

Core 101: The Sense of Self
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Due: 25 February 2003

Augustine's Encounter with Cicero and Ambrose

Throughout his life, Augustine's sense of autonomy and carnal passions came in conflict with his desire to know God. In his discovery of Cicero, he found that Wisdom must be sought outside of himself, yet he only found himself sinking back into the sins of the flesh when he allowed philosophers and learned men to digest the Scriptures for him, then feed them to him, garnished with their interpretations. Ambrose taught him that the only way he could find the truth is to seek the Scriptures for himself, because when the Word of God is approached as a work to study on a philosophical level, devoid of fervor or belief, it cannot be grasped. Cicero filled Augustine with the desire to know the source of Truth; Ambrose helped him find it.

Augustine came to find both Cicero and Ambrose while on his tireless pursuit of eloquence. His study of rhetoric and love for verbal persuasion and manipulation caused him to seek men and their written works, so that he could compare them to his own works and incorporate their form. His life's work was his studies. In retrospect, Augustine acknowledged that, "*it was my ambition to shine [in eloquence], all from a damnable vaingloriousness and for the satisfaction of human vanity*" (38). Thus he sought Cicero, "*whose tongue practically everyone [admired]*" (38), and Ambrose, "*famed among the best men of the whole world*" (82), yet these selfish reasons served as a means to take Augustine further along on his spiritual journey. In his reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*, he became enthralled, not by the "*excellence of its phrasing*" (38), but by the content of the words. He first judged Ambrose according to his eloquence, and found his

words unworthy of attention, yet in hindsight, Augustine realized that through them, “*little by little I was drawing closer [to God], though I did not yet realize it*” (82). The words of both Cicero and Ambrose, while sought by Augustine for intellectual depth and beautiful phrasing, served to inspire his search for Truth.

His ambition for worldly acclaim and public recognition was first encouraged by his parents, and especially his father, a catechumen who had received instruction in the fundamentals of Christianity but had not been baptized or confirmed in the Catholic faith. It was through him that Augustine was taught to pursue earthly treasures at the expense of spiritual doctrine; his father’s “*only concern was that I [Augustine] should learn to make as fine a persuasive speech as possible...this same father never bothered about how I was growing towards you [God] or how chaste or unchaste I might be, so long as I grew in eloquence*” (24; 25). When Augustine referred to his encounters with Cicero and Ambrose later in life however, they are both recalled in reference to his father. His discovery of Cicero was marked by the two-year anniversary of his father’s death, and he noted that the Bishop of Milan “*...received [him] as [would] a father...*” (82). In Cicero, Augustine found a theory that piqued his interest. In Ambrose, Augustine found the spiritual guidance and Christian mentorship that had been lacking in the relationship with his own biological father, who “*had practically no thought of You [God]...only vain ambition for [his son]...*”(26). Both men served as spiritual teachers, paternal surrogates who showed Augustine the way to obtain Truth.

At the time of his discovery of the works of Cicero, Augustine was a leader in the School of Rhetoric and kept company with a group called the Overturers, young men

who were notorious for participating in acts that tormented and humiliated others. Augustine's sense of shame for their actions did not allow him to participate fully with them. His moral upbringing, though he tried to ignore it, prevented him from fully enjoying their cruelty. Subconsciously, he felt it was wrong, "*I abominated the acts that were their specialty*" (37), and he was caught between two conflicting desires: the need for companionship, for which he was often willing to do anything, and that of his religious background, which was instilled in him from childhood by his mother. Her life was a constant prayer for the salvation of her son, and even as a child, she had told him about a wise and loving God. In retrospect, Augustine realized that it was his mother's earnest prayers, and the rudiments of Catholicism that she gave him that caused him to be dissatisfied with the work of Cicero, as he found "*the only thing lacking [in Cicero's work] was that the name of Jesus was not there. For with my mother's milk my infant heart had drunk in, and still held deep down in it...the name of your Son*"(39).

Yet, it was this same unconscious relationship between Christ and Truth that caused Augustine to be drawn to Ambrose, who "*...taught the doctrine of salvation most profitably...*"(82) and who was able to demonstrate to Augustine for the first time that Catholicism could be maintained on "*reasonable grounds*" (82). Cicero and Ambrose attuned Augustine's spiritual ear to the call of Wisdom and Truth, but Cicero failed to recognize God as the source of that Wisdom, and "*whatever lacked the name of Christ, no matter how learned and excellently written and true could not win [Augustine] wholly*" (39). Cicero inspired Augustine to relinquish carnal vanities and to "*love, and*

seek, and win, and hold, and embrace, not this or that philosophical school, but Wisdom itself, whatever it might be” (39). Filled with this new, burning desire to “wing upwards from earthly delights to You [God]” (38), he decided to study the Holy Scriptures for himself. When his pride, ignorance, and self-righteous intellectualism kept him from understanding what he read, and his “conceit was repelled by their [The Scriptures’] simplicity” (39), he turned to the Manicheans, a religious sect who offered to shed light on the Bible that was “shrouded deep in mystery” (39). According to their doctrine, the universe is caught in a battle between good and evil; neither divine force is stronger or able to overcome the other. Thus God, a “luminous immeasurable body” (65), is the source of good, and is not omnipotent, and therefore cannot defeat evil. The soul, as a divine particle of the very being of God, is housed within humans, who are the corporeal manifestation of evil, torn between the two “opposing powers” (80).

According to Manichean belief, the Scriptures were to be read literally, and this brought a great deal of confusion to many of the passages Augustine read, which caused him to doubt the veracity of the Word. According to the Bible, man is created in the image of God, thus the Manicheans thought that God had a physical form. According to Augustine’s reasoning, he felt it more reverent to hold God “infinite in all other parts even if [God] is finite in that part where the power of evil was set against You, than to imagine you finitely contained in all Your parts in the shape of a human body” (80). He was all too aware of the sensual pleasures and carnal motivations that defined his own human existence, and he was afraid, “to believe [that] the Word [was] made flesh lest I be forced to believe the Word defiled by flesh” (80). To think of a higher power worthy of

worship, confined by the same temptations of the flesh that he, as a man, wrestled with, seemed sacrilegious.

To Augustine, and according to the Manichean doctrine, humans were incapable of sin; there was another power within the soul that caused sin, therefore humans were inherently without blame and thus did not need forgiveness or salvation. As later noted by Augustine, “*My sin was all the more incurable because I thought I was not a sinner*” (79). Augustine’s soul and mind were in a state of turmoil as he “*despaired of man’s finding the way to [God]*” (82). His desire for spiritual understanding and inner peace had brought him, not to a place of surety, but to an oblivion of uncertainty. In his search for Wisdom wherever it may be found, as encouraged by Cicero, he only came upon more questions and greater confusion. He adopted the belief of one of the philosophical schools of that time, The Academics, who held the belief that nothing is right and nothing is wrong, but he still yearned for the stability of religious absolutes; a doctrine which was infallible and irrefutable upon which he could stand. He had been lead astray by those who “*seduce men’s minds by philosophy, coloring and covering their errors with its great and fine and honorable name*” (38). He desired to be assured that God does exist, and He loves and cares for mankind, and he wanted to be “*as certain of things unseen as that seven and three make ten...spiritual things which I did not know how to conceive save corporeally*” (91). Augustine likened his plight in hindsight to that of one who goes to a bad doctor, and is then unable to seek help from another physician, even a good one. His sick soul “*could not be healed save by believing, and refused to be healed that way for fear of believing falsehood. Thus I resisted Your [God’s] hands, for you first prepared*

for us the medicine of faith and then applied it to the diseases of the world”(91).

When Ambrose began to expound on Catholic doctrine, Augustine first judged his words according to their eloquence, but the more he listened, the more his understanding increased. He learned that the Holy Scriptures could be read figuratively as well as literally, thus the biblical phrase “man created in the image of God” does not mean that God was confined within the limits of the human body, but rather is “*wholly everywhere, yet nowhere limited within space*” (90). Through Ambrose, Augustine learned that Catholicism is not false, and while he was not entirely convinced that he had found absolute truth, he now knew how to discover it for himself.

Augustine’s quest for spiritual wisdom and religious conviction was a continual struggle between the carnal pleasures of intense sensual passion and the desire to know and serve an omnipotent God. His journey through life, defined by alternate periods of self-gratification and religious fervor, was marked by moments of spiritual enlightenment, incidences divinely preordained to awaken his religious conscience and guide his restless soul. These occurrences ultimately served to collectively draw Augustine closer to the spiritual certainty of divine truth, and to the God who is the source of all Truth. Two such monumental moments in Augustine’s life were his discovery of the works of Cicero, and his personal encounter with Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. Both discoveries came as a result of his insatiable desire for eloquence and the all-consuming need to excel in the study of rhetoric, the importance of which was emphasized by his parents, especially his father, and confirmed by the accolades and

admiration he received from his peers. His reading of Cicero birthed the desire to seek Wisdom not simply in one religious sect, but wherever and whenever it could be found. He began his ascent to Truth and spiritual conviction by becoming a disciple of philosophy, a “lover of wisdom”. Yet Cicero’s argument lacked the mention of the name of Christ, and because of the religious influence of his mother, it was to that name that Augustine subconsciously looked as the true source of Wisdom. His search for spiritual truth lead him to the psuedo-Christian sect of the Manicheans, who believed that the Scriptures were to be taken in the literal sense, and what could not be comprehended in that manner was to be disregarded. Thus the Word of God was not seen as a source of truth, but as a mere religious text filled with ambiguities and contradictions. When Augustine encountered Ambrose however, he found in the Bishop’s argument the mention of the name of Christ, and learned from him that certain passages of the Bible should be taken figuratively. Augustine’s sin-weary soul found that there was no fallacy in the Scriptures, only fallible men to misinterpret them. Cicero encouraged Augustine to seek Wisdom, and he did so through philosophers who interpreted the Scriptures for him. Ambrose taught Augustine to discern the Holy Word for himself, to seek it not as an intellectual skeptic with pre-established theories and half-truths, but as a mortal sinner in need of an Almighty, Immortal God. The Scriptures were not simply another rhetorical text to be analyzed and judged for their eloquence, but were, as shown by Ambrose, the inspired Word of God, given for the benefit of mankind. Cicero inspired Augustine to seek Wisdom; Augustine showed him the way to do so.

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*On my honor, I pledge that I have neither given nor received any unauthorized assistance
in the completion of this work.* _____