From dragons to worms: animals and the subversion of hierarchy in Augustine’s theology

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Abstract:
The theological interpretation of nature was a major issue in the life and thought of Augustine. Figuring critically in the intellectual process which allowed him to accept the Christian religion, the vision of a natural order created by an immaterial and eternal deity became a dominant theme in his theological literature. "Few other passages of Scripture," William A. Christian has observed, "intrigued Augustine as much as the first sentence of the book of Genesis. The fact that he devoted much of his spiritual autobiography to an extended meditation on the meaning of creation testifies to the importance which the idea held for him. In fact, so prevalent is the theme in his writings that it is difficult to find one of Augustine's works which does not in some way address the issue of creation. In addition to the last portion of the Confessions, Augustine wrote three commentaries on Genesis and assigned Book XI of City of God to the subject. Discussions of the order of the universe, the place of man in the world, and God's maintenance of creation appear in virtually all of his writings. Drawing from the Bible, the natural history tradition of classical literature, the Judeo-Christian hexaemeral literature, and even apparently direct observation, Augustine's literary output represents a lifelong attempt to comprehend the elusive character and infinite variety of nature.

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