AUGUSTINE’S PARADOXES

GILLIAN R. EVANS

The writings of Augustine of Hippo are shot through with paradoxes. Some are incidental to an argument and serve the purpose of capturing attention. But several form the girders of a system of thought which will stand up only if they can be accepted as expressions of inherently contradictory yet somehow simultaneous truths. There can be no question but that Augustine knew what he was doing in using them. Some of his paradoxes, and his devices for resolving them, were innovatory. Nevertheless, he was drawing on a good deal of tradition, too, and we must look at that first.

Very broadly, the late antique conception of paradox contained two elements. They were admirabilia and they were contra opinionem, as Cicero puts it.¹ They are striking and can therefore be used to rhetorical effect. And they make assertions which, on first hearing at least, defy acceptance. The user may place more stress on one or the other feature. That is to say, he may primarily intend to make the reader or listener wonder, or he may chiefly mean to make him think. The paradox as a figure of thought² was familiar to Augustine in Scripture, through Cicero, through Zeno and Socrates, and perhaps to some degree through Aristotle’s logic; though in the case of the Greeks the directness of his acquaintance may be in question. Jesus’ teaching contained many paradoxes. The Kingdom is here already, yet it is to come; it is both within and outside us; it comes both gradually and suddenly. He who would save his life must lose it (Matthew 16.25); to him that has shall be given (Matthew 25.29); he who abases himself shall be exalted (Luke 14.11). Paul, too, bristles with paradoxical notions of sovereignty and freedom; law and grace; living through dying; strength through weakness; foolishness and wisdom.


Augustine approaches such Biblical paradoxes with a view to explaining them, so that readers may see the truth they state and at the same time not be puzzled or disturbed in their faith by its form. In writing on the Sermon on the Mount, for example, he discusses ‘Thy Kingdom Come’. He explains that even though it is in a sense not yet present on earth, the Kingdom may be said to have ‘come’ already in that it has been revealed. Thus it is both here and not here.3 Earlier in the same study he explains the apparent contradiction between the instruction that no man should put away his wife (except for fornication), and: ‘if any man come to me and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters … he cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14.26). By way of the explanation that in heaven there will be no such temporal relationships; and an account of the sexual relation between husband and wife which sees it as an unfortunate temporary necessity, he comes to a crucial distinction between that which is ‘corruptible and mortal’ in relationships in this life, and that which involves a love for the human essentials which will survive into heaven.4 ‘Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you’ is, like much in the Sermon on the Mount, not merely an intellectual puzzle but a moral challenge, and Augustine responds to it accordingly by presenting an understanding which will make it possible for the reader not only to grasp it intellectually, but also to accept it emotionally and spiritually. The blessedness is within; the revilings strike only the outside of the recipient, and so they cannot diminish the blessedness.5 Of a similar sort is the paradox of Christ the servant promising freedom to all who believe in him (John 8.31-6). It disturbs with its implication that this will not be an uncomplicated freedom. Again Augustine treats it, this time in the Tractates on John, in a way which helps acceptance as well as insight.6

Setting aside Zeno’s mathematical and physical paradoxes, we are left with a body of classical paradox literature whose possible influence on Augustine’s handling of theological paradoxes we must now briefly assess. The Socratic principles:7 that virtue is knowledge, understanding

4 DSDM I.xiv.39-40.
5 DSDM I.iii.10-13.
6 In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus CXXIV, ed. D.R.Willems [CChr.SL 36] (Turnhout 1954), 42.1.