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The Myth of Pelagianism. By Ali Bonner. A British Academy Monograph. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xvii + 342. Price £80.00 (hbk). ISBN 978-0-19-726639-7.

The Myth of Pelagianism is a systematic reinterpretation of Pelagius' role in the development of Christian doctrine. Its central argument may be summarised as follows.¹ Pelagius' understanding of the relationship between divine grace and the human will is indistinguishable from Christian orthodoxy, such as it was defined and understood up to the time of St. Augustine. However, Augustine succeeded in misrepresenting Pelagius' teaching as innovative (i.e. heretical), and in passing his own heretical innovations off as orthodoxy [pp. 26–8, 195–6, 217, 263, 270–2, 285–7], thus fundamentally compromising Christian reflection on human psychology until the Renaissance, and the recovery of Classical literature that served as its basis [p. 306–7]. In this, Bonner's ground-breaking argument about Pelagius and Augustine is, paradoxically, also an argument to return to a very traditional (and largely discredited) historiography. Late Antiquity is again to be characterised by a loss of rational freedom² that is taken to be recovered only on the other side of a comparatively dark and ignorant Middle Ages,³ but with the important difference that now it is the triumph of Augustine over Pelagius that is presented as the primary evidence for these conclusions. Bonner's lack of reference to current scholarly interpretations of intellectual history when expounding her own [e.g. pp. 301–7] suggests that the traditional interpretation of history that she affirms is either assumed by her argument, as its unexamined basis, or that it was deemed to be an inescapable conclusion on the strength of her reevaluation of Pelagius alone. The former would, of course, be a serious weakness, the latter, if successful, a great and somewhat audacious achievement. Any definite conclusions must here wait upon the analysis of the structure of her argument which now follows. Although, if Bonner took this to be the necessary conclusion of her study of this one figure, in full knowledge of the boldness of this claim, it is certainly strange that recent scholarship would not be mentioned, at least for the sake of showing it to be wrong.

The foundation of her reinterpretation of Pelagius is her case for a minimalist position on the extent of his corpus. Her grounds for including only four letters,⁴ the *Statement of Faith*,⁵ and, notably, not the *Expositions of the Thirteen Epistles of St. Paul*⁶ are given in the introduction [pp. xvii–xviii; see also 237]. The grounds offered are, however, surprisingly sparse. We are assured that the attribution of these five works to Pelagius is incontestable, but not what makes them so. One would be forgiven for assuming that this must then reflect an

¹ My thanks to Liam Breatnach (DIAS), Nike Stam (DIAS), and especially, to Evan King (UCD), whose thoughtful editorial suggestions have done much to improve the expression of this review. My thanks also to Dr. Duncan Sneddon (Church of Scotland) for recommending James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* to me.

² For an important example, see E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge 1965).

³ For a good overview of the historical development of such an understanding of the Middle Ages, and its pitfalls, see Alessandra Petrina, 'All Petrarch's Fault: The Idea of a Renaissance', *Memoria di Shakespeare: A Journal of Shakespearean Studies* 6 (2019), 145–64.

⁴ i.e. *Letter to Demetrias (Ad Demetriadem)*, *On virginity (De virginitate)*, *On the Divine Law (De diuina lege)* and *Letter to Celantia (Ad Celantiam)*. The respective translations of these are found in B.R. Rees, tr., *Pelagius: Life and Letters* (Woodbridge 1988), 29–70, 71–87, 88–104, and 127–46, with references to the corresponding editions at 133–4.

⁵ *Libellus fidei*; Jacques-Paul Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina*, 217 vols (Paris 1841–55) XLV, col. 1716–8; William Wall, tr., *The History of Baptism in Two Parts*, 3 vols (London 1819, 4th ed.) I, 343–53.

⁶ *Expositiones XIII epistularum sancti Pauli*. See Alexander Souter, ed., *Pelagius's Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of St Paul*, 3 vols, Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Studies: Texts and Studies 9 (Cambridge 1922–31). Thus far, only the section of the *Expositions* which interprets the Epistle to the Romans has been translated into English; Theodore de Bruyn, tr. *Pelagius's Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford 1993).

unwavering scholarly consensus. But while she is far from being the only person to attribute these five works to Pelagius, of these, only the *Letter to Demetrias* and the *Statement of Faith* are listed among Pelagius' authentic works in Lössl's 2001 monograph on Julian of Aeclanum, for example.⁷ In a study that sets out to make an argument about Pelagius' thought as a whole – a study, moreover, that is likely to attract many non-specialist readers who are, as such, unfamiliar with the scholarship – it is unfortunate that the implicit reasons for her confidence in claiming these works for Pelagius, in spite of contrary arguments,⁸ are not made available to scrutiny. That said, this omission is not as puzzling as the brief and summary character of the case she makes for the exclusion of the *Expositions* from consideration, seeing that the task she has set for herself is greatly simplified (and perhaps even made possible) by it. For insofar as this exclusion may be justified, it frees her from having to deal with the greater part of the material on which rival characterisations of Pelagius have been based. It is, after all, about five times the length of Pelagius' entire corpus, as she understands it.⁹ Thus the conclusiveness of her findings, to a great extent, still remains to be seen. Their confirmation would seem to depend upon one of two future contingencies: 1) an argument for the absolute exclusion of the *Expositions* from the corpus of Pelagius' works which is sufficiently comprehensive to necessitate this conclusion thereafter, or 2) a similarly comprehensive demonstration that the *Expositions'* evidence of Pelagius' thought – to the degree, and in the way that, it should be admitted – does not materially alter her conclusions.

The most immediate result of her minimalist position on the extent of Pelagius' corpus is that it facilitates a similarly minimalist position on the extent of the admissible evidence found in Augustine. Any position which Augustine associates with Pelagius that is not found in the five relatively brief works which Bonner takes to be genuine, or else in the surviving fragments of his lost works (notably *In Defence of Free Will*¹⁰ and *On Nature*¹¹) is, on this basis, interpreted as further proof of Augustine's Machiavellian manipulation of the evidence.¹² Her attempt to wholly discredit Augustine's account of Pelagius' teaching, by this

⁷ Josef Lössl, *Julian von Aeclanum: Studien zu seinem Leben, seinem Werk, seiner Lehre und ihrer Überlieferung* (Leiden 2001), 342–3. For a brief summary of the scholarly debate regarding which letters may be attributed to Pelagius, and the continuing controversy concerning the attribution of *The Statement of Faith*, see Mathijs Lamberigts, 'Pelagius and Pelagians', in Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford 2008), 258–82, at 259–62.

⁸ Lamberigts, 'Pelagius and Pelagians', 264: 'certitude and unanimity exist only with respect to the commentary on Paul, the letter to Demetrias, the *Libellus fidei*, and a number of fragments, including *De natura* and *Pro libero arbitrio*'.

⁹ Souter's edition of the text is more than five hundred pages in length.

¹⁰ *Pro libero arbitrio*. A rebuttal to St. Jerome's anti-Pelagian works. There is no complete modern edition of the extant fragments. The majority (i.e. ten) are found in Augustine's *On the Grace of Christ and On Original Sin* (*De gratia Christi et de peccato originali*). These are collected in Migne, ed. *Patrologia Latina* XLIX, col. 611–13. There is another fragment in Augustine's *Letter* 186 and *Sermon* 156, for which, see Josef Lössl, 'Dating Augustine's *Sermons* 151–156: Internal Evidence', in Gert Partoens, ed., *Augustinus: Sermones de Novo Testamento [151–56]*, *Sermones in epistolas apostolicas I*, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 41Ba (Turnhout 2008), xxiii–lv. Three further fragments have been transmitted under attribution to St. Jerome in MS lat. 653 of the Bibliothèque Nationale, see Alex Souter, 'Another New Fragment of Pelagius', *The Journal of Theological Studies* 12.45 (1910), 32–5. These are collected in A.-G. Hamman, ed., *Patrologiae latinae supplementum*, 5 vols (1958–74) I, col.1539–43. Further bibliographical details are found in Anthony Dupont and Giulio Malavasi, 'The Question of the Impact of Divine Grace in the Pelagian Controversy: Human *posse, uelle et esse* according to Pelagius, Jerome, and Augustine', *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 112 (2017), 539–68, at 539.

¹¹ *De natura*. The target of Augustine's *On Nature and Grace* (*De natura et gratia*). The extant fragments are collected and discussed in Winrich A. Löhr, 'Pelagius' Schrift *De natura*: Rekonstruktion und Analyse', *Recherches augustiniennes* 31 (1999), 235–294.

¹² It is somewhat conspicuous that, of all the works of Pelagius for which fragmentary evidence remains, only *In Defence of Free Will* and *On Nature* are referenced or even named at any point. The lack of any reference to

and other means (which shall be discussed in turn), is the substance of the first chapter [pp. 1–28], but it is a recurring theme thereafter. Setting aside, for the moment, the fact that Bonner’s reduction of the Pelagian corpus to such a narrow scope is based on her own authority, rather than the careful provision of evidence, a demonstration that certain positions attributed to Pelagius by Augustine, were not, in fact, held by him, is certainly the right place for a polemic against Augustine’s trustworthiness as a source to begin. However, even had it been proven that the presence of later interpolations in the text of the *Expositions*, as it stands in Souter’s edition, meant that it cannot, in fact, provide any reliable evidence of Pelagius’ thought, this would still fall short of proof that the ideas found in it do not include his. Absence of unambiguous evidence is not unambiguous evidence of an absence. Or more precisely, uncertainty as to whether Pelagius held a position attributed to him by Augustine is not the same as proof that its attribution to Pelagius was manufactured by Augustine, especially if it also occurs in a text that is generally attributed to Pelagius. Where, for instance, Augustine bears witness to a doctrine also found in the *Expositions*, but not in the works that Bonner attributes to Pelagius, it might perhaps be argued that this reflects a subsequent Augustinianising intervention in the original text of the *Expositions*. Yet without further evidence, it will be at least as likely to indicate that Augustine was correctly informed on that point, or that he honestly believed himself to be so, either on the basis of familiarity with the *Expositions* itself,¹³ or another text he associated with Pelagius, whatever its true provenance might be.

Moreover, the Augustine whom she presents to us is something of a straw-man: being limited, for the most part, to an interpretation of the Augustine of *On the Deeds of Pelagius*,¹⁴ which is then used as the ostensible key to the significance of relevant passages from Augustine’s other works, in the more incidental references which are made to them. In the first instance, it is unclear that any one work of Augustine’s could be taken to be representative of his understanding of Pelagianism, since, as Bonner herself notes,¹⁵ his understanding of it developed over time. A successful attempt to invalidate the whole of his thought on Pelagius would require a much more extensive engagement with his anti-Pelagian writings, and their relationship to his thought as a whole, than has been attempted here. But were one to select only a single text, it would surely need to be the one in which Augustine’s case against Pelagius is most fully realised, rather than a text like *On the Deeds of Pelagius*, which is still fairly early in the development of his anti-Pelagian polemic. Albeit, the preliminary nature of this text is not the primary difficulty.

The main problem with treating this text as broadly representative of Augustine’s position is its purpose. In *On the Deeds of Pelagius*, Augustine is not attempting to produce a complete account of the faults that he had found specifically in Pelagius’ own writings, but

Extracts from the Divine Scriptures (Eclogarum ex divinis scripturis liber) is, for example, a notable exclusion. The extant fragments of this work occur in Jerome’s *Dialogue in Answer to the Pelagians (Dialogus contra Pelagianos)* and in Augustine’s *On the Deeds of Pelagius (De gestis Pelagii)*. They are collected in Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* XLVIII, col. 593–6.

¹³ After writing the first two books of *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins*, and before writing the third, Augustine obtained a copy of the *Expositions*. The third book is Augustine’s refutation of the *Expositions*’ interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, and the marks first time he mentions Pelagius by name; see *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et baptismo parvulorum* III.i.1, as noted by Roland J. Teske, *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century: Answer to the Pelagians*, 4 vols. (New York 2001–5) I, 22 and 136 n.1.

¹⁴ *De gestis Pelagii*; Charles F. Urban and Joseph Zycha, eds, *Sancti Avreli Avgvstini: De perfectione ivstittiae hominis, De gestis Pelagii, De gratia Christi et de peccato originali libri dvo, De nvptiis et concvpscencia ad valerivm comitem libri dvo*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 42 (Prague, Vienna and Leipzig 1902), 51–122; Teske, tr., *The Works of Saint Augustine* I, 336–83.

¹⁵ e.g. p. 227: ‘Augustine admitted that he was forced to redefine his ideas in the course of his opposition to Pelagius’.

rather, to show that the questions put to Pelagius by the Synod of Diospolis (415) did not succeed in forcing him to decisively defend or deny the larger body of heretical doctrines that had come to be associated with him. To be sure, it concludes with a list of heresies that he presents as describing ‘the whole of this heresy’ (*tota haeresis ista*).¹⁶ But ‘this heresy’ is the whole body of doctrines that Augustine takes to be derived from Pelagius’ seminal theological errors, and, therefore, the list of its component doctrines was never intended to be limited to those seminal errors in themselves, as is clearly seen when he shows himself unwilling to pronounce on how many of the propositions of ‘this heresy’ were ever actually held by Pelagius, or exactly how he may have understood those propositions that he did hold.¹⁷ The text in which Augustine’s certainty about the past or present content of Pelagius’ thought – or its relationship to the doctrines anathematised by the Synod of Diospolis – is at its lowest ebb, will be unlikely to show us much about the ultimate validity or invalidity of Augustine’s understanding of Pelagius. Such disjunctions as may be found between the doctrines condemned by the council and the writings of Pelagius that preceded the council,¹⁸ cannot reflect either well or badly on Augustine where he is at his most hesitant to insist upon their conjunction. And these disjunctions are not as many as are claimed.

Many of the disjunctions that Bonner identifies, between the doctrines that Augustine attributes to the larger body of Pelagianism, and the small corpus of writings that she takes to be authentically written by Pelagius, are created rather than found. At first glance, she is quite successful at reinterpreting most of these doctrines in a way that shows that they do not apply to Pelagius. But further attention reveals that she often achieves this by exploiting the semantic ambiguity that Augustine’s formulations have only when divorced from the larger context of his thought, and not taking into account (or actively setting aside)¹⁹ what Augustine evidently understood them to mean. A review is unfortunately not the appropriate occasion to deal with each relevant instance individually, and so the most important example must here stand for the rest.

It is not especially relevant that ‘grace’ (*gratia*) admitted many different interpretations in the theology of the time. Augustine’s dispute with Pelagius is not, as Bonner has it, that this word should only have the meaning that Augustine gave it [p. 11]. What was important to Augustine was that the reality described by a certain technical sense of ‘grace’ is absolutely necessary to the conversion of the soul, and that Pelagius seemed to think that this reality was non-essential, or even non-existent. In this signification, grace describes the way that God – however far any given person might look back in the process of their deliberation – is always already to be found there before, moving, persuading and instructing the soul from within, as the very condition, motive and goal of its potential for goodness: prevenient grace. More often than not, Bonner allows that Augustine’s insistence on the necessity of prevenient grace to the restoration of the soul – over and beyond the gracious help with which Pelagius believed that God always assisted a soul which did well – is not simply a struggle over what a word means, but a principled theological disagreement [e.g. p. 196]. So far so good. However, the leap she makes from there, in claiming that Pelagius’ doctrine of grace affirms

¹⁶ *De gestis Pelagii* XXXV.65; Urba and Zycha, eds, CSEL 42, 119; Teske, tr. *The Works of Augustine* I, 377.

¹⁷ *De gestis Pelagii* XIV.30 and XXXV.65. Quoted, in part, by Bonner on p. 23.

¹⁸ Bonner cites fragments of *In Defence of Free Will* as evidence against the validity of Augustine’s characterisation of the findings of the council of Diospolis [pp. 12–13, 19–21]. However, this work was composed in the year following the council. Moreover, Augustine shows no knowledge of it until his following anti-Pelagian work, *On the Grace of Christ and On Original Sin*, as indicated in note 10 above. Therefore, it appears to be inadmissible as unqualified evidence for or against the portrayal of Pelagianism in *On the Deeds of Pelagius*. This principle also applies to Bonner’s use of Pelagius’ *Statement of Faith* for the same purpose [pp. 6, 13, 19].

¹⁹ The most important examples of her actively setting aside Augustine’s interpretation being found in her discussion of propositions 8 and 9 [pp. 10–18].

the role of free will in *contrast* to Augustine, seems to betray a fundamental misunderstanding of Augustine.

Of course, arguments for the doctrine of double-predestination (the idea that souls can be predestined to damnation as well as salvation), whether in the mouth of a Gottschalk²⁰ or a Calvin,²¹ have tended to trace their lineage back to Augustine. But, if Bonner is correct, this would seem to suggest that only the most uncompromising forms of Calvinism, such as James Hogg satirised in *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*,²² have ever got Augustine right. The most basic problem with this interpretation is that Augustine is always talking about free will as if it were something that existed. Granted, it remains that Augustine is no less strong in his insistence that the soul is incapable of willing what is good without first being moved by God's prevenient grace, and further, that the ethical state of each soul is, in some sense, predestined by God, together with its resulting rewards and punishments. One might well argue that these positions are incommensurable with his insistence on the reality of free will [p. 170 n. 209].²³ However, the importance of free will as an Augustinian theme leaves no basis whatsoever for her claim that it is Pelagius' affirmation of free will, as such, that made him a target for persecution [pp. xiv, 13, 26, 170, 260, 273, 285–6], or that the 'confident account of man' that this is said to entail [pp. 100, 104–5, 108, 142, 165, 214, 226, 236] would not be 'publicly acceptable' again prior to the Renaissance [pp. 298, 307].

It may be that Bonner simply concluded that Augustine's doctrine of grace leaves no room for free will, whatever he might say to the contrary. There is at least one place where she says something like this [p. 263]. Such a concern was certainly raised (and refuted) at the Second Council of Orange, in 529. Nor was it raised there for the last time. But if so, such a conclusion cannot be maintained when Augustine's doctrine of grace is interpreted in light of his doctrine of God's eternity. The initial point to be made is that prevenient grace and predestination do not, as Bonner has it, amount to much the same thing for Augustine [e.g. pp. xii, 15–8, 20 n.59, 25, 196]. Prevenient grace, as he understands it, is not irresistible [cf. pp. xii, 161, 132, 224],²⁴ but rather upholds and strengthens the deliberative power of human reason from within, at its very root, so that the choice of what is truly good is able to take its place among the possible outcomes of its deliberations.²⁵ Although such a claim would seem to be entirely empty, were it to turn out that divine providence has predestined the results of the soul's deliberations about good and evil courses of action in a way which undermines

²⁰ Whose arguments were the target of Eriugena's *On Divine Predestination* (*De divina praedestinatione*).

²¹ e.g. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (*Institutio Christianae religionis*) III.21.

²² First published anonymously in 1824.

²³ Bonner portrays St. John Cassian's doctrine as paradoxical in the same way as she does Augustine's here. However, this is unaccountably taken as evidence that he parallels Pelagius, and opposes Augustine [p. 196 n. 298].

²⁴ The whole premise of *On the Perseverance of the Saints* (*De praedestinatione sanctorum*), for example, is based on this affirmation that one may, for a while, act in obedience to God's grace, but not persist in this obedience, or, alternatively, that such perseverance may (from the perspective of time) come to be granted in response to prayer, where it had not been granted to that point.

²⁵ e.g. *De spiritu et littera* XXX.52–5, esp. 52 and 54; Charles F. Urba and Joseph Zycha, eds, *Sancti Avreli Avgvstini: De Peccatorvm meritis et remissione et de baptism parvvlorvm ad Marcellinvm libri tres, De spiritu et littera liber vnvs, De natura et gratia liber vnvs, De natvra et origine animae libri qvattvor, Contra dvas epistvlas pelagianorvm libri qvattvor*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesasticorum Latinorum 60 (Vienna and Leipzig 1913), 208–12, at 208 and 212; Teske, tr., *The Works of Saint Augustine* I, 150–203, at 185–7, esp. 185 and 187: 'Liberum ergo arbitrium euacuamus per gratiam? absit, sed magis liberum arbitrium statuimus [...] cum potestas datur, non necessitas utique inponitur' (= Are we then doing away with free choice through grace? Heaven forbid! Rather, we make free choice stronger [...] when power is given, necessity is not imposed). Bonner describes Jerome's articulation of a similar view in *On Jeremiah* (*In Hieremiam*) IV.ii.5–7 as incoherent [pp. 176–7].

their freedom to fall in one way or another. It is in mistakenly concluding this to be the case that Bonner was left with little means of distinguishing between predestination and prevenient grace other than the basic contrast between prior preparation and subsequent enactment [pp. xii, 16].²⁶

The apparent contradiction of divine providence and human freedom emerges from an anthropomorphic conception of God, in which God is imagined as standing at a point in time, looking forwards into every future moment and providentially controlling all subsequent outcomes.²⁷ There can be no room for the meaningful deliberation of human reason in this perspective. The game is clearly rigged from the outset. However, if, as Augustine consistently claims, the eternity in which God abides is not an infinite duration of time, but an utter transcendence of time, which, as such, contains, in a simple changeless present, all that ever has or will emerge in the moment-by-moment of temporal process,²⁸ then we are dealing with a rather different situation. In a providence of this sort, all the deliberations of human reason (in its freedom), and their results (in their contingency), will have been always already included, as they are in and to themselves, in its atemporal causing and ordering of all things. In this way, what is brought about necessarily, from the perspective of eternity, is, nevertheless, from the perspective of our temporality, truly brought about through the deliberation of human will. This is, at any rate, how Boethius and Eriugena solved the problem: Boethius in Books IV and V of his *Consolation*,²⁹ and Eriugena, in his *On Divine Predestination*.³⁰

If then, we follow Boethius and Eriugena in interpreting Augustine by means of Augustine, it requires that we regard his doctrine of grace as an attempt, not to orchestrate the complete victory of divine providence over human freedom, but (*pace* Bonner) to conciliate a strong doctrine of divine providence with a strong doctrine of human freedom, without compromising the strength of either in the process. From this perspective, the problem with Pelagius' doctrine, as Bonner describes it, would not simply be that he fails to acknowledge the absolute dependence of human freedom on God's grace for its potential to be successful in its innate aspiration toward what is good. Although this (and not Pelagius' perceived demeanour) would certainly be the reason why Augustine accuses Pelagius of arrogance [cf.

²⁶ This interpretation is based on reading *On the Perseverance of the Saints* (*De praedestinatione sanctorum*) X.19 in isolation. However, in Augustine's understanding, there seems to be only one important (but specific) instance, in which their distinction is, in the end, limited to this: the existential experience of the righteous person, that has, as such, insofar as they are righteous, freely chosen to submit their will to the same liberating activity of grace which made their will sufficiently free to be capable of choosing to submit itself to that grace in the first instance.

²⁷ My argument in this paragraph owes much to Robert Crouse's magisterial essay, 'Saint Augustine, Semi-Pelagianism and the *Consolation* of Boethius', *Dionysius* 22 (2004), 95-110, esp. 106-110.

²⁸ e.g. Augustine, *Confessiones*, I.vi.10, VII.xv.2, XI, esp. VII.xv.2; *De civitate Dei* XI.5-6, 21, XII.16-18; *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, I.4; *De Genesi ad litteram liber unus imperfectus*, XIII; *De Genesi ad litteram*, VIII.20, 25-6.

²⁹ See especially, *De consolatione Philosophiae* V prosa 6, lines 30-31; Claudio Moreschini, ed., Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius: *De consolatione philosophiae. Opuscula Theologica* (München and Leipzig 2005, 2nd ed.), 159.109-116; V.E. Watts, tr., *Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy* (London and New York 1969), 167: 'si quid providentia praesens videt, id esse necesse est, tametsi nullam naturae habeat necessitatem. Atqui deus ea futura, quae ex arbitrii libertate proveniunt, praesentia contuetur; haec igitur, ad intuitum relata divinum, necessaria fiunt per condicionem divinae notionis, per se vero considerata ab absoluta naturae suae libertate non desinunt' (= if Providence sees something as present, it is necessary for it to happen, even though it has no necessity in its own nature. God sees those future events which happen of free will as present events; so that these things when considered with reference to God's sight of them do happen necessarily as a result of the condition of divine knowledge; but when considered in themselves they do not lose the absolute freedom of their nature).

³⁰ i.e. *De divina praedestinatione*.

pp. 23–4, 28, 78, 82, 105, 181, 306], as he does the pagan philosophers elsewhere.³¹ For Pelagius would also, in this view, appear to compromise divine providence for the sake of human freedom, by making it contingent on temporally foreknown human choices, a position that few Platonists, whether pagan, Jewish or Christian, could affirm.³² Such an inversion of the order of causality, in which divine activity is taken to respond to human activity, rather than human activity to divine activity, may well have been seen as an even more arrogant position to adopt than the former. Bonner is doubtless correct that political tensions between the episcopacy and unordained ascetics played a significant role in this debate, even if she overstates her point: Augustine being no stranger to the appeal of monastic asceticism himself,³³ and even the author of a monastic rule.³⁴ However, if she wants to reduce its significance to that of an anti-intellectual [pp. 205, 275, 303–5]³⁵ shoring up of ecclesiastical authority [pp. 20, 268–9, 277, 286], she must first find a way of discounting the philosophical significance that Augustine’s doctrine of grace has for the larger Platonic tradition to which he belongs, a tradition which extends far beyond the bounds of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Among his rough contemporaries, the closest analogy to Augustine’s solution to the problem of providence and human freedom is notably found, not in the works of a powerful fellow bishop, but in the works of Proclus, a Neoplatonic philosopher who was a member of the increasingly marginalised pagan minority.³⁶ And then there is the matter of Boethius and Eriugena to deal with. It will be a difficult task to charge two speculative philosophers of such standing (unordained philosophers at that) with making an anti-intellectual appeal to clerical authority in their following of Augustine’s doctrine of grace, and to make the charges stick.

However, while this book has little to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between Pelagius and Augustine’s critique of him, it makes significant contributions in other ways. The principal achievement of this book is found in its second and third chapters, which cumulatively make up about half its length [pp. 29–110 and 111–96]. These chapters contextualise Pelagius’ theology in the larger developments of ascetic theology at the time, as found in St. Athanasius’ *Life of St. Anthony*, together its subsequent Latin mediations [pp. 31–110], Apponius’ *Commentary on the Song of Songs* [pp. 192–4], Ambrosiaster’s *Commentary on the Pauline Epistles* [pp. 184–92], and, perhaps most importantly, in the writings of St. Jerome [pp. 111–83]. It is all too easy when dealing with famous heretics to see them as miracles of evil or goodness that somehow ‘come out of nowhere’, so to speak. These chapters do much to show how someone like Pelagius could perceive what they were doing as a faithful interpretation of Catholic tradition, such as they understood it. Among the more important results of Bonner’s analysis is the conclusion that Pelagius had (or came to have, under the pressure of the controversies in which he found himself),³⁷ a doctrine of grace which was not limited to the sense in which human nature may be said to be a divine gift, or even to the divine gift of the Mosaic law. Beyond these senses of grace, she demonstrates that

³¹ For discussion and references, see John Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers: The Problem of Paganism from Augustine to Leibniz* (Princeton and Oxford 2015), 27, 30–33.

³² i.e. since they would share standard doctrine that no superior cause can suffer the effects of a secondary cause.

³³ In Book VIII of his *Confessions*, Augustine describes the example of the Desert Fathers, and especially of St. Anthony the Great, as being instrumental to his conversion to Christianity. See *Confessiones* VIII.vi.15–29.

³⁴ i.e. *De opera monachorum*.

³⁵ esp. p. 205: ‘In reality it was not their intellect he objected to but their intellectual freedom’.

³⁶ See his *De providentia*. See also proposition 56 of his *Elements of Theology*; E.R. Dodds, ed. and tr., *Elements of Theology* (Oxford), ed. 54 and tr. 55: ‘Πάν τὸ ὑπὸ τῶν δευτέρων παραγόμενον καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν προτέρων καὶ αἰτιωτέρων παράγεται μείζονως, ἀφ’ ὧν καὶ τὰ δεύτερα παρήγεται’ (= all that is produced by secondary beings is produced in a greater measure by prior and more determinative principles).

³⁷ Bonner presents this as a compromise with Augustine on the part of Pelagius, rather than a view he held initially [pp. 12–14, 18, 111].

Pelagius saw the Holy Spirit as cooperating with human effort, helping the soul in every situation, in accordance with its merits [pp. 14–18, 22, 29].³⁸ This is a point well made. Yet this achievement is, as we have seen, somewhat diminished by her failure to recognise that Augustine also has a similar cooperative model himself,³⁹ albeit one with a crucial difference: he insists that this process of cooperation, in which merit is significant, is wholly dependent on the prior unmerited working of prevenient grace in the soul for its operation.⁴⁰ The other side of her missing this aspect of Augustine is that she does not consider that there may also be crucial differences between Pelagius' cooperative model of grace, and those which she finds in Athanasius, Jerome and the rest.⁴¹ Once she identifies the presence of a cooperative model in one of these authors, it is then assumed to be more or less indistinguishable from that of Pelagius, and the analysis, for the most part, stops there [pp. 110, 181–2, 184, 192, 194–6]. Thus, while this book is an important contribution to ongoing work to identify the 'lines of continuity' between Pelagius and other early Christian writers, it is manifestly not, as Bonner has claimed, the 'conclusion' of this analysis [p. 306]. It is, however, a useful and engaging reference point for future work in this area, in spite of the systemic damage which it suffered at the hands of her unmeasured polemic against Augustine.

Likewise, there is much that is useful and interesting in Bonner's description of the textual transmission of Pelagius' works in the seventh chapter [pp. 288–301]. Her expertise with the relevant manuscripts is everywhere evident in this discussion. Yet her interpretation of Augustine leads her to unfounded conclusions about the significance of the evidence here as well. The mistaken conviction that any affirmation of free will is indistinguishable from Pelagius' doctrine, and inherently opposed to Augustine's, leads her, in turn, to the mistaken inference that the subsequent attribution of his works to Jerome or Augustine must then demonstrate the uncomplicated acceptance of his ideas, as he himself understood them. The widespread preservation of Pelagius' texts under the names of authoritative authors certainly does reveal that they had an ongoing influence, of some sort, on Christian theology. But the meaning that a text might have for the medieval intellectual context which receives it cannot be assumed to be the same as our reconstruction of the meaning that it had for its late antique author, especially when that text had since come to be attributed to someone else. For her analysis of the character of this influence to be conclusive, she would have needed to consider how differently a given work of Pelagius would tend to have been understood, when interpreted in the light of the corpus (whether that of Jerome, or that of Augustine) in which it happened to have been falsely included. Even if Pelagius' and Augustine's respective views on free will were indeed as absolutely antithetical as Bonner claimed, it remains that a text which is attributed to Jerome, for instance, is unlikely to be interpreted in the same way as it would if it was attributed to a reputed adversary of Jerome [cf. pp. 295–7]. Although in this case, Bonner's confidence that Augustine and Pelagius are binary opposites on the idea of free will, and that all affirmations of free will are equal, appears to have made such a crucial consideration seem unnecessary, with the unfortunate result that she concluded her analysis of Pelagius' medieval influence before any conclusions could truly be reached.

There is, however, another aspect of this book, besides Bonner's misunderstanding of Augustine, which systemically interferes with its central contribution, and that is her long

³⁸ As Augustine himself notes; *On the Grace of Christ and on Original Sin (De gratia Christi et de peccato originali)* I.xxviii.29–xxx.31. Part of this passage is discussed by Bonner [p. 12].

³⁹ e.g. *On the Grace of Christ and on Original Sin (De gratia Christi et de peccato originali)* I.vi.7, I.xix.20, I.xxxiv.48, I.l.55.

⁴⁰ e.g. *On the Predestination of the Saints (De praedestinatione sanctorum)* IX.17–X.19. For discussion and further references, see Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers*, 32–3. See also, *On Grace and Free Will (De gratia et libero arbitrio)* VI.13.

⁴¹ For a recent essay which distinguishes Jerome's thought on these matters both from Augustine, on one hand, and from Pelagius, on the other, see Dupont and Malavasi, 'The Question of the Impact of Divine Grace'.

digression on ‘interactionist theory’, as it is known to sociologists [pp. 265–80]. According to her account of the theory, what constitutes ‘evil’ or ‘deviance’ in a given context is wholly determined by what will best serve the aspirations of the powerful for the further consolidation and expansion of their power. The author takes this broadly Nietzschean (or Foucauldian) analysis to apply, without exception, to accusations of heresy as much as any other identification of evil. This is not especially surprising in itself. But given the implications of such a theory for any attempt at describing the world, it is rather surprising that its truth is assumed uncritically, as if it (and its interpreters) wholly transcended the power-struggle which it described. Insofar as it is true, there can be no such thing as truly ‘disinterested analysis’, such as Bonner claims it provides [p. 267]. In the world it describes, there is only such meaning as the strong assign to the less strong.

Nevertheless, if this were the only principle at work in Bonner’s theology of history, we might have expected a fairly dispassionate description of the struggle between Augustine, Pelagius, and their respective allies, for the power to define the relationship between divine grace and human freedom, bearing in mind that all those involved (including Pelagius) had their own ideas of what doctrines were necessary to resist as heresies, and who their representatives were. There can be no heroes to praise or villains to blame in a world where the only losers are failed tyrants. Although, even then, this theory would introduce a significant tension to the book as a whole, seeing that, in idea, if not in sympathy, it would seem to take sides in spite of itself. For in theological terms, ‘interactionist theory’ is oddly reminiscent of a fairly radical interpretation of Augustine’s pessimism regarding the universal incapacity of human beings to attain to goodness on their own, apart from the foundational activity of prevenient grace first moving and instructing them from within.

What we are given, on the contrary, is a highly engaged defence of Pelagius against the purported machinations of Augustine and his allies. This is an exciting book. It has the air of courtroom drama, in which the expert defence-lawyer swiftly gathers masses of carefully ordered evidence which will, with a seeming excess of proof, exonerate the plaintiff of crimes which they did not commit, crimes of which their principal accuser is, in fact, guilty. Due to a number of factors, the chief of which is a fundamental mischaracterisation of Augustine’s position, we have seen that this apology, while accomplishing much that is worthy of further reflection and debate along the way, is rather less conclusive than it set out to be. However, this is not now our immediate concern.

The problem at issue here is that while an impassioned attempt to defend the just against the unjust, the sincere against the deceitful, sits very well with Bonner’s characterisation of Pelagius’ doctrine, given its emphasis on moral responsibility, it is not even intelligible in the world that her account of ‘interactionist theory’ describes, a world in which evil and good have no real existence, but are simply whatever it suits the powerful to say they are, for as long as it suits them to do so. Nor can such a theory support her historiography. It is not necessarily at variance, in principle, with an interpretation of history which finds in early modernity a return to the confidence, affirmative anthropology, and intellectual freedom that Bonner associates with the pre-Augustinian world. It is, however, in direct conflict with a portrayal of such a return as more positive than any other configuration which the powerful might determine for society.

And the mutual contradiction of these two rival anthropologies is joined by a third, which contradicts them both in turn. In her introductory and concluding arguments, Bonner does not present the affirmation of the efficacy of free will that she locates in Pelagius as preferable to the fatalism she finds in Augustine. Nor does she depict them as rival expressions of wholly arbitrary interactions of power. Rather, she describes them as irreconcilable ideas that are both, nevertheless, inherent to humanity itself [pp. xvii, 303]. Here the examples given are the 16th century debates between the Dominicans and Jesuits [pp. 300], and the authors of

Classical Greece, namely Homer, Heraclitus, Euripides and Sophocles [p. 303]. Following her discussion of the 16th century evidence, she gives two potential reasons that such a debate is impossible to resolve: 1) that it is based on a false opposition of grace and free will, or 2) that it is based on ‘personal experience or priorities’ [p. 300].

Each of these possibilities acts as a way of conciliating this third claim, that the debate between divine providence and free will is essential to human existence, with one of the two rival anthropological claims discussed above. The second of these, the idea that the endlessness of the debate is due to its fundamental basis in the whim of personal preference, seems at least potentially commensurable with the idea that all human values are no more than expressions of power, even if the concept of a debate as somehow essential to humanity would appear to place a limit on the variety of these expressions. But the alternate possibility, that the endlessness of the debate is based on an objectively false opposition of grace and free will, undermines the very idea that power wholly determines value, and thus the validity of ‘interactionist theory’ as a theory. Insofar as the endlessness of the debate may be due to a false opposition, one could seemingly bring it to an end were one to succeed in coming to a correct understanding of how grace and free will do not actually oppose each other. In this case, it would no longer be impossible to resolve. Real progress would, in principle, be attainable, and such progress would have the significance of helping humanity to be at rest with its own nature. This alternative seems somewhat more amenable to the main argument of the book, since Bonner is, in this argument, evidently attempting to arrive at definitive conclusions about the relationship between grace and free will that authentically belongs to early Christianity, and secondarily, the relationship that they truly have to each other in reality.

But then, we are offered yet another reason for the apparent impossibility of solving the debate between providence and freewill. The endlessness of the debate concerning them, we are told, is not due to a misunderstanding of their nature, but belongs to its very character as a debate, and is apparently something good in itself, that should not, as such, be limited in any respect. According to this understanding, the problem with Augustine is no longer his ‘negative’ anthropological perspective, but his attempt to reduce the number of acceptable perspectives [pp. xvii, 27, 108, 214–7, 303–4]. Insofar as such endlessness is presented as something inherently good, this theory contradicts the idea that all notions of good and evil are strictly relative. Insofar as it is seen as essentially endless, it contradicts the idea that someone could, through careful work, actually come to a better and more definite understanding about the ideas being debated. Thus, the third reason Bonner gives for the debate’s longevity, with which she opens and closes her study, is perhaps the strangest of those which she adopts, given that it undermines both her appeal to ‘interactionist theory’ and the purpose of her argument as a whole, which, as a scholarly argument, seeks to advance our demonstrable knowledge of this debate, and not simply to add yet another voice to an inherently inconclusive, if expanding, ‘plurality of discourses’ concerning it [p.303].

Bonner was right to be self-reflective about the theoretical foundation of her approach to interpreting Pelagius. There is a great deal of scholarly work which has the serious fault of not displaying adequate self-awareness on the part of the author about the theoretical basis of their own methodology. The attempt is to be applauded. However, this particular attempt is underdeveloped and deeply self-contradictory. As such, these aspects of the book unfortunately end up weakening the force of her main argument, and confusing its aims, rather than providing it with its appropriate theoretical foundations. The most promising among this array of perspectives is the idea that debate on the subject has been prolonged by a false opposition between grace and free will. Of all the possibilities she considers in the closing arguments, this is the one which best allows for the firm conclusions to which she aspired in her main argument, even if it is at wholly at odds with her digression on

‘interactionist theory’. But were this to have been made the clear guiding principle of this study, at the expense of its rivals, Augustine would have been a more likely hero for her account than Pelagius. For we have seen that it is Augustine that contended that there is no opposition between grace and free will, something which allowed him to insist upon strong forms of both simultaneously. Whereas, while Pelagius, in Bonner’s interpretation, certainly has room for the continual help of grace, he resists a doctrine of grace as strong as Augustine’s, because it seems to him not to leave adequate room for free will. In broad terms, his theory, as interpreted in this book, is not then that there is a false opposition between them, but that too much of one will not leave room for the other. Thus, in the end, even this way of theorising the goal of Bonner’s study seems to sit uneasily with her principal argument. It becomes difficult to believe that the analysis does not, to some degree, serve a conclusion that has already been reached by other means, when that conclusion is presented as the result of so many mutually contradictory interpretations of the evidence.⁴² If Pelagianism is a myth, it remains to be seen.

It seems fair to say that *The Myth of Pelagianism* is an important book, and, as such, well worth criticising thoroughly. It is in that spirit that I have done so here. I am reminded of the old Neoplatonic maxim which says that ‘all things are in all things, but in each thing according to its proper nature’.⁴³ Bonner clearly has the enviable scholarly gift of being able to discern the way that all things may be found (and may be said to be at stake) in the chosen object of study. The result is an unusually engaging argument which appears likely to attract a much broader and more varied readership than is typical for a scholarly book on late antique theology. Thus it seems well positioned to succeed (if any book is to succeed) in changing the character of the received assumptions that are broadly held concerning Pelagius. He was not against grace, but affirmed (or came to affirm) the moment-to-moment help that the soul received from the Holy Spirit, in accordance with its merits: in political terms, a Blairite rather than a Thatcherite, if you will.

This, in itself, would be a major achievement, even if similar arguments, with less popular effect, have previously been made. However, it is not, as a whole, a disciplined argument. Significant methodological oversights put the conclusiveness of her findings into question from the very outset. Her mischaracterisation of Augustine’s thought introduces systemic distortions throughout her interpretation of the evidence. The attempt to provide an account of the theoretical basis for her study undermines rather than strengthens its apologetic purpose. Thus its value to scholarship, while undeniable, is more in the parts than the whole, and more to experts, than to the broader audience to which it will likely appeal, since they will not have the same means of distinguishing between its illuminating moments, and those of the contrary tendency. It is hoped that this review may aid those who find themselves in the latter category in making good use of its significant, if complicated, contribution. *The Myth of Pelagianism* reveals a scholar whose future contributions to this field will be well worth anticipating. One would wish to hear more from her on the relationship of Pelagius to his predecessors, for example. But the question remains: will these future contributions likewise have the character of majestic ruins, having been dominated by the same polemicism that prevailed in and over this initial monograph, or will such titanic energies somehow be

⁴² As in the famous joke of the ‘borrowed kettle’, where the mutually contradictory arguments by which the borrower seeks to prove that they did not break the kettle, cumulatively prove that they did indeed break it. Sigmund Freud speaks as if it preexisted him. However, it is his telling of it in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that is seminal for subsequent theorists; James Strachey, tr., *Sigmund Freud. The Interpretation of Dreams: The Definitive Text* (New York 1955), 143–4.

⁴³ Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, proposition 103; Dodds, ed. and tr., *Elements of Theology*, ed. 92 and tr. 93: ‘Πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν, οἰκείως δὲ ἐν ἐκάστῳ’. Before Proclus, Syrianus attributed this broadly used saying to the Pythagoreans, and Iamblichus, to Numenius; see Dodds, *Elements of Theology*, 254.

made to serve the nuances of argument, rather than overthrow them when and where they will? If such a sea change can be brought about, I expect that the result could not fail to be unambiguously praiseworthy.

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