

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 27 | Issue 3

Article 12

7-1-2010

Cary, OUTWARD SIGNS: THE POWERLESSNESS OF EXTERNAL THINGS IN AUGUSTINE'S THOUGHT

J. Warren Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Smith, J. Warren (2010) "Cary, OUTWARD SIGNS: THE POWERLESSNESS OF EXTERNAL THINGS IN AUGUSTINE'S THOUGHT," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 3 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol27/iss3/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

that his ethic of love is not merely about restoring balance between parties when one has harmed the other; rather, it includes the more challenging ideal of extending forgiveness. This involves foregoing the negative emotions that the offended feels toward the offender. It also involves foregoing the doling out of retributive punishment, according to Wolterstorff. Genuine forgiveness and retribution are incompatible, he claims.

The chapters in *Jesus and Philosophy* engage a variety of distinct topics, from issues related to virtue and the ethics of Jesus to the historical, religious, and intellectual context in which Jesus lived and taught. Such breadth can sometimes be problematic, but in the case of this volume it is a virtue. Given that, as Moser points out in the preface, no scholarly book has been produced that explores the relationship between Jesus and philosophy, the range of issues and disciplines represented in the book add to its quality and suggest avenues where further research might proceed not only in philosophy, but in theology and biblical scholarship as well. I highly recommend this book not only for scholars interested in the connections between Jesus and philosophy, but also as a text for courses in religious studies, Christian thought, and philosophy. Philosophers with Christian commitments would do well to reflect on Moser's claims about philosophy as a kerygmatic discipline and the related issues raised by Gooch in his chapter. Whether or not they are correct, Moser and Gooch provide significant food for thought for those who are, in some sense, Christian philosophers.

Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought, by Phillip Cary. Oxford University Press, 2008. 344 pp. \$74.00 (cloth)

J. WARREN SMITH, Duke Divinity School

Outward Signs is a study in Augustine of Hippo's theory of semiotics and its implications for our understanding of the efficacy of the sacraments. It is the culmination of Phillip Cary's trilogy on Augustine's idea of interiority. The first volume in the trilogy, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self* (Oxford 2000), argues that Augustine is the originator of the idea that the soul is that "inner place" in which one withdraws to find God's presence. The second volume, *Inner Grace* (Oxford 2008), argues that Augustine's understanding of grace is essentially a synthesis of Plato and Paul. It is Platonist in that grace is the divine light illuminating the inner space of the soul, allowing vision of the intelligible things of God. It is Pauline in that the grace is given, not universally, but only to God's elect. This volume's clear and nuanced account of the development of Augustine's doctrine of grace from the Cassiciacum dialogues to *To Simplicianus*, climaxing with *On the Predestination of the Saints*, is a *tour de force* that will be invaluable to anyone seeking to understand the maturation of Augustine's soteriology.

Having argued that Augustinian grace works inwardly, turning our affection from external things toward God whom we meet in the inner space of the soul, Cary asks in *Outward Signs*, "What then is the value of the sensible realities of creation existing outside the soul?" "What power, if any, do the words of Scripture, the water of baptism, the bread and wine of Eucharist, and Christ's humanity—all of which are external signs—have for the soul's sanctification?"

The book begins with a brief history of semiotics within Classical and Hellenistic philosophy from Zeno to Cicero, which serves as the background for Augustine's expressionist semiotics (chapters 1 and 2). Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the development of Augustine's expressionist semiotics, which integrates a Platonic view of interiority with Ciceronian rhetorical theory to formulate a new theory of language that dominated the West until the Protestant Reformation. Chapters 5 and 8 explore the implications of Augustine's semiotics for a Christian view of the Incarnate Word, Scripture, and the Sacraments.

Prior to Augustine, the philosophical area of semiotics discussed by Zeno and Aristotle was not concerned with theories of language, but with the process of drawing probable inferences about unseen phenomena based on the visible signs (in Greek *semion*) in nature (p. 19). Smoke is a sign of fire; lactation is a sign of a woman's having been pregnant. Words, however, were not thought of as signs. For Plato, words do not signify things themselves, but represent thoughts that correspond with things. Thus words, in a Platonist understanding, belong to the inner world of thought, not the outer world of the senses. Augustine, however, follows Cicero's view in *On Invention* that signification (*significare*) is an *active* production of the soul that conveys some meaning to his audience (pp. 72–73). For Augustine, words are audible expressions of thoughts, like an orator's hand gestures signifying the hidden, internal intentions of the soul (p. 65). Although Augustine broke with a Platonist theory of language, he retains a Platonic epistemology, according to which the mind attains knowledge of the truth not through the mediation of sensible phenomena but by turning within itself to contemplate the hidden inner reality accessible only to the intellect (p. 94). This epistemology carries two important implications for Augustine's semiotics. First, since "all signs being external things are devoid of causal power over higher things like the soul" (p. 105), they can "never really make these inward realities known" (p. 88). Since words are signs and so belong to the category of externals, they cannot mediate knowledge of God to the soul. One understands the meaning of words only because she already knows the things signified. In *On the Teacher*, Augustine uses the example of the enigmatic word *sarabarae* from Daniel 3:27 to illustrate the point. No one knows what a *sarabara* is. The word could have meaning for us only if we had first seen a *sarabara* (pp. 94–95). Second, although Augustine rejects a Platonic theory of anamnesis, he concludes that we gain knowledge of the truth not through external signs/words but through the illumination of the *inner* teacher who is

Christ (pp. 90–91). This inner teacher is not Christ incarnate, but Christ the divine *Nous* who gives direct knowledge of the Truth in the inner space of the soul (p. 115). The inner teacher becomes external in the Incarnation in order to draw his people back to the unchanging Truth within the soul (p. 116). Thus Cary concludes that words, along with all other externals including Christ's incarnate form and the sacraments, are "powerless" to give the soul knowledge of God's truth and bring us happiness.

Signs are not without their purpose and value for Augustine. In a fallen world where we do not have immediate access to the thoughts of another person (p. 81ff), we use signs to express our thoughts to others. We use words to "try to teach" (p. 92) by directing the mind beyond the sign to the thing signified (p. 105). Thus sacred signs, e.g., Scripture and sacraments, do not teach us Truth but are the objects of Christian faith (p. 105). In contradistinction from understanding, in which reason grasps the Truth for itself, faith is the belief in what is told to us by an authority (p. 102). Faith prepares the believer for understanding that this life provides a foretaste of the beatific vision to come (p. 103). Nevertheless, the goal remains: The understanding of intellectual vision will ultimately supercede faith (p. 119). The Incarnation is but the mother's milk that accommodates our immaturity but is eventually to be replaced with the solid food of reason (p. 120). Once we have attained the vision of Christ as he is, i.e., "the form of God," we will no longer need "the form of a servant" in which he revealed himself (p. 148).

At the heart of Cary's project is a theological critique of Augustine's expressionist semiotics as the source of the "piety of interiority" that devalues all external things. Focusing on the inner experience of Christ not only devalues the goodness of God's material creation but treats God's self-disclosure in the person of a particular Jewish man as a mere epiphenomenon. Another troubling implication for Cary is that expressionist semiotics renders the sacraments mere *signs* of grace rather than *means* of grace (p. 156). Whereas later Medievals maintained that *sacramenta* were signs "which not only signify but *confer* what inwardly helps, such as the Gospel sacraments" (Peter Lombard, *Sent.* 1:1.1), for Augustine the sacraments are signs that only gesture toward the inner gift of grace but do not actually confer grace upon the soul. Augustine's expressionist account of sacraments rests upon a Platonist ontological division between the inner intelligible realm of the soul and the external, sensible realm of the body, according to which only the ontologically higher (the soul) can affect the lower (the body) but not the other way around (p. 163).

Outward Signs is a provocative examination of oft overlooked topics and texts that should challenge scholars to re-read *On the Teacher* and *On Christian Doctrine*. Yet one wonders if Cary does not overstate the Platonist/Augustinian distinction between the inner and the outer, creating an absolute dichotomy between them that diminishes the efficacy of signs in aiding our ascent to God. Although he rightly points to passages in *On the Teacher* in which Augustine seems to say that learning comes only

from the inner teacher and not external words, Cary makes this early text the hermeneutical key to reading all of Augustine's later writings. This is to overstate the case. Augustine's point in *On the Teacher* and *On Christian Doctrine* is that words, and all externals for that matter, are *insufficient* in and of themselves to bring the Christian to the knowledge of God. In this respect, Augustine's view is consistent with that of orthodox theologians of the East and West. Marius Victorinus argued that the Son remains hidden in the Incarnation until one receives the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, who reveals the Son veiled in human flesh and so allows us to make Thomas's confessions, "My Lord and My God." Likewise Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus interpreted Psalm 36:9 "in thy light shall we see light" to mean that only through the Divine light of the Spirit is one able to see the Divine light that is the Divine Word. Likewise, neither the words of Scripture nor the elements of the Sacrament in themselves reveal the God who inspired the Scriptures and is present to the believer in the Sacrament. Even as many in the first century saw Jesus as merely a man, so too many today see the Eucharist as merely bread and wine. Yet there is considerable difference between saying that signs, such as Scripture, the sacraments, and even the body of the incarnate Christ, are *insufficient* to give belief or knowledge, and saying that they are *powerless*. In practice for Augustine the preacher, outer verbal signs not only direct a person to turn within in prayer to seek the illumination of the Spirit, but their content, the reality signified, on which the Spirit casts its light becomes the content of the believer's knowledge of God.

Most of all, how does Cary's interpretation of Augustine's view of externals fit with his eschatology? Because of Augustine's insistence upon a material, bodily resurrection, outer signs do not pass away in the eschaton when the saints receive the face to face vision of God. There is no purely intellectual vision of the eternal intelligible realities, as awaited Socrates at the end of the *Phaedo*. Rather, in Augustine's eschatology, there is a harmonious integration of the external and the internal. The struggle between inner man and outer man is over. The private inner life gives way to public communion of the saints. Augustine, at the end of *City of God*, describes the "vision" of God as mediated through the saints' glorified *bodies* of the resurrection. Far from abandoning *sacramenta*, Augustine's eschatology preserves an eternal, sacramental function for the externals of the New Earth.