

REVIEW

J. Joyce Schuld, *Foucault and Augustine: Reconsidering Power and Love* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2003). ISBN 0-268-0269-9

With this thought-provoking and impressive study, J. Joyce Schuld makes an innovative contribution to the growing body of literature exploring the significance of the thought of Michel Foucault for Christian theology and the broader study of religion. Her discernment of parallels on a performative level, between Foucault's notion of power and St. Augustine's notion of love, supports what at first sight seems a rather unlikely prospect: a sustained and fruitful conversation between the intellectual projects of Foucault and Augustine. Attention to this performative level enables Schuld to pursue this unexpected conversation through a series of related issues in "theologically oriented cultural analysis", from social evil to the ambiguity of privileged discourses, while allowing Foucault's and Augustine's respective social and (inter)personal emphases to extend, in a kind of cross-contamination, "the geographic reach" of each other's analyses.¹ What emerges is a brilliantly articulated common concern with the complexities and ambiguities of the social and political spheres, and a common commitment to attending to the dangers and vulnerabilities associated with them. In so doing, Schuld succeeds in her goals of retrieving neglected dimensions of Augustine's thought and of demonstrating that Foucault has a value for theology, while elaborating a distinctive theological vision. And yet, her approach is not entirely unproblematic.

Particularly innovative in her cross-reading, from a methodological point of view, is its concern to explore the resonances and exploit the differences between these two thinkers to the benefit of both of their projects, without reducing the distinctiveness of their insights and approaches. However, Schuld provocatively claims that no "metanarrative pressures" are exerted at the performative level of power and love by Foucault's and Augustine's larger projects: for all of the differences between them, their analyses are ultimately not incompatible.² This correlates with Schuld's

¹ J. Joyce Schuld, *Foucault and Augustine: Reconsidering Power and Love* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2003), 3, 79.

² *Ibid.*, 78.

interpretation, inspired by aspects of the broader American reception of his thought, of Foucault's "specific researches" as "intentionally partial social descriptions" that are "empirical" in nature and "utterly uninterested in all-encompassing interpretations", "bracketing" rather than disqualifying broader questions. This enables her to present Foucault as attending to "forgotten voices" in a manner "suited to detecting and responding to the shifting risks of a post-modern world", while being able to locate his thought as "colourful fragments" within a more "intricate and extensive mosaic".³ Consequently, Foucault's carefully circumscribed social insights can be given greater "thickness" in their juxtaposition with Augustine's rather more personal and relational theological framework and can be inserted within it, even as the framework itself is extended by contact with Foucault's more political analysis.

While sophisticated and sympathetic (Schuld admirably wishes to defend Foucault against those who dismiss his thought as juvenile and dangerous), this reading simply seems to sacrifice too much of Foucault to Augustine's intellectual perspective. It cannot allow room for the possibility that Foucault's "bracketed" analyses and "unsettling rhetoric" might be strategic moments of a philosophical ethos that ultimately contests the "ontological and evaluative center" of Augustine's thought⁴ – or for the further possibility that Foucault's post-Christian concerns might even contest the *theological* presuppositions of Augustine's thought. In spite of her attention to differences between them, Schuld's interpretation of Foucault considerably limits the extent of those differences and threatens to subtly harmonize Foucault's thought with Augustine's theologically-motivated worldview. The difficulty here lies not so much in pursuing the interplay between Augustine and Foucault on the side of Christian cultural analysis, as in the tendency to obscure awareness that this is one half of the possible

³ Ibid., 8, 17-19.

⁴ Ibid., 42. See Schuld's quotation (p79) from Foucault's "The Subject and Power" supporting her view of his bracketed analyses: "If for the time being...I grant a certain privileged position to the question of 'how' it is not because I would wish to eliminate the question of 'what' and 'why'. Rather it is that I wish to present these in a different way." However, it seems that this text indicates the opposite of what Schuld draws from it. For as Foucault goes on to explain, the question of 'how', while of itself a "flat empirical little question", does want to "introduce a suspicion" concerning power's existence as the kind of object about which one can ask 'what' and 'why'. Thus, his concern is not to bracket, but to contest and alter, these questions of meaning and causality. See M. Foucault, "The Subject and Power" in J.D. Faubian, ed., *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, Volume 3 (New York: The New Press, 2000), 326-348, at 336-337.

conversation – that Foucault remains at a distance from Augustine and theology.⁵

These tensions carry through the opening chapter's fascinating exploration of the parallels between Augustinian 'love' and Foucauldian 'power'. There Schuld skilfully highlights how love, as well as power, is relational, dispersed, and productive; how love's emphasis upon the personal and power's attention to the social might complement one another to suggest a rich and varied network of relations that simultaneously constitute our personal and social space; how together power and love might better enable one to articulate the ambiguities, dangers and sites of subversive hope within that space.⁶ Schuld can propose that where Foucault extends Augustine's analysis deeper into the social and political spheres, the latter's notion of love introduces a richer grammar of human relationality, possessing a "generative" capacity in relation to human possibility that the political heritage of the term 'power' necessarily denies it.⁷ In addition, Schuld can suggest that Augustine's relational paradigm offers a more secure and satisfactory articulation of human freedom. Where Foucault must struggle to articulate a space of freedom beyond the ubiquity of power, Augustine can treat both of freedom and subjection within the single framework offered by love (in terms of ordered and disordered relations); where Foucault must define freedom in terms of autonomy (from power), Augustine can locate it within the sphere of interpersonal relationships.⁸

The quality of Schuld's writing – and this pertains throughout the book – is such as to evoke subtle and varied tones of likeness and contrast between Foucault's and Augustine's respective portrayals of power and love across a range of texts and concerns, while imaginatively opening up a shared space in which to conceive and extend the range and meaning of both. Nevertheless, omitted from this account is how Foucauldian power functions precisely against the assumption that a benign coincidence between power and freedom is possible, and thus how 'power' renders the space of relationality and (inter)subjectivity problematic as a space of freedom. While Schuld can recognise that Foucault would see dangers in Augustine's formulation of a freedom based on rightly ordered relations of dependency, her assumptions about the nature of Foucault's project do not allow her to see the contestation

⁵ Schuld's text tends to exhibit a degree of ambiguity, in this regard. At one moment, she stresses the irreducible differences between Foucault and Augustine and the limits of any conversation between them; at another, she seems to suggest that they simply differ in their styles of describing the same social reality, the one attending to the fine grain of specific aspects of that reality, the other continually relating these details within a larger pattern. See for example, Schuld, *Foucault and Augustine*, 8, 79.

⁶ See *ibid.*, 14ff.

⁷ See *ibid.*, 8, 31.

⁸ See *ibid.*, 18-30.

of that formulation implicit in his thought and, hence, the implied refusal of Augustine's position as a straightforward *alternative* to his own.⁹ It, therefore, does not clearly emerge in Schuld's discussion that Foucault's difficulties in reconciling power and freedom are ethical before they are conceptual. This is not to suggest that Schuld is incorrect to argue that Augustine's relational paradigm may have much to offer Foucault in this area (and vice versa), but that Foucault's contestation of Augustine's intersubjective emphasis (and Augustine's implicit contestation of Foucault's emphasis upon power) would seem to be a necessary part of the conversation between power and love, if the complexity of the encounter and the distinctiveness of each thinker's project is to be preserved.¹⁰

One further related difficulty needs to be mentioned. Schuld's desire to portray Augustine's and Foucault's analyses as complementary sometimes has the unfortunate tendency of leading to a simplified presentation of aspects of the content of Foucault's thought. For instance, she suggests that Foucault never resolves the tensions between his conceptions of power and freedom, but "simply wanders back and forth...between these two depictions of human possibilities".¹¹ However one ultimately judges Foucault's later reflections on themes such as 'governmentality', 'subjectivation', and 'care of the self', this description scarcely does them justice. Similarly, Schuld's emphasis upon the lack of a relational dimension to Foucault's notion of freedom tends to ignore, for instance, the emergence of the theme of friendship in his later thought.¹²

Nevertheless, within the parameters that follow upon her interpretation of Foucault, Schuld does offer an impressively sustained and

⁹ See *ibid.*, 43. See also, M. Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress" in P. Rabinow, ed., *Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 2000), 253-280, at 256. Foucault stresses that he is not pursuing alternative solutions but the genealogy of problems. His statement that "you can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people" would seem to bear on his conversation with Augustine.

¹⁰ Schuld wants to utilize Augustine's premodern thought as a way of appreciating Foucault's insights by creating a distance from the modernity he criticizes. However, Foucault's later genealogies of the subject suggest that Augustine's assumptions cannot be so readily or unproblematically differentiated from those of modernity and cannot so easily be made to escape Foucault's critique.

¹¹ Schuld, *Foucault and Augustine*, 29.

¹² For example, see Marli Huijer, "The Aesthetics of Existence in the Work of Michel Foucault", *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 25.2 (1999), 61-85. Huijer argues that "the relation to the intimate other, shaped as friendship, is crucial to [Foucault's] ethical-aesthetic approach." (61). Perhaps, this also suggests a limit to the usefulness of reading Foucault primarily through the lens of the notion of 'power', as it tends to obscure the significant developments to be found in Foucault's later thought, as well as the critique of aspects of the earlier deployment of 'power'.

multi-dimensional cross-reading of Foucault and Augustine. The conversation yields a multiplicity of insights for a Christian cultural analysis confident of its own “ontological and evaluative center”, and, perhaps most impressively, articulates a coherent perspective rooted in Augustine’s and Foucault’s genuinely shared concerns with the dangers and ambiguities, vulnerabilities and possibilities, of the personal and social spheres. Across a range of texts and questions, Schuld shows how their respective responses to the dangerous and failed rhetorics of empire and modernity lead to an attention to the ambiguities and dangers that underlie the “lust for certitude”¹³ and the privileging of certain discourses. She also shows how Foucault and Augustine highlight both the “performative vulnerabilities” that complicate our ability to eliminate the negative side of our social achievements and how certain people are rendered vulnerable in this context.

The fascinating comparison drawn between Augustine’s theory of original sin and Foucault’s analysis of power in the second chapter illustrate these achievements well. Schuld highlights how each thinker delineates a social space in which evil is anonymous and yet permeates its most infinitesimal ‘capillaries’ and processes.¹⁴ More importantly she shows how both Foucault and Augustine articulate a sense of human agency and responsibility within this social space responsive to the human vulnerability and moral ‘vertigo’ experienced within it. This enables her to present a striking and insightful contrast between the ‘vulnerable’ subjectivity Foucault and Augustine propose, on the one hand, and the ‘autonomous’ moral agent she discerns, for example, in the work of Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor, on the other.¹⁵ As such (and here her argument is perhaps most insightful and persuasive), Schuld succeeds in articulating a genuine and distinctive Foucauldian-Augustinian ethical ‘voice’.

Discerning the roots of this common understanding of human “performative vulnerabilities” in their “shared conviction that the materiality of the flesh and the particularity of subjective identities are both at the same time radically configurable and configuring”¹⁶ forms the basis for an extended discussion in Chapter 3, centred on notions of desire and habit, of the possibilities and limits of configuring our social world. In turn, this leads in Chapter 4 to an exploration of the human price of claims to certitude. An innovative feature of this discussion is the suggestion that Foucault and Augustine share a view that ‘concupiscence’ linked to sexual desire has only a relative significance in explaining ‘performative vulnerabilities’ and their social outcome: a more complex picture is required.¹⁷ The strength of Schuld’s

¹³ Schuld, *Foucault and Augustine*, 111.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, 47-51.

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, 59ff.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, 85-102.

analysis lies in her ability to convey the complexity performed in this regard in the writings of Foucault and Augustine and so to evoke the multi-dimensional approach called for in analyzing the contemporary context.

The final chapter, on the ambiguity of social achievements, reflects Schuld's accentuation of neglected social and political aspects of Augustine's theology. Against the backdrop of Foucault's texts, Augustine's view that the political is an unnatural and ambiguous realm can be seen to reflect not simply the contemplative's distrust of the world, but a genuine political gesture attuned to the ambiguity of all social achievements.¹⁸ Equally, Schuld can suggest a similar significance to Augustine's questioning not only of desire not ordered by reason, but of reason itself, disordered as it is by desire.¹⁹ At the same time, Foucault's sensitivity to the dangers of power demonstrates limitations in Augustine's political thought, such as his readiness to tolerate, for the preservation of order, measures that he admitted were repellent.²⁰

At the beginning of her study, Schuld cites Foucault's invitation to approach his thought as a tool-box containing various resources to be used in "creative analysis and appropriation".²¹ And in many respects this book is an admirable and sophisticated response to that invitation, opening up a rich and unexpected conversation. However, at crucial points in the argument Schuld makes her strategic reading of Foucault coincide too neatly with Foucault's own concerns. Where this occurs Foucault's work suffers the kind of distortions that often troubled him, and the credibility of Schuld's argument suffers. Thus, while her study reveals much in Foucault's and Augustine's ethical approaches that appears critical to our contemporary context and develops a fine theologically oriented cultural analysis, important in its own right, it also misses opportunities for a more profound *Auseinandersetzung* between Foucault and Augustine and, consequently, a more thorough contestation of theology's own entanglement in the ambiguities and dangers, vulnerabilities and possibilities of our present. Nevertheless, this study is highly recommended for its creative and insightful elaboration of a new and unexpected space of dialogue and for its challenge to the preconceptions and categorizations that can all too readily circumscribe ethical and religious thinking.

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¹⁸ See *ibid.*, 161ff.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, 177-8.

²⁰ See *ibid.*, 186.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.