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Introduction

AUGUSTINE GOT SLAVERY WRONG. He inferred from his belief that slavery is God's just punishment of sin that it is not inherently unjust. But this is the start of the story, not the end. It is not enough to know that Augustine was wrong about slavery. It is worth understanding why he had this view and what role, if any, it played in his wider thought. This book addresses these topics. To do so adequately, we must avoid minimizing the badness and significance of Augustine's position.

Some minimizers give Augustine outs he never took up. Gervase Corcoran speculates that Augustine "could [have been] an enthusiastic supporter of manumission."¹ However, Augustine never said anything to suggest this.

One might be inclined to explain away Augustine's view of slavery as a mere product of his context. But this does not suffice as an explanation. As Chris de Wet argues, the historical context that scholars can access need not reflect the widespread opinion of the times. We often access historical context through texts that typically reflect the concerns and attitudes of elites. This leaves "the voices of the ancient masses, of peasants, and slaves, which are just as relevant for historical context" lost to time.² If the subaltern could speak then, we cannot hear them now. Furthermore, as Ilaria Ramelli shows, some of Augustine's contemporaries opposed slavery. At least one, Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395), called for its abolition.³ Reducing Augustine's position to a mere product of his context overlooks that similarly situated figures avoided his errors.

1. Corcoran 1985, 40.

2. De Wet 2018, 7–8.

3. Ramelli 2016, 172–89. See also Corcoran 1985, 55; Ramelli 2012.

A third minimization strategy is to treat slavery in Augustine's thought as merely metaphorical. According to this line of thinking, when referring to humans as "slaves of God" or "slaves of sin" Augustine was simply drawing on a culturally salient image for a rhetorical flourish.

This doesn't work either. Augustine had much to say about chattel slavery, the practice of humans owning other humans as property. It saturated his world. His family had owned slaves in his youth. While he was bishop, some clergy who served beneath him owned slaves.⁴ So did some of his wealthy parishioners. The practice of kidnapping tenant farmers to sell them as slaves was rampant. Augustine took the institution of chattel slavery to be permissible. This demands attention and, if possible, explanation. Moreover, this book will argue that even Augustine's apparently metaphorical uses of "slavery" were often not merely metaphorical.

The role of slavery in Augustine's thought is sometimes subtly minimized via translation. Most translators of Augustine render *dominus* as lord or Lord, not master, and *servus* as servant or bondservant, not slave. This obscures the ubiquity of master and slave concepts. The translation of *dominus* has caused no small controversy in Augustine studies of late.⁵ In her provocative 2017 translation of the *Confessions*, Sarah Ruden renders it as "master." I once asked a prominent Augustine scholar what he made of Ruden's decision. He didn't approve. When I asked him why, he said, "Well, I guess it's because 'Lord' is a Biblical term."

He was right: the language of Augustine's heart was the language of the Christian Scriptures.⁶ In calling God *dominus*, Augustine was referring to the title most Bibles translate as "Lord." But in Augustine's Old Latin (*Vetus Latina*) Bible and in his linguistic context, *dominus* was the term used to pick out both a lord and a slave-master. The same is true of *Adonai* in the Hebrew Bible and κύριος in the Septuagint and New Testament. A *dominus* ruled over *servi*. And *servi* belonged to a legal category of persons excluded from the basic rights and privileges of citizenship and under the uncontrolled power of others. We cannot, therefore, translate away the problem of slavery in Augustine's writings.

On the other hand, modern readers (especially those of us living in the long shadow of Atlantic slavery) may be tempted to conflate the social positions of ancient Roman *servi* and *domini* with their modern Atlantic counterparts. In acknowledging this as a mistake, I do not mean to

4. Shaw 2011, 373–74.

5. See, e.g., van Schoor 2017; Brown 2017; Ruden 2018; Williams 2019, xxx; Alimi 2020.

6. Teske 2009; Cameron 2012; Williams 2019.

relativize the horrors of Roman slavery. I only mean that if we are to properly evaluate slavery in Augustine's writings, we must be precise about what we're discussing.

To achieve this precision, we must carefully examine the ways *servi* and *domini* functioned in Augustine's life, writings, and broader social context. Doing so will help us understand the roles, institutions, and practices Augustine had in mind when he used the terms *servus*, *servitus*, *dominus*, *dominatus*, and their cognates. Let us call the concepts these terms refer to the "contested concepts." Because this book addresses the topics of slavery to humans and slavery to God, I must analyze how the contested concepts function in both the human and divine cases. I do so in chapters 1 and 5, respectively.

There is a sense in which the decisions about how to translate the contested concepts might seem immaterial. What matters are the facts and commitments signaled by the contested concepts, not the English words we use to represent them. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. Accordingly, I devote considerable attention to elucidating the ways the contested concepts functioned in Augustine's life and work.

Still, the terms slave, master, slavery, and mastery carry significant rhetorical force. Perhaps you worry that the use of such stark terms, given their rhetorical force, requires significant justification to be warranted.

If so, I share your concern. I use the starker terms precisely because they are the best English representations of the contested concepts. By the end of chapter 1, I hope to have convinced you that this is true for the interhuman relationships and roles that Augustine marked using the terms *servus*, *dominus*, and cognates. By the end of chapter 5, I hope to have convinced you that the same is true for the divine-human relationship and its attendant roles. I will use those starker English terms throughout the book, recognizing that readers skeptical of this translation decision will have to wait to see the full argument in its favor.

A fifth minimization strategy is to claim that Augustine thought that chattel slavery was basically unimportant, an evil contingency of earthly life with no ultimate significance.⁷ However, once one begins looking for slavery and mastery in Augustine's writings, one finds that they are both ubiquitous and often theologically important. As such, this strategy, too, falls flat.

Rather than minimization, we need an account of the role of slavery in Augustine's thought that takes its significance seriously. Doing so requires attending to three topics. First, we must understand what Augustine

7. Dyson 2011, 110; Bretherton 2015, 106.

believed the purpose of chattel slavery to be, and why. By “why,” I mean the arguments he gave and the commitments—philosophical, theological, and otherwise—he explicitly took himself to be accountable to. But I also mean the commitments he didn’t make explicit to which he was nevertheless accountable.

A central theme of this book is that many of Augustine’s commitments married Christian theology to Roman philosophy. Though the influence of Roman philosophy on Augustine’s thinking has sometimes been underappreciated, it should not be surprising. Augustine was born in Roman North Africa. He thought and spoke in Latin. He received a classical Roman education, especially in Cicero, Terence, Sallust, and Virgil.⁸ He took to this education, eventually becoming a professor of rhetoric in Milan, the imperial seat of Rome’s western half.

His mother, Monica, was a Christian; his father, Patricius, was not. In his twenties, he was introduced to Manichaeism, to which he soon converted, much to Monica’s chagrin: Manichaeism was Christianity’s main religious rival in fourth-century Rome. He remained a Manichaean for nine years before converting to Christianity, and he soon embarked on a rapid ascent through the Catholic hierarchy. By age thirty-six he was a priest. Within four years, bishop.

Augustine’s was the Christianity of a convert: passionate, fierce, often polemical. He typically distanced himself from his Roman identity. He sometimes lamented his Roman education and wished and worked for the Christian Scriptures to take root in his heart as deeply as had the Roman ideas of his youth. He “[spoke] of Rome as an outsider,” distinguishing the Roman Empire he judged wicked from the Christian Church he thought holy.⁹

Ironically, this only confirms how Roman Augustine was. Romans loved criticizing Rome. And even when positioning himself as an outsider to Rome, Augustine invoked, interpreted, redefined, and rejected the assumptions, concepts, inferences, and arguments of his Roman predecessors.

One such concept was slavery, which Augustine wrote about often. “Slave” and its cognates are mentioned over two hundred times across his magnum opus, *City of God*. Of course, mere mentions are only a crude measure of importance. However, the concept of slavery also plays a central role in his work. For example, he characterized humanity’s relationships both to God and to sin as “slavery.” For reasons that you might

8. Hagendahl 1967, 692; O’Donnell 1980, 164.

9. Markus 1988, 57. See also Augustine, *conf.* 1; Hammer 2014, 382.

imagine, a single term rarely describes both relationships in Augustine's thought. Slavery does.

Little of the vast scholarship on Augustine attends to how he thought about slavery.¹⁰ In attempting to map Augustine's various commitments that gave shape to his view of slavery, I am charting somewhat new waters. The literature on Christianity and slavery tends to focus on Early Christian and Atlantic slavery.¹¹ Far less work has been done on slavery in late antique and medieval Christianity. Augustine's position as a link between antiquity and the Middle Ages makes understanding his account crucial to the broader history of slavery. I will argue that his writings on slavery especially reflect the influence of two philosophers Augustine first encountered in his classical Roman education, Cicero and Seneca, and a Christian theologian he discovered as an adult, Lactantius.

I will not assess Augustine's culpability for his views on slavery. I pass over this question not to minimize slavery's importance or how wrong Augustine's views were but because evaluating culpability would take us too far afield from the main aims of this project. Augustine did not know that slavery was wrong. In this respect, he was morally ignorant.

This does not mean that Augustine could not have known better. He could have. I will argue that at least one similarly situated Christian, Lactantius, realized that slavery was wrong. He articulated this view in *Divine Institutes*. Augustine read the *Divine Institutes* and often referred to it in his writings.

However, making all-things-considered judgments about the culpability of the morally ignorant is fraught.¹² For my purposes, it suffices to say that Augustine is worth engaging on the question of slavery because he was, is, and will continue to be one of the most influential figures in the history of ideas, because his views on slavery were horribly wrong, and because these views were important for the rest of his thought.

The second topic to consider is Augustine's conception of slavery to God and how he thought it related to chattel slavery. Many theists believe that some or all humans are slaves of some deity. This imagery occurs

10. Until recently, the main studies of Augustine on slavery in English were Mary 1954; Corcoran 1985; Garnsey 1996, 206–19. Happily, this trend is changing. See, e.g., Chambers 2013; Ramelli 2016; Elm 2017; Elia 2018, 2021, and 2024; Benjamins 2021; Botha 2022; Kahlos 2022.

11. The following literature is especially instructive. On slavery in the New Testament and Early Christianity, see Martin 1990; Barclay 1991; Combes 1998; Harris 2001; Glancy 2002; Goldenberg 2003; Harrill 2006. On Christianity and slavery in the Americas, see Hanke 1959 and 1974; Goetz 2012; Cameron 2014; Gerbner 2018.

12. See, e.g., Rosen 2003; Harman 2011.

throughout the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, which Augustine considered authoritative. Different theists also draw different inferences about the permissibility of chattel slavery from the idea that people might be slaves of a deity. My second task is to clarify this collection of issues in Augustine's thought.

Finally, taking Augustine's views on slavery seriously also requires us to examine how his understanding of slavery connects to his broader thought. The third task of this project is to explicate some of these connections, focusing on his ethics and politics.

In the Roman imagination, the category of slave marked the boundaries of citizenship; slavery was defined against citizenship such that to be a slave was not to be a citizen and vice versa.¹³ Because they were not citizens, slaves lacked access to fundamental legal rights.¹⁴ They were under masters' rule and excluded from the instruments of self-rule available to citizens. For most Romans, therefore, slavery, law, citizenship, and rule were entangled concepts. One could have a good understanding of what a city was like if one understood how it considered slavery, what its laws were, in virtue of what its citizens were bound together, and its norms surrounding rule and authority. For this reason, my analysis of Augustine's politics focuses on these concepts. Since Augustine was a Roman, we should expect slavery to be embedded in his ethical and political thought.

This, I will argue, is precisely what we find. We can adapt W.V.O. Quine's helpful image of the web of beliefs to explain this idea.¹⁵ Think of all of Augustine's commitments, when taken together, as a web. As in a web, some commitments are nearer to the center, and others are on the periphery. One can change a commitment at the periphery without disturbing much of the rest of the web. But one cannot do the same for commitments nearer to the center.

I claim that Augustine's beliefs about slavery were much closer to the center of his web than has previously been thought. Attending to Augustine's account of slavery helps clarify what he meant in designating all humans as slaves of God; why he thought that the best temporal laws should be concerned with their observers' virtue and religion; why he believed that unaccountable deities are not worthy of worship; how he complicated the republican opposition of slavery and citizenship; and why he thought that Christianity is necessary for justice and freedom. In other

13. Gaius, *inst.* 1.7.48–52; Justinian, *dig.* 1.6.1.

14. Bradley 1988.

15. Quine 1951.

words, Augustine's account of slavery helps us understand his theories of law, rule, and citizenship.

It is impossible to cleave the discussion of slavery from Augustine's broader theology. One oft-discussed theological topic closely tied to the question of chattel slavery is the doctrine of providence: it is natural to think that chattel slavery could not be so widespread if God did not providentially ordain it, and natural to ask why, if God ordains it, chattel slavery should be abolished. However, over the course of this book, we will see that many other theological topics are implicated in Augustine's account of chattel slavery, including his doctrines of God, creation, the fall, the Incarnation, nature, and grace, as well as his hermeneutics. Fully addressing the relationship between slavery and any one of these topics could occupy its own book. I will limit my discussions of Augustine's theology to the direct ways the theological topics bear on the ethical and political questions I focus on.

You may have noticed that I use the word "account" and not "defense" to describe what Augustine had to say about slavery. It does not make sense to speak of Augustine's defense of slavery. Defense presumes attack, and Augustine certainly did not perceive slavery as under attack. Instead, his concern was slavery's uses and abuses. He wanted his readers and listeners to use slavery well and offered an account of how to do so.

1. Augustine among the Romans

I have made and will continue to make claims about Augustine's commitments in this book. Since my primary aim is to offer a historically sensitive interpretation of Augustine in his context, most of these claims articulate commitments he could have recognized as his own. However, Augustine did not always develop the implications of his commitments. A secondary aim of this project is to bring some of those implications to the surface. This allows us to see, even where Augustine did not, what his commitments entail. Working out these entailments prepares us to evaluate what was at stake for Augustinians throughout history, and what is at stake for present-day Augustinians, in taking on this or that commitment. I have tried to be clear about when I am pursuing which sort of analysis.

Throughout this book I will sometimes refer to "Augustinians." Who are they? Any attempt to answer this question precisely, specifically, and fairly would require its own book. However, Quine's image of the web of beliefs that I mentioned above can help us construct a formal definition. An Augustinian is anyone who takes enough of Augustine's core

commitments as her own core commitments. Political Augustinians take enough of Augustine's core political commitments as their own core political commitments.

This definition formally captures what people mean by calling themselves or others Augustinians. Consider, for example, Charles Mathewes's claim that Reinhold Niebuhr is an Augustinian because he emphasized two ideas: first, that humans seek the good even in sinning; second, that the ubiquity of sinfulness renders all of our attempts to seek the good tragic.¹⁶ Mathewes is claiming that these two ideas were core commitments for Niebuhr. If he weren't, it wouldn't make sense for him to use these ideas as evidence for the claim that *Niebuhr* was an Augustinian. He is also claiming that they were core commitments for Augustine. If not, they would not serve as good evidence that Niebuhr was an *Augustinian*.

For my purposes, this formal account will suffice. I hope to leave the question of whether any particular person is an Augustinian open: contestable and contextual. I certainly have no interest in policing Augustinianism's boundaries. However, given the connections I explicate between slavery and religion, law, rule, and citizenship in Augustine's thought, my work suggests places where some Augustinians may wish to reconsider or revise some of their endorsements of Augustine's commitments.

Any attempt to reconstruct a historical figure's commitments requires contextualization. Contextualization focuses one's historical study. For any sufficiently complex thinker, there are many contextual lenses we could use to interpret him or her.¹⁷ In the case of Augustine, for example, we could study his moral and political thought by focusing on Christian Neoplatonism, or Rome's Christianization, or late antique ecclesiological disputes.

My project situates Augustine in the intellectual landscape shaped by some of the predominant figures in Roman moral and political thought. In other words, my primary lens is Augustine's Roman intellectual context. This is not to denigrate other lenses. All I mean is that we can learn something new and crucial about Augustine by attending to his Roman predecessors. Among Augustine's non-Christian predecessors, I pay special attention to Cicero. However, Seneca and Varro also play significant roles in my account.

Perhaps the most important figure in this book aside from Augustine is Lactantius (c. 250–c. 325). The choice to focus on Lactantius may be

16. Mathewes 2001, 107–48.

17. Brandom 2002, 99; Mercer 2019.

surprising. He is not nearly as well-known as Cicero and Seneca. Accordingly, Appendix B provides a brief timeline of Lactantius's (as well as Augustine's) life and major works.

Lactantius commands far less scholarly attention than other figures this book treats, and when he is mentioned, his theology tends to receive more attention than his political thought.¹⁸ It is noteworthy, however, that more than many early Christians, Lactantius relied heavily on Roman literature, history, and philosophy for his arguments and comparatively little on the Bible or Christian theology. Perhaps for this reason, Jerome lamented, "Would that Lactantius had been as good at affirming our beliefs as he was at demolishing those of others."¹⁹

Regardless of whether Jerome's characterization was fair, recent scholarship has begun to show that Lactantius both was an important political thinker in his own right and also is an instructive foil for Augustine.²⁰ Like Augustine, Lactantius was a North African convert to Christianity, a keen student of classical Roman literature, and a professor of rhetoric at an important imperial post. Aside from their biographical similarities, they shared many important theological, philosophical, and political commitments. Lactantius's *Divine Institutes* was the most wide-ranging Christian treatise against Roman ideology and society before *City of God*. Augustine was clearly influenced by it and in many ways patterned *City of God* after it.

Despite their similarities, Augustine and Lactantius differed on several crucial questions. Most importantly for this book, they differed on slavery's permissibility. Lactantius, therefore, demonstrates the contingencies of Augustine's coordination of his Roman and Christian commitments. He was similarly situated to Augustine and held many of the same commitments. But, unlike Augustine, Lactantius identified slavery as wrong.

I mentioned that this book reads Augustine in light of earlier Roman thinkers. It is easiest to trace the influence of these earlier thinkers on Augustine in cases where he referred to them explicitly. He did so most often in *City of God*: before writing it, Augustine underwent a period of careful study of earlier Roman literature, history, and philosophy.²¹ There he explicitly

18. Roots 1987, 466.

19. Jerome, *ep.* 58.10. On Lactantius's method, see DePalma Digeser 2000, 9, 31–32, and 84–90; Gibson 2008, 8–10; Kendeffy 2015. Scholars disagree about the fairness of Jerome's claim. Garnsey 2002 seems to largely accept it. Nicholson 2004; Schott 2008; Thomas 2011; and Coleman 2017 argue that Lactantius avoided citing Christian Scriptures not from ignorance, but to not give his non-Christian opponents a reason to discredit him.

20. DePalma Digeser 1998, 2000, 2003, 2006, 2016; Bochet 1998; Garnsey 2002; Nicholson 2004; Bowlin 2006; Gassman 2020; Corke-Webster 2022.

21. Hagedahl 1967, 572.

engaged with Cicero on justice, Seneca on fate, and Varro and Lactantius on religion. Lactantius's writings are also replete with references to these earlier Roman thinkers. Appendix C provides an overview of the most important writings of Cicero, Seneca, and Varro that Lactantius and Augustine had read, when they first read them, and how close their readings seem to have been.

However, Augustine did not always explicitly refer to those who had shaped his intellectual landscape. An example may help explain why. Most contemporary Anglophone classrooms' introductions to moral philosophy present a few main options for moral reasoning: deontology, utilitarianism, and, sometimes, virtue ethics. Deontology is often associated with Immanuel Kant, utilitarianism with Jeremy Bentham or John Stuart Mill, virtue ethics with Aristotle. In this respect, Kantian deontology, Benthamite/Millian utilitarianism, and Aristotelian virtue ethics are default options in modern moral reasoning. As one progresses in moral philosophy, one begins to question the familiar distinctions among the schools of thought, the easy assignment of figures to schools, and the idea that these approaches exhaust the possibilities for moral reasoning. Still, someone with an introductory background in modern moral philosophy can say something about the schools, why they are thought to be distinct, and how each figure is meant to represent a school. She can rehearse some of the most significant arguments for and against each position. And she can trade in ideas such as treating people as ends and not merely means, or the greatest good for the greatest number, or eudaimonia, even without explicitly referring to Kant, Bentham, Mill, or Aristotle.

Something similar was true for well-educated fourth- and fifth-century Romans, including Augustine. Most of them imbibed Cicero, Virgil, Sallust, and Terence in their schooling. The Christian intelligentsia was also familiar with themes and arguments in Tertullian, Eusebius, Cyprian, and Lactantius, and found much to endorse in Seneca. Augustine thus encountered Senecan ideas not simply directly by reading Seneca, but also indirectly, by reading other Christians.

We can therefore discern the influence of these figures even when Augustine did not mention them. To do so, however, we cannot simply work backward from his explicit references. We must also work forward from how his predecessors considered similar topics.

For each topic, I begin by providing a background of some of the Roman discourses that would have been important for Augustine. No description of this background can reasonably aspire to comprehensiveness. But focusing on some of the most salient texts and figures can provide for us a

better understanding of the backdrop against which Augustine developed his own views. We will be able to notice when Augustine repurposes a Senecan argument, refuses a Ciceronian dichotomy, misinterprets a Varronian analysis, or supplements a Lactantian theory.

Let me say something about repurposing. Though often highly critical of other philosophers (especially non-Christian Romans), Augustine sought to recruit what he took to be their best insights for his own agenda. *Christian Teaching* provides a striking analogy for his methodology, drawn from the Hebrew Bible. The book of Exodus tells the story of the Israelites leaving enslavement in Egypt. In Exodus 12:35–36, the Israelites take gold and silver from the Egyptians as they leave. Though the Egyptians' gold and silver had often been put to profane uses, the Israelites used these riches for a holier purpose. Christian thinkers, Augustine thought, should treat non-Christian philosophers analogously:

If by chance those who are called philosophers have said what is true and fitting with our faith (most of all, the Platonists), not only are we not to fear this, but we ought to reclaim it from its unjust owners for our own use.²²

In repurposing, Augustine borrowed from this philosopher or school and that philosopher or school, usually without much anxiety about whether the pieces he was cobbling together were compatible with each other on their own terms. When repurposing, his primary goal was to show how the best thinkers, properly understood, in their own way pointed to Christianity. We will encounter several places where Augustine repurposed earlier thinkers to make points that they would have rejected.

Some thinkers are relevant only for some topics. For instance, Varro's account of traditional Roman religion was crucial for Augustine. He believed Varro to be traditional Roman religion's best defender. He also thought that despite Varro's best efforts, Varro had laid bare Roman religion's deepest problems.²³ Thus, on the question of religion, Augustine relied heavily on Varro (even while misreading him). Varro accordingly plays an important role in the discussion of religion in chapter 4. Since Augustine did not engage Varro on slavery, citizenship, rule, or law, Varro does not figure elsewhere. By contrast, Augustine learned (sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly) from Cicero on slavery, law, religion, rule,

22. Augustine, *doct. Christ.* 2.40: "Philosophi autem qui vocantur, si qua forte vera et fidei nostrae accomodata dixerunt, maxime Platonici, non solum formidanda non sunt, sed ab eis etiam tamquam ab iniustis possessoribus in usum nostrum vindicanda."

23. Augustine, *civ. Dei* 18.40.

and citizenship. Cicero will therefore be with us throughout the whole book.

The proof of this approach must be in the pudding. Scholars in religious studies, philosophy, and theology have written vastly on Augustine's Greek and Christian sources but seldom appreciated his Roman debts.²⁴ I hope to convince you that attending to Augustine's Roman predecessors helps us understand him better. If successful, my argument suggests that Augustine studies can benefit greatly from more attention to the Roman Augustine.²⁵

2. *Four Key Terms*

A few concepts recur throughout this book. Four are especially important, and as such merit discussion up front: virtue, semblances, polysemy, and dual character. Throughout the book I will also refer to other concepts that were important for at least some of the thinkers we will encounter. When such a concept comes up, I will briefly discuss its meaning in the immediately relevant context. To supplement this, Appendix A provides expanded discussions of some of these concepts.

2.1 | VIRTUE

The Roman thinkers I discuss did not share a single definition of virtue. They certainly did not agree on which traits are virtues. But for our purposes, a very general description will suffice. Each believed that virtues are excellences of character. As excellent, virtues are, everything else held equal, desirable. A person is better off for being just, wise, or merciful. As a matter of character, virtues must be stable across a wide variety of situations. Trials test whether someone has some virtue. Someone who tells the truth only when doing so costs little lacks the virtue of honesty. Honest people tell the truth even at significant cost.

24. On Augustine the Platonist/Neo-Platonist, see, e.g., Burnaby 1938, Wetzel 1992, Cary 2000 and 2008, and Stewart-Kroeker 2017. On Augustine on Paul, see, e.g., Fredrikson 1986 and 1988, Cary 2000 and 2008. On Augustine and Ambrose, see, e.g., Brown 1967 and 1972, Rousseau 1977, and Garnsey 1996. In philosophy, scholarship that engages with Augustine's Roman debts includes: Rist 1994 and Brittain 2011 and 2012 (Cicero); and Byers 2003, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, and 2016 (Seneca). In theology: Dodaro 2004 (Cicero); Webb 2013 and 2016 (Livy); and Burns 1999, von Heyking 2001, and Harding 2008 (Sallust).

25. The approach I am advocating for is more common in classics and the history of political thought than in theology, religious studies, or philosophy. See, e.g., Garnsey 1996, Hammer 2014, Ogle 2019 and 2020, and Keys 2022.

I will sometimes treat virtues as occupying a mean between an excess and a deficiency. Courage, for example, is a mean between cowardice and foolhardiness. Courageous people persist in activities worth doing in the face of fear. Cowardice is a deficiency related to courage; the coward is overcome by fear. Foolhardiness is an excess related to courage; the foolhardy person fears not what he should. The excess-mean-deficiency framework goes back to Aristotle.²⁶ Though not all our thinkers explicitly endorsed this framework, it can often help us understand the distinctions they were making.

2.2 | SEMBLANCES

Many virtues often have lookalikes, semblances. It is easy to mistake semblances for the real thing. Imagine someone who never protests a friend's bad behavior. He might seem to have the virtue of tolerance. Tolerance patiently endures objectionable differences.²⁷ But he could simply be pusillanimous, too timid to object to his friend's behavior. If so, he does not patiently endure objectionable difference. He doesn't have the virtue of tolerance after all.

Throughout history, thinkers have often exploited the ambiguities between virtues and their semblances to recast what others have called virtue as vice and what others have called vice as virtue. This was one of Augustine's favorite rhetorical moves. For instance, many Romans praised great men who desired glory as having the virtue of magnanimity.²⁸ Augustine disagreed, arguing that all they had was a vicious semblance: pride.²⁹

2.3 | POLYSEMY

A word is polysemic when it picks out multiple, related meanings. For instance, "water" is polysemic. In the fact, "at 611.657 Pa and 273.16 K, water can coexist as solid, liquid, and gas," "water" means pure H₂O. In the request, "Please fetch me some water to boil for tea," it means liquid H₂O with limited admixture. In the title of the Elton John/Bernie Taupin song, "Madman across the Water," it means a body of water, specifically a lake or sea. Though not identical in meaning, these three senses of water

26. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1106a26–b28.

27. Bowlin 2016, 130.

28. Many, not all. As Long 2006 argues, one project in Cicero's *de officiis* is to critically reevaluate glory.

29. Keys 2022.

share some conceptual content. It may be helpful to distinguish polysemes from homonyms. Homonyms are distinct words with the same spelling but unrelated meanings (e.g., “bank” can name a place that holds money or the edge of a river or lake). Polysemes share conceptual overlap, as in our case of water.

Many of the crucial terms in this book are polysemic. Arguably all the main terms I treat—slavery, law, citizenship, rule, and religion—are. When analyzing how a term functions in a text or tradition, we must remember that it need not have precisely the same meaning in all contexts. Because polysemic terms have a range of closely connected meanings, they are often sites for disagreement between thinkers.

2.4 | DUAL-CHARACTER CONCEPTS

Some polysemic terms are associated with dual-character concepts. A dual-character concept involves concrete characteristics and abstract values.³⁰ Consider the concept of a philosopher. Someone who earns a living writing and teaching philosophy is in one sense a philosopher. Imagine, however, that he doesn’t think critically or carefully examine or question any part of his world. In this case, we might deny that he is a *true* philosopher. This is what it means to say that “philosopher” has a dual character: someone can be a philosopher without being a true philosopher.

Augustine often invoked dual-character concepts when polemicizing against Roman political and moral thought. Romans, he thought, had virtue but not true virtue. They promised freedom, but only Christianity could secure true freedom. The concepts whose dual characters are most important to my analysis are religion, the focus of chapters 3 and 4, and justice, discussed in chapter 8.

3. *Outline*

This book has three parts, corresponding to the three tasks I suggested are important for those hoping to take Augustine’s views on slavery seriously: first, to explain Augustine’s account of chattel slavery; second, to clarify the connection between chattel slavery and slavery to God; third, to explore the role of slavery in Augustine’s broader thought.

30. Knobe, Prasada, and Newman 2013. My understanding of dual-character concepts is indebted to Stout 2017, which develops this with respect to ancient uses of *religio*. See also Leslie 2015 and Reuter 2018.

Part 1, “Slaves of Men,” takes up the first task. Chapter 1, “Slavery as Augustine Knew It,” provides an overview of what Augustine had in mind when invoking and analyzing the institution of chattel slavery. Since he never described the institution of *servitus* in much detail, we must reconstruct this picture from the late antique North African historical and legal record. Doing so reveals that *servi* were property of *domini*, dominated, liable to be bought and sold, and subject to grave violence without means of holding their *domini* accountable. I therefore translate *servitus* as slavery, *servi* as slaves, and *domini* as masters, when referring to this institution and the social roles that constituted it. Chapter 1 also introduces three commitments central to Augustine’s account of chattel slavery: first, that chattel slavery can benefit slaves; second, that chattel slavery is not inherently morally bad or wrong; third, that all humans are slaves of God.

Chapter 2, “Four Romans on Slavery,” argues that Augustine held that God ordains chattel slavery as an institution whereby masters should help their slaves become Christians. It grounds this in the three commitments introduced in chapter 1, tracing Augustine’s debts with respect to them back to Cicero, Seneca, and Lactantius.

A central idea introduced in Part 1 is Augustine’s commitment that God has the authority to punish humans by enslaving them because all humans are slaves of God. I call the idea that all humans are slaves of God “universal slavery.” Part 2, “Slaves of God,” takes on the second task, examining the idea of universal slavery in more detail. Doing so helps us to better understand the connection between chattel slavery and slavery to God.

Chapters 3 and 4 argue that universal slavery follows from the theory of religion that Augustine endorsed. To do so, I trace the development of this theory from its roots in Cicero. Chapter 3, “Religions False, True, and Otherwise,” presents Cicero’s understanding of religion as a virtue. It then demonstrates how Lactantius took up parts of Cicero’s conception and joined them to a Christian story about the origin and purpose of religious worship. The result was a theory of religion: an analytical tool that Lactantius used to identify the social practice of deity-worship as religion, assign each person and each polity a religion, and judge all religions as true or false.

Chapter 4, “Inescapable Slavery,” contends that Augustine’s endorsement of Lactantius’s theory of religion helps us make sense of his criticisms of Varro. This theory also formed the basis for Augustine’s belief that slavery to God is universal and eternal. Those who worship God, he believed, are faithful slaves. All others are fugitives. But none can avoid being a slave of God. Slavery to God is inescapable.

Chapter 5, “God’s Mastery,” considers what Augustine meant in calling humans slaves of God. I argue that for Augustine, this relationship involves unaccountable rule (albeit for the sake of human benefit). It is also marked by the threat and exercise of violent coercion. It therefore merits the name “slavery.” Accordingly, humans are, for Augustine, God’s slaves, not merely His servants. God is master, not simply Lord. This chapter also explores the relationship between slavery to God and two other types of divine-human relationship: friendship and sonship.

Part 3, “Slavery and Liberty,” takes up the third task: exploring the role of slavery in Augustine’s broader ethics and politics. I focus on his accounts of law, rule, and citizenship. Chapter 6, “Laws of Unrighteous Gods,” discusses law’s relationship to virtue, religion, and liberty. I argue that Augustine’s defense of religious coercion is structurally analogous to his account of chattel slavery. For this reason, the two topics are mutually informative. I use Augustine’s account of religious coercion to fill in several lacunae in his account of slavery.

Chapter 7, “Slave-Citizens,” seeks to situate Augustine in the republican political tradition. It considers the implications of Augustine’s equating faithful slavery to God and true citizenship in the city of God. This commitment, I argue, sets Augustine against the republican idea that slavery and citizenship are mutually exclusive. However, this chapter also argues that though Augustine made an exception for God’s rule over humans, in general he agreed with the republicans that rulers ought to be accountable to the ruled. Augustine did not accept that domination is never authoritative; he accepted that God dominates humans but rules authoritatively. However, he accepted that authoritative rule *typically* requires domination; it does so for all interhuman relationships.

Chapter 8, “How to Be a Republic,” reconsiders why Augustine believed that Cicero’s account of justice entailed that Rome never had justice and was thus never a republic. It argues that Augustine took Cicero to have highlighted a tension between ethics and politics that Rome could not adequately resolve. This tension was laid bare in Cicero’s endorsement of enslaving foreigners (at least as Augustine read him). Augustine believed that Rome’s lust for mastery proved it to have failed to adequately coordinate ethics and politics. Christianity’s account of universal slavery to God, Augustine thought, resolves this tension.

Augustine’s importance in the history of ideas makes it worth our while to understand him. We cannot do so if we gloss over his views on slavery—abhorrent though they are. I hope to convince you that his accounts of divine and chattel slavery are interesting in their own right, and that

keeping them in view will help us learn a great deal about how he understood law, rule, and citizenship.

Our world is not Augustine's, but it is one he did a great deal to shape. His views on slavery and the connections between these views and his broader political thought have influenced us. Though not the main focus of this book, the legacies of Augustine's commitments are striking. At the end of each part, I reflect briefly on similarities between Augustine's thought and the discussions surrounding chattel slavery in the Atlantic context.³¹

Explicating Augustine's account of slavery and its role in his broader ethics and politics prepares us to recognize how our intellectual world has been and continues to be formed by Augustinian ideas; reject implausible and unjust parts of his account; retrieve any wisdom or moral insight it offers; reinterpret these goods to make them intelligible to and useful for us, given our own commitments; and reimagine possibilities beyond the ones Augustine himself knew.

The more of Augustine's commitments one endorses, the more challenging this engagement will be. Those who share many of Augustine's commitments—certain Augustinians—have an especially pressing burden to identify which commitments they wish to preserve and to reconstruct them, disentangled from Augustine's views on slavery. And for those who endorse few—even none—of Augustine's commitments, successful engagement still demands understanding. After all, even if one's chosen method of engagement is wholesale rejection, any meaningful rejection of a commitment requires first understanding it.

31. For interesting and related work, see Gustafson 2014 and Malamud 2017.

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