

## THE LIFE OF AUGUSTINE

‘Take and read.’ ‘Wherever one finds truth, it is the Lord’s.’ ‘You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.’ These sayings—and many others—come from the pen of Aurelius Augustinus, known to us today as Augustine. He is unarguably one of the greatest theologians in the history of the Christian church, and arguably the most significant. Who was this man whom Henry Chadwick could call ‘the greatest figure of Christian antiquity’?<sup>1</sup>

Augustine (A.D. 354–430) is what we call today a ‘Western’ theologian—in that he spoke and wrote in Latin and lived and worked in the western half of Christendom. He was born in the small town of Thagaste in northern Africa on November 13, 354 (present-day Souk-Ahras, in Algeria). Augustine’s father Patricius does not appear to have been a Christian, but he was committed to his son and to providing a good education for him. Augustine’s mom was indeed a confessing Christian and is portrayed by Augustine as zealously committed to her son’s spiritual wellbeing, and as praying fervently for him during his rather debauched youth.

---

1 Henry Chadwick, in his foreword to Serge Lancel, *St. Augustine*, tr. Antonia Nevill (London: SCM, 2002), 14.

It is difficult to come to terms with Augustine's 'life' without having some understanding of his spiritual, theological, and philosophical pilgrimage. We will consider this in some detail below, as well as the key controversies that indelibly shaped him.

Augustine was classically educated, in that he studied the trivium—the 'language arts' of grammar, logic or dialectic, and rhetoric (i.e., the 'three ways' of the classical liberal arts). He studied in Madouros (near Thagaste), and then, after a year of idleness in Thagaste (369–70), he moved to Carthage for further study (370–73). It is here that Augustine discovered a work by the first-century B.C. Roman orator and statesman Cicero: *Hortensius*. Interestingly, this text ignites a love for wisdom in Augustine. In God's mysterious and sovereign way, He uses this Roman orator as one piece of the mosaic of Augustine's life that would culminate in devotion to the love of wisdom.

Augustine's reflections on his own educational experience are fascinating. Many today look to Augustine as a model for exemplary classical education. This is understandable, but as Augustine worked through the varied implications of being a Christian, his own reflections on his educational background are quite mixed. As noted above, Augustine did indeed study what are often called the liberal arts—especially the so-called trivium of grammar, dialectic (roughly equal to logic), and rhetoric. But as Augustine reflects on his own traditional education, and does so explicitly as a Christian, he offers significant criticism of it.

Augustine reflected at some length on what a more Christian approach to language or rhetoric might look like—especially in his *On Christian Doctrine*. As a Christian, Augustine's mind had turned to eternal, spiritual, and ultimate things, and he lamented that much of his formal education was not concerned in the least with such realities. It was not that Augustine—as a Christian—rejected such everyday things such as education. Rather, it is probably truer to say that Augustine began to *reconfigure* or

*reinterpret* the nature, practice, and ends of education in light of his Christian conversion.

Thus Augustine says: ‘See the exact care with which the sons of men observe the conventions of letters and syllables received from those who so talked before them.’<sup>2</sup> He continues: ‘Yet they neglect the eternal contracts of lasting salvation received from you.’ That is, some people are particularly concerned with getting the ‘letters and syllables’ correct, but they are *not* attentive to the salvific words that proceed from God Himself. Likewise, Augustine criticizes anyone who ‘is extremely vigilant in precautions against some error in language, but is indifferent to the possibility that the emotional force of his mind may bring about a man’s execution.’<sup>3</sup> The problem is clear: one can know grammar and rhetoric but be indifferent to the most egregious of moral problems.

Augustine makes a series of striking comments related to his own classical education in the trivium. He first speaks of his own training in ‘literature and oratory’ which his father was eager to fund. Augustine laments that while many people praised his father for sacrificing to provide his son a superior education in the language arts, his father possessed no analogous commitment to the training of Augustine’s character: ‘But this same father did not care what character before you I was developing, or how chaste I was so long as I possessed a cultured tongue—though my culture really meant a desert uncultivated by you, God. You are the one true and good lord of your land, which is my heart.’<sup>4</sup>

At times Augustine speaks positively of rhetoric in *Confessions*. But interestingly, he seems to consider himself something of a renegade in doing so! Unlike (in his telling) other teachers of rhetoric, Augustine sought to teach others the ‘tricks of rhetoric’

---

2 *Confessions* 1.27.29. Unless otherwise noted, I am utilizing Henry Chadwick’s English translation of *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, II.3.5.

but ‘without any resort to a trick.’ And he did this ‘not that they should use them *against* the life of an innocent man, but that sometimes they might save the life of a guilty person.’ Augustine believed that God saw in Augustine ‘the spark of my integrity,’ which prompted him to teach rhetoric with an aim to a virtuous goal.<sup>5</sup>

Augustine does speak of ‘eloquence’ (*eloquentia*) in Book X,<sup>6</sup> but mainly as a study in contrasts between how we recall something like happiness or joy and how we recall eloquence.<sup>7</sup> In recounting his own education in rhetoric, Augustine sometimes speaks of textbooks on eloquence but here he is lamenting his own sin, and what drove him to study in the first place. He writes: ‘I wanted to distinguish myself as an orator for a damnable and conceited purpose, namely delight in human vanity.’<sup>8</sup>

Augustine evaluates positively Moses’ ‘skill in eloquence’ and his ‘facility of style.’<sup>9</sup> But what is the advantage to such training in the liberal arts, if Augustine is ‘the most wicked slave of evil lusts’?<sup>10</sup> Intellectual and mental acuity are gifts, Augustine affirms, ‘but that did not move me to offer them [i.e., such gifts] to you.’<sup>11</sup> Augustine asks poignantly: ‘What advantage did it bring me to have a good thing and not to use it well?’<sup>12</sup> Augustine confesses that although he might have excelled in the liberal arts, he could nonetheless at the time affirm various egregious heresies. Thus:

What profit, then, was it for me at that time that my agile mind found no difficulty in these subjects, and that without assistance from a human teacher I could elucidate extremely

5 *Ibid.*, IV.2.2.

6 *Ibid.*, X.21.30

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*, III.4.7.

9 *Ibid.*, XII.26.36.

10 *Ibid.*, IV.16.30.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*, IV.16.39

complicated books, when my comprehension of religion was erroneous, distorted, and shamefully sacrilegious!<sup>13</sup>

It was also in Carthage that Augustine encountered and eventually ‘joined’ (or was associated with) the Manicheans.<sup>14</sup> The Manicheans were a dualistic and gnostic sect that had its origins in the third century A.D. in Persia (modern-day Iran) with a man named Mani. Augustine would remain enmeshed in Manichaeism for nine years.

The Manicheans believed that at one point Spirit and Matter, Good and Evil, Light and Dark, had all been separated from one another. However, these things had become mixed together, so that this dualism runs through the heart of all things—including human beings. Hence, to be ‘saved’ is to be released or rescued from materiality, which was considered to be intrinsically evil—hence the gnostic flavor to Manichaeism, since gnosticism posits that physical ‘stuff’ is inherently bad or evil. Augustine eventually became disillusioned with Manichaeism, especially after one of their famed teachers was unable to satisfactorily address some of his intellectual dilemmas. In Carthage Augustine would also take a concubine. They would have one child together, a son named Adeodatus (Latin for ‘given by God’), who was born in 372.

Augustine spent a year in Rome (383–84) and then went to Milan, where he met Ambrose, the bishop. Augustine taught rhetoric in Milan, but more importantly, perhaps, he came under the influence of Ambrose during this time. Augustine also developed a circle of friends and discovered the books of the Platonists. If we think of Cicero’s *Hortensius* and Manichaeism as the first two most important intellectual influences in

---

13 *Ibid.*, IX.16.31. Augustine also briefly deals with rhetoric or eloquence in *Confessions* IV.14.21 and V.23.13.

14 I put ‘joined’ in quotes because one would become more and more ‘in’ the Manichees over time, and Augustine was never in the inner circle in the fullest sense.

Augustine's life, then the books of the Platonists are the third, sequentially. Augustine refers to this discovery explicitly in his *Confessions*.

When Augustine speaks of the Platonists he is referring to what we now call the 'Neo-Platonists,' a development or form of Platonism seen in thinkers like Plotinus (A.D. 204–270) and Porphyry (A.D. 234–305). Neo-Platonism is 'Platonic' in that it privileges the immaterial over the material, but unlike Manicheism it does not see the material world as inherently evil. Thus Neo-Platonism seems to have given Augustine some tools, or at least a viable framework, for thinking of the created order as good—an affirmation that would of course be necessary as Augustine worked out his own theological convictions. Augustine would write in *Confessions* that he was 'on fire' reading the books of the Platonists. While Augustine later labored to extricate himself from those aspects of Neoplatonism that were less friendly to Christian belief, he arguably never fully separated himself from Neoplatonism as a system or worldview.

In 385, Augustine's mother Monica arranged a marriage for him. In Monica's view Augustine was destined for great things, and his current mistress simply would not do. Augustine ultimately sent his mistress back to North Africa, keeping Adeodatus with him. Little is known about the mother of Augustine's son. He eventually separated from her, and does not seem to mention her in his large corpus other than in the *Confessions*:

The woman with whom I habitually slept was torn away from my side because she was a hindrance to my marriage. My heart which was deeply attached was a hindrance to my marriage [i.e., the marriage planned by Augustine's mom, Monica]. My heart which was deeply attached was cut and wounded, and left a trail of blood. She had returned to Africa vowing that she would