

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01794-8 - Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis

Sarah Catherine Byers

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

Perception and the Language of the Mind

There is a scene at the heart of Augustine's *Confessions* that has had great influence on Western culture¹ and that is linked to other important works in his corpus by its themes: perception, motivation, affectivity, moral conflict, and conversion. Yet, despite the widespread fame of this "garden scene" at the climax of book eight, there is as yet no consensus about what the story purports to relate. Instead we find disagreement, vagueness, or silence about Augustine's meaning in paragraphs twenty-six and twenty-seven, where Augustine says, for example:²

Vain trifles and the trivialities of the empty-headed, my old loves, held me back. They tugged at the garment of my flesh and whispered: 'Are you getting rid of us?' And 'from this moment we shall never be with you again, not for ever and ever.' And 'from this moment this and that are forbidden to you for ever and ever.' ... What filth, what disgraceful things they were suggesting! ... I hesitated to detach myself, to be rid of them, to make the leap to where I was being called while the overwhelming force of habit was saying to me, 'Do you think you can live without them?' ... from that direction where I had set my face and towards which I was afraid to move, the chaste dignity of continence was appearing, serene and cheerful without licentiousness, enticing me honorably to come and not to hesitate.... as if to say: 'Are you incapable of doing what these men and women have done? ... Make the leap without anxiety.'

Some modern language translations also convey a sense of discomfort with this part of the *Confessions* by departing from Augustine's words or adding an interpretative heading to the text. Thus the question remains an open one: What exactly does Augustine intend to represent when he says his "old loves" were "whispering at him," and "suggesting" vile acts to him, but that alternately

¹ For some documentation of its influence, see e.g., Courcelle (1965), Schnaubelt and van Fleteren (1999).

² The full text of these paragraphs is printed in Appendix I. Trans. Chadwick (1992) adapted. All subsequent quotations of *conf.* are from this trans. unless otherwise noted.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01794-8 - Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis

Sarah Catherine Byers

Excerpt

[More information](#)

“the dignity of continence was appearing” to him, “cheerful,” and “honorably enticing,” “as if speaking” and “exhorting” him to come?

The puzzlement here is important because it is symptomatic of a more general uncertainty among historians of philosophy and textual commentators about central themes in Augustine’s moral psychology. It is clear enough from the context that this passage pertains to motivation: it describes an agent’s attraction to two contradictory types of behavior (continent and incontinent). It is no surprise, then, that topics conceptually dependent upon a theory of motivation – emotions, weakness of will, and moral development – remain contested or under-studied in the literature on Augustine. It is because we lack a precise understanding of the theory of motivation operative in *Confessions* book eight that other famous passages such as *City of God* books nine and fourteen, which pertain to emotions and will, and *Replies to Simplicianus* book one, which pertains to moral development, are generally only partially understood, even by scholars.

At the same time, conditions are ripe for a deep and thorough account of the relations between these topics in Augustine. The last few decades have seen a renewed interest in philosophical psychology and “virtue ethics,” yet the way that Augustine’s psychology supports his virtue ethics remains largely unexplored.

Using *Confessions* 8.11.26–27 as a touchstone and employing a new method, we shall consider a range of texts from throughout Augustine’s corpus and from figures in antiquity who influenced him, in order to arrive at a more precise understanding of his motivational theory. That in turn will open the door to the related themes of affectivity and moral development.

I. I. OUR PRESENT OPTIONS FOR *CONFESSIONS* 8.11.26–27

Before seeking out a fresh interpretation through which to approach this set of topics in Augustine, we should briefly consider why the available exegesis on *Confessions* 8.11.26–27 is not entirely adequate. Often this passage is simply summarized or passed over in the commentaries;³ but when interpretative stands are taken, they can range from the odd to the informative.

According to one way of looking at paragraph twenty-seven, it describes a vision, “the apparition of a womanly figure, the Lady Continence,” which is no “mere poetic personification.”⁴ This suggests that Augustine saw a lady

³ E.g., it is passed over in Kotzé (2004) 178–81, Mara (1985) 71–87.

⁴ O’Connell (1996) 224, 242–244; (1994) 137. As for what it is that is appearing, O’Connell holds (not consistently) that continence means a state of soul opposed to “any kind of dispersion” in temporal affairs rather than the virtue of chastity in particular ([1996] 224, 242, 247–249, but see 228; [1994] 47). He also claims that Augustine was seeing the “feminine face of God,” “the eternal Christ,” the Word, the paradigm of virtue, appearing as a “she” ([1996] 247, 243, 248, 250; [1994] 47, 137).

Continence cannot be the face or Word of God because continence herself refers to God in the third person. Nor does *continentia* refer to merely a generic state of recollection. It refers

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01794-8 - Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis

Sarah Catherine Byers

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1.1 Our Present Options for Confessions 8.11.26–27

3

standing, or perhaps hovering in the air, external to himself. A softened version of the same interpretation would say that Augustine had a representation of such a woman in his imagination. Influential translations deviating from or adding to Augustine's actual words also lend themselves to this kind of interpretation.⁵

A rather different interpretation has been offered by those who point out similarities between *Confessions* 8.11.26–27 and the use of personification in other works of late antique literature. Courcelle contributed much in this vein, and O'Donnell added to Courcelle's list.⁶ More recent treatments have focused on similarities to Athanasius' *Life of Antony the Egyptian Monk*⁷ and the Manichean *Thesaurus*.⁸ According to this way of looking at the text,

primarily to sexual continence, as is clear not only from the *Confessions* themselves (see the notes in Ch. 2.4), but also from the numerous similarities between paragraph twenty-seven and Augustine's usage and analysis of the term *continentia* in *virg.* and *cont.* In *virg.*, written around the time that the *conf.* was finished (401), *continentia* is a synonym for *virginitas* thirty-two times; cf. the definitions of *continentia* in *cont.* 1.1, 2.5, 3.9. Augustine does hold that there is an *analogy* between promiscuity and generalized dissipation in worldly affairs, but the primary sense of the word *continentia*, on which the extended sense is based, is sexual continence; and it is clear that he is using the primary sense in *Confessions* eight. This has been recognized historically and in some recent prominent commentaries: Carey (2008b) 173, O'Donnell (1992) commentary on "membra tua" in 8.11.27, Saarinen (1994) 22, Quinn (2002) 471 n. 27. Therefore, other suggestions (e.g., Starnes [1990] 231) are also misleading.

⁵ Chadwick's Oxford translation is a good example. When Augustine says, "aperiebatur ... casta dignitas continentiae," Chadwick says, "there was appearing the chaste and dignified Lady Continence." We search in vain for this *domina*, which Chadwick has made the subject of the sentence, in the Latin original. Although there is some personification a few lines later in the text when continence is said to be smiling and as if speaking, this early introduction and overstatement of it departs from the text. (Even if Augustine is here using the figure of metonymy with *dignitas aperiebatur*, that device is typically employed for a reason, and the translation obscures Augustine's emphasis on *dignitas* by making it an adjective rather than the subject of the sentence.) The translation of the equally prestigious BA 14 ([1962] 63) renders this sentence literally, but adds a heading to paragraph twenty-seven, which reads, "Discours de la Continence." To the uncritical reader, this colors the passage to suggest that Augustine perceived an image of Continence delivering an oration. Boulding's more recent English translation says, "there appeared the chaste, dignified figure of Continence" (1997), 205. This again seems to have Augustine seeing a sensible object or an image of one, given that the term "figure" (*figura*), which does not in fact appear in this passage, refers to the shape of a sensible object when Augustine does use it.

⁶ Courcelle notes that Persius *Satire* V, Tertullian *De Monogamia* 8, and the author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* 3.8.4 personify virtues and vices, including *continentia* ([1950] 192 n. 2–3; [1963] 112–117); O'Donnell (1992) cites Courcelle in his commentary on 8.11.27 and adds that Ambrose offers a faint implication of a personification of continence at *de Isaac vel anima* 8.79. We could add Prudentius to the list: *Psychomachia* ll. 40–98.

⁷ So Wills (2004) 122.

⁸ So Stock (1996) 106: In the Manichean myth (quoted in Augustine, *nat. b.* 44), God the Father, also described as the powers of light, is said to be transformed into the likeness of many beautiful, holy maidens who appear to the males of the race of darkness. In the ensuing liaison, bits of the divine substance, which had been trapped inside the males, passes from them to rejoin the Father or the powers of light.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01794-8 - Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis

Sarah Catherine Byers

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Augustine's description is modeled on these earlier devotional or literary texts, and once we recognize that, it can seem to follow that his talk of "appearances" and "speaking" is a literary ornament lacking philosophical significance or historical accuracy.⁹

How shall we evaluate these interpretative lines?

An external apparition would clearly be untenable, because Augustine himself says that the "appearance" of continence and of the "old loves" was "nothing other than a controversy of myself with myself," taking place within his own heart (*in corde meo*).¹⁰ Moreover, because he takes pains to indicate that there were not auditory sense images (he uses a counterfactual subjunctive: "as if speaking" (*quasi diceret*)), we are probably on the wrong track to suppose that he literally perceived a pictorial representation in his imagination.

Let us, therefore, consider the alternative interpretative method, that of seeking to identify literary parallels. Though it is sometimes useful to note similarities between Augustine's personification and that found in other late antique texts, the similarities are not sufficient to tell us what Augustine means in these paragraphs, and this for two reasons. First, the similarity being pointed out by these commentators is often the mere fact that both Augustine and the earlier authors personify virtues and vices, including the virtue of continence. But the personification of abstract nouns, and of virtues and vices in particular, is common practice in ancient literary culture. Thus, if Augustine is in some respects like Tertullian, like Prudentius, or like the author of the *Shepherd of Hermas* in that he uses personification, this mainly tells us that he has had a classical education. We must still ask what his metaphors actually represent in their particular details.

Second, when we attend to the details we find that the dissimilarities between the *Confessions* passage and the earlier literary works are typically just as striking and numerous as the similarities; and this makes it clear that

⁹ The issue of philosophical importance is distinct from the historicity question, but the assumption by readers in this line seems to be that once we have identified the metaphors as metaphors, the interpretative work is done.

For the view that the narrative is fictitious, see Stock (1996) 344 n. 207 and Courcelle (1950) 195. Note that if one asserts that Augustine's account is simply fictional, one makes him violate his own hermeneutical theory at the beginning of *Gn. litt.*, which was written immediately after the *conf.* There he asserts that the style in which a text is written indicates the intent of its author, so if a text sounds like it is listing events, then we should take it to be asserting that the events occurred – unless there is absolutely no way to arrive at a coherent meaning by taking it in this way. A text is not limited to only one kind of meaning, however; and so a historical text may also be figurative. In *Confessions* eight, Augustine says *tunc* and *tum* repeatedly, so we should read him as intending the narrated events to be taken as a record of what he experienced, and the metaphors to be aids for understanding the nature of the inner psychological states provoked by the events. Clark's balanced view has much to recommend it: book eight is probably an historical narrative colored by Augustine's concerns and limitations of memory at the time of writing ([1993] 68–69).

¹⁰ 8.11.27. For the meaning of "cor," see notes in Section 6c this chapter and in Ch. 2.3a.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01794-8 - Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis

Sarah Catherine Byers

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1.1 Our Present Options for Confessions 8.11.26–27

5

Augustine is not simply imitating those accounts.¹¹ The fifth *Satire* of Persius is exceptional because it has more in common with Augustine's personification than does any other suggested literary precedent; yet even here we find dis-analogies. Persius, like Augustine, ridicules people who are slaves to their own evil dispositions such as avarice, ambition, lust, and greed; he describes these dispositions interiorly "speaking" and "whispering" commands, questions, and warnings.¹² Nevertheless, the accounts differ. The metaphor of "appearance"

¹¹ His account is substantially different from the *vit. Ant.* The alleged dependence of the "whispering" (*susurrare*) in *conf.* 8.11.26 upon the *vit. Ant.* (Wills [2004] 122) is unconvincing because although the Greek in *vit. Ant.* 5 uses *hupoballein* three times, which *can* be translated "whisper," it was not translated that way either by Evagrius (who uses "to send, to implant or insert" *immittere* and *inserere*) or by the author of the more literal, and presumably older Latin translation (which uses the similar terms *submittere* and *subjicere*, as well as "suggest" *suggerere*). More generally, the *vit. Ant.* differs from *conf.* 8.11.26–27 in that the demons who propose impurity to Antony are quite emphatically separate beings, outside of Antony himself – they live in the air and dance around in it, they make noises that are audible to multiple people at once (e.g. *vit. Ant.* 13.1–4, 21.4, 25.1–4, 26.6, 28.9, 35.3, 36.1–2, 36.5, 39.6). In contrast, Augustine makes clear that this is going on inside himself: it was his own habit (*consuetudo*), as if whispering. Further, *vit. Ant.* 20.5 conflicts with Augustine's self-proclaimed purpose in paragraphs twenty-six and -seven (see *conf.* 8.6.13, which introduces the account).

As for the Manichean myth, the implausibility of its serving as a model is clear from the fact that in his *De Natura Boni*, written concurrently with the *Confessions* (*nat. b.* in 399; *conf.* in 397–400/1), Augustine excoriates the myth as containing *turpitudines incredibiles* which should not even be mentioned or thought about (*nat. b.* 44). Stock suggests that in modeling his account on this one, Augustine was satirizing it ([1996] 106). Not only does this require that we assume Augustine is violating his own advice not to mention the *turpitudines* unnecessarily, but it would make this the only occasion in his corpus where he uses vice (incontinent behaviors) to represent virtue (continence). There is no reason to assume such an anomaly, given that there is another possible explanation of the passage (on which see this chapter Section 7, Ch. 2.4, and Ch. 2.8).

The *Shepherd of Hermas* 3.8.2 describes a vision of seven women standing around a tower, seven virtues, which are daughters of one another, including continence, which is the daughter of faith, and is "girded and manlike"; the only thing similar to Augustine's *Confessions* is the fact that continence is personified as a woman; the claim here that continence is the result of faith diverges from Augustine's description, in which continence *precedes* his "standing on the rule of faith" (*conf.* 8.12.30), and in which continence is presented as highly feminine, rather than masculine.

Tertullian's *On Monogamy* 8 treats continence as the counterpart of monogamy and discusses the laudability of both. The virtues are not personified, beyond Tertullian calling them the two priestesses of Christian sanctity; and he describes Zechariah and John the Baptist as embodiments of these respective virtues. In contrast, *Confessions* 8.11.26–27 is not concerned with monogamous marriage as a path comparable to celibacy; nor does Augustine have anything to say about Zechariah or John.

¹² See ll. 132–160. Reason also whispers (*secretam garrit*) at the character interiorly, warning him that an irrational act is a wrong act, ll. 96–98. Other details of metaphor and phrasing are shared by the two texts. The commands given by Avarice include the repeated exhortation to "Get up!" in the morning; Augustine compares his inability to adopt a continent life as an unwillingness to get up in the morning (*conf.* 8.5.12); in Persius, the dispositions of avarice, greed and luxury are called "interior masters" (*domini*), which keep one in (moral) chains (ll. 129–130); cf. *conf.* 8.5.9, 8.6.13. Other similarities of phrase are pointed out by Courcelle (1963) 116–117.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01794-8 - Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis

Sarah Catherine Byers

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and “seeing” that is central to Augustine’s descriptions is absent in Persius. Moreover, Persius’ avarice and luxury are dispositions that have already been acquired when they “speak” interiorly; but when continence “speaks” to Augustine, it is a virtue he does not yet have. Thus, although it is reasonable to think that Augustine’s imagery was inspired by Persius, it also seems that he was trying to describe some features of experience that Persius was not.

We see then, that while some interpretations of *Confessions* 8.11.26–27 are helpful in some respects, no one of them is entirely adequate. This lack of a definitive interpretation despite the work of knowledgeable commentators writing in good faith, the silence of other commentators, and the overdone translations in volumes of otherwise excellent quality, seem to point to a problem in our understanding of the deeper levels of the text. The problem might bear analogy with the way that ignorance of syntax blocks successful reading of a sentence, even when one knows what most of the words mean individually.

1.2. A HYPOTHESIS

If we proceed according to the hypothesis that a conceptual schema awaits discovery here, we should next ask what the plausible candidates for such a schema would be. Given that Augustine elsewhere uses terms like “seeing” and “appearing” for not only sensory but also intellectual cognition, the possibility presents itself that when he says “the dignity of continence was appearing,” he is describing a “seeing” of something by the mind – that is to say, his realization that continence has *dignitas*. On the other hand, when his old habit of incontinence “suggests” that he “look back” at his past actions, it may mean that he is also “seeing” that there are attractive features in incontinent acts as well. Pursuing this line, we note that the conceptual framework is epistemological – for these are the topics of epistemology. Now Augustine’s philosophical roots are neo-Platonic and Stoic; and so the epistemology at work here would have to be one or the other – or a combination of both.

In our search for identifying characteristics, we next revert to Augustine’s repeated stipulation that in both cases of “appearing” there was “quasi-speech.” Now this makes the presence of Stoic epistemology come forth from the metaphors in an almost alarming way. For as has been much discussed, Stoic epistemology posited that all human perception includes mental language. Moreover, if there is Stoic epistemology in Augustine’s text, that might also help to account for its special affinities with Persius’ fifth *Satire*; for Persius describes the interior speech and whispering of avarice, luxury, and reason during an encomium on his teacher Cornutus, who, he reports, followed the teachings of Cleanthes, a student of Zeno of Citium, the founder of the Stoic school. As there are allusions to Stoic ethical doctrines in the *Satire*, it is possible that epistemological elements relevant to ethics are also operating in the passage. Augustine’s reference to an “appearance” may be a poetic way of referring

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01794-8 - Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis

Sarah Catherine Byers

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1.3 Augustine's Rhetorical Texts

7

to the Stoic impression (*phantasia, visum*). Here then, is a promising line of interpretation. It will be worthwhile to consider the independent evidence that Augustine knew the Stoic epistemology, with its hallmark theory of a universal grammar, before returning to the text of the *Confessions* to see whether he is making use of that theory.

1.3. A PROPOSED METHOD OF INQUIRY: AUGUSTINE'S RHETORICAL TEXTS

The first question, of course, is: did Augustine actually know the Stoic claim that mental language plays a role in human perception? His *On Dialectic* would seem to be the place to look for an answer. In it he summarizes parts of the Stoic linguistic theory of mental “sayables” (*dicibilia* for Stoic *lekta*);¹³ and because Stoic accounts stipulated that sayables subsist in rational perceptual “impressions” (*visa, phantasiai*), we would expect Augustine to repeat this idea also. Unfortunately, however, the *On Dialectic* is incomplete. It ends before Augustine moves into a discussion of the various types of sayable sentences – though he mentions a few, in their Stoic taxonomic divisions – or alludes to the Stoic claim that sayables subsist in impressions. We do have an idea of the kind of source material from which Augustine must have been working: though his main source (perhaps one of Varro's works)¹⁴ is now lost, his discussion of “sayables” indicates that it was probably a doxography similar in some of its content to Diogenes Laertius' extant Greek account in his *Life of Zeno*, written a century before Augustine.¹⁵ Yet, given the incompleteness of the *On Dialectic*, it can seem that we will never know to what extent he concurred with the Stoics that mental language is operative in perception, or went on to use this account in his theory of motivation.

On the other hand, the picture does not look so bleak if we take into account some relevant facts about Augustine's intellectual context. First, for the Stoics and for authors in late antiquity, rhetoric, linguistics, and epistemology were closely associated disciplines (sometimes classed together under the heading, “logic,” Augustine's *dialectica*). Especially for the Stoics, discussions of the forms of spoken language, the forms of mental language, and the process of

¹³ Long notes the similarity of Augustine's definition of the *dicibile* to Sextus Empiricus' definition of the Stoic *lekton*; see Long (2005) 36–55, esp. 52; cf. Rist (1994) 23ff. On the authenticity of the *On Dialectic*, see Pépin (1976) 59–60; Jackson and Pinborg (1976) 3–5, 27ff. and passim.

¹⁴ E.g., *On Dialectic* or *The Disciplines*; cf. Long (2005) 37, Pépin, (1976) 112, 121–130.

¹⁵ Compare Augustine's definition of dialectic to that in DL, 7.42 and that in the *Peri Pathōn* of unknown authorship (so Jackson and Pinborg [1976] 121 n. 2). Compare his taxonomy of “conjoined words” (*verba coniuncta*) into complete (*sententiae*) and incomplete units of meaning, and the complete into assertibles and nonassertible expressions such as commands, wishes, and curses, with the further division of assertibles into simple and combined, including conditionals and syllogisms, to DL, 7.73 and 7.69 on the divisions of *lekta*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01794-8 - Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis

Sarah Catherine Byers

Excerpt

[More information](#)

perception were contiguous.¹⁶ Second, Augustine was trained professionally as a rhetorician. It stands to reason that in composing his own texts about rhetoric¹⁷ and his works of rhetoric (sermons),¹⁸ he may have recalled these contiguous accounts. If so, then his rhetorical texts might contain traces of his familiarity with these connections.

I.4. STOIC MENTAL LANGUAGE IN RELATION TO THE HISTORY OF RHETORIC

In order to establish more clearly the relation between ancient rhetoric and Stoic theories of mental language and perception, we should first briefly contextualize the Stoics.

The Stoics developed their account of mental language in the context of sophists and rhetoricians who compiled lists of spoken sentence-types. Protagoras was apparently the first to show an interest in compiling such a list; Aristotle is the most illustrious of those who later did the same.¹⁹ These enumerations of moods and other syntactic categories were intended for use in persuasive oratory and dialectical debate. Though most ancient handbooks on rhetoric are lost to us, it is clear that with the passage of time, these lists continued to accrue new items; and from the fourth century B.C.E. on, they were symbiotic with technical discussions of rhetoric and logic.²⁰

The Stoics' own list was evidently intended to be a *complete* list of sentential forms, unlike the previous lists of items *useful* for rhetoric and poetry; thus it showed an interest in language as such. The Stoics' most interesting contribution, however, was to assert that thought itself has a kind of grammar: the forms of spoken language are like a mirror of the forms of thought. By moving the language under discussion to the internal forum, and claiming that there are "sayables" (*lekta*)²¹ in the mind, as distinct from spoken

¹⁶ DL, 7.41–44; cf. Cicero, *inv.* 1.46.86, *top.* 13.55, *ac.* 1.8.32 and 1.5.19. Cf. Aristotle, *rh.* 1.1 (1354a1).

¹⁷ The *On Christian Teaching*, which I treat in Chapter 2.

¹⁸ By "sermons" I refer to both the collection known as his "sermons" and his expositions of the psalms. Most of the latter were preached; others were notes intended for preaching on the psalms.

¹⁹ Protagoras distinguishes speech (*logos*) into prayer, question, answer, and command (DL, 9.52–53). Aristotle's discussion of diction (*lexis*) in the *poet.* mentions six distinct patterns of sentences, knowledge of which was proper to the rhetorician – Protagoras' four, plus statement and threat (*poet.* 19.7). Other examples: Antisthenes the Cynic wrote treatises on speech (*lexis*) or styles of discourse, and on "question and answer" (DL, 6.3, 6.15–17); Alcidamas, a rhetorician contemporary with Aristotle, adopted a fourfold distinction of speech acts: affirmation, denial, question, and greeting (DL, 7.54).

²⁰ See, e.g., "affirmation" and "denial" in Aristotle *int.* 3.6 (16b6), *an. pr.* 1.46 (51b20), 2.11 (62a14).

²¹ On the (difficulty in) translation of this term, see Barnouw (2002) 286–289, Bobzien (2003) 86, Inwood (1985) 43, Rist (1969) 147, Reesor (1989) 34. On *lekta* and *pragmata* as synonymous, see DL, 7.57 and for discussion, Atherton (1993) 252.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01794-8 - Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis

Sarah Catherine Byers

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1.4 Stoic Mental Language in Relation to Rhetoric

9

language (*lexis*),²² the Stoics asserted the existence of a kind of mental language having intrinsic aptness for articulation. This aptness, implying an orientation toward public communication, complemented their understanding of human nature as social. In this kind of a model, mental language helps to explain why there are grammatical similarities between conventional languages, and how translation between them would be possible.²³

The only extant version of the Stoics' list of simple sayables names ten.²⁴ Four are items that we know had already been members of earlier lists compiled by rhetoricians: questions, defined as queries having "yes" or "no" answers, imperatives, the vocative, and petition or cursing, often taken to be a reference to the optative mood.²⁵ Four other sayables are new in comparison to those lists: dubitatives, which are interrogatives manifesting anxiety or uncertainty by means of the particle *ara* (e.g., "Can it be that pain and life are in some way akin?"),²⁶ the so-called "pseudo-assertible," which seems to be an exclamation,²⁷ the oath, and the hypothetical (that was, perhaps, a reference to the subjunctive).²⁸ Of the remaining two, the first has affinities to Aristotle's logic: this is the class of assertibles, which, when articulated, are declaratives; because they are assertorial, they can be true or false.²⁹ The final item makes explicit a distinction in form that Aristotle had indicated by examples:³⁰ inquiries, which are open-ended questions,³¹ are distinct from the already-mentioned "questions."

²² See DL, 7.56.

²³ Cf. Cicero *leg.* 1.10.30. The enumeration of sentence-types seems to imply that in any given spoken language, the number of possible grammatical structures for the meaning of a sentence is naturally limited (even if not limited to one only). Thus sentence syntax is not purely conventional.

²⁴ Simple as opposed to compounds (disjunctions, conditionals, conjunctions, etc.), on which see Section 6a of this chapter.

²⁵ DL, 7.66–7. Questions = *erōtēmata*, imperatives = *prostaktika*, vocative = *prosagoreutikon*, petition or cursing = *aratikon*. On *aratikon*, cf. "prayer" in the lists of Protagoras and Aristotle (*euchē*); in the Stoic list, *aratikon* is often taken to be a reference to the optative mood. There is a lacuna in Diogenes' text at this point, so that *aratikon* itself is without definition or illustration.

²⁶ DL, 7.68. My quotations from DL follow the translation of Hicks (1931).

²⁷ Diogenes' examples: "How like the herdsman is to Priam's sons [!]" and "Fair (indeed) is the Parthenon[!]" (DL, 7.67).

²⁸ DL, 7.67–68. Dubitatives = *epaporētika*, pseudo-assertible = *homoion axiōmati*, oath = *horkikon*, hypothetical = *hupothetikon*. The "hypothetical" is undefined and without illustration owing to a lacuna in the text, and it is difficult to imagine what a distinctively hypothetical form of a sentence would be, given that the conditional is not an option here (the conditional is a "nonsimple assertible," according to the Stoics, whereas these are simple sayables); so the subjunctive mood seems likely.

²⁹ Assertibles = *axiōmata*; cf. DL, 7.63, 7.65, 7.68.

³⁰ Dialectical questions (*erōtēseis dialektikai*) present a choice between two contradictories; open-ended questions are effective for trapping witnesses and outwitting interlocutors (*int.* 11 (20b22–30); *rh.* 3.18.1–6 (1419a1–6); *top.* 8.4 (159a17–24), 8.7 (160a16–34)).

³¹ Inquiries = *pusmata*; DL, 7.63, 7.66.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01794-8 - Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis

Sarah Catherine Byers

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Despite the Stoic preference for laconism,³² the historical fact that the activity of listing and analyzing sentence-types had originated with the practice of oratory meant that items from the Stoics' list of sayables were incorporated into discussions of "ornaments of speech" in manuals on oratory, as an aid to effective speaking. Cicero's enumeration of "figures of thought and speech" or "ornaments" recommended for stimulating or persuading an audience contains most of the items in the Stoics' list of sayables: the optative/prayer and cursing (*optatio atque exsecratio*), inquiry (*percontatio*), question (*rogatio*), the dubitative (*dubitatio*), exclamation (*exclamatio*), and the assertion.³³ Here we have six of the ten sentence-types in the Stoics' list. We find a similar list in Quintilian and some elements of such discussions in Gellius.³⁴

The Stoics went on to specify that this mental language is operative in perception; but before moving on to that point, we should look at Augustine's rhetorical texts for evidence that he made use of the kind of linguistic analysis conveyed in these lists.

1.5. STOIC-INDEBTED LINGUISTICS IN AUGUSTINE'S RHETORICAL TEXTS

The discipline of rhetoric was influenced by Stoic linguistics' list of sayable sentence-types, and Augustine's sermons are exercises in rhetoric composed by someone with professional training in the discipline of rhetoric. Furthermore, the Stoic *theory* of sayables was known to Augustine, as we see from his *On Dialectic*. Given these facts, it is not terribly surprising that when Augustine composed his own rhetorical works on the psalms, he made use of these linguistic analyses. The psalms that he had to preach upon contain reported speech acts (e.g., "I said: 'I shall never be moved!'" "I said: 'Who will give me wings like a dove, and I will fly and be at rest?'" etc.). When he looked at these as material to be preached about, the analyses of sentence-types (exclamations, interrogatives, etc.) he had encountered in the contiguous rhetorical and epistemological accounts apparently came to mind. For he consistently glosses the psalms' reported speech acts as *interior* speech in the reason of the person.³⁵ This

³² Zeno's asceticism extended to speech; see DL, 7.20–21, 7.24, 7.42. Cf. Aubert (2007) 41–62.

³³ Cicero, *ornamenta sententiarum*, *orat.* 39.137–138 and *de orat.* 3.53.203–3.54.207. The vocative, though not mentioned in these lists, is also used as a device in Cicero's actual speeches.

³⁴ Quintilian, *inst.* 9.1.26ff.; cf. on *figurae, orationis lumina*, *inst.* 9.1.11, 9.1.17, 9.2.103. Gellius on *axiōma*, with the Latin terms used by Cicero (*pronuntiatum*) and Varro (*profatum* or *proloquium*), NA16.8.8–10.

³⁵ See, e.g., *en. Ps.* 86.2, where he says that exterior speech breaks forth from interior thought or meditation (*intus apud se meditari*), that is from a heart, which had been going over many things interiorly in silence (*multa secum in silentio*), and *en. Ps.* 129.12, where thought (*cogitatio*) is described as speaking (*dicere*), with sentential content given several times. *En. Ps.* 76.9 interprets "I was babbling (*garriebam*)" (Psalm 76:7) as a speaking within one's spirit (*cum spiritu suo loquebatur*), silent thinking (*in silentio cogitat*); *en. Ps.* 3.4 stipulates that "with my