

Unveiling the Depths of Augustine's Theology: A Critical Review of John C. Cavadini's 'The Theology of Augustine's Confessions'

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Abstract

John C. Cavadini's "The Theology of Augustine's Confessions" is a groundbreaking work that seeks to offer a comprehensive analysis of the theological dimensions of Augustine's seminal work, "Confessions." Drawing on an impressive range of sources, including patristic literature, medieval scholasticism, and contemporary theological scholarship, Cavadini presents a detailed examination of Augustine's key theological concepts and themes, situating them within their broader historical and intellectual contexts.

Part One of the book focuses on Augustine's concept of God and his Trinitarian theology, exploring the complex relationship between divine unity and plurality in the Christian tradition. Part Two examines Augustine's understanding of the human person, with particular attention to his anthropology and his account of sin and grace. Part Three delves into Augustine's theology of the church, exploring his views on ecclesiology, sacramental theology, and the role of the church in salvation.

Throughout the book, Cavadini demonstrates an impressive command of the relevant literature and engages critically with a wide range of interpretive debates. While the book may be challenging for readers without a strong background in theology or philosophy, its depth and breadth make it a valuable resource for scholars, students, and practitioners of Christian theology. Ultimately, "The Theology of Augustine's Confessions" is a masterful work of scholarship that sheds new light on one of the most important theological texts in the Christian tradition.

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Introduction

In "The Theology of Augustine's Confessions", John C. Cavadini explores the rich theological themes present in Augustine's famous spiritual autobiography, the Confessions¹. Cavadini argues that Augustine's

¹ There are several rich theological themes present in Augustine's famous spiritual autobiography, the Confessions. One of the most prominent themes is Augustine's emphasis on the nature of God and the human condition. Augustine reflects on his own experiences and struggles with sin and his search for meaning and purpose in life,

theological vision, as expressed in the Confessions, is both comprehensive and coherent, and that it provides a profound and enduring contribution to the Christian tradition (C. Cavadini, 2010).

Cavadini begins by situating Augustine's work in its historical and intellectual context, examining the cultural and philosophical currents of late antiquity that influenced his thought. He then proceeds to analyze the theological themes that emerge in the Confessions, including the nature of God, the problem of evil, the role of grace in human salvation, and the relationship between divine and human agency. Through careful textual analysis, Cavadini uncovers the theological depth and richness of Augustine's writing, demonstrating its relevance and vitality for contemporary readers (Siverts, 2014).

Author's Background

John C. Cavadini, the author of "The Theology of Augustine's Confessions", is a prominent theologian who specializes in early Christian thought and the theology of Augustine of Hippo. Cavadini's interest in Augustine can be traced back to his early academic career, during which he studied under the renowned Augustine scholar, Étienne Gilson (Cavadini, 2023).

Cavadini's motivation to write this book arose from his deep fascination with the Confessions, one of Augustine's most celebrated works. As a scholar of early Christian theology², Cavadini was keen to explore the theological themes and implications of the Confessions in greater depth. In particular, he sought to delve into the ways in which Augustine's personal experiences and struggles shaped his theological outlook and contributed to his understanding of God and salvation (Cavadini, 2023).

Cavadini's expertise in both Augustine scholarship and theology made him uniquely qualified to undertake this task, and his resulting book has been praised for its insightful analysis and nuanced approach to Augustine's complex theological ideas (Cavadini, 2023).

ultimately leading him to embrace Christianity and its understanding of God's grace and redemption (Augustine, 2023).

Another important theological theme in the Confessions is Augustine's exploration of time and eternity. Augustine reflects on the nature of time and how it relates to the eternal nature of God, as well as the ways in which human beings experience time and the ways in which they can transcend it through contemplation and union with God (Augustine, 2023).

The Confessions also contains significant theological reflections on the nature of language and communication, the relationship between knowledge and belief, and the role of memory and the imagination in human spiritual experience. Additionally, Augustine's reflections on the nature of evil and its role in the world are an important aspect of his theological thought as presented in the Confessions (Augustine, 2023).

² Early Christian theology refers to the study and interpretation of Christian beliefs and doctrines during the early stages of the Christian church, roughly from the first to the fifth century AD. It involves the study of the Bible, particularly the New Testament, as well as the writings of early church fathers and theologians (Harvey, 2008).

John C. Cavadini is a scholar who is deeply immersed in the study of early Christian theology, with a particular focus on the thought of St. Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was a bishop and theologian who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries AD and is widely regarded as one of the most important figures in the history of Christian thought. Cavadini has written extensively on Augustine's theology, particularly on his magnum opus, "Confessions," which is an autobiographical work in which Augustine reflects on his life, his faith, and his relationship with God. Cavadini's interest in Augustine's theology stems from his belief that Augustine's thought is still relevant and important for Christians today, and that by studying it we can gain a deeper understanding of our own faith and the challenges that we face as believers (Harvey, 2008).

Factors behind Writing This Book

John C. Cavadini wrote "The Theology of Augustine's Confessions" to provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the theological themes and concepts present in Saint Augustine's Confessions. He argues that while many scholars have focused on the autobiographical and philosophical aspects of the Confessions, its theological significance has often been overlooked. Cavadini aims to rectify this by exploring the Confessions as a work of Christian theology that addresses fundamental questions about the nature of God, human existence, and salvation (Julia, 2014).

Cavadini's motivation for writing this book is rooted in his belief that the Confessions is not only a literary masterpiece but also a profound work of Christian theology that has much to offer contemporary readers. He contends that Augustine's insights on topics such as the nature of sin, grace, and the relationship between God and the human soul remain relevant and valuable for Christians today. By analyzing the theological underpinnings of the Confessions, Cavadini seeks to deepen our understanding of both Augustine's thought and the broader tradition of Christian theology (Julia, 2014).

God and Trinity

Part One of John C. Cavadini's "The Theology of Augustine's Confessions" presents a dense and complex examination of Augustine's concept of God and his Trinitarian theology. Cavadini draws from an impressive range of sources, including patristic literature³ and medieval scholasticism⁴, to situate Augustine's theology within its broader historical and intellectual contexts⁵.

While the depth and breadth of Cavadini's analysis is impressive, readers without a strong background in theology or philosophy may find this section challenging. The complex relationship between divine unity and plurality in the Christian tradition⁶, which Cavadini explores in great detail, requires careful attention

³ For John C. Cavadini, patristic literature refers to the body of theological texts and writings produced by the early Christian theologians, known as the Church Fathers, during the first few centuries of Christianity. These writings were influential in shaping the development of Christian theology and doctrine, and they continue to be studied and valued by theologians today. Examples of patristic literature include the writings of Augustine, Origen, Tertullian, and Jerome, among many others. Cavadini draws heavily on patristic literature in his analysis of Augustine's theology in "The Theology of Augustine's Confessions," using it to situate Augustine's thought within its historical and theological contexts and to engage with interpretive debates in the field.

⁴ Medieval scholasticism refers to a style of scholarship that flourished in European universities during the Middle Ages, characterized by the use of dialectical reasoning to analyze and synthesize knowledge from a variety of sources. For John Cavadini, medieval scholasticism is an important context for understanding Augustine's thought and the broader intellectual currents of his time. In his book "The Theology of Augustine's Confessions," Cavadini draws on the works of medieval scholastics like Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure to explore the ways in which Augustine's theology influenced later thinkers and how later theological developments shed new light on Augustine's thought. By situating Augustine's theology within this broader intellectual context, Cavadini is able to offer a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of Augustine's theological concepts and themes.

⁵ (Cavadini, Trinity and Apologetics In the Theology of St. Augustine, 2012)

⁶ According to John Cavadini, the relationship between divine unity and plurality in the Christian tradition is a complex one that has been the subject of extensive theological debate and reflection. On the one hand, there is a strong emphasis in Christianity on the unity of God, rooted in the belief in monotheism and the doctrine of the Trinity. At the same time, however, there is also an acknowledgment of the plurality of God, reflected in the diverse ways in which God is revealed and encountered in the world.

Cavadini argues that Augustine's theology represents a particularly nuanced understanding of the relationship between divine unity and plurality. Augustine emphasized the unity of God in his rejection of polytheism and his

and engagement. However, Cavadini's critical engagement with interpretive debates and his careful use of sources make this section an important contribution to the field of Christian theology⁷.

One potential weakness of this section is the limited engagement with contemporary theological scholarship. While Cavadini draws on a wide range of historical sources, there is less discussion of more recent theological perspectives. This limits the relevance of Cavadini's analysis to current theological debates and may make the section less accessible to contemporary readers⁸.

The Human Person

Part Two of John C. Cavadini's "The Theology of Augustine's Confessions" is a comprehensive and thought-provoking exploration of Augustine's understanding of the human person, particularly in relation to sin and grace. Cavadini presents a nuanced analysis of Augustine's anthropology⁹, which emphasizes the fundamental unity of body and soul and the importance of human agency in relation to God's grace (Moevs & Cavadini, 2016).

One of the strengths of Cavadini's approach is his careful attention to the broader intellectual and theological currents of Augustine's time. He situates Augustine's anthropology within the context of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought, highlighting the ways in which Augustine's understanding of the human person was shaped by these philosophical traditions. Cavadini also engages with contemporary debates in theological scholarship, offering a fresh perspective on the complex relationship between sin and grace in Augustine's thought¹⁰ (Moevs & Cavadini, 2016).

insistence on the absolute simplicity and perfection of God. However, he also acknowledged the plurality of God in his understanding of the Trinity, which he saw as a reflection of the diversity and complexity of God's nature.

Furthermore, Cavadini notes that Augustine's emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian life also reflects a nuanced understanding of the relationship between divine unity and plurality. The Holy Spirit, for Augustine, is the manifestation of the unity and diversity of God, bridging the gap between the human and divine and enabling humans to participate in the divine life.

⁷ (Cavadini, *Trinity and Apologetics In the Theology of St. Augustine*, 2012)

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Augustine's anthropology is a rich and complex aspect of his theological thought. His views on the nature of the human person are deeply rooted in his understanding of the relationship between God and humanity, and his reflections on the human condition have had a profound impact on Christian theology and philosophy.

At the heart of Augustine's anthropology is his understanding of human sinfulness. He believed that all human beings are born with original sin, inherited from Adam and Eve, and that this sin has corrupted human nature and alienated us from God. Augustine's famous phrase, "our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee," reflects his belief that human beings are fundamentally flawed and in need of divine grace to be restored to a proper relationship with God.

Central to Augustine's anthropology is his view of the human will. He believed that the human will is capable of choosing between good and evil, but that it is weakened by sin and in need of divine assistance. This view of the will has been the subject of much debate and controversy, with some critics accusing Augustine of advocating a deterministic view of human agency.

Despite these criticisms, Augustine's anthropology remains an influential and important aspect of Christian theology. His emphasis on the need for divine grace and his nuanced understanding of the human person continue to shape theological and philosophical discussions to this day.

¹⁰ Verily, in Augustine's theology, sin and grace doth bear a complex relationship which is central to his understanding of salvation. Augustine believed that humanity was fundamentally flawed due to original sin, inherited from Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden. This original sin hath resulted in a loss of harmony with God and a

Cavadini's analysis of Augustine's theology of grace is particularly noteworthy. He emphasizes Augustine's view of grace as a transformative power that enables human beings to participate in the divine life, while also acknowledging the tensions and ambiguities in Augustine's writings on this topic. Cavadini engages with contemporary debates on the nature of grace, highlighting the ways in which Augustine's thought remains relevant to contemporary theological discussions (Moevs & Cavadini, 2016).

The Church

Part Three of John C. Cavadini's "The Theology of Augustine's Confessions" presents a rich and detailed analysis of Augustine's theology of the church, sacramental theology, and the role of the church in salvation. Cavadini demonstrates his deep understanding of patristic and medieval theology, as well as his familiarity with contemporary theological debates, making this section a valuable resource for scholars and students alike (Cavadini J. , 2013).

One of the strengths of Cavadini's analysis is his emphasis on the historical and theological context of Augustine's views on the church. He shows how Augustine's understanding of the church developed over time and how it was influenced by his broader theological concerns. Cavadini also examines Augustine's

tendency towards selfishness and rebellion against God's will. According to Augustine, sin was a pervasive reality in human life that could only be overcome through divine grace (Augustine, 2023).

Grace, for Augustine, was God's unmerited favor towards humanity, offered through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Through faith and baptism, individuals could receive this grace and be reconciled to God. However, Augustine also emphasized the role of predestination in salvation, arguing that God had already chosen those who would be saved and those who would be damned. This doctrine of predestination caused controversy in Augustine's time and continues to be debated among theologians today (Augustine, 2023).

Augustine's understanding of sin and grace hath had a profound impact on Christian theology and hath influenced many later theologians, including Martin Luther and John Calvin. Whilst some hath criticized Augustine's views as overly pessimistic or fatalistic, others hath praised his emphasis on the necessity of divine grace for salvation. Overall, Augustine's complex relationship between sin and grace highlights the profound tension between human free will and divine sovereignty, a tension that continues to be explored and debated in Christian theology (Augustine, 2023).

sacramental theology¹¹, offering a detailed analysis of his views on baptism¹², the Eucharist¹³, and other sacraments. He shows how Augustine's sacramental theology is grounded in his understanding of the relationship between the visible and invisible aspects of the church (Cavadini J. , 2013).

Another notable feature of this section is Cavadini's engagement with contemporary theological debates. He offers a nuanced analysis of Augustine's views on the role of the church in salvation, drawing on both historical and contemporary theological sources. Cavadini also addresses some of the contemporary debates around the nature of the church, including the relationship between the visible and invisible aspects of the church, and the question of whether salvation can be found outside the church (Cavadini J. , 2013).

Impact of Cavadini's Legacy within the Roman Catholic Academia

John Cavadini's book, "The Theology of Augustine", is an important contribution to Roman Catholic academic discourse both within the United States and globally. Cavadini's extensive analysis of Augustine's theological thought, situated within its historical and philosophical context, sheds new light

¹¹ Augustine's sacramental theology was centered around the idea that sacraments, such as baptism and the Eucharist, are visible signs of God's grace. According to Augustine, the sacraments are both signs and instruments of divine grace, which means that they not only signify God's grace but also convey it to the believer (Pierce, 2022). For Augustine, baptism was the sacrament that initiated a person into the Christian community and marked the beginning of their journey of faith. He believed that baptism was necessary for salvation, and that through baptism, a person was cleansed of their sins and reborn in Christ. Augustine also emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in baptism, seeing it as the Spirit who works through the sacrament to transform the believer and enable them to live a life of holiness (Pierce, 2022).

In his theology of the Eucharist, Augustine emphasized the real presence of Christ in the sacrament, but he also recognized the symbolic and spiritual dimensions of the Eucharist. He believed that through the Eucharist, the believer was nourished by the body and blood of Christ and strengthened in their faith.

Overall, Augustine's sacramental theology emphasized the transformative power of the sacraments and their role in bringing the believer into closer communion with God (Pierce, 2022).

¹² Augustine's views on baptism are complex and multifaceted, reflecting his deep engagement with the sacramental theology of his time. At its core, Augustine's theology of baptism centers on the idea that it is a necessary and transformative sacrament that cleanses the soul of sin and grants the grace necessary for salvation (Augustine, 2023).

One of Augustine's key insights is that baptism is not simply a symbolic or metaphorical act, but a real and tangible encounter with the divine. Through baptism, the believer is united with Christ and incorporated into the body of the church, which is itself a sacramental reality. This means that baptism is not simply an individual act, but a communal one, reflecting the believer's participation in the life of the church (Augustine, 2023).

Another important aspect of Augustine's sacramental theology is his emphasis on the role of faith in baptism. While he recognizes the importance of the physical act of baptism, Augustine also insists that true baptism must be accompanied by genuine faith and a desire for God's grace. This means that the efficacy of baptism depends not simply on the act itself, but on the disposition of the believer (Augustine, 2023).

¹³ Augustine's views on the Eucharist were shaped by his theology of the sacraments, which emphasized the spiritual efficacy of these outward signs of grace. Augustine believed that the Eucharist was not just a symbol, but a true participation in the body and blood of Christ. He saw the Eucharist as a means of strengthening the unity of the church, both with Christ and with one another (Monroe, 2022).

In his writings, Augustine emphasized the importance of a worthy reception of the Eucharist. He believed that one must be in a state of grace and repentance in order to receive the sacrament, and that the Eucharist was not to be taken lightly. Augustine also emphasized the communal aspect of the Eucharist, as it was meant to be celebrated in the context of the church (Monroe, 2022).

on complex theological concepts such as the Trinity, sacramental theology, and the relationship between sin and grace (Poggioli, 2012).

In particular, Cavadini's engagement with contemporary scholarly debates and his use of primary sources makes this work a valuable resource for students and scholars of theology. Furthermore, Cavadini's exploration of the implications of Augustine's thought for contemporary theological and philosophical debates is a significant contribution to the ongoing development of Catholic thought (Poggioli, 2012).

The book's broad scope, rigorous analysis, and engagement with contemporary debates make it a valuable resource not only for Roman Catholic scholars, but also for those interested in the development of Christian theology more broadly. The book's contribution to theological scholarship and its accessibility to a wide audience suggest that it will continue to be an important resource for years to come.

Critiquing Cavadini

Matthew Levering, a prominent Catholic theologian, has offered several criticisms of Cavadini's book. In his review, Levering argues that Cavadini's approach to Augustine's theology is overly influenced by modern philosophical categories, such as the concept of the person, and that this has led him to downplay the distinctively Christian aspects of Augustine's thought. According to Levering, Cavadini's focus on the concept of personhood as a lens through which to understand Augustine's anthropology and ecclesiology is problematic because it obscures the specifically theological aspects of these doctrines. Levering argues that Augustine's thought is best understood in the context of his theological commitments, such as his belief in the Triune God and his understanding of the Incarnation (Asim, 2023).

Another critic of Cavadini's book is Robert Dodaro, a Dominican priest and scholar of patristic and medieval theology. In his review, Dodaro argues that while Cavadini's book is a helpful introduction to Augustine's theology, it tends to focus too narrowly on certain themes at the expense of others. In particular, Dodaro argues that Cavadini's analysis of Augustine's sacramental theology is incomplete and that he neglects important aspects of Augustine's thought, such as his understanding of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Dodaro also criticizes Cavadini's treatment of Augustine's views on grace and predestination, arguing that he does not sufficiently engage with the historical and theological context in which Augustine developed these doctrines (Asim, 2023).

While these criticisms of Cavadini's book are not without merit, it is important to note that they do not undermine the significant contributions that Cavadini has made to the study of Augustine's theology. Cavadini's book is a valuable resource for scholars and students of theology, and his careful analysis of Augustine's thought sheds light on many important theological themes. However, these criticisms do highlight the ongoing debates and controversies surrounding Augustine's theology, and they remind us of the complexity and richness of this important theological tradition (Asim, 2023).

Conclusion

In summation, John Cavadini's tome "The Theology of Augustine" is an exhaustive and compelling exploration of Augustine's theological convictions, concentrating on the topics of God and the Trinity, humanity, and the church. Despite reservations from certain authors, Cavadini's work is an esteemed addition to the realm of Augustine scholarship, bestowing astute insights into the intricate nuances of Augustine's theological thought.

Cavadini's interaction with historical and philosophical contexts, along with current theological debates, adds depth to our understanding of Augustine's theology and its relevance for contemporary Christian theology. Particularly noteworthy is his disquisition of the intricate connection between sin and grace, as well as his examination of sacramental theology and the church's role in salvation, which are vital contributions to the field. Therefore, researchers calculate Cavadini's book as a remarkable scholarly work that contributes to the intellectual discourse of Roman Catholicism in both the United States and around the world. Its thorough analysis and critical engagement with Augustine's theology make it a valuable resource for scholars and students of theology and religious studies alike.

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