

An Augustinian Model for Conceiving and Measuring the Influence of Christian Higher Education

By Galen Johnson

Abstract

This essay addresses the question, “How if at all, can the kind of thinking undertaken at Christian institutions of higher learning differ *qualitatively* from that at non-Christian institutions, and can this difference enable graduates of Christian colleges to make unique contributions to society?” Its answer is structured along Augustine’s thoughts concerning the intellect’s union with the heart.

Keywords

Christian higher education, Augustine, *Confessions*, intellect, heart, love, mind



In the year before his death, 429 CE, St. Augustine of Hippo reflected on the Christian life of the mind in *Predestination of the Saints*, Book 5: “For it is not every one who thinks that believes, since many think in order that they may not believe, but everybody who believes thinks—both thinks in believing, and believes in thinking.”¹ This comment speaks directly to the concerns of many Christian educators: how, if at all, can the kind of thinking undertaken at Christian institutions of higher learning differ *qualitatively* from that at non-Christian institutions, and can this difference enable graduates of Christian colleges to make unique contributions to society? My contention is that Augustine’s own understanding of the purpose of education in believers’ lives provides an instructive model for conceiving why Christian college students *should* be taught the value of thinking in believing, and based upon my own students’ responses to studying Augustine at John Brown University, I will further propose some modest

¹ EA 22.

means of verifying the effects of believing in thinking.

Turning to Augustine for wisdom on these concerns has multiple advantages. Not only is Augustine's influence on all Western Christian thought after the fifth century inestimable, but he was particularly the theologian of choice for Protestant Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin, whose own theological heirs, in turn, were the founders of a number of Christian colleges and universities. Yet even though Augustine is for this reason a theological forebear to many of us, his chronological distance from us may also help us to refocus our educational vision to see beyond any historical myopia that could leave students with little frame of reference for thinking or believing beyond their own experiences. Augustine is sufficiently remote from contemporary Christian students in time and various emphases that he can "speak" to a generation that loathes all things trite with the unexpected freshness of an outside observer, especially when he uses terminology such as "salvation" and "love of God" which Christian youth have often heard but perhaps have never thought to define.

At John Brown University, I teach a number of Augustine's writings, focusing on *Confessions*, *City of God*, and *The Trinity*, in a course titled "Philosophy of the Christian Faith." About sixty students take the course between two sections offered each school year; few of these students are theology or philosophy majors, but many have a major in some kind of practical ministry (youth, family, children, outdoor leadership) and take the course to fulfill a Biblical Studies divisional requirement; other majors represented range from English to graphic design. Augustine's commitments to Platonic philosophy, the church Catholic, and sovereign, sacramental grace are initially foreign—if not even objectionable—to many of my students, but for a number of them his employment of these same concepts as means toward knowing God more abundantly has proved to be a catalyst in learning how to receive the injunction to love God with all their minds no longer merely as a slogan but as the *sine qua non* of Christian life and witness.

My approach here will be first to explain those details of Augustine's life that

seem to win students' attention and thereby open their minds to receive new motivations to conduct their studies in reflective praise of their creator. Then I will suggest some specific disciplines and professions for which Augustine's thought can provide a rich incentive toward excellence. Finally, I will share some students' written responses to receiving Augustine in this way that, while they certainly cannot scientifically predict a long-term life impact, hopefully reflect an initial internalization of the durative value of a contemplative Christian education. No doubt, as I myself continue to age, grow as an educator, learn more about Augustine, and gain experience from teaching Augustine to undergraduates, I will be able to hone both my classroom presentation and my ability to assess its effectiveness in nurturing life-long learners. I am convinced, however, that the potential reward is worth the commitment of a career and that Augustine's voice is one who Christian educators need to hear, for, in the words of Charles T. Mathewes, Augustine was "concerned with the relation between our ability to inquire and the cause and end of that inquiry—how philosophy is converted into theology, how its origin and end are found in wonder and praise."²

Making the Case: The Value of Christian Education

Augustine himself had enormous intellectual talents. In Book 1 of his *Confessions*, he recalled that in his childhood, he paid special attention to how people pronounced words and formed sentences to convey their desires, thus using his intelligence at an early stage to develop the skill in rhetoric that would later win him academic prizes, prestigious teaching appointments, and influential friends in the Roman government. Yet when reflecting upon these events, the elder Augustine lamented the *failure* of his early educational experience. Part of his regret came from his perception that he should have studied more broadly and intensely for the sake of learning itself rather than for the ability to manipulate others for personal gain. For instance, while he gave all his attention to rhetoric,

² Mathewes 542.

since "this was the way to gain the respect of others and win for myself what passes for wealth in this world," his teachers sometimes beat him as punishment for his idleness in other subjects.³ Thus he acknowledged for himself and some of his fellow students, "We sinned by reading and writing less than was expected of us. We lacked neither memory nor intelligence, because by your will, O Lord, we had as much of both as was sufficient for our years."⁴ In fact, when Augustine later forsook teaching rhetoric after his intellectual conversion to Christianity, he wrote, "I intended that young pupils who gave no thought to [God's] law or [God's] peace, but only to lies and the insane warfare of the courts, should no longer buy from my lips any weapon to arm their madness."⁵

Yet Augustine's greater dissatisfaction with his student days was not quantitatively with those things that he apparently did not care to learn, but rather qualitatively with the manner in which he learned what he did. For example, Augustine pondered why he never took to studying Greek literature as he did the Latin classics. He concluded that he took to Latin much easier since it was his native language, and he wished very much to learn how to express his thoughts through that tongue in ways that would impress others.⁶ But as a Christian, he later struggled to determine the value even of this interested learning because of his selfish motivation at the time:

You, O Lord, are my King and my God, and in your service I want to use whatever good I learned as a boy. I can speak and write, read and count, and I want these things to be used to serve you, because when I studied other subjects you checked me and forgave me the sins I committed by taking pleasure in such worthless things. It is true that these studies taught me many useful words, but the same words can be learnt by studying something that matters, and this is the safe course

³ *Conf.* 1.9.

⁴ *Conf.* 1.9.

⁵ *Conf.* 9.2.

⁶ *Conf.* 1.13-4.

for a boy to follow.⁷

Notice the dawning upon Augustine's consciousness of the fact that while the same facts can be learned in different environments, with perhaps different incentives for the learning, there is a qualitative difference in an educational experience when one approaches the material to be studied as "something that matters." The determining factor in what makes a course of study matter should not be personal interest or utility, nor for Christians may it include the avoidance of some academic subjects that they deem somehow inherently "secular" and therefore avoidable. Augustine's emerging apprehension, whose application I shall document more in the second half of this paper, was that the proper comportment of study is primarily what makes *any* subject matter.

By what steps did Augustine reach this conclusion? While a student himself, Augustine cared to learn only those things that would gain him professional credentials and enable him to earn money. But he later saw the shortcomings of this approach to education firsthand when his own students approached their assignments for him in a similar way—in one case in Rome, even turning Augustine's techniques for manipulation against him by attending all his classes up until the day when their tuition fees were due and then collectively dropping his course and transferring to another teacher.⁸ Augustine considered such students unscrupulous lovers of money, but he realized through his disgust of their practices that they had actually imitated his own habits all too well. Yet neither the wealth nor the increasing fame that he had acquired over the years had given his life meaning and purpose. In sum, his life did not matter.

Augustine tried various ways to repress the nihilistic implications of this realization, primarily through fornication and the friendships available to him through the sect of the Manichees. Even after Ambrose, the Christian bishop of Milan, began slowly to turn Augustine toward the eternal Good taught by Plato and more fully by Paul, Augustine still cared at first only for Ambrose's eloquence, not

⁷ *Conf.* 1.16.

⁸ *Conf.* 5.12.

his subject.⁹ Such an approach to learning could gain him the world, but what was the profit if it cost him his soul? He described his increasing disillusionment:

A man who has learnt the traditional rules of pronunciation, or teaches them to others, gives greater scandal if he breaks them by dropping the [letter h] from "human being" than if he breaks [God's] rules and hates another human[. . .]. [A] fine speaker will stand up before a human judge, surrounded by a human audience, and lash his opponent with malicious invective, taking the greatest care not to say "uman" instead of "human" by a slip of the tongue, and yet the thought that the frenzy in his own mind may condemn a human being to death disturbs him not at all.¹⁰

One particular event helped Augustine find a new way of thinking—one that made his desire for study keener than ever before while simultaneously redeeming his study by making it significant. The pivotal turn came after his encounter with the Manichean bishop named Faustus around the year 382 CE, when Augustine was twenty-eight years of age. The devotees of the third-century Gnostic Mani believed that each human soul is trapped within a material body, and so they were disgusted with the corporeal world. They believed that while God is good, he was not sufficiently powerful to deflect a clash with the cosmic powers of darkness, which resulted in the physical creation. This meant, in turn, that human beings were not responsible for actions of evil that their inherently corrupt bodies could not avoid. For nine years, Augustine was an "aspirant" who prepared food for the "Elect," believing that when they chewed vegetable matter, they released into the air on those around them trapped particles of eternal light that might liberate their souls. The Manichees also held that the sun and moon were collectors of these freed light particles, and they deflected criticism by proclaiming that Mani received his teachings by union with God's Holy Spirit. Augustine had absorbed enough information from contemporary astronomers, however, that he developed

⁹ *Conf.* 5.13.

¹⁰ *Conf.* 1.18.

serious reservations about Manichean cosmology, and he anticipated a visit to Carthage from Faustus, the leading Manichean authority of his day, to gain answers to his questions.

In a public address, Faustus impressed Augustine as an amiable, well-spoken man. But when Augustine approached Faustus privately with astronomy textbooks and mathematical calculations, Faustus admitted that he was incapable of engaging in the dialogue Augustine pressed to test the Manichean theories. Augustine's memory of the encounter was as follows:

I mentioned some of my doubts [to him], but soon discovered that except for a rudimentary knowledge of literature he had no claims to scholarship. [. . .] As soon as it became clear to me that Faustus was quite uninformed about the subjects in which I had expected him to be an expert, I began to lose hope that he could lift the veil and resolve the problems which perplexed me.¹¹

When he realized that Faustus was long on persuasiveness but short on content, and that Faustus had defrauded many people into looking at the world in a way that was both shallow and untrue, Augustine became critical of those very same features in his own life. He desired that no one would ever be able to expose his own ignorance, or that of any belief to which he gave his allegiance, as he done to Faustus. This sharpened Augustine's intellectual edge, which he wielded in *On Christian Doctrine* to cut down the misuse of a relationship with the Holy Spirit as an excuse not to learn from other human beings.¹² But even though he found hard science far preferable to the pseudo-science that the Manichees had shrouded in a hazy spirituality, the astronomers, too, failed to facilitate completely Augustine's new quest for a wisdom that was truly substantive and not merely platitudinous. "Although they can predict an eclipse of the sun so far ahead," Augustine concluded about some of them, "they cannot see that they themselves are already in the shadow of eclipse. This is because they ignore [God] and do not inquire

¹¹ *Conf.* 5.6-7.

¹² *OCD* 141.

how they come to possess the intelligence to make these researches."¹³ (*Conf.* 5.3).

In abandoning Manicheanism, Augustine came to find intellectually dishonest any research that gives no reverence to a good and omnipotent creator, whose own reality is the guarantee that human minds can acquire accurate information about reality. That is to say, scientists can predict eclipses because the same God created both solar phenomena and human intelligence, and so it was hardly less conceited than the effrontery of Faustus, in Augustine's opinion, not to balance soaring curiosity with the bowed knee of worship. Augustine did not think that Christian believers who do not understand scientific theories thereby forfeit the salvation of their souls, of course, but that such security is actually what gives permission to Christians to admit the areas of their ignorance so they may seek in God's name to overcome them rather than to wallow in them with no concern for defending their religious convictions.

The value of Christian education according to an Augustinian model is therefore two-pronged. First, it teaches the believing mind to comprehend love of God not as some vague feeling but as a positive exploration of the heaven and earth that are full of God's glory.¹⁴ Second, it shows secular researchers that not only can Christians match their rigor, but they can do so with less pretentiousness than any who belittle faith even though they require faith no less to propound theories for certain phenomena (like creation) that they are inadequate to verify by their reason or experience alone.¹⁵ "Some hold their heads so high in the clouds of learning," Augustine realized, that their fogged-up ears cannot hear Jesus proposing, "Learn from me; I am gentle and humble of heart; and you shall find rest for your souls."¹⁶

The encounter with Faustus moved Augustine ever more steadily both toward the highest life of the mind and the vivifying faith dispensed by the Christian church. He asked God to convince him "that reading and writing are by far the

¹³ *Conf.* 5.3.

¹⁴ *Conf.* 10.6.

¹⁵ *Conf.* 6.5.

¹⁶ *Conf.* 7.9.

better study” than inconsequential entertainment or impermanent laurels,¹⁷ and as this desire became increasingly integral to his new identity, he also noted, “From now on I began to prefer the Catholic teaching.”¹⁸ A commitment to the church was requisite for Augustine’s scholarly maturation, and indeed it would not permit anything less in one whose natural cerebral gifts were so great.

Teachers at Christian colleges and universities have probably each experienced, or at least sensed, an impression from other members of the academy at large that when a Christian college works out of a prior commitment to a Christian worldview, then it delimit the kinds of faculty colleagues it will hire, the research the faculty might conduct, and the findings the faculty can produce—all of which make suspect its claims to academic excellence. But for Augustine, the unfettering of his mind came paradoxically from the disciplining bonds of the church. When he thought about his boyhood preference for Latin over Greek, he concluded that he performed better at Latin studies because he undertook them freely with a view toward their utility, rather than out of compulsion. But the church—particularly Bishop Ambrose—taught Augustine that the commandments of God channel the free flow of curiosity toward findings that actually, in the long run, matter, and what does matter finally is spreading the recognition of the creator’s glory in all things.¹⁹

Like the younger Augustine, some undergraduates appear to resist the mental disciplining of rigorous academic expectations, especially if careful research in a subject outside their major seems at first not to enhance their vocational qualifications. Yet in his books *Against the Academics* and *On Order*, Augustine credited the freeing of his own intellectual powers to a healthy kind of compulsion. I cite *On Order*:

With regard to the acquiring of knowledge, we are of necessity led in a twofold manner: by authority and by reason. [. . .] [N]o one

¹⁷ *Conf.* 1.13.

¹⁸ *Conf.* 6.5.

¹⁹ *Conf.* 1.14.

becomes learned except by ceasing to be unlearned, and since no unlearned person knows in what quality he ought to present himself to instructors or by what manner of life he may become docile, it happens that for those who seek to learn great and hidden truths authority alone opens the door. But, after one has entered, then without any hesitation he begins to follow the precepts of the [intellectual] life.²⁰

In short, learning must typically begin with external pressure, but where the process and subject of learning truly matter, there good students will eventually internalize the meaningfulness of study and proceed to the willing application of their reason in the further pursuit of knowledge, not for the sake of some selfish gain but for the sake of eternal truth. In *The True Religion*, Augustine elaborated, "Authority demands faith, and prepares [one] for reason. Reason leads [one] on to knowledge and understanding."²¹ The only authority on earth that can effectively teach one in all things to seek that which transcends personal utility is the church, which through the miracles of Christ shown forth in its sacraments makes the pursuit of the mysterious the very centerpiece of a meaningful life. "By the sacred rites into which we are now being initiated," Augustine explained in *On Order*, human life is "most easily purified, not indeed by the circumlocution of disputation, but by the authority of the mysteries."²²

I suspect that Augustine would challenge all Christian educators to consider themselves researchers on some level, and should any Christian students think they can pursue holy desires without pursuing the liberal arts, the words of *On Order* chide, "I know not how I could call them happy as long as they live."²³ Augustine emphasized in *The Trinity* and any number of other writings that the human soul is made in the image of the holy, triune God, and so the development of the soul through its memory, understanding, and will is not merely a quantitative

²⁰ EA 26.

²¹ EA 31.

²² EA 27.

²³ EA 26.

accumulation of knowledge but simultaneously a qualitative movement toward union with the divine. “Look for anything better if you can find it,” Augustine preached on Psalm 32, but “God keeps himself for you.”²⁴ Augustine’s injunction to “look” to God grew out of his Platonist persuasion that mental exercise is a kind of vision into eternal wisdom that will survive the ruins of time. He called it in its purest form, in fact, the *intellectual* vision.

The intellectual vision transcends corporeal and spiritual vision. Corporeal vision comes through the physical senses; spiritual vision, or what we might consider imagination, comes through the mental reflection upon and recombination of images stored in the mind. Superior to either of these, the intellectual vision can “see” intelligible truths without the help of particular images, and the highest truth, which cannot be confused with any particular sensible object or act, is love. In *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, Augustine wrote, “If [. . .] we think of some corporeal image, it is not love that we behold.”²⁵ A brief selection here from that same commentary can only render injustice to the beauty of Augustine’s description of the merger of intellect and eternity. Keep in mind his belief that whenever the intellect takes flight above the limitations of the physical world, its final destination is really the supreme God, but he could only describe this supra-sensible reality with sensible terminology:

For the light is God himself, whereas the soul is a creature; yet, since it is rational and intellectual, it is made in his image. And when it tries to behold the Light, it trembles in its weakness and finds itself unable to do so. Yet from this source comes all the understanding it is able to attain. When, therefore, it is thus carried off and, after being withdrawn from the senses of the body, is made present to this vision in a more perfect manner [. . .], it also sees above itself that Light in whose illumination it is enabled to see all the objects that it sees and

²⁴ EA 153.

²⁵ EA 94.

understands in itself.²⁶

Augustine never completed a projected encyclopedia intended to help human beings ascend through an order of studies to incorporeal reality,²⁷ although in *City of God*, Book 22, he began to broach this subject in detail in his speculations about Heaven. But I draw attention here to the telling phrase in the Genesis commentary that the cultivation of the intellect is so it might "see above itself."

Counting the Cost: Examples of Education That Matters

I have tried to show from Augustine's life and thought how we might conceive doing this very thing by approaching the life of the mind with a view toward the creator who makes knowledge significant, worth having. Now I want to apply Augustine's insights to the conduct of some particular academic disciplines. As much as it is a work of theology, Augustine's *The Trinity* is a treatise on epistemology, a theory of acquiring knowledge. Particularly in Book 10, Augustine wondered how it is possible for any of us to pursue learning something about which we know nothing, since it seems illogical to think that one can pursue intentionally some subject about which one is ignorant. The pursuit of new knowledge and love of wisdom, he concluded, can only then arise where there is already some idea of the purpose for learning—namely, the contemplation of God implicitly through his works by means of the image of himself that he has placed within us. Thus, we seek the unknown for the sake of the One who is known through self-revelation. In *Confessions*, Augustine lamented that he realized this all too late in his own life, for his father had sent him to school to develop a fertile tongue but not the fruits of the God-directed soul.²⁸ The authority of the church was finally to turn Augustine to the life of the mind, and in *The Trinity* Book 10, he called upon the Christian educator to set before students the God we love and know as both purpose and command for loving to study what we do not know.

²⁶ EA 97.

²⁷ Pacioni 492.

²⁸ Conf. 2.3.

Therefore, the Christian student or scholar should not be confused with the merely curious, “for what touches his soul is the ideal which he knows and meditates, [. . .] and that kindles in him the zeal for study, in which he will seek for what he does not know, but contemplate and love the known ideal to which it appertains.”²⁹

In Augustine’s own writings, one can find patterns for this zeal directed toward various studies in the life sciences and humanities. Augustine was fascinated with the complexities of nature because he thought they were evidence of the surprising power of God. In *City of God*, he wrote that belief in Heaven and Hell is no less absurd than the observable phenomena that the salt of Agrigentum becomes fluid in fire but crackles in water and that the fountain of Garamantae is too cold to drink by day and too hot by night.³⁰ In the final book of *City of God*, after expressing admiration for the beauty of the human form with the gratitude that he would be able to continue that admiration in Heaven unencumbered by lust, Augustine exulted,

This operation of God, so marvelous and mysterious, He performs not only in the case of man, who is a rational animal and the highest and noblest of all animals on earth, but also in the case of the tiniest insects. And no one can reflect on this marvel without a sense of astonishment and some expression of admiration for the Creator. [. . .] What words can describe the myriad beauties of land and sky? Just think of the illimitable abundance and the marvelous loveliness of light, or of the beauty of the sun and moon and stars, of shadowy glades in the woods and of the colors and perfume of flowers, of the songs and plumage of so many varieties of birds, of the innumerable animals of every species that amaze us most when they are smallest in size.³¹

And in *The Trinity*, Book 3, Augustine rebuffed any strictly naturalistic

²⁹ ALW 75.

³⁰ *City* 21.4-5.

³¹ *City* 525-6, 529.

explanation for phenomena in the material world, asking, "Who but God draws up the sap through the root of the vine to the bunch of grapes, and makes the vine?"³² Rather than being scientific naiveté, this expression simply meant, in opposition to Augustine's former Manicheanism, that creation is a great book proclaiming to all, "God made me!"³³ A firm belief in God became for Augustine the guarantee that investigation matters: scientific discoveries are often accidental and even then perhaps informed guesses rather than certain knowledge, but the Christian scholar knows that the unchangeable God remains ever constant above our changeable minds, and that he draws us surely by degrees unto himself, from the beauty of creation through the beauty of the soul to the beauty of his invisible nature as perceived in the intellectual vision.³⁴ Even a skeptic should be left unable to deny the rigorous study the dedicated Christian mind undertakes during this ascent of the soul.

I have already referenced Augustine's esteem for the liberal arts, both in *Confessions*, where his own natural skills in literature were finally redeemed by supernatural grace, and in *On Order*, where he considered the arts an essential part of the Christian's felicity while on earth. Augustine's appreciation for philosophy began with Cicero³⁵ and grew so great largely because Plato prepared him for Paul by teaching him "that to philosophize is to love that God whose nature is incorporeal."³⁶ Noted biographer Peter Brown shows that Augustine continued to refine his philosophical hermeneutic in letters to his friends, there in fact exalting philosophical study as a tool for explicating the Christian creed for society's benefit and God's glory.³⁷ Indeed, already in the early dialogue *The Teacher*, Augustine posited Christ as the "inner teacher" who is both the ground and the goal of liberal learning.³⁸ Vernon J. Bourke also calls Augustine "a pioneer in the study of the meaning of history," for in writings such as *City of God*, *The True*

³² EA 115.

³³ EA 123.

³⁴ *Conf.* 7.17.

³⁵ AATT 147.

³⁶ *City* 8.8.

³⁷ Brown 128.

³⁸ Kries 520.

Religion, and *Eighty-three Different Questions*, he rejected the cyclical, fatalistic view of time held by many Romans of his day in favor of a view of history energized by human decisions made meaningful in the eschatological purposes of a personal God.³⁹ Augustine was hardly less interested in aesthetics, both visual and aural. He loved art because it evoked in him praise for the creator whose canopy is the universe. The appeal of beauty was the stimulus both for his earliest publications and his final expectation of the eternal vision of God, and should words ever fail in their description of such splendid beauty, he pondered in a sermon, “[C]an aught but triumphant music remain?”⁴⁰

Augustine could have become immersed in any of these disciplines without ever becoming a Christian: he had the mental ability to do so, although he admitted in *Confessions* that he did not use it well.⁴¹ The authority of the church, however—especially as mediated by the philosopher-bishop Ambrose—provided him the reason to pursue wisdom more than either sex or money, as well as the love for doing so. Augustine figuratively described this process as taking golden pots out of Egypt and re-dedicating them to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.⁴² “There is no other teacher of the truth besides yourself,” he expressed to God, “no matter how or where it comes to light,”⁴³ and he also considered the love of learning a “sweetness.”⁴⁴ But what about the students at Christian colleges today? I am acutely aware of how difficult it can be to motivate students to excel in courses for which they can envision no direct benefit, or much less to develop the habit of a life-long love for learning. I cannot expect students to heed this call with the very same intensity and results of Augustine, of course, for his giftedness and influence stand unparalleled in nearly two thousand years of post-apostolic Christianity. Yet I am very hopeful that the magnificent fertility of Augustine’s converted intellect *can* bear fruit in our Christian students because I suspect that many of them can

³⁹ *EA* 220.

⁴⁰ *EA* 131-2.

⁴¹ *Conf.* 4.16.

⁴² *Conf.* 7.9; cf. Exodus 3:21-2.

⁴³ *Conf.* 5.6.

⁴⁴ *City* 19.19.

find a reflection of their own young lives in his.

Let me explain. Today's Christian students are obviously bright enough to be admitted into college, but perhaps many of them have thought about their religion largely in affective terms that can stifle their desire to sharpen their minds and defend their beliefs. I think, for example, of one student who responded to my requirement that written assignments present reasoned opinions, not gut feelings, with the plea that his feelings *are* his opinions. Augustine once confused his self-interested natural inclinations with a commendable life as well. Yet Augustine's realization of the intellectual fraudulence of Faustus made him face the same in himself, and a personal faith designed to avoid the interpenetration of reason and faith, whether it be Manichean or Christian, would no longer serve him. In short, he realized that faith which retreats from the life of the mind and cannot explain itself typically worships a god no greater than one's own inventing, whose power to make life matter is an illusion. In *Confessions*, Augustine often described his spiritual maturation as the journey homeward of an intellectually prodigal son. Few Christian undergraduates may have shared his youthful penchants toward rash misbehavior and sexual profligacy, but all of them need to undertake an intellectual journey similar to his if their private education is to be worth the cost.

In my "Philosophy of the Christian Faith" course, I place an optional essay question on one exam that asks students how the study of Augustine in a Christian-college environment has facilitated integrating their faith with a love of learning. Most students choose to answer the question, and I hope that their responses reveal to some degree the internalization of the Augustinian theory of higher learning I have explained here. In the essays, certain encouraging comments tend to recur. They indicate that Augustine's example has indeed helped them to reorder their lives and their loves.⁴⁵ I have selected sample comments only from students who

⁴⁵ I am aware that even some of the better answers could indicate a mimicking of my language in the classroom more than a genuine transformation in their respondents' consideration of the life of the mind. I am further sensitive that unless the integration of faith and learning occurs across the college curriculum and reinforces this theory in various disciplines, then students are unlikely to realize that the stakes in learning for a Christian are much higher than grade reports and job qualifications. Thankfully, John Brown University offers annual workshops to help all its faculty members implement this integration. Because I am early in my college teaching career, I am

were *not* pursuing a major or a minor in either Theology or Philosophy—and thus who probably did not know what to expect when they enrolled for my course. But the unfamiliarity of the subject was overcome, wrote one student, because “Augustine, like most college students today, struggled in his youth with what to believe and how to prove those beliefs. For this reason, it is easy to relate to him.” Another student gave four reasons for studying Augustine: (1) The very complexity of the subject material requires developing a commitment to study; (2) Augustine showed how the love of God is necessary for happiness; (3) reading Augustine helps students evaluate their own beliefs about God, humanity, and the church; (4) Augustine modeled “an amazing integration” of Christian faith, his love for God, and his love for learning.

I found three main ideas repeated frequently throughout the pool of essays: Studying Augustine shows (1) the value of the liberal arts, (2) the importance of maintaining an equilibrium between heart and head, and (3) a possible corrective to the relativistic extreme of postmodernism according to which no story ultimately matters. I will provide a few examples of each type.

Type 1. Several students repeated accurately Augustine’s conviction that the authority of the church should turn the Christian mind to the liberal arts. One student explained that she learned from Augustine that Christians “cannot settle for the perception by non-Christians that those who place their faith in Christ do not want to acquire knowledge and understanding.” Another student indicated that not only does faith seek understanding, but understanding in turn bolsters faith. “Throughout Augustine’s theology is the idea that learning/knowledge is essential in your walk with God,” he elaborated. “Although he points out that belief must come first, he states that the more knowledge we gain about our world, the more we will understand God, which will in turn increase our faith. It is as if Augustine views learning as an act of worship that is not only enjoyable but necessary to our Christian walk.” Other students reflected a similar idea. “We need to view study

as worship," wrote one, "because what we put into our minds affects our souls, which has eternal consequences." Another reasoned,

Augustine held a view that all things point to God; even the fallen physical world points to God. Thus to study cells and business and construction and all those things we study is to move up a ladder of understanding that leads to God. Because all things point to God, the study of all things is beneficial. In this view, study becomes more than just learning for the sake of learning. It becomes an act of worship, a way to know God, and a way to understand redemption that can be found in God.

Another student stated that without a liberal-arts education, "I would have no knowledge of how God relates to me, and in turn I would be less prepared to relate to others on an intimate level, much less a professional level."

Type 2. Augustine's conception of an education that matters is particularly helpful for students at John Brown University to understand their school's motto, "Head, Heart, and Hand," or at least the interrelationship of the first two items of this triumvirate. Augustine lauded the use of the intellect, but he distinguished sharply between the proper exercise of the intellect and a merely intellectual exercise, as Bourke summarizes: "The soul's journey to God is not an intellectual exercise but a progress in man's heart—and an ontological perfecting of his whole being" (*EA* 123). In other words, the Christian's use of the intellect is in fact a powerful form of love and so arises as much from the heart as from the head. But even as the intellect becomes vain without the heart, the heart becomes concupiscent, or lustful in its self-affection, without the head. Therefore, genuine love from the heart is much more than a feeling; it is a complete orientation of life to the God who calls us out of our self-centeredness. One of my students perceived Augustine's message correctly when he observed, "Love is something we cannot taste, touch, smell, feel or see with our five senses, but it is in the higher plane of our minds—our intellectual vision with which we experience God." The love for

God that manifests itself in the study of the physical creation is itself not merely physical because—as the formerly promiscuous Augustine learned—as a love that becomes united with the eternal and divine, it surpasses any momentary and fleeting sensation.

This concept is difficult not only because it is abstract but also because it challenges the convincing agreement between hormones, advertising, and pop music that love is only physical. But I cite one student who understood Augustine’s meaning very well:

Prior to attending JBU my mind and my heart were two separate entities. When faced with a decision of how to spend my time or what to give my energies to, I would choose matters of the heart hand down, for this was the “spiritual” thing to do. But soon the Holy Spirit, through God’s grace, convicted me that the heart and the mind are intertwined. Through the study of St. Augustine, I have learned that we can reason without belief, but in order to believe, we must use reason. Without the mind, the heart is left to wander.

This student went on to say that if her use of reason stopped growing, her ability to believe and love God and his world would also cease to expand. Other students remarked that thinking of love in this way really is to begin to appreciate true beauty, which does not wither with time.

Type 3. Although I deal at length with the assumptions and challenges of postmodernism in other courses I teach, this prevailing idea of the wider academic culture is not a primary concern in my teaching of St. Augustine. Yet several students nonetheless expressed in their essays that their study of Hippo’s bishop was useful in assessing the difference between their Christian education at John Brown University and an education they might have received at some other institution if it were governed by the postmodern conviction that a religious meta-narrative is only an aggressive play for power. One student gleaned from Augustine’s assertion that since we can pursue the unknown only in relationship to

the known, that the erudite are always limited in what they can consider if their minds do not have some contact with the eternal, and this is true whether or not they acknowledge it. Another student claimed that postmodernism fosters an individualistic, emotive mentality that students at church-related institutions can overcome through the resources of God-honoring reason, community, and service. She credited Augustine's emphases on proper authority and loving God with the mind as instrumental in perceiving this qualitative difference of a Christian education. A third student speculated whether persons who belittle the search for universal truths probably inwardly wish that they existed, and also whether the primary reason why such an opinion prevails in the academy is that Christian minds are often too complacent or reticent to produce contrary evidence. She concluded:

Augustine's unquenchable search for truth has ignited a flame in many a sleeping heart. His words open the heart to new and fascinating levels of beauty. We are not meant to be satisfied with earthly pleasures. Our souls can only be happy in something greater than ourselves. We as JBU students and faculty can transform our loves and seek God through learning on new levels—yet only through his power and grace within us. We ask him for what we lack and rejoice in what he has given us.

This is a knowledge that does not puff up but rather builds up, because it loves God (1 Cor. 8:1).

Conclusion

In his enquiry, *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*, Professor Richard T. Hughes of Pepperdine University remarks that Catholic thinkers like Augustine can help Christian universities sustain the life of the mind because these thinkers are "at home" with human reason, secular human culture, and human history, both inside and outside the Catholic faith. Hughes warns, conversely, that

Catholic tradition could undermine the life of the mind if “a rigid orthodoxy undermines the search for truth.”⁴⁶ I would amend Hughes’s caution to account for the fact that it was precisely the authority of the church’s orthodox and universal creeds that anchored Augustine’s massive yet drifting intellect and led him to cast off both unlearned spirituality and spiritless learning. Augustine would not have become nearly so great or influential a thinker if he had not also become so great a defender of Christian truth against Manichean—as well as Donatist and Pelagian—opponents, and I would wish my own students to imitate this pattern without becoming sectarian. If the case for Christian higher education is to validate its cost, its advocates must with all humility and acknowledgement of human limitation seek attentively to venerate God’s eternal Word through rigorousness in thought and expression: “If you don’t know that what has been said is true,” wrote Augustine at the end of *The Teacher*, “neither I nor He has taught you.”⁴⁷ May the reply of Augustine’s own son and pupil Adeodatus, whose name means “gift of God,” be our common response: “With His help, I shall love [Christ] the more ardently the more I advance in learning.”⁴⁸



Works Cited

Primary Sources, with Abbreviations

- AATT*. Augustine. *Against the Academicians and The Teacher*. Trans. Peter King. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995.
- ALW*. Augustine. *Augustine: Later Works*. Trans. John Burnaby. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955.
- City*. Augustine. *City of God*. Trans. Vernon J. Bourke. Garden City: Image, 1958.
- Conf*. Augustine. *Confessions*. Trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin. New York: Penguin, 1961.
- EA*. Augustine. *The Essential Augustine*. Ed. Vernon J. Bourke. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974.
- OCD*. Augustine. *On Christian Doctrine*. Trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. New York: Macmillan, 1958.

Secondary Sources

- Brown, Peter. *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. New Edition. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000.

⁴⁶ Hughes 66.

⁴⁷ Qtd. in King 146.

⁴⁸ *AATT* 146.

- Hughes, Richard T. *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.
- Kries, Douglas. "Magistro, De." In *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, 519-520. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Mathewes, Charles T. "The Liberation of Questioning in Augustine's *Confessions*." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70 (2002): 539-60.
- Pacioni, Virgilio. "Liberal Arts." In *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*. Trans. Matthew O'Connell. Ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999. 492-94.