideas and by whom his mind was shaped.

Generally, TeSelle was not interested in entering debate with scholarly commentary on Augustine, whose theology has been constantly digested by academics. This is especially true of the earlier parts of the book. This presentation therefore on the whole seeks to access Augustine’s theology directly from his writings. Only occasionally did TeSelle call attention to differing viewpoints or indicate dependence on another’s interpretation as he had, for instance, Jean Rivière’s thesis that Augustine’s atonement theology was basically the ransom theory yet also containing precursors of an Anselmian satisfaction theory (167ff).

TeSelle took a diachronic rather than a synchronic approach. While either approach may be appropriate, one must recognize the limitations of each. The diachronic approach is better suited to the question of the state of Augustine’s theology at any point in time and recognizing in time how the controversies in which he was engaged sparked his thought. On the other hand, the approach is not as well suited to the question of what Augustine thought about any particular issue. Though the interest of many readers may be toward that latter question, a purely synchronic approach is not possible anyway because it does not take into account the development of Augustine’s thought.

TeSelle was aware of the lack of homogeneity within Augustine’s theological formulations (341). As examples given in the book demonstrate, Augustine clarified or retracted certain positions while also coming to greater or lesser certainty about others. Since discussion of Augustinian doctrine therefore must not be separated from temporal development, TeSelle’s diachronic method is not without merit. This especially serves TeSelle’s purpose of identifying moments of influence on Augustine’s thought as he did, for example, in dating Augustine’s reading of Porphyry’s On the Philosophy from Oracles at 400, thus identifying a point after which such discussion began to inform Agustine’s theological enquiry (125-126). The overarching understanding of how certain works operated as influences is consistent with TeSelle’s purpose to show that Augustine, creative thinker though he may have been, was not entirely independent in his thought. Teselle wrote that he “did not operate entirely without suggestion and encouragement from earlier thinkers, both philosophical and theological. But he was the one who succeeded in working through these suggestions consistently and thoroughly” (117). This thesis is especially well served by the diachronic approach.

A successful example of this comes in TeSelle's exploration of De Trinitate. Subjecting the work to form analysis and redactional criticism, TeSelle identified the developments that took place during the long period of the book's writing. He could then compare then earliest form to the finished product. His analysis of the first stages of the work revealed that the work did not begin with much unity but rather was "fragmentary" (236). Following another scholar, TeSelle could thus identify the impetus for the more mature theological reflections on the Trinity found in books V though VIII of De Trinitate (294). Responsible for this was the ideas found in new readings of earlier church fathers on the subject. In both Trinitarian theology and anthropology, Teselle concluded that Augustine integrated Platonic speculation into a biblical context (309). This exemplifies TeSelle's project of identifying points of influence in Augustine's theology.

Early in his discussion of Augustine's intellectual beginnings TeSelle made an uncomfortable comment about Augustine's pre-conversion intellectual awareness. He said that what Augustine knew of Christian theology was "nothing" except whatever he may have picked up while with Ambrose in Milan (55). To say that Ambrose was Augustine's only source of Christian theology before his conversion is to ignore much from Augustine's early history. In Carthage, Augustine attended a Bible study, even if only for the mischievous purpose of meeting girls. He was nonetheless exposed to Christian teaching. His mother also was insistent on advocating the Christian faith to her son. It is clear that she was greatly concerned about his faith and this likely would have included instruction and admonition in Christian belief. Even in Augustine's Manichaeism, he would have caught a glimpse of at least shadows of Christian theology. Mani had appropriated some aspects of Christian teaching in the development of his religious path. Later, his followers in Christian contexts, such as the North African context in which Augustine discovered the religion, would integrate Christian themes into their doctrines in order to form a syncretistic blend of religion that would have found greater appeal to a Christian audience. Though Augustine's exposure to Christian theology may have been ignored, incomplete and distorted, it is not entirely accurate to claim that Ambrose was the only pre-conversion influence on Augustine regarding Christian theology.

The importance of accurately identifying the elements of Augustine's theological prehistory is of great value considering that TeSelle's goal is to identify the influences on Augustine's thought. By erasing the traces of Christian theology that may have been impressed on Augustine aside from Ambrose's influence TeSelle thus presents a distorted portrait of Augustine's turn of thought to Christianity. Such a presentation is inadequate either by presenting Augustine's moment of conversion as providing a clean slate onto which an unadulterated theology was inscribed or by opening the door to elevating the prominence of other thought forms such as those by which Augustine's nascent understanding was molded. Accurately gauging the Christian foundation on which Augustine stood even in the earliest period is thus of vital importance. However, TeSelle's assessment in its minimization of a Christian prehistory casts doubt on the weight that he assigned to Neo-Platonism and other systems on Augustine's theological development.

At times, Teselles' eagerness to identify influences from other writers appears suspect. In discussing the possibility of Tyconius' influence on Augustine's theology of predestination (180-182), Teselle relied on the work of Alberto Pincherle, whose description of Tyconius' influence was limited, at least in Teselle's presentation of the argument, to pointing to certain Scriptural texts. The authors then wonder why Augustine was reticent to mention Tyconius even as Teselle admitted that "Tyconius did not furnish the crucial propositions" but only highlighted certain scriptural texts from which to formulate a theology of predestination (182, emphasis in original). Unless there are other ways to demonstrate Tyconius' influence on Augustine in this matter at that time in Augustine's life, to so readily nominate Tyconius as the fountainhead of Augustine's predestinarian theology would rob Augustine of a genuine creativity in handling the scriptural texts. If both Augustine and Tyconius were facing the same issue and using the same starting point, Scripture, as the chief informant to their theologies, then there should be no surprise that their use of Scripture would have areas of overlap. More must be demonstrated and this casts doubt on the confidence

one might have in Teselle’s project to identify such influences.

Although not every conclusion is without uncertainty, the overall scope of the project is successful in showing that Augustine is not a theologian who can be responsibly studied without an awareness of the ideas with which he interacted. TeSelle has demonstrated that Augustine was not only creative in his interpretations of Scripture and his responses to the controversies of his day but was also an effective compiler and processor of the philosophy and theology of his predecessors. He was an able critic of earlier thought and utilized it in the formulations of his own unique brand of theology and scriptural interpretation.

Erik Graff says

This book was read for a class entitled "The Philosophy of St. Augustine" taught by David Hassel, S.J. at Loyola University Chicago. David later served on my orals committee for the philosophy degree.

This book made little impression on me, but David did. One of the reasons I took his course a general interest in classical antiquity, but another, perhaps more important, reason was that my then-wife, Linda, had recommended him after taking a class or two with him herself. Linda was deaf, this was the early eighties and Loyola University was certainly not in the vanguard so far as accomodating disabled students. Much depended upon the personality of the instructors and David was one of the best--a kind and considerate person.
