

On Interpreting Marsilius' Use of St. Augustine

In a lucid and well organised paper D. G. Mulcahy argues that, *contra* Gewirth, Augustine had no special or influential place in the thought of Marsilius of Padua¹). The argument is painstakingly referenced from the *Defensor Pacis* and is certainly an antidote to the assertion of «influence» whenever an earlier thinker reminds an historian of a later one. Nevertheless, Mulcahy's treatment of the relationship between Augustine and Marsilius is misleading to the point of anachronism, and his main textual inferences are invalid.

Marsilius is said to give a «... distorted version of Augustine...» (p. 461); to make unwarranted references (p. 462); to «bend» or «strain» quotations from Augustine's meaning (pp. 464-465); and to distort Augustine «wholesale» (p. 465). Marsilius' misuse of Augustine is stated to contrast with his use of Aristotle whose thought Marsilius «weaves» into his own (p. 459).

The obvious emotional force of Mulcahy's terminology creates a censorious impression, which is persistent enough to appear intentional. Marsilius should have treated Augustine differently. In the 14th century, however, the purposes of citation of a name or document were to render it concordant with one's own argument, or to use it as a means of formulating that argument persuasively. In either case, the citations were an integral part of polemical argument. The name or document was not as we understand it a *source*: that is something having meaning independent of contemporary concerns that might be elicited through careful study, and which might as a result throw light upon the past. The citation was of an *authority*: that is an inescapable name or canon of work that had to be made to speak in an appropriate manner if an argument was to carry weight in and for the present. When Marsilius used Augustine he was citing a widely recognised and potent Authority in religious and political argument, just as he was

¹) D. G. MULCAHY, «The Hands of Augustine but the Voice of Marsilius», *Augustiniana* 21, 1971, pp. 457-466. All page numbers in the text refer to this article.

when citing other Church Fathers or the Bible. In a general way, Mulcahy testifies to Marsilius' skill in citing such « sources » (p. 457) and seems partly aware of what might most simply be summarised as an authority attitude, as opposed to its antithesis a source attitude, by suggesting that Marsilius' use of Augustine is eristic. Nevertheless, an appropriate exploration of Marsilius' use of Augustine plays no part in his argument. This is disappointing. The vitality of authority usage depended upon a sustained willingness and technical ability to select, quote, gloss and allude with dexterity. The continuity and universality of such a ventriloquistic adaptation of the past to the often very different needs of the present, itself speaks of an important facet of medieval intellectual life. It is not only disappointing but also paradoxical that the authority attitude is not understood on its own terms. In Mulcahy's paper, we have an example of the modern source attitude, assuming distance and aiming at the elucidation of an author's ideas, being irrelevantly read into the author's (Marsilius') citation of an authority. A consistent adoption of the source attitude would in fact recognise that to criticise Marsilius for failing to use his sources competently or honestly, in short to bend and distort them is in effect to abandon those criteria of elucidation which constitute the source attitude itself. The implication of Mulcahy's stigmatic vocabulary is that Marsilius should have been using Augustine as a source — more as a 20th century historian than as a 14th century polemicist. Marsilius would probably have found sources unintelligible and a choice between authority and source usage meaningless. Consequently only a superficial reading can find a contrast between Marsilius' use of Augustine and Aristotle (p. 458-9).

It has been amply evidenced that Aristotle, in Moerbeke's translation, was frequently quoted out of context; apparently misunderstood; distorted and misused by Marsilius²). Even a cursory glance at the

²) Scattered and pejorative references are to be found e.g., in both A. P. D'ENTREVES, *The Medieval Contribution to Political Thought*, Oxford, 1939, and in HERMANN SEGAL, « Marsilius von Padua : Grundfragen der Interpretation », *Academie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur*, Historische Kommission, Historische Forschungen, Band 2, Wiesbaden, Steiner, 1959. G. LAGARDE, *La naissance de l'esprit laïque au déclin du moyen âge*, St. Paul-trois-Châteaux, 1934-1946, VI vols., especially in volume III exhibits the attitude I am criticising throughout. A. GEWIRTH, *Marsilius of Padua*, New York, 1956, vol. II, devotes Appendix A to Marsilius' more striking « misinterpretations » (p. 432) of Aristotle, one of which is shown to be « ... precisely the opposite of Aristotle's meaning », *ibid.*

Defensor reveals an adulatory attitude to the authoritative and divine Aristotle, who on one occasion has only to speak (with the voice of Marsilius) for a question to be settled³). Marsilius' treatment of Aristotle has incurred the displeasure of some of those who have commented on it just as the similar, albeit less concentrated and extensive use of Augustine has incurred the displeasure of Mulcahy. Such disapproval is historically irrelevant. To confuse the co-option of authoritative figures in the name of a political cause with the interpretation of sources in the persuance of historical understanding, and thence to insinuate some intellectual or moral failing, is not only trivial, but fundamentally anachronistic.

Mulcahy states that although « ... one could not conclude... that Augustine had no part in shaping Marsilius' thought... » (p. 466), it is « significant » that the main issues on which Augustine is cited in *Discourse II* of the *Defensor Pacis* are « ... anticipated, to say the least... » in *Discourse I*, where Augustine is hardly ever mentioned. Notwithstanding the qualification, the textual evidence does not bear the implication that Augustine was of minor, or even negligible importance for the formation of Marsilius' thought. That *Discourse I* comes first in the written *opus* does not mean that it takes precedence in either a logical or a compositional sense. We do not know in what order the discourses were conceived, written, or how they were re-worked once drafted. Compositionally, would it be reasonable to suggest that because the Bible is used relatively infrequently in *Discourse I* but with great persistency in *Discourse II* that it came to have an importance for Marsilius? Logically, to put the matter at its simplest, it is not possible to tell from the taxonomy of the text whether *Discourse I* was an *ex post facto* rationalisation of the themes and arguments of *Discourse II* or whether *Discourse II* was an application of principles enunciated independently in *Discourse I*. Augustine's absence from *Discourse I* is a textual fact from which we cannot infer, or even more loosely insinuate his intellectually subordinate role in shaping Marsilius' thought. That the arguments of *Discourse I* « anticipated » those of *Discourse II* is hardly worth saying if Mulcahy is referring to textual format. As he sees the anticipations as « significant » he is presumably referring to something more than textual

³) *Defensor Pacis*, I.iv.1-2. Here Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2.125b.27 is cited and briefly glossed, after which Marsilius simply writes « Thus having determined (*sic itaqua determinata*) that the end of the community is living and living well... ».

format — to some logic of creation in the *Defensor* and/or to some hierarchy of influence upon its author, which as it stands, is to argue *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. « Anticipated, to say the least » and « significant » serve only to disguise the fact, surely partly admitted in the qualification (p. 466, cited above), that he cannot infer from the textual evidence the relationship he would like us to believe he has established.

The alleged relationship is couched in terms of influence. Mulcahy claims that Marsilius' misuse of Augustine « shows » (p. 464) a lack of acquaintance with Augustine. In general, Mulcahy concludes that the facts of Marsilian usage signify a lack of any « real understanding of Augustine » (p. 465). Marsilius' usage of Augustine suggests not influence but « ... the very contrary » (p. 465). The dying words of the article reiterate these conclusions, (p. 466) on the basis of what we have already been told correctly and apparently with some surprise, « In fact, Marsilius seems hardly concerned with Augustine beyond the use to which he can put him for his own purposes », (p. 465). Not labouring that Marsilius' purposes were his and not ours, it is difficult to know what to make of Mulcahy's conclusions.

The only evidence for any sort of relationship between the two thinkers is that Marsilius makes use of recognisable elements of Augustine's work. In this light misinterpretation or misuse do not admit of an inference of non-influence, let alone « ... the very contrary » of influence. Assuming for the purposes of argument that influence can be proved or disproved, it might be suggested that Marsilius, like so many others, was influenced even though he did not understand : how accurately did Augustine understand Plato ? Even a deliberate distortion admits of the possibility of influence. Given the interpretative latitude of the medieval practice of authority citation the discrepancies between Augustinian texts and Marsilius' citation of them in no way proves the Paduan's lack of familiarity with Augustine. The reverse could equally be the case : the effectiveness of the distortion necessary to co-opt the authority of Augustine might well have depended on familiarity with his work. Marsilius knew his Moerbeke well enough, but Aristotle is subjected to « distortion » too.

The question now to be asked is whether the notion of influence is not more of a hindrance than a help in elucidating the relationship between Marsilius and Augustine. Relationships couched in the terminology of influence create the illusion of an hypothetical chain of argument in Marsilius that is affected from the outside by Augustine as

deus ex machina. It is obvious that without Augustine the *Defensor Pacis* would have been different : it is, however, impossible to say how it would have been different. Put another way, « influence » creates a grammatical confusion between the active and passive voice : it is a question of who does what to whom. It is not Augustine who influences, or Marsilius who is influenced by, it is Marsilius who uses. Mulcahy confuses by providing evidence of use in the vocabulary of influence. It is therefore surely better to talk not of influence upon, but of use by, which is a matter that can at least be evidenced and clearly discussed.

The notion of influence further supposes a continuity of identity in the items taken by one thinker (Marsilius) from another (Augustine), and without such continuity there can be no evidence of any direct relationship.

Some continuity is admitted by Mulcahy through such expressions as « distortion » and « bending », but it is doubtful if this continuity can be said to reside to any significant degree in the ideas or thought of the two men (*contra* Mulcahy p. 464). If ideas are taken as intellectual responses to perceived problems, constituting thought, then there is a world of difference between the thought of Marsilius and that of Augustine. This is at least the case in that part of Marsilius' problem, how to use effectively the authority of Augustine's words, or those attributed to him. If conversely the items of the continuous identity are words, then to talk in terms of distortion of the Augustinian ideas expressed in them is misleading if not redundant. This is no more than to suggest very briefly that the notion of influence prohibits a clear discussion of the relationship between Augustine and Marsilius ; irrespective of whether we assert it with Gewirth or deny it with Mulcahy. The whole process seems misconceived : that about which we cannot speak clearly we should pass over in silence.

Given these formal difficulties with the notion of influence *per se* it is easy to see why Mulcahy, albeit for the wrong reasons, can pour scepticism specifically upon the allegedly influential relationship between Augustine and Marsilius. Mulcahy, however writes not just of Marsilius' familiarity with words and expressions, or even the ideas of Augustine but in terms of a « real » understanding and a « genuine » influence (p. 466). These are crucial and potentially loaded expressions, and from the context of the argument, although never defined, seem to imply an historical, accurate, objective, perhaps even modern (or at

least modernly acceptable) understanding of Augustine ⁴). If this is the connotation, we may have at these points (pp. 464-466), not an inference from the « facts », which is ostensibly the question Mulcahy asks: « So much for the statement of facts. The real question is what do the facts signify ». We may have instead a rhetorical device to disguise the reformulation of the value judgement that Marsilius should have treated Augustine with the respect due to a source and not with the ingenuity appropriate to a potent authority. We are back with the paradox of the source attitude — being abandoned by being over extended. Documents must be interpreted in their own terms and not have distortingly alien elements imported into them : but the source attitude itself is an alien importation into the documentary usage of the 14th century.

If Marsilius is judged and found wanting (and what else could one expect) in the light of such anachronistic attitudes, then both Marsilius and his relationship to Augustine are *ipso facto* bound to be « distorted wholesale ».

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⁴) At p. 464 « ... shows that he had no *real* acquaintance with ... » (my italics) may only mean to refer to the detail of Marsilius' knowledge, not with the quality of his understanding. Yet if Augustine and Marsilius held diametrically opposed views on the *Power of the Keys* as Mulcahy argues, then in any case, if Marsilius did have a *real* acquaintance with Augustine on the matter, he would not have been so naive as to reveal in detail Augustine's views. He would have done what he did with e.g., Aristotle, quote out of context, as at *Discourse* I.viii.2; and I.xii.2. Alternatively he might have cited the obscure or redundant as he cited Aristotle at *Discourse*, I.xii.4. Even then, on a charitable reading of *real* we are in fact shown remarkably little.