NOTES ON A METHOD: ENGAGING WITH AUGUSTINE AT THE INTERSECTION OF PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY, AND HISTORY

Notas sobre un método: el compromiso con Agustín
en la intersección de la filosofía, la teología y la historia

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Abstract

This article addresses the following question: Is it possible, and if so, to what extent, to draw upon sources from different contexts or disciplines to perform theological research? The first part describes the historical origins and contemporary application of the handmaiden model of theology ("philosophy is the handmaiden of theology," *philosophia ancilla theologiae*). In the second section, I consider two closely related objections to this model, namely confirmation bias (or eisegesis) and anachronism. Section three demonstrates that while these objections should be carefully considered, they do not preclude altogether the possibility of engaging with sources across temporal or disciplinary boundaries. Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy grounds the possibility of such interaction. The remainder of the article provides a more specific vision of how this model can be practiced. First, I look to the theological tradition itself, in particular Augustine's interpretive principles as applied to Genesis 1 (*Confessiones* 12) and Michael Fishbane's appropriation of the Jewish hermeneutical tradition. Finally, the contemporary scholars William Desmond and Cyril O'Regan exemplify the responsible constructive engagement with the sources. I argue that practitioners of the handmaiden model must take

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seriously objections to and concerns about their methodology. Nonetheless, once critically adapted to present circumstances, this model is feasible for a contemporary scholarly context. One can respect the integrity of the sources while also interpreting them in ways which apply to present theological interests. A key implication of this research is that for each to function properly, historical theology and systematic theology must consistently interact with each other.

Keywords

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la siguiente cuestión: ¿es posible, y si es así, en qué medida, recurrir a fuentes de diferentes contextos o disciplinas para realizar una investigación teológica? En la primera parte se describen los orígenes históricos y la aplicación contemporánea del modelo de la teología ("la filosofía es sierva de la teología", *philosophia ancilla theologiae*). En la segunda sección, Se consideran dos objeciones estrechamente relacionadas con este modelo, a saber, el sesgo de confirmación (o eiségesis) y el anacronismo. La tercera sección demuestra que, si bien estas objeciones deben ser consideradas cuidadosamente, no excluyen por completo la posibilidad de comprometerse con las fuentes más allá de las fronteras temporales o disciplinarias. La filosofía hermenéutica de Gadamer fundamenta la posibilidad de dicha interacción. El resto del artículo ofrece una visión más específica de cómo puede practicarse este modelo. En primer lugar, me remito a la propia tradición teológica, en particular a los principios interpretativos de Agustín aplicados a Génesis 1 (Confessiones 12) y a la apropiación de la tradición hermenéutica judía por parte de Michael Fishbane. Por último, los estudiosos contemporáneos William Desmond y Cyril O'Regan ejemplifican el compromiso constructivo responsable con las fuentes. Se sostiene que los practicantes del modelo de la sierva deben tomarse en serio las objeciones y preocupaciones sobre su metodología. No obstante, este modelo, una vez adaptado críticamente a las circunstancias actuales, es factible para un contexto académico contemporáneo. Se puede respetar la integridad de las fuentes y, al mismo tiempo, interpretarlas de forma que se ajusten a los intereses teológicos actuales. Una implicación clave de esta investigación es que, para que cada una de ellas funcione adecuadamente, la teología histórica y la teología sistemática deben interactuar coherentemente entre sí.

Palabras clave

General Introduction

For much of Christian history, Church intellectuals have looked to sources from outside their own confessional context to understand their faith, interpret the Bible, develop and defend doctrine, and articulate theological positions. Even in the present, theologians continue to follow this methodology. I too subscribe to this approach. Expressed in the simplest terms, I envision my preferred method like a conversation: I have a particular question or issue in mind, and I "speak with" someone (i.e., read a text) for further insight, and then develop my own account.

However, in light of the critical turn and the development of new disciplines for exploring texts, especially historical criticism and philology, this ancient model has been gradually called into question as a legitimate form of scholarship. This article therefore addresses the following question: Is it still plausible for theologians to draw upon sources from across temporal, social, cultural, and contextual boundaries for the sake of arguing for systematic and doctrinal positions?

The article consists of five main parts. In the first section, I provide an overview of the so-called handmaiden model, a term derived from the renowned Latin phrase *philosophia ancilla theologiae*, "philosophy is the handmaiden of theology," and relate it to contemporary scholars who advocate and practice it.

The second section consists of a series of criticisms and objections to the foregoing method, drawn mainly from the field of historical theology. I consider two distinct but closely related challenges. The first, eisegesis, or in a psychological idiom, confirmation bias, involves systematic theologians selectively reading and interpreting historical sources in support of an agenda, thus violating the integrity of the source. They display a tendency to neglect aspects of the sources which conflict with their own constructive positions. Secondly, in service of their own arguments, these scholars read texts in anachronistic ways, projecting contemporary categories and concepts onto the source. The common theme here is the failure to respect the source as the author composed it, as well as how it developed in and reflects its original context.

In the third section, I present some critical responses to the positions raised in the previous section. While the need to respect the integrity of the sources is essential, this does not preclude the possibility of drawing upon them for contemporary conversations. With especial reference to Hans-Georg Gadamer, I argue that one can legitimately draw interpretations from these texts which extend beyond the bounds of the author's intentions and original context. Indeed, it will become clear that the faithful historical reading of a text does not merely permit but actually requires this form of constructive engagement.

Although a foundation for the handmaiden model may be established, it leaves a wide range of possibilities for how to perform it. The final two sections of this article address the application of this method. I look to two major sources of inspiration, first to the depth of the theological tradition itself, and secondly to exemplars from contemporary scholarship. As for the former, I focus first on Augustine, who seems to have anticipated this question in his own time. The result is to show that the interpretation of sources admits of levels. One can speak *both* of the source in relation to its author's intentions and its original context *and* in relation to present interests. Then I turn to Michael Fishbane's *ressourcement* of the ancient Jewish tradition of scriptural interpretation. From Fishbane's thought I draw the conclusion

that far from being antagonists, historical theology and systematic theology require each other properly to perform their respective operations.

Finally, I demonstrate how one could perform the method today, considering the research of William Desmond. He articulates two related ways that one can do systematic theology and philosophy while respecting the integrity of the sources. Desmond sketches a path for the attainment of my objective of conversing with historical sources for the sake of advancing knowledge about a particular topic.

In sum, I argue that, after reflecting on the methodological tradition of Christian theology and chastened by various criticisms and insights, one can nevertheless continue an ancient approach to Christian thought in the 21st century and beyond.

1. A succinct description of the method

1a. The origins of the "handmaiden" model

Early Christians responded in a variety of ways to the antique culture in which they lived (de Beer, 2012). Between the two extremes of outright rejection (Antiochian School, Tertullian, and Tatian) and uncritical acceptance (Gnosticism), the early Church eventually settled on a middle way, whereby Christians could critically engage with the classical world, especially Greek philosophy (de Beer, 2012). Over the centuries, this middle approach came to be encapsulated in the phrase *philosophia ancilla theologiae*, hence also known as the "handmaiden model."[2] This means that Christian thinkers look to non-Christian sources to articulate theological positions or to interpret the scriptures. Thus, philosophy and other sciences have been placed at the service of theology.

Though enjoying a rich heritage within the Christian tradition, both Jewish (e.g., Moses Maimonides/ Rambam [1135-1204 CE]) and Muslim (e.g., Ibn Sina/Avicenna [980-1037 CE] and Ibn Rushd/Averroës [1126-1198 CE]) scholars have, in their own ways, engaged in this rich dialogue between faith and reason. The father of this model was Philo of Alexandria (ca. 15 BCE-ca. 50 CE), who integrated Greek philosophy and Jewish revelation (de Mowbray, 2004; de Beer, 2012). His novel methodology was subsequently mediated to Christianity by Clement of Alexandria and Origen (de Mowbray, 2004, pp. 3-6).

Over the centuries, several biblical passages were used to illustrate and justify the Christian approach to secular knowledge. One of the earliest and most notable concerns the *spoliatio Aegyptiorum*, or the despoiling of the Egyptians. Exodus recounts how as the Israelites fled from Egypt, they seized the riches of the Egyptians. This episode symbolises how God's people–now the Church–has the right to use the wealth of the nations–their knowledge–to advance Christian truth (Folliet, 2002; de Mowbray, 2004).

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2   I seem to recall seeing this specific term, "handmaiden model," perhaps in MacDonald (2010), though I do not recall the specific source. Furthermore, as de Mowbray (2004) explains, it seems that the phrase does not appear verbatim in any patristic or mediaeval sources, though it is often attributed to Peter Damian (1007-1072 CE) (pp. 11-12).

Augustine himself was a major proponent of this tradition, and the first of the Latin West (de Mowbray, 2004, p. 9; Harrison, 1992, p. 8 n. 33; cf. *De Doctrina Christiana* [*On Christian Doctrine*] 2.40.60). Augustine writes that the treasures of the pagans should be appropriated for the sake of promulgating the Gospel (Folliet, 2002, p. 12). Augustine's thinking is dynamic, cutting across boundaries and barriers. His thought is both associative and allusive, the upshot of which is that in his writing one can discern a certain "syncretistic" approach to his sources (Harrison, 1992, p. 4). This "eclecticism" in Augustine's thought reflects a broader trend in the patristic period, and indeed, a method which was normative for Augustine (Harrison, 1992, pp. 48, 71). Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* (*Summary of Theology*), which incorporates multifarious Christian and non-Christian sources, epitomises this eclecticism.

Concerning the historical origins of this handmaiden method, I believe that two points are especially noteworthy. First, Philo came to view the Jewish scriptures not simply in terms of a literal meaning but also a metaphorical or allegorical meaning. The Greeks had already applied this interpretive method to Homer, and Origen adopted a similar approach for Christianity (de Mowbray, 2004, pp. 3, 6). Secondly, this "handmaiden" method became notably *eclectic*: wherever truth was to be found, it would be claimed and used to advance religious truth (de Mowbray, 2004, pp. 4, 6, 8). As we shall see, these two essential aspects of the method under consideration, especially the latter, present challenges in a contemporary scholarly context.

1b. The handmaiden model in contemporary research

The central focus of my research is to engage with contemporary philosophical and theological questions,[3] especially in metaphysics and epistemology, grounded in a close reading of historical sources, most notably Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE). From these figures I draw discrete conceptual resources that can enrich contemporary understanding and advance scholarly research. I invoke the handmaiden model for two related reasons. First, as discussed *supra*, this method originally refers to employing non-religious knowledge for the sake of developing theological positions or interpreting scripture. I have done this, for example, by drawing upon Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics to articulate theological positions based on Augustine's theology. However, I also refer to the handmaiden model insofar as I am claiming the resources of Christian figures, such as Augustine, to employ for contemporary theological purposes.

Several contemporary scholars practice a similar methodology, and their work has deeply informed my own approach to Augustine. These figures include Jean-Louis Chrétien, John Haldane, John Haught, Jean-Luc Marion, Willemien Otten, Richard Swinburne, Denys Turner, and Rowan Williams.

To name a few specific examples, I seek to emulate the work of such figures as Charles Taylor, whose philosophical thought is fundamentally informed by historical research (Blakely, 2013). In her *Divine*

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3   Because the relevant methodology operates at the intersection of philosophy and theology –an approach reflective of Augustine's own method (cf. Bochet, 1998)–, I shall largely use terms like "theology," "systematic theology," and "philosophy" interchangeably when discussing my own research. The more "Protestant" term "constructive" appears occasionally throughout this article, and it has the same sense.

Illumination, a key point of departure for my research, Lydia Schumacher (2011) calls for a recovery of Augustine's illumination theory in the present. My way of proceeding is also consistent with that of theologian Susannah Ticciati (2013), who, in her monograph on Augustine's semiotics, describes her approach in the following way: "We are reading Augustine not principally in order to arrive at a historical reconstruction of the significance of his texts at their time of writing (although the importance of this exercise is not denied), but with a view to their *contemporary theological generativity*" (pp. 9-10; emphases mine). Ticciati's (2013) felicitous phrase, "contemporary theological generativity" (p. 10), closely reflects the spirit of my own work. The philosopher William Desmond (2003), one of my former PhD supervisors, follows a similar approach:

> My aim is to engage the *questions themselves*. Some exposition of thinkers is needed and given, but a report of scholarly findings is not the primary focus. … I honor the spirit of philological earnestness but my interest falls on the themes themselves and engaging them with important philosophers. The engagement is philosophical. I am not doing art criticism, or literary criticism … (p. ix; emphasis mine).

Like Desmond, my goal is to engage the "questions themselves" as opposed to their original setting, even if these two objects of enquiry are inseparable.

2. Challenges to the handmaiden model

The very terms "handmaiden" and "despoiling" suggest a problematic methodology. While the former reflects a potentially supercilious attitude towards the secular world and may beg several questions (cf. Niel, 1966, p. 465),[4] the latter suggests violence in confiscating others' resources and employing them for different purposes, a violence which may offend against the integrity and original meaning of the sources.

2a. Confirmation bias/eisegesis

It seems to me that any constructive engagement with classical sources must respond to at least two problems, namely (1) confirmation bias (or eisegesis) and (2) anachronism, the latter of which applies both to the *content* and to the *context* of the primary sources. I shall describe each of these in turn, also demonstrating their close connexion.

2.a.i. Confirmation bias as psychological phenomenon

According to R. Nickerson (1998), "confirmation bias" is the process whereby "one selectively gathers, or gives undue weight to, evidence that supports one's position while neglecting to gather, or discounting, evidence that would tell against it" (p. 175). One may identify here a twofold challenge, that is, in both

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4   On a related note, Beyers (2016) discusses debates throughout the 20th century over whether and to what extent theology is "scientific."

the privileging and the dismissal of evidence; it seems that each of these can operate distinctly from one another, even if inseparably.

Confirmation bias is fundamentally a *psychological* phenomenon. I believe that this observation admits of at least two significant points. First, as Nickerson demonstrates by citing Francis Bacon, confirmation bias results from a question that somehow implicates one personally. When something of immediate interest impinges upon one's reasoning, the ability dispassionately to evaluate an argument virtually disappears (Nickerson, 1998, p. 176). Furthermore, confirmation bias is a largely unconscious phenomenon, which is to say that one is more or less aware of its implication in one's reasoning. Indeed, Nickerson (1998) writes of the "*unwitting* selectivity in the acquisition and use of evidence" (p. 175; emphasis mine).[5] Motivated by non- or even irrational impulses, the human mind subtly evades truth in favour of one's own views.

2.a.ii. Confirmation bias applied to theology[6]

The Augustine scholar M. Barnes helps one to see how confirmation bias applies to the topic at hand. One's point of departure may predetermine and thus vitiate the findings of one's research (cf. Barnes, 1995, p. 250). Barnes (1995) inveighs against the prejudicial reading and outright abuse of sources by systematicians (pp. 243-4). The systematic theologian projects concepts and ideas onto the historical source and then "discovers" them through apparent critical research. Thus Barnes (1995): "The dialogue between systematic theology and historical theology is transformed into a conversation between a ventriloquist and her or his prop" (p. 244). Notably, Barnes is not the only contemporary scholar to employ the provocative image of a ventriloquist and a mannequin.

In his chapter on Merold Westphal's appropriation of Hegel's thought, William Desmond (2009) outlines a few approaches that one may take to an historical figure in the attempt to "despoil" them. Herein he identifies one approach which must be avoided, namely the *ventriloquist* approach (Desmond, 2009, p. 24). To be sure, this occurs in a benign form when two speakers try to understand each other, for instance, by repeating another's words and phrases.[7] Instead, Desmond (2009) condemns the act by which a researcher uses another's authority as a basis for his or her own positions (pp. 24-5). His concern is not with the appropriation of an historical figure as such, even in ways that the person would not endorse or accept (Desmond, 2009, p. 25). There is an enormous difference between engaging with a figure, even creatively, and blurring the line between the figure's thought and one's own (Desmond, 2009, pp. 24, 25). The constructive engagement with the other figure requires that one clearly distinguish between one's own voice and that of the figure in question (Desmond, 2009, p. 25). For Desmond (2009), "an honest

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5   More alarming still is Aristotle's observation that of the 256 potential argument structures in his logical system, only fifteen are valid (Pessin and Engel, 2015, p. 76).

6   In his *Confessiones* (*Confessions*), Augustine notably provides insight pertinent to this phenomenon as he reflects on the light of truth. One lauds truth when one sees it illumining truths about the world, yet one curses it when that light shines on oneself, revealing all of one's flaws and imperfections. Similar to those who fall victim to confirmation bias, Augustine identifies an *à la carte* approach to truth, rooted in one's egoistic pride: "They love truth when it shines out, but they hate it when it shows them up as being in the wrong" (*amant eam [=ueritatem] lucentem, oderunt eam redarguentem*) (Augustine, 2016, pp. 128-29: 10.23.34).

7   W. Desmond made this point in a conversation concerning "Despoiling the Egyptians-Gently," although it does not appear explicitly in the text itself.

commentator should, in the first instance, seek to be true to what Hegel said and intended in his own words. One must have the integrity to let Hegel be Hegel" (p. 25).

I believe that the concern of Barnes and other historians and philologists can be summarised in the following way. A contemporary scholar–perhaps in good faith–wishes to prove a certain philosophical or theological point with respect to a present argument, whether in the literature or society in general. To do so, she looks to earlier sources for insight into her topic of interest. The problem is that our earnest scholar foregrounds evidence in support of her position and ignores evidence that conflicts with it. The result is a slanted and partial view of the authoritative source. When taken to the extreme, the scholar misuses the earlier figure in support of her position; the cart has been placed before the horse. Rather than attending to the source, respecting its integrity and complexity (let alone the *context* in which it originated, more on which anon), the scholar imposes her own position on it. She unjustly appeals to an authority figure in support of her views. However, the ostensible substantiation of her thesis is actually a case of selective citation and dubious reasoning. The scholar hijacks the authority's voice and uses it as a puppet to support her position.

2b. Sources and their contexts in systematic theology

The foregoing discussion of confirmation bias allows one to glimpse how the neglect of the original context of the sources can result in anachronism. I use the term *original* deliberately, as it bespeaks at least two senses. The first and more obvious refers to the circumstances in which the source was composed. But secondly, and related to the first sense, the context to some degree is the very origin, and thus a *constitutive* influence on, the relevant source. The context informs the content and is partly responsible for its production. Thus, I contend that an ignorance of context will inevitably result in a misunderstanding–or at least a partial understanding–of the relevant text or idea.

Remarkably, systematic theology does display a tendency to neglect the primary sources themselves. Barnes takes systematicians to task for treating the sources as otiose for their studies. Certain theologians present positions which are grounded in "conceptually bypassing the need, simply put, to read the texts being narrated" (Barnes, 1995, p. 242). As a result, the texts are evacuated of their original meanings and are no longer considered relevant to one's studies: "The texts thus have no content(s) apart from the grand narrative, and thus no integrity that would demand a direct encounter" (Barnes, 1995, p. 242). The church historian J. Pelikan also laments the lack of careful attention to the sources amongst systematic theologians and is particularly concerned about the idea that one can even do theology without the sources. According to Pelikan (1966), history must inform and at times correct the claims of systematicians:

Polemical theology must debate the issues of legitimacy and limit; dogmatic theology must strive to formulate some *a priori* judgments about the development of doctrine. But it is up to church history to trace the processes of development; and if church historians neglect to do this, they will leave the job by default for their more speculative colleagues to settle without irritating interference from the documentary evidence (p. 5).

Pelikan suggests that for systematic theology itself to succeed, it must be informed, guided, and even critiqued and corrected by historical theology.

In addition to a general neglect of the sources, Barnes laments the lack of attention to their original contexts. He rejects the apparent tendency in systematic theology to impose contemporary categories on historical sources (Barnes, 1995, p. 239). According to Barnes (1995), "modern reconstructions are captive to modern interpretive categories" (p. 239). In his *Chez Augustin*, G. Madec (1998) provides two such examples. First, Madec (1998) observes that contemporary theologians interpret Augustine's theology according to the mediaeval dispensation's approach to faith and reason (pp. 8, 14-15).[8] However, this application is anachronistic, for the scholastic approach to faith and reason does not accurately reflect that of the patristic period (Madec, 1998, p. 8; cf. de Beer, 2012). Indeed, it was not until the 13th century that the relevant distinction was articulated (Madec, 1998, pp. 9-10).[9] Similarly, Madec argues that Augustine's thought does not admit of a distinction between the natural and the supernatural, but rather the distinction between the eternal Logos and the incarnate Word (Madec, 1998, p. 14; cf. van Riel, 2012). Barnes and Madec stress that the failure to appreciate the contextual nuances of classic sources leads to misinterpretation. Moreover, such fallacious historical readings undermine the theological objectives for which they are cited.

2c. Concluding thoughts on the criticisms of the method

This section has revealed grave challenges to the handmaiden model of theology as it is done in the present. Systematic theologians may easily succumb to the pernicious effects of confirmation bias in their studies, resulting in an inaccurate and eisegetical interpretation of the sources. Such findings will be further vitiated if the systematicians insist upon a "reductive use of primary sources" (Barnes, 1995, p. 250) and a failure to appreciate their original setting. With a better sense of the serious challenges involved in performing systematic readings of historical sources, let us consider whether and to what extent such scholarship can be performed reliably and responsibly.

3. Systematic theology revisited

The foregoing considerations challenge the methodology presented in the first section of this article. While neither Barnes nor Pelikan reject in principle the application of philosophical and systematic methods to historical sources, their arguments challenge scholars to reflect more carefully on their work. The remainder of this article is dedicated to precisely that task. I shall present a revised and clarified understanding of a

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8   A paradigmatic example of this can be found in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* I, q. 1, art. 1, wherein he writes that divine revelation provides knowledge which cannot be discovered by mere human reason. Furthermore, he argues that revelation is a necessary supplement to human knowledge for the sake of salvation.

9   However, P. MacDonald (2010) would dispute Madec's position.

philosophical and systematic approach to the sources which considers the criticisms described above and presents insights from other fields to justify the relevant methods.

3a. A critique of the historical perspective

Before proceeding to this task, however, I should like briefly to tarry on one of the points raised in the previous section, in particular that by Pelikan (1966). As we have seen, he writes that historical theology must correct and guide systematic theology, especially when the latter departs from a faithful reading of the sources (Pelikan, 1966, p. 5). To this claim there can be no dispute. However, I believe that the reverse is also true, namely that systematic theology must also correct and guide historical theology, especially when the latter loses sight of the texts as possessed of metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical significance.

As a basis for my claim, I turn to A. Michalewski's treatment of Middle Platonism in her 2014 monograph *La puissance de l'intelligible* (*The Power of the Intelligible*). According to Michalewski (2014), the distinctive feature of Middle Platonism was its predominant interest in the exegesis of Platonic texts–especially the *Timaeus*–to determine Plato's actual intentions, rather than an enquiry into the significance of the texts for the practitioners of philosophy themselves (pp. 44-5). In other words, readers of Plato were arguing over what Plato "actually" meant as opposed to how his words could help them to live a better life. The result of this subtle if significant shift was a tendency towards pedantry, sophistry, and arrogance. As Michalewski (2014) writes,

> When Seneca complains of the threat that philology places on philosophy, what he laments is that for many young people, philosophy had become nothing but *an intellectual joust*, a mental contest where it is more about *shining than forming one's soul* (pp. 44-5; emphases mine).[10]

In my estimation, through this process of focusing primarily if not exclusively on authorial intention, one misses the very point of the text in question, namely opening oneself to introspection. When the content of the text itself is no longer seen as exercising a truth claim over the reader, one closes oneself to the opportunity to place oneself in question (Weinsheimer, 1985, pp. 142, 181).

This treatment of classical philosophy also reminds one that to read the sources in context is precisely to read them as living documents that are intended to make a difference to us. From its earliest beginnings, Greek philosophy constituted a holistic approach to education, the ultimate goal of which was the perfection of the soul (cf. Praet, 2020, p. 225; Star, 2017, p. 33; Cushman, 1950, *passim*, e.g.: pp. 71, 144, 147, 150, 298, 300). Early Christian intellectuals–not least of whom Augustine–adopted this view and incorporated it into their writings (Köckert, 2016, pp. 239-40; Löhr, 2010, p. 160; cf. de Beer, 2012). Furthermore, regardless of one's sympathies, one must consider the way in which the ancient authors themselves understood their own writings. According to F. Young (2005), ancient commentators did not

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10 "Lorsque Sénèque se plaint de la menace que la philologie fait peser sur la philosophie, ce qu'il déplore c'est que pour de nombreux jeunes gens, la philosophie ne soit devenue qu'une *joute intellectuelle*, un sport cérébral où il s'agit *davantage de briller que de former son âme*" (my translation).

distinguish between the intentions of the author and the meanings derived from the text by the reader (p. 133). Figures like Augustine viewed themselves within the context of a broader conversation which stretched in four dimensions and which was not so much about the particular words of their works, but about the subject matter itself (Pollmann, 2007).

As I see it, if the extreme of constructive theology is a cynical and selfish abuse of the sources, that of historical theology is a myopic, self-indulgent, and pedantic study which closes the reader to self-examination and ethical transformation (cf. Collingwood, 1958). Michalewski (2014) suggests this point when she writes,

> If one no longer views philosophy essentially as an "art of living" but above all as a theoretical study, an exercise disconnected from all concrete practical application, *not transforming the life of the one who grasps the texts*, then nothing more of it remains than the "philological" aspect (p. 45; cf. Danto, 1956, p. 23).[11]

My point is that attention to the philosophical content of a text is not a romantic departure from rigorous scholarly enquiry; it is an integral part of that enquiry itself.

Michalewski's treatment of the reception history of Plato demonstrates, I contend, that historical and systematic theology must ever be in dialogue with one another. The former serves as a "necessary prophylactic against anachronism" (Gregory, 2012, 7) and neglect, while the latter acts as a prophetic voice, ever calling historians to remember the true essence of philosophy and theology. In my own research, I wish to integrate both tasks to respect and preserve this essential and productive tension between historical and systematic theology.

3b. Gadamer and hermeneutical philosophy

Philosophical hermeneutics understands the meaning of a text as extending beyond the limitations of the original intentions of its author. One can identify a few reasons for this position, beginning with the process of composition. As one composes a text, one wishes to communicate a particular truth. However, this singular focus is only one part of what is reproduced in the author's writing. The deliberate aim of the author is like the tip of the iceberg, while the author's entire mental world–which is connected to and supports the top–lies beneath the surface. The latter part is what J. Weinsheimer (1985) calls the "surplus" of meaning contained within every text (p. 157). While this excess may escape the author's notice, it is still available to the reader in the work. Therefore, the proper interpretation of a work must attend to the wider background as well as the latent potencies of a text. The "intrinsic" meaning of a text, and therefore its correct interpretation, exceeds the conscious intentions of its creator.

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11 "Si l'on ne voit plus essentiellement la philosophie comme un 'art de vivre,' mais principalement comme une étude théorique, un exercice détaché de toute mise en pratique concrète, *ne transformant pas la vie de celui qui comprend les textes*, alors il n'en reste plus que la dimension 'philologique'" (my translation).

Furthermore, an ambiguity lies within the concept of authorial intention itself, the clarification of which provides reason for conceiving of a text's meaning as open to creative possibilities. An author, by making a truth claim in a text, *intends*–i.e., focuses on–something objective in the world, as opposed to a subjective psychological reality. From this observation, Weinsheimer (1985) draws the following conclusion: "The author's intention, therefore, is not to be confined within the parameters of the author's mind" (p. 156). In other words, to speak of authorial intention is notably to understand such an intention as inherently transcending the mental boundaries of the author.

Above all, Gadamer understands the essence of historical texts in terms of their contemporary communication. In *Wahrheit und Methode* (*Truth and Method*), Gadamer interrogates what it means to be a text. He argues that the correct interpretation of a text requires its *application* in the present day (Gadamer, 2013, p. 308; cf. Frei, 1974, pp. 106-17; Bernstein, 1983, p. 38). According to Weinsheimer (1985), "Law and Scripture cannot be understood merely aesthetically or merely historically because their claim on the present, their claim to be applicable, is part of what they are" (pp. 185-6). On this basis, I argue that the ideal way to respect the integrity of historical texts is to read them and identify their messages in different contexts.

Due to the surplus of meaning contained within a text, one may perceive numerous possible meanings and applications in it. Gadamer understands different interpretations as the realisation of the manifold dimensions and possibilities of one and the same thing (Grondin, 2006, p. 480; cf. Zimmermann, 2004, p. 172). Several interpretations of a particular text can all be true and need not compete with one another (Gadamer, 2013, p. 416). Furthermore, in my estimation, instead of thinking of the creative interpretation of a source as attributing a novel meaning or property, one ought to think of it in terms of revealing a latent truth contained within it. Indeed, according to Gadamer, every interpretation discloses some aspect of that which is interpreted (Gadamer, 2013, p. 489). Even in disclosing or positing further meanings, these are still responsive to and grounded in the original text itself (cf. Scraire, 2007, pp. 237-8). As I see it, this hermeneutical principle protects one against the dual risk of eisegesis and anachronism. Simply put, "The meaning is in the text" (Fortin-Melkevik, 1993, p. 227).[12] Moreover, such a revelation is enabled precisely *in virtue of* the unique perspective of the reader (Holston, 2014, p. 190).

From the perspective of hermeneutics, the interpretation of a text can be framed in terms of a conversation, *Gespräch* (Gadamer, 2013, p. 407). This is because both conversation and interpretation are reciprocal in nature (Gadamer, 2013, p. 407). A conversation must involve a common element understood by all participants and be guided by this same topic (Gadamer, 2013, pp. 375, 401, 403). Moreover, it is this common element which links spoken conversation and interpretive reading (Gadamer, 2013, p. 386). When one reads and interprets a text, the two partners in this dialogue, namely the text, or indirectly, the author thereof, and the reader, are both focused together on a common subject matter (Gadamer, 2013, pp. 405-6).[13] This is how I understand my method of looking to historical sources for contemporary insight.

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12 "Le sens est dans le texte" (my translation).

13 On this point, the analytic philosopher R. Wedgwood (2007) argues for the possibility of communicating across temporal boundaries, in particular by the curious reference to the concept of "witches" (pp. 172-3). See also Danto (1956, p. 26).

Furthermore, Gadamer stresses that a correct reading of a text, like any genuine conversation, does not permit one simply to impose one's own agenda. One's interpretations are always revised in light of one's encounter with the thing or the text itself (Scraire, 2007, p. 238; cf. Holston, 2014, p. 198). "To reach an understanding in a dialogue," writes Gadamer (2013), "is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were" (p. 387).[14] Though an ever-present danger, the possibility of confirmation bias can be mitigated by this open encounter with a text, whereby one becomes vulnerable and open to challenge. Just as an appropriate reading of theological sources requires one to be attentive to their resonance for the reader, so too does the reader have a responsibility to listen to and be influenced by the text, even to the point of revising or jettisoning prior commitments and beliefs.

It seems that the extreme position of rejecting any dialogue with sources altogether has been refuted. However, that still leaves a great deal of room for addressing obstacles to understanding (cf. Taylor, 2002, pp. 137-8). The rest of this article provides more specific suggestions for how to navigate the application of *philosophia ancilla theologiae*.

4. Methodological resources derived from the theological tradition itself

Resources from within the theological tradition itself can also provide the basis for a handmaiden approach to theology.

4a. Augustine's exegesis of Genesis 1

Augustine addresses questions of scriptural interpretation in the twelfth book of his *Confessiones* (*Confessions*), focusing mainly on the appropriate understanding of *in principio* ("In the beginning") in Genesis 1 (Augustine, 2016, pp. 308-21: 12.23.32-12.27.37.; Matthews, 2008, p. 158).[15] Augustine argues that a variety of interpretations of a particular passage may be apt, but that is not to say that just any one is valid (Matthews, 2008, p. 147). As G. Matthews explains, Augustine understands God as the author not only of the Scriptures but also of history. Thus, through divine providence, the Bible comes to admit of the possibility of an indefinite number of true interpretations. The full significance of a text extends beyond the thoughts of its (human) author (Matthews, 2008, pp. 158-9; *Conf.* 12.23.33).

Augustine enumerates two major forms of disagreement that can result from the interpretation of signs (in this case, a written text) (Augustine, 2016, pp. 308-11: 12.23.32).[16] The first pertains to the

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14 "Verständigung im Gespräch ist nicht ein bloßes Sichausspielen und Durchsetzen des eigenen Standpunktes, sondern eine Verwandlung ins Gemeinsame hin, in der man nicht bleibt, was man war" (Gadamer, 1986-1995, *GW* 1, p. 384).
15 See also Hammond's n. 60 on p. 310: "A[ugustine] is concerned here with authorial intention and inherent meaning."
16 Cf. O'Donnell, 1992, at *ibid*: "Author's intention is elusive; the more so in scriptural texts, where the author whose intention matters is God."

truth of the matter being related (*de ueritate rerum*), while the second pertains to the intentions of the author (*de ipsius qui enuntiat uoluntate*) (Augustine, 2016, p. 310: 12.23.32; Matthews, 2008, p. 158). Augustine differentiates these two foci in the following manner: "It is one thing to inquire into the truth surrounding the act of creation; and another to inquire into what Moses … wanted the reader and hearer to understand in the words of scripture" (Augustine, 2016, p. 311: 12.23.32). In other words, Augustine distinguishes between the truth about creation contained in the words themselves and what Moses originally intended. Indeed, Augustine identifies two possibilities for Moses' original intentions (O'Donnell, 1992, at *Conf.* 12.24.33; Hammond, 2016, p. 312 n. 61). He concludes that while both could be accurate, it is not clear which is truly reflective of Moses' mind at the time of composition (Augustine, 2016, pp. 310-13: 12.24.33). Augustine's primary concern is with what God communicates through the human agent Moses (Augustine, 2016, pp. 310-11: 12.23.32).[17]

Despite his interest in the theological content of the scriptural text, Augustine acknowledges that there are those who will argue with him over what Moses (the presumed author of Genesis) actually meant. These opponents will claim that they, and not Augustine, have properly understood Moses' intentions (Augustine, 2016, pp. 312-15: 12.25.34). Augustine replies that these could not truly understand Moses' mind as clearly as they claim. Furthermore, he believes that these readers cling to their own interpretation in virtue of their pride, "not because it is true but because it is theirs" (*non quia uera est, sed quia sua est*) (Augustine, 2016, pp. 314-15: 12.25.34). "But when they argue," Augustine claims, "that Moses did not mean what I say, but what they say, I cannot accept it, cannot warm to it, because even if it is so, still their presumption betrays arrogance, not knowledge. It is born of pride, not vision" (Augustine, 2016, p. 315: 12.25.34). Augustine suggests that those who quibble over authorial intent miss the point of scripture itself, namely charitable love (Augustine, 2016, pp. 314-17: 12.25.35). "Look how foolish it is," writes Augustine, "amid all this abundance of completely true opinions which can be plucked from those writings, to presume to assert which of them Moses believed most strongly, and with destructive arguments to offend against the very love on account of which he whose words we are trying to explain said it all" (Augustine, 2016, p. 317: 12.25.35). To the extent that a claim is true, it does not belong to any individual person, but to all who love truth (Augustine, 2016, pp. 312-15: 12.25.34). One sees that something is true not in virtue of a particular person, but in the light of Truth itself (Augustine, 2016, pp. 314-17: 12.25.35). Augustine notes that he and his opponents substantially agree on doctrinal matters pertaining to Genesis (O'Donnell, 1992, at 12.24.33). He questions the point behind arguing over Moses' intentions, especially when this is something that cannot be known (Augustine, 2016, pp. 314-17: 12.25.35).

Moreover, Augustine argues that even if we could ascertain Moses' meaning, that would not thereby exclude other interpretations (Matthews 2008, 159). As Matthews (2008) explains,

> A human being, for example, Moses, is inspired to write the words that make up a portion of God's Word. God approves what this Divinely inspired human scribe writes. However, God knows that different readers and hearers may interpret the words of any given statement of the Divinely inspired text to state different truths. Some of these truths will have been in the mind of the human author when he wrote whatever

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17 "Let us approach the words of your book and seek in them your will, expressed through the will of your servant [Moses], by whose pen you have disseminated those words" (*accedamus simul ad uerba libri tui et quaeramus in eis uo[l]untatem tuam per uoluntatem famuli tui [=Moses], cuius calamo dispensasti ea*) (Augustine, 2016, pp. 310-11: 12.23.32).

it was he wrote. But some of those truths may not have been in the human scribe's mind at all. Still, they may be readings God anticipated someone would assign to the text and so ordained as a justifiable interpretation. If we can actually discern the human author's mind, we may well have received a superior truth. But a truth is a truth. If we glean a truth from the sacred text, we will have learned something God ordained to be learned, even if it is not the meaning that was in the head of the human scribe when he wrote the sacred words (p. 159).

In virtue of its divine compositional origin (Matthews, 2008, pp. 158-9), the Bible provides a treasury of truths for all people, adjusted for their own individual needs and abilities (Augustine, 2016, pp. 314-21: 12.25.35-12.27.37). However, this is not to say that any interpretation is valid (Augustine, 2016, pp. 319-21: 12.27.37; Matthews, 2008, pp. 159, 161). Augustine claims that God ordained it such that many interpretations would be possible, though not all thereby equal (Matthews, 2008, pp. 147, 160). As G. van Riel (2007) notes (in reference to *Conf.* 12.22.31-28.38), an account of the human author's intentions is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a proper interpretation of scriptural texts. In addition to the literal meaning of the text, one must also interpret within the broader framework of the tradition and according to "right reason" (van Riel, 2007, p. 211).[18]

4b. Michael Fishbane and Jewish scriptural interpretation

Michael Fishbane, who has sought to construct a specifically Jewish hermeneutical theology, grounded in the Jewish Bible, or TNKH, has also informed both the content of my research and its methodology. Fishbane (2008) views hermeneutics as integral to the tradition of Jewish theology, particularly in its attempt to negotiate the dialectic between God's infinitude and the implications thereof for human life (p. 60). Moreover, given the complex history of Judaism, its adherents throughout history have faced and continue to face a fundamentally *practical* problem, namely, how to understand and apply the Torah in radically different historical and social circumstances (cf. Fishbane, 2008, p. 60).[19]

In *Sacred Attunement*, Fishbane (2008) seeks to blend a traditional Jewish theological approach to scripture and the principles thereof with contemporary hermeneutical theology. He turns to the four major reading strategies of Jewish scriptural interpretation: *peshat*; *derash*; *remez*; and *sod*, sometimes expressed with the acronym PaRDeS (Fishbane, 2008, pp. 64-5). The interpretive strategies of the PaRDeS can be deployed individually or in a plethora of combinations (Fishbane, 2008, p. 104). In his theology, Fishbane

18 Within the context of analytic philosophy, a similar approach to interpretation has been formulated with respect to artworks. Gaut (1993) argues for the possibility of attributing seemingly new properties to a work while grounding that attribution in the work itself (pp. 599, 600, 603, 604; cf. Percival, 2000, p. 55; Lamarque, 2010, pp. 69, 161). Similarly, Stecker (2003) claims that one can interpret works in apparently anachronistic ways. He employs the distinction between a concept and the content of a concept to support his point (Stecker, 2003, pp. 143-4). Perhaps the most striking parallel is presented by Levinson (1999), who suggests a hierarchy of interpretation, distinguishing between "does mean" and "could mean" (p. 6).

19 To name but a few noteworthy examples, one could think of the Talmuds; the *Code* of Moses Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah*, 12th c. CE); Joseph Caro's *Shulchan Arukh* (16th c. CE); and the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 and the subsequent fragmentation of (American) Judaism, which continues even today.

proposes to re-appropriate the PaRDeS for a contemporary audience. In this section, I shall focus on the first two of these interpretive approaches, with particular attention to how their interaction provides a model for historical and systematic theological methods.

Peshat deals primarily with the literal and linguistic meaning of a text, i.e., its "original" meaning in its "original" context. It requires true humility on the part of the reader and acceptance of the text as given (Fishbane, 2008, pp. 66, 71). Crucially, however, the reader's informed and active engagement activates and realises the dormant content of the text (Fishbane, 2008, pp. 66, 71). *Derash,* in contrast, involves the exploration of the potential meanings or significances of the Torah, going beyond the literal meaning sought in the *peshat* (Fishbane, 2008, p. 74). With *derash,* the focus is on the meaning of the text *for the reader here and now* (Fishbane, 2008, p. 76). Furthermore, the reader's own context informs the lesson that one takes from a *derash* reading of scripture (Fishbane, 2008, p. 81). *Derash* represents the ongoing voice and verve of the Torah throughout the ages, as the text is inherently something which has meaning for new generations (Fishbane, 2008, p. 75). As Fishbane (2008) writes, "the voice of Sinai was ceaseless, unendingly turned over and over to find all that is in it" (p. 76).

One of the specific techniques of a *derash* reading is intertextuality. Moving beyond the relationships of words in the individual passages, one searches for relationships between other passages as well (Fishbane, 2008, p. 75). In addition to scripture itself, one also draws upon the traditions of interpretation and exegesis (Fishbane, 2008, p. 76). In Fishbane's (2008) words, "new possibilities are disclosed through creative combinations or reformulations of scriptural language" (p. 76). *Derash* introduces one to the potential for novelty and creativity (Fishbane, 2008, p. 105). By standing in the overarching tradition of the Torah, one discloses new meanings of the text (Fishbane, 2008, p. 75). "Scripture is deemed an ever-flowing fountain with diverse meanings expressed through the mouths of its teachers" (Fishbane, 2008, p. 76).

I derive the following insights from Fishbane's treatment. First, although one can interpret the TNKH in a number of ways, these presuppose fidelity to the text; *peshat* is the fount from which all other interpretations flow. Secondly, from within the Jewish tradition, Fishbane expresses the hermeneutical idea that an essential aspect of the text is to make a claim on its readers in a variety of circumstances. Similar to Augustine, Fishbane (2008) grounds this inexhaustible depth of the text in its divine authorship. Furthermore, it seems to me that one can draw an analogy between *peshat* and the historical-critical and philological reading of sources on the one hand, and *derash* and systematic and hermeneutical readings on the other. As Fishbane (2008) makes clear, even though these two strategies have different goals, they are mutually enriching, and even inseparable:

> Here then is a delicate simultaneity: the *derash* guards against the stultification of the *peshat*, while the *peshat* grounds the *derash* in the common world; the *derash* is a prophetic voice decrying fundamentalistic reductions, while the *peshat* keeps counsel with the basic truth that circumstances require choices about values and meaning. In the fullest sense, the *derash* helps God remain God in our world by keeping the vastness of possibilities alive through the Oral Torah; but just as vitally, the *peshat* of the common world reminds us that we must always act in the here and now, and that this is the domain where Divinity may become actual and humanly real. Both factors must be held in mind; both are truths of a living theology (p. 106).

In my estimation, Fishbane's argument provides support for my claim that historical and systematic theology must remain in constant dialogue with each other. Somewhat like the relationship between *peshat* and *derash*, both have an essential part to play in the living tradition of Christian theology.

5. Exemplars: Desmond and O'Regan

In his aforementioned chapter on Westphal, Desmond (2009) defines two further approaches to the use of historical sources, both of which I have sought to emulate in my own research. One of these is the *companioning* approach. The *companionate* method mimics a conversation, in which one comes to articulate one's own thought, yet with the help and guidance of another speaker (Desmond, 2009, p. 23). While the latter constitutes a source of inspiration and direction, the former does not simply repeat the thought of the companion (Desmond, 2009, p. 23). According to Desmond (2009), an example of the companionate approach can be found in Westphal's theological treatment of Heidegger, wherein the former respects the integrity of the latter's thought and clearly identifies the boundaries between the two of them (p. 27). "Westphal is careful," Desmond (2009) writes, "to delineate what terms he makes use of from Heidegger. This is a *companioning* use of Heidegger, *not* a *ventriloquizing*" (p. 27, emphases mine).

In addition to the companioning, Desmond describes the *comparative*. In this case, we are not concerned with one figure, but rather with a dialogue envisioned between two particular figures. Moreover, we are not only thinking about the conditions of possibility for a dialogue between two sources, but two sources separated by both contextual and ideological differences. Even if they can be seen as speaking intelligibly to one another, how are we to adjudicate disagreements between them? Desmond's solution is to focus on an overarching question or problem. Such a juxtaposition is motivated by the compelling continuities between these sources, or possibly by their divergence. Westphal for example employs Hegelian concepts and ideas, yet in a way that does not presuppose Hegel's entire philosophical system. In Westphal we see an instance of someone engaging constructively with a figure in Hegel who apparently has nothing to offer (Desmond, 2009, p. 24). Westphal's approach, as Desmond (2009) explains, is "not to deny the possibility of conflict, but it is to deny conflict as the last word" (p. 24). Above all, the comparative method is best suited to enquiries in which a particular question, issue, or theme itself is at stake, rather than the study of the thought of a particular source.[6] Desmond's articulation of the comparative approach has deeply informed my own research. I strive to identify the areas of intersection between Augustine and other philosophical or theological figures, such as Gadamer. Such an enquiry, therefore, is guided by a particular issue, thus ensuring greater protection for the integrity of the respective corpora of all sources involved.

C. O'Regan's 2012 chapter on Augustine and Heidegger illustrates the aforementioned ideas of Desmond in two major ways. First, O'Regan takes contemporary scholars to task for developing positions which, while invoking Augustine, fail to reflect the genuine Augustine (O'Regan 2012, 175). In Desmond's terms, O'Regan identifies and rejects a "ventriloquizing" reading. The main task of O'Regan's piece, as the title suggests, is to allow Augustine to answer his critics–in this case Heidegger–from across temporal boundaries (O'Regan 2012, 135). I believe that O'Regan blends the companionate and the comparative approaches; he closely reads and critiques Heidegger's own reading of Augustine on time and subsequently, again on the basis of a close consideration of Augustine's own works, responds to Heidegger's treatment of Augustine. Furthermore, O'Regan's treatment of Augustine suggests that this early Christian author truly

has something to offer here and now, as a source of theological and philosophical reflection. Similarly, I contend that O'Regan's work suggests that the full significance of a text can be realised precisely in and through contemporary appropriation.

General Conclusion

As I conclude, I would like to review some of the key insights and implications of my research. Despite certain challenges to the handmaiden method, the foregoing study has demonstrated that this theological model is in fact tenable.

First and foremost, the findings of philosophical hermeneutics provide a basis for the legitimacy of interpreting scriptural and theological sources beyond the boundaries of the author's intentions and context. Simply in virtue of discussing texts in terms which do not reflect their original situation does not mean that one has lapsed into anachronism. Moreover, given the nature of religious texts, respecting the integrity of the source does not merely permit but *requires* one to reinterpret it and apply it in light of new circumstances.

The idea of various levels of interpretation provides a guide for the critical engagement with historical sources. On the one hand, one can study the source simply on the basis of its historical or philological characteristics. On the other hand, it is perfectly legitimate to interrogate the text from the perspective of contemporary conversations and interests. One can honour the integrity of the text while creatively dialoguing with it. This distinction also helps to show the proper areas of historical and systematic theology, respectively. However, considering the work of Pelikan and Fishbane, for example, it becomes clear that historical and systematic theology exist in a state of mutual dependence. They cannot perform their own functions without each other.

My sincere hope is that this research will open the door to increased collaboration between church historians and systematicians, as well as provide guidance and inspiration to scholars who wish to continue the ancient tradition of *philosophia ancilla theologiae*.

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