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I. Introduction

Augustine made a significant contribution to the history of philosophical accounts of affectivity which scholars have not yet noticed. He resolved a problem in the Stoic theory as it was known to him from Seneca and Aulus Gellius: the question of the cognitive cause of “preliminary passions” (propatheiai), reflex-like affective reactions which must be immediately controlled if a morally bad emotion is to be avoided. It was problematic in the Stoic accounts that these affective reactions were said to occur without the judgments that would constitute emotions properly so called (path or eupatheiai); for given the Stoics’ rational psychology and their stipulation that emotions are reducible to judgments, any affective state would seem to require a cognitive cause. Augustine moved beyond the Stoics by developing the implications of their own cognitivism. He identified the cause of propatheiai as momentary doubt, as I shall demonstrate by citing passages from sermons spanning twenty-seven years of Augustine’s writing career.

Augustine described the cognitive cause of preliminary passions only in his sermons; he did not do so in his other, more obviously philosophical works, although the descriptions in the sermons harmonize with what he does say about preliminary passions in more argumentative, formal works such as the De Civitate Dei. That peculiar fact can presumably be explained as follows. He wrote his theoretical works for specific purposes (usually apologetic); in such works, introducing his theory about the cognitive cause of preliminary passions would not have

1 Although R. Sorabji has recently drawn attention to some of the relevant passages (Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 378–9). For further references to this work, see notes 28–30 and 99 below.

2 By “sermons” I refer both to the collection called Sermones and the Enarrationes in Psalmos (hereafter “EP”).

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been useful. However in the sermons, where his purpose is often to instruct on how to overcome temptation, detailed analysis of preliminary passions was conducive to his goal. Thus in the sermons we find evidence that from early in his writing career he had indeed thought about the problem of preliminary passions and had posited doubt as the cause. This interesting discovery is one indication that scholars are right to have recently drawn attention to the philosophical interest of Augustine’s sermons, and to the fact that these texts have been largely ignored in secondary literature in philosophy.

2. THE STOIC BACKGROUND TO AUGUSTINE’S THEORY OF PRELIMINARY PASSIONS

Through Cicero, Seneca, and Gellius, Augustine was familiar with such Stoic claims as

(1) emotions are caused by (or are) judgments that some thing that seems relevant to one’s personal well-being is a great good or evil;


On the importance of Seneca for Augustine, I differ from H. Hagendahl (Augustine and the Latin Classics II [Göteborg: Almqvist &Wiksell, 1967]) but am of like mind with a number of other scholars surveyed by him (see Hagendahl, op. cit., 678–80). Hagendahl held that the scantiness of Augustine’s explicit references to Seneca militates against the view that he was a significant influence. But Seneca need not have been frequently mentioned in order to be an influence, and more generally Hagendahl’s approach overlooks the cumulative weight of converging pieces of evidence which in isolation seem to him insufficient to establish an important connection between the two authors. For some such evidence not addressed by Hagendahl, see what follows and section three below.


See, e.g., Cicero, Tusculane Disputationes (hereafter “TD”) 3.24–5, 3.28, 3.61, 4.22; Seneca, De Ira (hereafter “DI”) 2.1.4, 2.3.1, 2.3.4, 2.3.5, 2.4.2. Cicero says both that they are caused by and that they are judgments; see A. Lloyd (“Emotion and Decision in Stoic Psychology,” in The Stoics, J. Rist, ed. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978], 237, 244) for discussion of the Stoics’ shift from an Aristotelian model of emotion as a psychological process composed of stages to a model of aspects of a single event (awareness of a judgment).

The connection between relevance (see Cicero’s discussion of required “freshness” or “urgency” (rectas, urgenas), TD 3.26, 3.27, 3.55–6, 3.61, 3.75, 4.14) and interest in one’s well-being is implicit; it follows from the role of oikeiosis in Stoic psychology, on which see B. Inwood (Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985], 185) and S. Pembroke (“Oikeiosis,” in Problems in Stoicism, A. Long, ed. [University of London: The Athlone Press, 1971], esp. 130).

Cicero frequently says that the intentional objects of emotions are “great” goods and evils (magnum bonum/malum; see references in previous note). But it should be noted that he occasionally says the object is simply “a good” or “an evil” (TD 3.24–5, 3.74 citing Zeno immediately after). It seems possible that the older, more orthodox formulation was the latter, given the Stoics’ claim that nothing
emotions are susceptible to moral evaluation depending upon the truth or falsity of the judgments, since wisdom is a sufficient condition for virtue (health or strength of soul). For example, morally bad emotions (“passions”) are caused by false judgments that some thing which is of no value at all, or of very little value, is of great value;\(^\text{10}\) 

there are involuntary affective reactions, which appear to be passions (morally bad emotions), but which arise without the relevant judgments; even sages may have these. These non-consensual affects are described variously as the results of past passions (“shadows” or “bites”)\(^\text{11}\) and as “preliminaries” of full-blown passions (propatheai).\(^\text{12}\) I shall focus on the accounts of “preliminaries” which Augustine knew; these occur in Seneca and Gellius.

The Stoics had no substantive account of the cognitive component of preliminary passions, although Seneca and Gellius had alluded to internal acts corresponding to the physiological manifestations of preliminary forms of fear and anger. In Seneca we find the claim that preliminaries to anger are caused by the reception of an impression (species, opinio\(^\text{13}\)) that one has been injured, without is good except virtue, which does not admit of degrees (see, e.g., De Finibus [hereafter DF] 3.34–6, 3.50, 3.58, TD 2.60–1). Note, e.g., that the use of “great good” harmonizes with Cicero’s criticism that the Stoics’ “preferred indifferents” are equal in value to the “lesser goods” enumerated by other philosophical schools (DF 4.23; compare Augustine De Civitate Dei [hereafter “DCD”] 9.4).\(^\text{14}\)

I know of no precedent for Cicero’s use of “great” goods/evils. He cites Chrysippus in a passage where he uses the formulation “great evil” (TD 3.61). M. Graver has recently presented evidence for the suggestion that Chrysippus is Cicero’s direct source for much of the Stoic material (Cicero on the Emotions [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002], 204–7). But “great” good/evil does not occur in the passages she presents from Galen, Diogenes Laertius, and Calcidius which are or may be based on Chrysippus; the objects of passions are said to be simply “goods” or “a fine thing” (see Graver, op. cit., 204 [cf. 206], 210). Origen does report that Chrysippus thought he did not require the premise that non-virtues are non-goods: even if it should be true that there are three classes of goods (two being non-virtues), there are still passions which ought to be cured (Contra Celsum; see Graver, op. cit., 212). That being so, Cicero’s formulation does not clash with Chrysippus, even if he modified what he found in Chrysippus, or if Chrysippus was not his direct source.

In any case, Augustine considered Cicero a reliable source for the Stoic theory of the passions (see the references in DCD 8.17, 9.4, and 14.8); thus he would have accepted Cicero’s most frequent formulation (“great” goods and evils) as Stoic. The term “intentional object” for “what an emotion is about” was made current by R. Solomon (see, e.g., The Passions, 2nd ed. [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983], 171–2, citing the phenomenological tradition).\(^\text{2}\)

In this formulation, which I paraphrase from Seneca (Epist. 75.11: “... in magnio pretio habere in aliqua habenda vel in nillo”), two possible judgments are mentioned: (a) a judgment that something of no value has great value, or (b) a judgment that the magnitude of its value is greater than it actually is. This is presumably because of the variation in value among the “indifferent things” (non-virtues, non-goods), some of which are possessed of moderate value (indifferens cum aestimatione mediocri) and others of which are neutral (see DF 3.50–4). Compare Seneca, Epist. 75.11 on the intentional object of a passion (magnum pretium) to Cicero, TD 4.26: “an eminently desirable thing” (res valde expetenda), citing Chrysippus shortly before (4.23).

Cicero, TD 3.83; Seneca citing Zeno, DI 1.16.7.


This odd use of opinio for an un-assented-to impression (so different from Cicero’s use) is noted by Inwood, op. cit., 179, and then argued to be Seneca’s making a distinction between two types of rationality (“Seneca and Psychological Dualism,” in Passions and Perceptions, J. Brunschwig and M. Nussbaum, eds. [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993] 174–7).
approval or acceptance (adprobare, capere) of the impression as true. The person who has such a preliminary reaction “thinks” (putavit) that he has been injured, and the impression has the same syllogistic form as is found in the judgment which constitutes anger itself. Yet this impression is contrasted with judging that the propositions in the syllogism are true, with comprehending (intelligere) that one has been injured, and with knowingly becoming angry.

Gellius, summarizing Epictetus’s position, reports that preliminary fear is provoked by impressions (phantasiai, visa), and describes the internal state of the subject as follows: “we yield to natural weakness (naturali infirmitati cedamus) rather than judge (censeamus)” that impressions are true.

Seneca indicates how the transition from preliminary passion to passion proper may occur in the case of anger: by brooding over suspicions and believing things for which one has insufficient evidence. Such credulity contributes to the “growth” of preliminaries into a judgment of the mind from which anger is born.

What evidence do we have that Augustine knew and was influenced by these accounts of preliminary passions? Although he does not mention Seneca by name when he directly addresses the topic of affectivity, he indicates that he had more than average knowledge of Seneca in the Confessiones, and mentions him three times in the De Civitate Dei. Moreover, we find elements from Seneca’s moral treatises and letters in Augustine’s discussion of the Stoic view of emotion in the De Civitate Dei, and in other argumentative texts. As I shall illustrate below, there are similarities between Seneca’s account of preliminaries to anger in the De Ira and Augustine’s accounts of the same phenomena in his sermons; he makes use of the same metaphors and identifies the same causes of anger as Seneca does.

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14 DI 2.1.4, 2.3.5.
15 DI 2.3.4.
16 DI 2.4.1: “tamquam oporteat me vindicari cum laesus sim, aut oporteat hunc poenas dare, cum scelus fecerit.”
17 DI 2.1.1, 2.1.5.
18 DI 2.3.4, 2.1.1.
20 DI 2.4.1, “praeparatio affectus . . . incipiant, crescant” with DI 2.24.1–2.
21 At e.g., DCD 9.4–9.5, DCD 14.9.
22 When he describes his disappointment in discovering that Faustus was significantly less educated than himself, Faustus’s knowledge was “of a merely conventional kind”: “He had read some orations of Cicero, a very few books by Seneca, some pieces of poetry, and some volumes of his own sect” (Conf. 5.6.11).
23 DCD 5.8 regarding Seneca’s Epist. 107, and DCD 6.10 (twice).
24 For instance, he sometimes relies on Seneca’s technical term affectus (for Stoic pathos) when referring to emotions that he considers to be sins (DCD 8.14, DCD 14.12). This suggests familiarity with Seneca’s moral treatises and letters, where this term is used. Again, of the four Stoic passions to which Augustine draws attention in De Civitate Dei 9.5, ira and misericordia seem to be included because of Seneca; anger is not emphasized by Cicero, and the distinction between clementia and misericordia is mentioned only in passing in Tusculanae, which does not seem sufficient to explain Augustine’s treating it as a hallmark Stoic position. At De Clementia 2.5.4 Seneca claims that “No sorrow befalls (cadere) the sage,” and this closely resembles the claim Augustine ascribes to the Stoics in DCD 9.4: “The Stoics say that no passion befalls (cadere) the sage.” Moreover, in Contra Faustum 25 Augustine’s characterization of cruelty as that which thirsts for blood in an exaggerated reaction to injury is reminiscent of Seneca’s discussion in De Ira 2.5.1–4. And at DCD 14.15 his example of the irrationality of anger directed at inanimate objects is similar to Seneca, DI 2.26.1–2.
It is also clear that Gellius’s summary of Epictetus’s account of preliminary passions (in *Noctes Atticae* 19.1) significantly influenced Augustine. The latter summarizes this text, in the interest of solving a problem or furthering his argument, in two places: *De Civitate Dei* 9.4 and *Quaestiones in Heptateuchem* 1.30. In both he shows awareness of the distinction between a preliminary, which is not caused by a false judgment of the mind (*mens*), and a passion, which is. In *De Civitate Dei* 9.4–5, he explains that the preliminary passion (which he calls a *passio praeveniens mensis et rationis officium*) does not oust the virtue from a sage’s mind (*mens*). In the *Quaestiones in Heptateuchem* he uses *Noctes Atticae* 19.1 to defend the virtue of Abraham. *Genesis* states that “panic came over Abraham, and behold, a great fear seized him.” Yet Augustine holds that Abraham was wise. Seeking to reconcile these two facts, he interprets the statement that Abraham was seized with fear as a description of a preliminary passion. He summarizes *Noctes Atticae* 19.1, and says that Epictetus’s account is to be “diligently applied” to Abraham’s case.

In both these texts, Augustine says that such preliminaries befall the “animus” as opposed to the *mens*. The essential question, as he sees it, is whether the *mens* consents; the animus which is affected upon the receipt of pre-approved impressions is sufficiently separate from the *mens* to preclude the consent of one who exhibits them. Since Seneca regularly attributes superficial changes and preliminary passions to the animus, but judgment that constitutes a passion to the *mens*,

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43 See DCD 9.4–5, e.g., 9.4: “... the Stoics allow this version of ‘passions’ to visit the animus of the wise man, who in their system is free from every vice. Thus they do not consider these experiences themselves to be vices when they affect the wise man in such a way that they can do nothing against the virtue and order of his *mens*” (trans. Weisen adapted).

44 “Pavor irruit super Abraham, et ecce timor magnus incidit ei” (*Gen.* 15.12).

45 E.g., *EP* 7.2.21: “Am I to say something different from that which Abraham said, from that which Isaac said, from that which Jacob said, from that which the Prophets said? ... Is there greater wisdom in me than in them? Greater understanding in me than in them?”

46 He begins his exegesis: “On account of those who hold that those perturbations [like fear] do not befall the soul of the wise man, it must be considered whether it [Abraham’s state] be the sort of thing described by A. Gellius in his books of the *Attic Nights*” (*Quaestiones in Heptateuchem* hereafter “*QH*”) 1.30: “Tractanda est ista quaestio—propter eos qui contendunt perturbationes istas non cadere in animum sapientis—utrum tale aliquid sit, quale A. Gellius commemorat in libris Noctium Atticarum”). Sorabji, op. cit., 379 treats Augustine’s “*sit*” as an existential, so that he gets the result: “We must discuss the question whether there is such a thing as A. Gellius mentions. ... ” *Esse* can, of course, have existential force; but there is no apparent reason why that force should be assumed here and in the discussion which follows; the existence of such a thing is not the issue. Augustine’s question is only whether this is the state that Abraham was in.

47 “... [H]e [the Stoic philosopher on board the ship] brought out a certain book by the Stoic Epictetus, where it was read that the Stoics had not held that no sort of perturbation befalls the soul of the sage, in the sense that nothing of that sort appears in his feelings (*affectibus*), but that ‘perturbation’ was defined by them as [that state] when reason cedes to such changes [of soul]; but when it does not cede, that is not to be called a perturbation” (*QH* 1.30: “proultit librum quendam Epicteti Stoici, ubi legebaturu non inta placuisse Stoicis nullam talenum perturbationem cadere in animum sapientis, quasi nihil tale in eorum adpararet affectibus, sed perturbationem ab eis definiti, cum ratio talibus motus cederet; cum autem non cederet, non dicendam perturbationem”). This shows understanding of the distinction between *pathos*, involving consent of the mind, and *propatheia*, which does not, pace Sorabji, op. cit., 379, 380.

48 *QH* 1.30: “Sed considerandum est quemadmodum hoc dicat A. Gellius, et diligenter inserendum.” This sentence is not included by Sorabji, op. cit., 380, who stops translating before Augustine’s exposition has ended.

49 DI 1.16.7, 2.2.2, 2.3.5, 2.4.2.
and since Gellius, too, specifies that the *mens* is not involved in preliminary passions which move the *animus*, Augustine is in line with his Stoic sources when he invokes a *mens-animus* distinction.

But what does Augustine mean by saying that the preliminary passion is in the *animus*? It would seem that he ought to mean that there is some rational component in the preliminary affective reaction. For, as has been widely recognized, Augustine consistently uses *animus* to connote rationality. Given this sense of *animus*, and the fact that Seneca and Gellius had vaguely alluded to certain internal acts as causes of preliminary passions, it would not be surprising if Augustine had actually gone on to posit a cognitive cause of preliminary passions.

### 3. **Augustine’s Contribution: Preliminary Passions in the Sermons**

As we have seen, both Seneca and Gellius describe preliminary passions as reactions to impressions. In an early sermon, we see Augustine setting up the problem which remains unresolved in such descriptions. Reflecting on those accounts of preliminary passions with which he was familiar, he argues that a reflex reaction of panic fear to a surprise event cannot be explained except as a wavering in (though not a loss of) the virtue of the impressed person, which must be due to a momentary weakness in said person’s apprehension of the truth (“light”). It cannot be explained by reference to a quality intrinsic to the surprising event itself, but must have a cognitive cause:

Generally something comes on us of a sudden. . . . The earth quakes, thunder is sent from heaven, a formidable attack is made upon us, or a horrible sound is heard. Perhaps a lion is seen on the road. . . . perhaps robbers lie in wait for us. . . . we panic. . . . Why? Because my courage has failed me. For what would be feared, if that courage still remained unmoved? Whatever had tidings were brought, whatever threatened, whatever sound was heard, whatever happened, whatever was ‘horrible’, would inspire no terror. Where does that trouble [i.e., the reflexive terror] come from? . . . Why has my courage failed me? The light of my eyes is not with me.

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35 Written in 395 AD.
36 Two of the examples he gives may be from Seneca, who mentions thunder and oncoming assault of the enemy at Di 2.2.4 and 2.3.3; the example of thunder is also in Gellius, NA 12.5.
37 It is not my purpose here to discuss the fact that, while he denies that preliminary passions are sins, Augustine thinks they are evidence of a damaged, weakened state of soul (which has been caused by sin). Compare Seneca, Di 1.16.7 and Cicero, TD 3.83, and see n. 84 below.
38 When quoting from Augustine’s sermons, I have italicized lines from scripture which they contain, so that his words can easily be distinguished from the passage he is commenting on.
The problem that Augustine identifies is the following. The sage is supposed to know that death and physical suffering do not merit fear. But if the sage knows this at the moment when a life-threatening event befalls him, then why does he react as if the thing merited fear? Why does he have an impression to which he cannot assent without forfeiting his wisdom? Events such as noises or the view of a large animal cannot be inherently, necessarily terrifying; they only terrify when they are interpreted (however briefly) as having a certain import by the one who becomes panicked. There are only two variables in the equation, and the external event is not causing the sage to see it as something which it is not. Hence the cause must be a momentary weakness in the sage’s apprehension of the real import of the situation (i.e., of the truth, or “light”).

In other sermons, Augustine specifies that this cognitive cause is doubt. By doubt he means hesitation over two incompatible propositions, as opposed to an internal act of asserting or deciding on one of them.

Though it is not my main goal to discuss the propositional content of the doubt we shall see Augustine describing, it will be useful to say a word about it in preparation for citing the passages themselves. Otherwise that content may at times seem so incongruous with the Stoic theory as to distract from or even call into question Augustine’s genuine development of Stoic cognitivism.

Recall that the Stoic view as known to Augustine was that emotions are caused by (or are) judgments that some thing that seems relevant to one’s personal well-being is a great good or evil. That being so, if a Stoic had identified doubt as the cognitive cause of preliminary passions, he would likely have said that it was doubt over whether some thing were a great good or evil. And only the virtues are great goods, according to the Stoics.

Augustine moved beyond the Stoics by giving metaphysical backing to this allusion to “great” goods. To do so he employed a Platonic distinction between mutable (“temporal”) and immutable (“eternal”) goods; the former are lesser goods, while the latter are great goods. Temporal goods “contribute to our earthly life”; they include both corporeal and incorporeal mutable goods such as spouses, children, human cultures or empires, fame, honor, and friendships. In this life, all temporal goods are “already passing and soon will die,” and therefore our possession of these goods can come to an end even against our will.(

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(pathos) (see, e.g., DCD 9.4), but he does not accept that the term need be restricted to such a narrow scope. Colloquially, a wide range of phenomena is embraced by the word perturbatio, and Augustine is accustomed in his preaching to using perturbatio less technically—for any disruption of a harmonious arrangement or ideal state. When using perturbatio for a preliminary, he distinguishes it from a passion by using a mens-anima distinction. When the scriptural passage given uses anima distinction.

* Since according to the Stoics, only the virtues are good enough to merit emotions; see DCD 9.5 and, e.g., TD 3.74. 3.76–7, De Fin. 3.35; see also above.

* See notes 7 and 8 above.

* EP 32.2.5.

* EP 26.2.17; EP 34.1.1.7; EP 58.1.7; and see Augustine on Rome, Sermo 296.7.

* See De Libero Arbitrio (hereafter “DLA”) 1.3.8–1.4.10.
The eternal goods, like the Stoics’ “great goods,” are the virtues. The virtues may be called “eternal” in two senses. First, following Plotinus, Augustine held that there are unchanging standards of the virtues among the Ideas in the eternal Mind of God. Second, the virtues can be possessed endlessly by the immortal soul. Because the Forms/Ideas are immutable, once they have been possessed (by contemplation of and action conforming to the standards) they are only lost when he who has them willingly alters his relation to them. So eternal goods are “goods which cannot be lost in a shipwreck”: the “inner treasures” of truth and wisdom, and the “jewels of conscience,” such as faith, hope, charity, hospitality, chastity, justice, and fidelity.

Making use of this distinction, Augustine said that a passion is caused by a false judgment that a temporal good has the value of the eternal goods. And he held that in a preliminary passion, one doubts whether a particular temporal good has the value of eternal goods.

As it happens, the overvaluation that constitutes a passion is incompatible with properly valuing eternal goods. For the virtues alone are necessary and sufficient for happiness; but someone who ascribes the value of eternal goods to temporal goods must hold that possession of temporal goods is necessary and sufficient for happiness. This leaves eternal goods in a merely accidental role—they may make a life happier or happiest, but are not productive of happiness.

Since eternal goods are “in” God (i.e., of God’s nature), failure to ascribe the proper value to them, Augustine reasons, constitutes a “turning away from” God,
a sin. Thus we shall sometimes see him representing the judgments that constitute passions and the doubt that constitutes preliminaries as concerned with God himself. These acts are about God at least by implication.

Finally, Augustine’s belief that God’s governance is ultimately responsible for the distribution of temporal goods explains why we shall see him describing some passions as reducible to judgments that God’s providence is inept or unjust. Given God’s responsibility, Augustine held that passions provoked by the absence of an overvalued temporal good are in fact about God’s providence. Someone who lacks a temporal good which he or she believes to be necessary for happiness holds (at least by implication) that God has misallocated that good.

I am now in a position to present the evidence that Augustine considered doubt the cognitive cause of preliminary passions. The texts wherein he specifies this do not make use of theoretical language, for the context determines the language used in the sermons. The language is given in scriptural phrases and stories which he uses to analyze and moralize about affectivity.

Thus the key to discovering what Augustine thinks about preliminary passions is to notice which scriptural passages he habitually puts to this didactic purpose. Conversely, failure to take this phenomenon into account will result in failure to recognize important features of his account.

In fact, several scriptural phrases have a virtually technical function in Augustine’s sermons. He uses them consistently over a period of twenty-seven years to refer metaphorically to preliminary passions. There are three such “technical” metaphors; he employs these to describe preliminary jealousy, fear, cupidity, and anger: a slipping foot, an irritated eye, and a speck (in the eye) vs. a beam.

As odd as it may seem at first to treat metaphors as constituting a theory about the cognitive cause of preliminary passions, the practice is warranted given that these are precise analogies whose elements consistently represent cognitive acts, powers of the soul, and specific affective states. Moreover, what Augustine says in

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52 See DLA 1.16.35 and 2.19.54 on the definition of sin. For the identification of the virtues with God (because of the metaphysics), see, e.g., Sermo 107.A.3: “You will possess God. You will be full of God. . . . However much God has given you, however much piety he has granted you, however much charity, however much justice he has granted, however much chastity, whatever he has granted you of himself, cannot be superfluous. Your inner riches are enormous. What are they called? God.”

53 Certainly the extent to which one is aware of the implication depends upon one’s awareness of metaphysics. But that does not prevent it from being a fact, according to Augustine. His reasoning is that God is not a projection of the human mind, but part of reality whether people recognize him or not. For example: “It was because sin was forbidden [by the Law] that it was recognized for what it is” (Sermo 283.2)—note that he does not say it only counted as a sin after people became aware that it was so.

54 See, e.g., EP 31.2.26: “Refer the scourge that falls on you to God, because the devil does nothing to you unless by permission from our powerful God, who may allow it either as a punishment or a discipline.”

55 E.g., “whether you blame God directly or in a roundabout way through fate . . . in one way or another you are willing to find fault with God” (Sermo 29B.7), and see n. 53.

56 392–419 AD. See also next note.

57 There are twelve instances of the slipping foot metaphor, beginning in 392 AD and ending in 419; thirteen featuring the irritated eye, beginning in 392 and ending in 410–2 (the last sermon is of uncertain date); and seven usages of the speck versus the beam metaphor, beginning in 392 and ending in 415 or 418 (the last sermon is of uncertain date).
these sermons in metaphorical language harmonizes with what he says in more theoretical terms about the *propatheia* to fear of Gellius’s sage at *De Civitate Dei* 9.4 and *Quaestiones in Heptateuchem* 1.30.

It will be observed in what follows that while much of the material for Augustine’s account of preliminary passions comes from scripture, it is Augustine who designates this material as having the meaning it does; it is by no means explicitly designated as such by scripture itself. It is Augustine’s search for the causes of human behavior that discovers relations between disparate phrases in the scriptural text and unifies them into a single psychological account.

### 3.1 Preliminary Jealousy, Fear, and Cupidity: The Slipping Foot

The image of a slipping foot recurs in Augustine’s sermons as a metaphor signifying doubt. He develops the metaphor from the scriptural phrases “I almost lost my footing, my steps were nearly overthrown,” “‘If ever,’ I said, ‘My foot has slipped . . . ,’” and “[they] disturb the paths of your feet.” The distinction between doubting whether some proposition is true and assenting to it is quite clear in a sermon on *Psalm 72*:

Almost my feet were moved, almost my steps were overthrown. . . . My feet were moved toward going astray (*ad errandum*), my steps were overthrown toward falling (*ad lapsum*); not entirely, but almost (*non omnino, sed paene*) I was already going astray, I had not gone (*ibam non ieram*); I was already falling, I had not fallen (*cadebam non cecideram*). . . . How has God known, and is there knowledge in the Most High? . . . these are dangerous words, brethren, offensive, and almost blasphemous (*paene blasphema*). . . . This is why I say, ‘and almost [blasphemous]’: he has not said, ‘God has not known’; he has not said, ‘There is no knowledge in the Most High’; but he is asking, hesitating, doubting (*quaerens, haesitans, dubitans*). This is the same as he said a little while back, *My steps were almost overthrown, How has God known, and is there knowledge in the Most High? He does not affirm it* (*non confirmat*), but the very doubt is dangerous.

Variations on this theme occur in other sermons. Slipping, stumbling, staggering, and sinking represent doubt, while standing firmly (in keeping with an accepted sense of *stare* in Augustine’s day), or having already fallen or sunk, signify commitment to some proposition, i.e., assent.

The important thing to notice, for our purposes, is that Augustine applies the slipping foot metaphor for uncertainty to the cognitive state of someone having a preliminary passion. In fact *Psalm 72* is itself one example of this: Augustine says that the psalmist is struggling with preliminary jealousy. He describes his state thus: [He’s saying], ‘I saw that they who did not serve God had that which I desired . . . and my feet were almost moved.”

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58 Although Augustine’s interpretations are in his opinion compatible with what is in scripture.
59 *Psalm 72*:2.
60 *Psalm 93*:18. See, e.g., *EP* 76.4.
61 *Isaiah* 3:12. See, e.g., *Sermo* 75.10.
63 *EP* 72.20, citing *Psalm* 72.12.
64 Augustine spells out the figurative sense on which the use of *stare* for holding fast to an opinion is based in *EP* 106.12: “Quid est ‘stetit’? Permansit, perduravit . . . non transit.”
66 *EP* 72.9.
So then, what does he mean [by saying], *I almost lost my footing, and my steps were nearly overthrown?* ‘I almost slipped,’ he’s saying, ‘I almost fell.’ . . . Because I was jealous, he says, *of sinners, observing the peace of sinners,* that is, ‘on seeing bad people do well I staggered and reeled’ . . . Notice how in staggering he is on the verge of falling, how close he is to ruin.67

Augustine had said that the slipping foot signified doubt about the “knowledge” of God; we now see that the knowledge in question is “know-how”—God’s *competence* in distributing temporal goods. And Augustine associates this doubt with the question of the *value* of temporal goods:

That’s why his feet were almost moved; that’s why his steps were nearly overthrown; that’s why he was close to ruin. Look at what a dangerous position he has gotten into; he says there, *And I said, ‘How has God known? And is there knowledge in the Most High?’* Notice what a dangerous position he has got into by looking for earthly good fortune from God as though it were of great value.68

Doubt is identified as the source of other preliminary passions when Augustine uses the gospel story of Peter beginning to sink while walking on the sea. Although the gospel account says Peter was fearful, it does not indicate that his state was propathetic.69 But Augustine explicitly links other scriptural phrases about slipping feet to this description of Peter, and to Jesus’s question, “*Why did you doubt?*” Thus Peter’s sinking, but not having sunk, is a distinction between cognitive aspects of affective states: that of doubt versus assent and preliminary passion versus passion.

So Peter functions as a symbol of someone who has a preliminary fear:70 “*Look at Peter, who was the symbolic representative of us all: now he’s trusting, now he’s tottering . . . in his being filled with alarm, and his staggering . . . he represents the weak.*”71 Peter’s slip represents the fact that when someone is faced with a misfortune, he “experiences inner dread.”72 This dread is associated with doubt, which Augustine contrasts with enlightened thoughts or constancy in belief. For instance:

Listen to what the psalm says now: *Beside myself with fear . . . In another psalm he declared, ‘If I said ‘my foot has slipped, your mercy, Lord, came to my help.’ . . . Think what a good illustration . . . we have in Peter. . . . Peter climbed out of the boat and began to walk. He went bravely . . . but when he felt the force of the wind he was frightened. . . . Beginning to go under, he cried, ‘I’m sinking, Lord!’ And Jesus stretched out a hand to him and pulled him up, saying, ‘Why did you doubt?’ . . . I cried to you, says the psalmist. . . . It is as though he is telling us, ‘Believe me, I know what I am talking about. I was in trouble, I called upon the Lord, and he never let me down. . . he enlightened my thoughts and strengthened [me in] my agitation.’73

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68 *Sermo* 19.4: “*videte ad quod periculum venerit quarendo a Deo pro magno praemio terrean felicitatem*”; translation of the passage is adapted from Hill.
69 Matthew 14:29–31: “And Peter going down out of the boat, walked upon the water to come to Jesus. But seeing the wind strong, he was afraid, and when he had begun to sink, he cried out, saying, ‘Lord, save me.’ And immediately Jesus stretching forth his hand took hold of him, and said to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’”
70 In addition to the following passages see EP 30.1, EP 54.5, EP 93.22, *Sermo* 75.1.
71 *Sermo* 76.4.
72 EP 30.2, 3.10.
[W]hen we stumble and stagger in this life, let us call upon him as the disciples called upon him when they said, ‘Increase our faith.’ Peter too . . . staggered . . . he began to tremble . . . And yet when he grew afraid he cried out . . . Then the Lord took him by the hand and said . . . ‘Why did you doubt?’ . . . This fulfilled what was said in the psalm: ‘If, I said, ‘my foot has slipped, your mercy, Lord, came to my help.’”

Augustine explains that the “enlightened” thought which cuts doubt short is the proposition that to be rich is to have riches which cannot be lost in a shipwreck (i.e., to have eternal goods). This is the same point that he makes when he summarizes Gellius’s report of Epictetus in the De Civitate Dei. There he says that the sage avoided the passion of fear insofar as “he was both able to suffer that agitation, and to hold the opinion firmly in his mens that life and bodily welfare, the loss of which was threatened by the raging storm, were not goods which make their possessor good, as does justice [an eternal good].”

Peter’s beginning to sink recurs as a motif in Augustine’s descriptions of preliminary passions; he uses it to refer to preliminary cupidity as well. Peter is a symbol of someone who wavers through desire (fluctuat cupiditate), beginning to deviate slightly from his love of God and coming dangerously close to desiring temporal goods as ends in themselves. Such a person does not yet, however, love temporal goods in such a way as to sin. He has not yet perished (sinned); he is staggering, and only beginning to sink. Augustine emphasizes the cognitive cause of this beginning of desire while unfolding the meaning of the story:

This gospel that has just been read . . . about the apostle Peter . . . is advising us to take the sea as meaning the present age and this world . . . my foot has slipped. It’s a psalm speaking, the words of a sacred song . . . they can be our words too . . . [The Lord] rebuked the doubter . . . ‘Why did you doubt?’ . . . Think of the world and this age as the sea . . . You love God; you’re walking on the sea, the swell of the world is under your feet. You love the world; it will swallow you. . . . Consult . . . your own desire . . . see if some inner wind is not blowing you off course . . . If your foot has slipped, if you stagger, if there is something you are not subduing, if you begin to sink, say, ‘Lord, I perish, deliver me.’ Say, ‘I perish,’ in order not to perish.

Human beings . . . are often thrown off balance by human praise and fame, and are on the verge of going under. That’s the meaning of Peter shaking . . . in the sea . . . the soul (animus) struggles against the desire for human praise. . . . Those who call you well-off lead you astray, and disturb the paths of your feet . . . Cry out, Peter, as you stagger, and say, ‘Lord, save me.’ . . . He does indeed rebuke you and say . . . ‘Why did you doubt?’ . . . [resuming the interpretive summary of the gospel story:] all doubts and hesitations were laid to rest; the stormy sea was stilled, and thus they came to the safety of terra firma.

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74 Sermo 80.6, citing Lk. 17:5 and Psalm 93:18.
76 DCD 9.4.
77 In addition to the following passages, see also EP 93.25 with EP 93.22.
78 Sermo 76.9.
80 Sermo 76.1 and 76.8–9, citing Psalm 91:18 (trans. Hill adapted).
81 Sermo 75.10, citing Is. 3:11 (trans. Hill adapted). I have omitted the words “with alarm” in the sentence “That’s the meaning of Peter shaking with alarm in the sea”; the mention of fear is distracting given that our focus is on what is being represented (preliminary cupidity), rather than the story itself.
82 Somewhat confusingly, elsewhere in this sermon (Sermo 75.4–5) Augustine switches back and forth between using “being tossed about by storms of desires” to signify temptations (being “on the verge of going under”), as he does here, and using it to signify desires which are actually passions.
3.2 Preliminary Anger: The Irritated Eye

The words of Psalm 4:5, “Be angry and sin not,” had already been interpreted as a reference to an involuntary *propatheia* of anger by Origen. Augustine offered a similar interpretation: “Be angry and sin not. . . . Even if you are angry, sin not. That is, even though a movement of the soul (motus animi) rises up which, as a penalty for sin, is not under our control, at least refuse to consent with your reason and mind (mens).” And he often speaks of a sort of “anger” which is not yet a passion but only “close to” (prope) it. To do so, he frequently uses metaphors developed from the scriptural phrase, “My eye is troubled through anger [turbatus est prae ira oculus meus].” Augustine could have been inspired by Cicero to use the phrase thus; the latter compared the rational soul when disordered by a passion (animus conturbatus) to a disordered eye (oculus conturbatus).

Augustine makes the distinction between preliminary “anger” and real anger by differentiating an irritated eye in an imperfect condition from a blind eye: “Before one passes into darkness, then, the eye is irritated by anger; but one must prevent . . . the eye from becoming blinded.” The *mens* is the eye of the soul, and “the loss of the understanding of the truth . . . is the blindness of the mind.” Someone with preliminary anger is “troubled” but is only on the verge of assent to the false proposition that would constitute the passion of anger:

*Cease from anger, and leave indignation. Don’t you know where that anger is leading you? You are on the verge of telling God he is unjust, it’s tending toward that. . . . Look at what it gives birth to; smother the wicked conception. Cease from anger, and leave indignation,* so that now, returning to your senses, you may say, *My eye is troubled through anger.*

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84 Augustine holds that preliminary passions result from damage to the soul caused by either personal sin or the original sin; see, e.g., DCD 14.12 and 14.15.

85 EP 4.6: “Irascemini, et nonle peccare. . . . Etiam si irascemini, nolite peccare; id est, etiamsi surgit motus animi, qui iam propter poenam peccati non est in nostra potestate, saltem ei non consentiat ratio et mens.”


87 Psalm 6:8.

88 TD 3.15.

89 EP 30.2-4.

90 E.g., *Sermo* 88.14: “the eye is healed when it understands . . .”; *Sermo* 88.5–6: “The light which concerns the eye of the mind . . . is eternal wisdom.” Augustine’s references to the mens “seeing” are constant.


92 The terms used for unsteadiness are *turbatus, conturbatus,* and *perturbatio.* For this use of *perturbatio,* see n. 39 above.

As if to make clear that this preliminary, troubled mental state is doubt, Augustine explains: “My eye is troubled through anger . . . As if in a storm and waves he were beginning to sink, like Peter.”

The troubled but not blinded eye (mind) forms the basis for Augustine’s use of the phrase “Do not let the sun go down on your anger” as an exhortation to prevent preliminary passions from becoming passions. He explains that the sun (light, truth) has gone down on one’s anger once one assents to falsehood and therefore is guilty of a passion: “the true light is righteousness and wisdom, which the mind (mens) ceases to see once it has been overcome (superata) by the perturbatio of anger, as if by cloudiness (nubilo); and then it is as though the sun has gone down on a person’s anger”; “do not let the sun go down on your anger, lest perhaps you become angry and the sun goes down on you, that is, the sun of righteousness deserts you, and you remain in darkness.”

Up to the point of being “overcome by cloudiness,” awareness of the truth (“light”) is apparently reduced (the mind is apparently “clouded”), though not utterly lacking. We saw that Augustine attributed preliminary fear to a weakness in the apprehension of the truth by means of the phrase, “the light of my eyes is not with me.” And he explicitly identifies a preliminary cloudy state with doubt when he mentions preliminary sadness: “He did not doubt, he did not hesitate, he did not becloud his devotion with sadness”; “no sadness beclouded his most devout mens.” Thus by the exhortation “do not let the sun go down on your anger” Augustine means “do not let uncertainty about a false proposition become assertion of a false proposition.”

3.3 Preliminary Anger: The Speck versus the Beam

Finally, again taking “eye” to represent mind, Augustine saw in the scriptural contrast between a speck of wood and a beam in the eye yet another opportunity for the exhortation to prevent preliminary passions (caused by confusion) from turning into passions (caused by assent to falsehood). Thus he interlaced the phrase “do not let the sun go down on your anger” with his exegesis of this gospel image.

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94 EP 54.5. Cf. Sermo 63.2–3 for unsteadiness of mind (with reference to Peter “in the waves”) as temptation.
95 Ephesians 4:26.
96 Sermo 75.5.
97 Sermo 58.7.
98 Sermo 299E.5, regarding Abraham’s preparation to sacrifice Isaac (“non dubitavit, non haesitavit, non devotionem tristitia nubilavit”).
99 Sermo 305.4: “nulla tristitia mentem devotissimam nubilaret.” In this passage, Augustine is arguing that prior to his passion Christ did not himself have the sort of sadness which would be exemplified by Peter’s slipping (cf. EP 31.2.26, and EP 30.2.1.3 with EP 30.4.3.10); he felt sadness (by a sort of transfer) “in us” who are subject to preliminaries of sorrow. In this Augustine differed from Origen and Jerome, who had tried to reconcile Christ’s perfect wisdom with Matt. 26:37 by emphasizing that Christ only “began to be” sorrowful, i.e. by describing his “sorrow” as a propatheia (see Jerome, Commentariorum in Mattheum 26:37; Origen, Commentariorum Series 90). Apparently Augustine did not think this interpretation sufficient for maintaining the perfection of Christ. Sorabji, op. cit., 349, 353 drew my attention to Jerome and Origen.
100 Matt. 7:3–5.
On such occasions, he showed his indebtedness to Seneca by transposing the images of birth and growth by which Seneca had described the transition from *primus motus* to the passion of anger\(^{104}\) onto the speck/beam distinction. The result is a hybrid in which the speck of wood is alive; it is a shoot which, having been born, can grow into a beam. This organic rendering of the splinter is an unexpected bit of exegesis, given that there is no hint of it in the scriptural passage itself (nor is there any connection with anger therein).\(^{105}\) Augustine’s manner of speaking only makes sense as a mixing of the gospel passage with metaphors like those of the *De Ira*. And Augustine, like Seneca, says that the transition to passion is fostered by suspicion.

In these cases, to distinguish “anger” which is not yet a passion (recall *Psalm 4:5*) from the passion of anger, Augustine often calls the former “anger” and the latter “hatred.”\(^{106}\) He defines hatred as the desire for revenge,\(^{107}\) which he equates with enjoying or benefiting from someone else’s misfortune;\(^{108}\) and he indicates that hatred is a sin, but “anger” is merely a precursor to a sin.\(^{109}\) This is compatible with the fact that in the *De Civitate Dei* he follows the convention of the “veteres” in calling the desire for revenge “anger.”\(^{110}\) It is clear that although he is not particular about the terminology he uses, he thinks that what is a sin is desire (with assent) for revenge.

For someone familiar with the metaphors, the distinction between preliminary anger and the passion of anger, and between the cognitive states of each of these, is evident in the following (as is the Senecan description of the transition):

> Anger is a speck, hatred is a beam. But nourish a speck, and it becomes a beam . . . so to prevent the speck from becoming a beam, *do not let the sun go down on your anger*.\(^{111}\)

So anger is not yet hatred; we do not hate those with whom we are angry; but if that anger remains and is not quickly uprooted, it grows into hatred. This is why scripture bids us, *Do not let the sun go down on your anger*; it is urging us to pluck out newly-aroused anger before it turns into hatred . . . that speck is a little shoot that may grow into a beam if it is not plucked out at once. This is why the psalmist does not say, ‘My eye has been blinded by anger’; he says it is *irritated*. If it were being blinded, that would mean there was hatred there already, not anger. . . . therefore John says, *Whoever hates his brother is still in darkness.*

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101 *De Ira* 2.1.1: *incipiat*; 2.2.1: *nascitur*; 2.4.1: *incipiant, crescant*; 2.22.4, 2.24.1: suspicions impel us toward anger.
102 *Matt. 7* 3–5: “And why do you see the speck in your brother’s eye, and do not see the beam that is in your own eye? Or how do you say to your brother, ‘Let me pull the speck out of your eye’, when there is a beam in your own eye? You hypocrite, first pull out the beam from your own eye, and then you will see, so as to pull out the speck from your brother’s eye.”
103 L. Verheijen (“The Straw, the Beam, the Tusculan Disputations and the Rule of Saint Augustine,” *Augustinian Studies* 2 (1971): 17–31) drew attention to some of the passages I shall cite and interpreted them as references to a distinction between the *perturbatio* of anger, and the *morbus* of hatred (cf. *TD* 4.21 and 4.25). While it is true that when contrasting anger and hatred, by “anger” Augustine sometimes designates a sin less grave than the sin of hatred (e.g., *Sermo* 82.2, which is not cited by Verheijen), Verheijen missed the characteristic marks of the preliminary versus passion distinction which appear in some of Augustine’s exegeses on the straw and the beam.
104 *Sermo* 49.9.
106 *Sermo* 211.1, *EP* 30.2.2–4, *EP* 4.6, *EP* 54.4 and 7; in *Sermo* 63.2–3, too, anger is the “temptation” although there is no contrast with hatred.
107 See DCD 14.15.
108 *Sermo* 49.7.
Before one passes into darkness, then, the eye is irritated by anger; but one must prevent anger from turning into hatred, and the eye from becoming blindered. That’s why the psalmist says, *My eye is troubled through anger.*

It is human to get angry. But anger, born as a short-lived shoot, should not be irrigated by suspicions and become the beam of hatred. Anger is one thing, hatred is another . . . in comparison to hatred, anger is a shoot. But a shoot, if you nurture it, will be a beam. If you pluck it out, it will be nothing.

There is a beam in your eye. Why is there a beam in your eye? Because you neglected [to pull out] the speck born there . . . you cultivated it in yourself, you watered it with false suspicions; by believing the words of detractors about yourself, and the bad words of detractors about a friend, you nurtured it.

4. CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from Augustine’s sermons that he had considered the problem of a cognitive cause for Stoic “preliminary passions,” and had adopted a theory that this cause is momentary doubt. He displayed remarkable versatility in making use of any given material as a vehicle for describing preliminary passions, and great consistency in attributing them to doubt. That is of interest as an important step in the history of philosophical psychology, but it should also increase awareness of Augustine’s stature as an intellectual. Though not called upon to think about the problem by the more formal, theoretical writing tasks he often had at hand, he nevertheless reflected upon the incomplete Stoic account and developed it in a fittingly “cognitivist” manner.


110. *Sermo 49.7.* Cf. *Ser mo 114.A.6:* “. . . that fresh (recens) anger is a tiny speck, scarcely noticeable. Fresh anger troubles the eye, like a speck in the eye: *my eye is troubled in anger.* But that speck is nurtured by suspicions, is strengthened with the passing of time. That speck is going to become a beam” (trans. Hill adapted). Verheijen, op. cit., drew my attention to this passage.

111. I received helpful comments from Brad Inwood on an earlier draft of this article.