Review of: Susan Wessel, On Compassion, Healing, Suffering, and the Purpose of the Emotional Life (Reading Augustine series)

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Susan Wessel. On Compassion, Healing, Suffering, and the Purpose of the Emotional Life. New York/ London: Bloomsbury, 2020. X. 166 pages. ISBN: 978-1-5013-4453-4.

This is an attractive book that is potentially appealing to a wide audience. Written by Patristics expert Professor Susan Wessel of the Catholic University of America, it puts Augustine of Hippo in dialogue with a range of both Christian and classical authors. Wessel is already well-known for her wide range of stimulating publications, including *Passion and Compassion in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, 2016), *Cyril of Alexandria and the Nestorian Controversy* (Oxford, 2004), as well as the article on "Schmerz" for the *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*. With this new book, written for the popular series *Reading Augustine* (ed. Miles Hollingworth), Wessel eloquently communicates the innovativeness of Augustine's emotional teaching, and how it arose out of both personal experience and philosophical reflection.

A brief summary of the book is as follows. Chapter 1, titled "Provocation", immediately engages the reader with the thesis that "compassion is the soul of Christianity" (1) before moving on to focus on Augustine's development of his emotional teaching (5ff). Drawing on the work of Jason BeDuhn, Wessel argues that the young Augustine may have encountered the Manichean teaching that emotions were "external forces of a rebellious evil power" (8), but that he came to develop his own emotional teaching centered on his reading of the Psalms (20–24). Chapter 2 then proceeds to discuss the theme of sadness (29–51). Here, Wessel highlights how, generally, the Stoics have a goal of "diminishing [sadness'] relevance for the moral life", while Christians see sadness as "part of a purposeful trajectory of the self, moving in harmony with God" (30). Drawing on *De ciuitate Dei* 14 and other texts, Wessel also explores Augustine's Latin vocabulary for sadness (30–32), Ambrose's teaching on sadness (37–38), and Augustine's experience of profound grief over losing a friend, as described in *Confessions* 4 (38–48). Chapter 3 ("Suffering") moves onto grander themes, opening with a description of the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410 CE (53). In this chapter, Wessel explores the intersection between emotions, social class, and politics. She narrates Augustine's relationships with the Roman elites Volusianus and Marcellinus (54–55), and explains how Augustine's approach to history in *De ciuitate Dei* is distinct from that of Orosius, Eusebius of Caesarea, or Salvian of Marseilles (61ff). Chapter 4 ("Remembering") again stirs the reader's attention straightaway, this time by discussing Augustine's own account of experiencing an erection in the Roman baths (79). Drawing largely on books 9-13 of *Confessions*, Wessel here gives a lively account of Augustine's searching explorations of desire (80–81), time (82–90) ; "Memories of Feelings" (90–95), the final section of this chapter compares themes in Augustine to David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, and Martha Nussbaum (95–100). A major focus of the penultimate chapter, Chapter 5 ("Healing"), is Christ. Wessel situates Augustine within the *Christus medicus* tradition (110–117), and also explains how the emotions of Jesus are crucial for Augustine's emotional account (117–122). The final chap-

ter, "Accommodation" (Chapter 6), draws widely on Augustine's sermons, but also again discusses *De ciuitate Dei*, as well as some of his explicitly anti-Pelagian texts. Wessel highlights the importance of eschatology: "For Augustine, no matter how virtuous we are, perfect justice can never be attainted until the eschatological reality of the city of God..." (143). The book contains a bibliography and extensive index.

In her book, in addition to tracing over a wide range of Augustine's works (cf. vii–x), Wessel should be praised for including discussion of classical authors including Aeschylus (116), Juvenal (5), and Epictetus (66). Moreover, her discussion of authors such as Emily Dickinson (12, 15) and Zadie Smith (43), while perhaps unconventional, has the possibility to attract a new readership.The binding and cover of the book are very pleasant to hold, and the copy-editing is excellent.

The book responds to a renewed scholarly interest in the philosophy of emotions in the ancient world, led by scholars such as Martha Nussbaum (*Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge, 2003) and Douglas Cairns (*Aidōs: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature*, Oxford, 1993). At the same time, it could be used by students. The fact that Wessel describes the Latin emotional terminology of Augustine means that it could stimulate new interest in learning Latin. In addition to being of potential use for theology or intellectual history courses, it could also serve undergraduate courses in philosophy.

With regard to these potential audiences, i.e. researchers and students, in closing, I would like to make two comments concerning how the book might have been improved.

(1) As a piece of research, it was striking to me how little French or German scholarship appears in the bibliography (or Italian, Spanish, etc.). From my own counting, there is one French-language source cited, one German, and 55 English, so 97% English. Wessel's choice to concentrate so heavy on English-language scholarship may be due to the fact that she is writing for a popular series (*Reading Augustine*). At the same time, as a native English-speaker, I personally worry about less-experienced readers getting the impression that most of the major Augustine or early Christian scholarship is in English. This is already a strong bias, encouraged not wholly unjustifiably by the eloquent publications of Peter Brown (e.g. *Augustine of Hippo*, Berkley and Los Angeles, California 2013). Even in his biography, however – also written for a popular audience – Brown repeatedly cites French and German scholarship. Along these lines, I wonder if Wessel might have done the same more often, in an effort of encouraging an appreciation of the "catholicity" of the 21st century Augustine research effort, and inviting interest among English-speakers in learning foreign languages. Wessel does cite the excellent biography of Serge Lancel (38, 126), but perhaps could have cited from a more diverse range of resources, e.g. the *Augustin Handbuch* (ed. V. Drecoll), *Augustinus Lexikon*, *Augustinus Opera-Werke*, *Bibliothèque augustinienne*, and *Nuova biblioteca agostiniana*.

(2) From a pedagogical perspective, aspects of Wessel's account of Stoicism gave me pause. This has not just to do with the number of times they come up (I counted 44 times the word "Stoicism" occurs), but the way that axiomatic statements might lead to confusion for students. Just to give one example, on page 19, Wessel says that "Augustine subscribed to the Stoic theory of the four disturbances (*perturbationes*)". A reader might see this, and then think this applies to something like the *Confessions* – a very popular student text – but it would be wrong to suggest that Augustine confines himself there to talking only about *cupiditas*, *laetitia*, *metus*, and *tristitia*. Moreover, it is clear on his sermon on Acts 17 (s. 150) that he sees the Stoics, along with Epicureans, as enemies to the "grace of God". With that in mind, I was left feeling concerned that students reading this book might spend more time trying to fit Augustine's thought to a Stoic system, rather than considering the seriousness of his hostility to Stoicism as a system. If we took his hostility seriously, it might mean Stoicism would be discussed less.