Summer 2020

Review of *On Self-Harm, Narcissism, Atonement and the Vulnerable Christ*, by David Vincent Meconi

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Book Reviews

David Vincent Meconi, S.J. *On Self-Harm, Narcissism, Atonement, and the Vulnerable Christ.* Foreword by Eleonore Stump. Reading Augustine Series. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 165 pp. Paper, $30.00.

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The book under review traces the origins of self-harm, in both its ancient and contemporary guises, back to what Augustine's *City of God* calls "love of self, even to the point of contempt for God." This slim monograph manages to achieve relevance for a contemporary culture beset by cutting, opioid addictions, and anxiety without sacrificing theological depth or fidelity to Augustine's thought.

The first chapter ("God and Those Made to Become Like God") develops Augustine's Trinitarian anthropology. Profiling Augustine's thought against the background of early Trinitarian theology, the author shows how the Doctor of Grace manages to avoid the Scylla of Arian subordinationism and the Charybdis of Sabellian modalism by reconceiving the Trinitarian persons as substantial relations. The relationality of the Godhead implies that the human *imago Dei*, as it strives to conform to its archetype, will become not less but more relational – both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, the human person comes to possess the *imago Dei* most fully not by the mere possession of memory, understanding, and will, but by using the threefold faculty doxologically. Horizontally, Augustine's anthropology is relational to the point of conceiving all sin as a kind of *incurvatio in se*, a turning toward the self that eventuates in a turning against the self. The author illustrates this dynamic with Augustine's reaction to the loss of his unnamed friend in *Confessions* IV, which left him thrown back upon a self that had become an "enigma." Though critics often blame Augustine for the post-Cartesian fixation on the isolated self, nothing could be further from the truth.

Chapter 2 ("Becoming God without God?") explores Augustine's hamartiology. It presents pride, understood as love of one's "own superiority" (44), as the fountainhead from which all sinful actions and all human misery flow. Drawing on Augustine's many treatments of Genesis, the author shows how both angels and humans rebel according to a common pattern, namely, the choosing of self as an ersatz deity. In the case of humans, who are created good but incomplete, this means attempting to complete oneself, both by inverting the *ordo amorum* (the favored conceptuality of the early Augustine) and by choosing one's private good over the common good (the favored conceptuality of Augustine after

400 A.D.). In every case, when persons try to make themselves more than they are, they become less than they could be, thereby inflicting the ultimate self-harm.

Chapter 3 ("Those Pears: Sin as Self-Sabotage") offers an answer to those who wonder why Augustine so bitterly lamented his youthful theft of pears, a crime that most would be inclined to dismiss as an adolescent prank. The author begins by noting the narrative's many intra- and intertextual resonances, ranging from the other garden scenes of the *Confessions* to the Prodigal Son of Luke's Gospel. Especially interesting is the argument that the pear tree evokes not only the forbidden fruit of Genesis but the Manichaean belief that the fruit contains sparks of trapped divinity – a higher good that Augustine would have thereby subordinated to the lower good of swine. The chapter represents, in sum, a sustained meditation on the mysterious motive that Augustine offers for his theft: "I fell in love with my own ruin" (*amavi perire*). It concludes that the sin haunts Augustine precisely because he can find no explanation for it beyond his appetite for self-destruction.

Chapter 4 ("Narcissism and the Paradox of Self-Love") expounds the disjunction that runs through so much of Augustine's theology of charity: either love of God above all creatures, or a narcissism that finds a twisted satisfaction in self-destruction. For Augustine, the author argues, love can never be solipsistic because one must vulnerably love someone else before one can properly love oneself. If Augustine had ever commented on Ovid's version of the myth of Narcissus, the author speculates, he would have likely focused not on the young man's end state, that is, his paralyzing fascination with his own image, but on his initial flight from the infatuated nymph Echo. The myth thus serves as a cautionary tale not so much against the active narcissism of swaggering overconfidence as against the passive narcissism of attachment to aseity. When we make our own security paramount, our mind turns on itself almost like an immune system that longer recognizes its own DNA. The consequent tendency is to caricature reality so as to protect improper self-love, a tendency that Augustine recognized retrospectively in his youthful contempt for the Catholic Church.

Chapter 5 ("Atonement and the Vulnerable Christ") explains how Augustine understands the incarnation to furnish the remedy for our self-destructive isolation. By becoming man and dying on the cross as the *Christus deformis*, God identifies with and cures the *homo deformis*. This insight structures Augustine's preaching. The bishop of Hippo typically begins by inviting congregants to examine their own indigence and then proceeds to present Christ as the only adequate fulfillment of the *cor inquietum*. Christ satisfies, in turn, by identifying himself with a corporate body, the Church. In becoming our neighbor, God has made it possible for us to love him by loving our neighbor rightly. The author suggests that Augustine, as he matures pastorally and gains emotional distance

from his youthful unchastity, construes less competitively the relationship between love of God and love of neighbor. Whereas the newly ordained Augustine would preach "God is love" (but not vice versa), the spiritually mature Augustine of the *Homilies of the First Epistle on John* can say with equal conviction "Love is God." The ability to love God by God's grace and through neighbor heals the fragmented self.

In the final analysis, then, and despite its gritty title, *On Self-Harm, Narcissism, Atonement and the Vulnerable Christ* accentuates the more positive and humanistic strands in Augustine's account of human transformation. The book favorably contrasts Augustine's relatively positive view of nature with the "stern-minded Christianity" of the Desert Fathers (135). The Augustine who preaches the fulfillment of cherished desires prevails over the Augustine who preaches an impending judgment. The Augustine who portrays God as all-embracing love wins out over the Augustine who accepts the damnation of unbaptized infants. The Augustine who learns the noncompetitive quality of God-love and neighbor-love and who comes to see "how his congregants love their children and boast about their grandchildren" (150), predominates over the Augustine of *De nuptiis et concipiscentia*, who warns sternly of the dangers of marital concupiscence and gives virginity pride of place. The author's pastoral instincts, in short, lead him to foreground those aspects of Augustine more attractive to contemporary sensibilities and, arguably, more responsive to today's needs.

These same pastoral instincts, combined with a deep knowledge of Augustine, prove to be the book's great strength. The author's long experience of teaching Augustine, mentioned *obiter* at several points in the book, has clearly "magnetized" his mind to the apt contemporary illustration or parallel. He dramatizes the appetite for ruin with situations familiar to those pastorally engaged in today's culture: cutting, pornography and masturbation, addiction, and so on. The book opens with the moving story of a man wearing a blasphemous t-shirt who, upon being confronted, admits perceptively, "Father, I hate myself so much, I want everyone else to hate me too." The chapter on "Narcissism and the Paradox of Self-Love" likewise teems with illuminating connections. A *Rolling Stone* interview with the singer Marianne Faithfull connects narcissism to self-hatred in the dynamic of substance abuse. Psychological literature on narcissistic personality disorder and a character study of Mayella Ewell from *To Kill a Mockingbird* round out the picture. The book shuttles back and forth between Augustine's idiom and our own, providing a kind of ongoing cultural translation.

Though this might seem to give the book an uneven tone, neither scholarly nor popular, I think the book largely succeeds as a bridge across the two registers. It offers the scholar a subtle reading of Augustine on sin and justification. It offers the student accessible examples of otherwise intangible concepts. I am confident

that I will both pray and teach better for having read it. The author is to be congratulated.