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"EXQUISITE AND PRECIOUS VESSELS": *DOCTRINA* IN BOOK I OF AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS*[1]

Abstract

In this essay I argue that Book I of the *Confessions* demonstrates Augustine's valuation of the liberal arts according to the register of "use." The classical *doctrina* in which Augustine was schooled is understood in the *Confessions* to be marked by pride (*doctrina superbiae*) and signified by the veils that cloak the entrances of the academies; this *doctrina*'s "use" is self-aggrandizement. By contrast, Augustine finds the teaching of humility signified in the humility of a child; the *doctrina humilitatis* finds its "use" in the praise of God. Still, in recounting his own childhood, Augustine seems eager to present himself familiar with the classical tradition and a cultural *savoir faire*. I argue, however, that when considered under the auspices of "use" Augustine's quotations of Virgil, references to Cicero and Plato, and allusions to Terence and Seneca do not entail he himself falls prey to *doctrina superbiae*, but rather this display of familiarity with the classical canon underscores my argument that Augustine values the liberal arts according to their "use." Augustine takes no umbrage with classical learning per se, but models appropriate "use" with intricate Latin rhetorical flourishes while weaving the story of his life into Virgil's *Aeneid*. In modeling appropriate "use" of the liberal arts Augustine demonstrates how they can be used as "exquisite and precious vessels" intended for the praise of God or, conversely, can be filled with the "wine of error."

The reader of contemporary autobiographies is left rather perplexed reading Book One of the *Confessions*. There is no mention of Augustine's childhood years at home; instead he immediately launches into an account of his time at school. Indeed, his schooling is the dominant motif of the first book of the *Confessions*. This article will demonstrate that in recalling his early education, Augustine delineates two antithetical accounts of *doctrina*, each with its own guiding principles, signs and goals. The classical *doctrina* in which Augustine was reared is marked by pride (*superbia*), and its goal is worldly success. This *doctrina*, I will argue, is signified by the veils that cloak the entrances of the academies. Augustine contrasts this *doctrina* with the teaching of humility (*doctrina humilitatis*); its goal is rest in God and

[1] I would like to thank Prof. Lewis Ayres for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

is signified by the humility of a child. The *Confessions* do not use these terms of binary opposition (*doctrina humilitatis* and *doctrina superbiae*). Nevertheless, my argument is that such terminology is a helpful heuristic device to elucidate Augustine's account of education. Further, the terms are textually tethered in the sense that education, pride and humility are dominant motifs of the *Confessions*. This article will proceed in two steps. First, I will expand on these two antithetical accounts of *doctrina* running through Book One of the *Confessions*; and second, I will consider how Augustine understands classical learning to function positively in the *doctrina humilitatis*.[2]

I am building on existing scholarship of Augustine's relation to the liberal arts and applying this scholarship to an interpretation of Book One of the *Confessions*. That the contrast between *superbia* and *humilitas* is a dominant motif in the *Confessions* is well established in authoritative commentaries such as James O'Donnell's three-volume commentary,[3] Pierre Courcelle's magisterial *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin*,[4] and Aime Solignac's introduction to the *Confessions* in the *Bibliotèque Augustinienne*.[5] It is not necessary for us to revisit their analyses of the dominance of the themes of pride and humility in the *Confessions*. Similarly, I am relying especially on the scholarship of Henri-Irénée Marrou,[6] Olivier du Roy[7] and, more recently, Mark Vessey and Karla Pollmann's edited book of conference papers[8] for understanding Augustine's valuation of the liberal arts.[9]

[2] *Superbia* is a dominant motif in the *Confessions*, as it is in many of Augustine's writings. Maurice Testard has offered a detailed textual analysis of the *Confessions* in terms of *superbia*: "Le 'superbia' dans les Confessions de saint Augustin," in *Homo Spiritalis*, ed. Cornelius Mayer (Würzburg: Augustinus, 1987), pp. 136-69. A search in the *Library of Latin Texts* reveals 44 uses of the term *superbus* and its lexical families; this is contrasted with the 34 uses of various lexical forms of *humilis* and *humilitas*.

[3] James O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

[4] Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris: de Boccard, 1950).

[5] Aimé Solignac, *Bibliothèque Augustinienne: Œuvres de saint Augustin*, vol 14: *Les Confessions*: VIII-XIII (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1962).

[6] Henri-Irénée Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (Paris: De Boccard, 1938).

[7] Olivier Du Roy, *L'intelligence de la foi en la Trinité selon saint Augustin* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1966).

[8] Karla Pollmann and Mark Vessey, ed. *Augustine and the disciplines: from Cassiciacum to Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[9] Wolfgang Hübner, "Disciplina," *AugLex* (Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1986-); Cornelius Mayer, "Doctrina," *AugLex*; Maximilian Fussl and David Pingree, "Disciplinae liberales," *AugLex* all provide a great overview and foundation for the argument I am building.

What I am proposing as a "new" reading, then, is that in the contrast between *superbia* and *humilitas* in Book One of the *Confessions* we are presented with two contrasting accounts of education. By looking at the way in which Augustine links pride and humility with *doctrina* (and I will argue that Augustine's use of the term "signs" (*signa*) warrants precisely such a linkage), we can shed new light on his account of the "use" of the liberal arts. Thus, my conclusions regarding Augustine's valuation of the liberal arts according to the register of "use" do not differ from those of Isabelle Bochet and Pierre-Marie Hombert[10] and other standard accounts, but rather lend textual support from *Confessions* One to their arguments that praise (*laus*) and confession (*confessio*) are the appropriate "use" of the liberal arts.

The Humility of Faith

Throughout the first book of the *Confessions* there is a sustained binary opposition between pride and humility that illuminates the discourse on education. This serves to set the stage for Augustine's own journey in the purgation of pride, which does not find its denouement until Book Nine. In constructing the foundation for his account of education, Augustine counsels humility as a *sine qua non* for education. Pride hampers the efforts of education. This explains the emphasis that we will see on infancy in Book One. The opening lines of the *Confessions* initiate a contrast between God and the proud; these lines open with an encomium to God, whose greatness is contrasted with the feebleness of humanity: "You are great, Lord and highly to be praised."[11] The greatness of God is set in opposition to the smallness of the human person. Twice in the first paragraph Augustine repeats the phrase "a piece of your creation" (*portio creaturae tuae*): "Man, a little piece of your creation desires to praise you."[12] The mortality and sin of the human person are the reason why God resists the proud (*superbis*).[13]

[10] Isabelle Bochet, "Le 'juste usage' de la culture," *Bibliothèque Augustinienne* 11 (1997), 528-546; Pierre-Marie Hombert, *Gloria Gratiae, Se glorifier en Dieu, principe et fin de la théologie augustinienne de la grâce* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1996).

[11] *Conf.* I.1.1 (CCSL 27.1). Aurelius Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). In this article I will quote Chadwick's translation of the *Confessions*, and for the Latin text I rely on *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, 27 (Turnholti: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1981).

[12] *Conf.* I.1.1 (CCSL 27.1).

[13] *Conf.* I.1.1 (CCSL 27.1).

"Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man."[14] The proud disdain the created order of affection, which is the praise of God (*tu excitas ut laudare te delectet*), and find no rest (*requies*) because their aim is self-praise rather than the praise of God.[15] Thus, already in the opening paragraph Augustine has set up the leitmotif of the first book by suggesting a contrast between the proud, typified by their mortality and sin, and God, who resists them. Humility, we will discover, is the requisite disposition to receive education.

Augustine prays, "Grant me, Lord, to know and understand" (*Da mihi, domine, scire et intellegere*).[16] Knowing and understanding is placed within the mindset of a humble calling on and praising of God, which, as Augustine reiterates later on, presupposes faith. The curriculum that Augustine will mold for his *doctrina*, the "knowing and understanding," necessitates the groundwork of the *humilitas* of belief in the incarnation. Thus, at the outset of the *Confessions*, before giving his account of education, Augustine links "knowing and understanding" with the humility of faith and prayer and, ultimately, the humility of the incarnation:

> In seeking him they find him, and in finding they will praise him. Lord, I would seek you, calling upon you – and calling upon you is an act of believing in you. You have been preached to us. My faith, Lord, calls upon you. It is your gift to me. You breathed it into me by the humanity of your Son.[17]

James O'Donnell explains that in this opening paragraph of the *Confessions* there is a progression from preaching (*praedicare*) to believing in (*credere*) and ending in calling upon (*inuocare*) God. This schema is mirrored by another movement: seeking (*requirere* and *quaerere*) finds its fulfillment in finding (*inuenire*) and praising (*laudare*).[18] In the first paragraphs of the *Confessions*, Augustine has prepared the foundation for an exposition of the *doctrina humilitatis*.

[14] *Conf.* 1.1.1 (CCSL 27.1). The term "nevertheless" (*et tamen*) is a literary devise that Augustine frequently employs. O'Donnell points out that it occurs 59 times in the *Confessions* and 12 times in the first book alone, to express a reality in the midst of an apparent contradiction and paradox. James O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, vol 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), p. 12.

[15] "[O]ur heart is restless until it rests in you" is not only the most well known line of the *Confessions*, but is also a recurring motif. Already in the first book Augustine asks, "Who will enable me to find rest in you?" *Conf.* I.5.5 (CCSL 27.3). We discover that the *inquietum* of the human heart is only resolved by a humble submission to the *ordo* of God. Cf. George Lawless, "Interior Peace in the 'Confessions,'" *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 26 (1980), 54.

[16] *Conf.* I.1.1 (CCSL 27.1).

[17] *Conf.* I.1.1 (CCSL 27.1).

[18] O'Donnell, *Confessions Commentary*, p. 17.

The desire to know and understand is fulfilled as gift; the *doctrina* that Augustine will develop is a search predicated on the *humilitas* of faith that finds its *requies* in praise.

Augustine admits that knowledge of his infancy is based on trust, for it is a period in his life of which he has no memory: "For I do not remember" (*non enim ego memini*).[19] The dialectic of memory and trust runs parallel to that of learning and faith; the frailty of memory necessitates trust.[20] The perennial Augustinian theme of faith taking the place of knowledge is articulated in a unique way in Augustine's infancy narrative. Augustine has no recollection that as a baby he smiled in his sleep, but he believes it from what he is told and acknowledges that our experience indicates that this is what infants do.[21] This epistemological triad of memory, trust, and experience is reiterated in the next paragraph, where Augustine claims ignorance on the origin of the soul: "Was I anywhere, or any sort of person? I have no one able to tell me that – neither my father nor my mother nor the experience of others nor my own memory."[22]

Augustine's reflection on his infancy underscores the *humilitas* of faith and trust that are preambles necessary to proceed to the knowing (*scire*) and understanding (*intellegere*) of *doctrina* with which he initiated his discussion. Augustine praises (*laudem*) God for his beginnings that he himself does not remember (*quae non memini*) but must rather take on the experience of others and on the testimony of weak women.[23] But Augustine also bemoans the sin of his infancy, which, despite not remembering it from his own youth, he can witness in any tiny child.[24] And so, for a third time he repeats the epistemological triad that necessitates *humilitas*: "This period of my life, Lord, I do not remember having lived, but I have believed what others have told

[19] *Conf.* I.6.7 (CCSL 27.4).

[20] It has been pointed out by Pierre Courcelle that a leitmotif of Augustine's narrative is that he does not remember his infancy: "Augustin prend soin de souligner qu'il ne se rappelle ni sa vie antérieure à sa venue sur terre, ni sa vie dans le sein de sa mère, ni le lait qu'il but nouveau-né, ni ses premiers sourires, ni ses premiers pleurs. Sur tous ces points, il est réduit à reconstituer sa vie par conjecture, en contrôlant les racontars des témoins de son enfance par l'observation directe des bébés." Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris: De Boccard, 1950), pp. 32-33.

[21] *Conf.* I.6.8 (CCSL 27.4). (*hoc enim de me mihi indicatum est et credidi.*)

[22] *Conf.* I.6.9 (CCSL 27.5).

[23] *Conf.* I.6.10 (CCSL 27.5). *auctoritatibus etiam muliercularum multa de se credere.* The diminutive *muliercula* serves to underscore the *humilitas* requisite to accept the divine *doctrina.*

[24] *quis me commemorat? an quilibet tantillus nunc paruulus, in quo uideo quod non memini de me? Conf.* I.7.11 (CCSL 27.6).

me and have assumed how I behaved from observing other infants."[25] Thus, prior to giving an explicit account of education Augustine has, in the infancy narrative, laid the necessary groundwork. *Doctrina* comes by way of memory, belief and experience, which Augustine acknowledges requires much faith (*multum fida*).[26]

The *Confessions* are often noted for their rather austere outlook on babies and criticized for their menacing descriptions of infants' contorted will and depravity. Who can forget Augustine's description of a baby "pale with jealousy and bitterness" glaring at his brother who is sharing his mother's milk?[27] O'Donnell remarks,

> For [Augustine] an infant is a small adult, lacking various powers but experiencing the world just as an adult would. He cannot speak or make his *indignatio* efficacious, but he is capable of all the emotions and the velleities that arise from them. Such a view of the infant is eminently compatible with a doctrine of infant baptism, but is philosophically problematic.[28]

Certainly Augustine's theology of original sin and baptism appears in the first book of the *Confessions*.[29] However, if we consider his description of an infant in the context of *doctrina*, a different emphasis comes to the fore. His portrayal of an infant as "almost an Epicurean,"[30] who "knew nothing more than how to suck and to be quietened by bodily delights,"[31] is intended, I would argue, to highlight

[25] *Conf.* I.7.12 (CCSL 27.7).
[26] *Conf.* I.7.12 (CCSL 27.7).
[27] *Conf.* I.7.11 (CCSL 27.6).
[28] O'Donnell, *Confessions Commentary*, p. 44.
[29] Augustine's doctrine of original sin evolves substantially from his presentation in 397. Athanase Sage has traced the development of Augustine's understanding of original sin in three stages. First, his early work up till the *Confessions*, then in the works dating from 397-411, especially the commentaries on Genesis, and finally, Augustine's writings against the Pelagians later in life. Although a very helpful survey, Sage's work does not interact with the *Confessions* in much detail except to note that Augustine's description of infant behavior represents "la manifestation d'un péché proprement dit." Athanase Sage, "Péché originel: Naissance d'un dogme," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 13 (1967), 224. Cf. P. Rigby, *Original Sin in Augustine's 'Confessions'* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1987). A superb article by Margaret R. Miles considers Augustine's infancy narrative as foreshadowing later concupiscence; the grasping avarice that is never satisfied and the desire for control expressed through sex, power, and possessions. Augustine's anxiety and *inquietum* cannot be resolved while he is possessed by disordered desires; only in the *ordo* of God does he find "rest." Margaret R. Miles, "Infancy, Parenting, and Nourishment in Augustine's *Confessions*," *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 (1982), 349-364.
[30] O'Donnell, *Confessions Commentary*, p. 36.
[31] *Conf.* I.6.7 (CCSL 27.4).

less the degenerate *nature* of the child than the necessary role of *paideia*. Augustine is less beholden to a certain theological agenda regarding original sin than he is consciously trying to situate his account of infancy within dominant Latin philosophical themes of development and maturation. The infancy narrative begins with stating that he does "not know whence I came to be in this mortal life or, as I may call it, this living death."[32] Some commentators see here a barely veiled reference to Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 3.869: "*mortalem uitam mors cum immortalis ademit.*" Similarly, in his description of infant behavior Augustine follows Cicero, who had tried to understand human nature by analyzing an infant (*De finibus* 5.55). Lastly, Augustine notes the tendency of infants to strike their parents and caretakers in an attempt "to do as much injury as possible."[33] This is perhaps an allusion to Seneca's *De constantia sapientis* 11.2, in which the Stoic philosopher also notes that babies will hit their mother in anger. The peppering of his infancy narrative with references and allusions to the classical canon is in keeping with Augustine's understanding of the "use" of the liberal arts in *doctrina*, which I will argue is a theme that runs through Book One of the *Confessions*. The emphasis thus lies not on the child's depravity, but on his immaturity. The infant is content with "bodily delights" because he is as yet unaware of the "gifts you bestow both inwardly in the mind and outwardly in body."[34] The child still awaits education; his mind is as yet unformed.

Up to this point we have seen the humility of faith that Augustine understands to be necessary for education; the acceptance in trust, as a gift, of what is taught is proper to infants. This is not yet an account of *doctrina* per se, but is a foundational preamble thereto. In the next section of the first half of this paper we see the movement from infancy to boyhood that is marked by the ability to use and interpret signs. It is only in the ability to apply signs that Augustine begins to speak of *doctrina*.

Signa as *Doctrina*

The stress on immaturity and subsequent growth in *doctrina* is illustrated by recounting the infant's desire to communicate through "signs": "So I threw my limbs about and uttered sounds, signs

[32] *Conf.* I.6.7 (CCSL 27.4).
[33] *Conf.* I.7.11 (CCSL 27.6).
[34] *Conf.* I.6.7 (CCSL 27.4).

resembling my wishes, the small number of signs of which I was capable but such signs as lay in my power to use: for there was no real resemblance."[35] *Signa* are inextricably interwoven with Augustine's account of *doctrina*. The term *infans* refers to a person who cannot yet speak and by extension cannot yet remember. It is peculiar to *infantes* that their *signa* are ineffective. Not only does an infant have recourse to only very few signs, but those few signs also fail to communicate: "[F]or there was no real resemblance."[36] For this reason Augustine does not speak of *doctrina* in reference to infants. The process of maturation in *doctrina* is growth in the knowledge of signs, and so Augustine will write that at the "last stage of my infant speechlessness I was searching out signs by which I made my thoughts known to others."[37]

When Augustine "emerged from infancy to boyhood" he was "no longer a baby incapable of speech but already a boy with power to talk. This I remember."[38] The link between memory and speech is reiterated: it is the ability to speak that marks the entrance into boyhood, and as a lack of memory was proper to infants, so memory is within the purview of boyhood. Augustine recounts the learning process by which he matured in the knowledge of signs. Although he had no "formal teaching" (*ordine doctrinae*) in the Latin language, he "gradually gathered the meaning of words"[39]: "I learned to articulate my wishes by training my mouth to use these signs. In this way I communicated the signs of my wishes to those around me."[40] The initial presentation of his ineffective attempts as an infant to communicate his wishes by signs is juxtaposed by the way he describes his successful attempts as a boy. In both cases, Augustine describes himself as making sounds and body movements to bend the will of those entrusted with his care.[41] In the first case he remained frustrated; unable to participate in human society he was left to weep in frustration by himself – he was not yet ready for *doctrina*. As a boy, however, he was able

[35] *Conf.* I.6.8 (CCSL 27.4). *itaque iactabam membra et uoces, signa similia uoluntatibus meis, pauca quae poteram, qualia poteram: non enim erant uere similia.*

[36] *Conf.* I.6.8 (CCSL 27.4). *non enim erant uere similia.*

[37] *Conf.* I.6.10 (CCSL 27.5).

[38] *Conf.* I.8.13 (CCSL 27.7).

[39] *Conf.* I.8.13 (CCSL 27.7).

[40] *Conf.* I.8.13 (CCSL 27.7). *crebro audita quarum rerum signa essent paulatim conligebam measque iam uoluntates edomito in eis signis ore per haec enuntiabam. sic cum his inter quos eram uoluntatum enuntiandarum signa communicaui.*

[41] *iactabam membra et uoces*; *Conf.* I.6.8 (CCSL 27.4). *cum gemitibus et uocibus uariis et uariis membrorum motibus*; *Conf.* I.8.13 (CCSL 27.7).

to communicate by signs and "entered more deeply into the stormy society of human life."[42] Augustine uses the precise term *doctrina* only in reference to his boyhood education. Everything else up to this point was propedeutic. It is in boyhood that one can use signs and, therefore, begin education.

We now see more clearly the relation of *signa* to *doctrina*. Maturation in *paideia* is marked by the ability to effectively use and interpret *signa*. At this point in the *Confessions*, Augustine contrasts the *signa* employed in classical *doctrina*, which is characterized by *superbia*, with the *doctrina* of Christ, which is distinguished by *humilitas*. Our first point of reference is Augustine recalling the rite whereby he was signed with the cross when near death from an illness:

> When I was still a boy, I had heard about eternal life promised to us through the humility of our Lord God (*humilitatem domini dei*), coming down to our pride (*ad superbiam nostram*), and I was already signed with the sign of the cross (*signabar iam signo crucis*) and seasoned with salt from the time I came from my mother's womb.[43]

The *signum crucis* attests to the humility by which Christ stoops to conquer human pride.[44] It also serves to further underscore the contrast between the *doctrina superbiae* and the *doctrina humilitatis*, each known by their own *signa*.[45]

The next instance of *signa* occurs in Augustine's discussion of the *doctrina* he received in literature. Behind the curtains that hung in front of the academy, great pride was lurking.[46] Indeed, these "veils" hanging in front of the doors of the schools of literature "do not signify

[42] *Conf.* I.8.13 (CCSL 27.8).

[43] *Conf.* I.11.17 (CCSL 27.9).

[44] Chapter 6 of Pierre-Marie Hombert's *Gloria Gratiae* is a study in the paradox of Christ's glory through the humility of the incarnation in Augustine's thought. Similarly, see T. J. Van Bavel, "L'Humanité du Christ comme *lac paruulorum* et comme *uia* dans la spiritualité de saint Augustin," *Augustiniana* 7 (1957), 245-81. Also, Brian E. Daley, "A Humble Mediator: the Distinctive Elements in St. Augustine's Christology," *Word and Spirit* 9 (1987), 100-17. The latter essay is an excellent summary of Augustine's Christology as a humble descent. Lastly, see I. W. A. Jamieson, "Augustine's *Confessiones*: The Structure of Humility," *Augustiniana* 24 (1974), 234-46. The overarching theme of "humilitas" in Augustine's thought is well articulated by Cornelius Mayer, "Humiliatio, humilitas," *AugLex*.

[45] Maurice Testard remarks, "On notera en outre l'art du rhéteur, qui n'est point gratuité, mais qui fait valoir, avec l'alliance de mots 'descendentis ad superbiam', le paradoxe déconcertant de l'humilité du Dieu incarné qui s'abaisse à la rencontre de l'orgueil humain." Testard, "Le '*superbia*' dans les Confessions," 141.

[46] The "veils" were probably intended as door entrances that were guarded by an usher who would ensure that only those were admitted who had paid their fees.

(*significant*) the prestige of élite teaching so much as the covering up of error."[47] In Augustine's account, the veils (*uela*) are the *signa* of the pride that classical education fosters. A stark contrast marks the *doctrina* of Christ. Augustine recalls the Gospel scene in which the children are brought to Jesus. Christ welcomes them and blesses them. Augustine writes, "So you, our king, have taken the small physical size of a child as a [sign] of humility (*humilitatis ergo signum*)"[48] The child, who is usually the subject of education, here functions as the *signum* of the *doctrina humilitatis*. And so, the scene of Jesus calling the children to himself serves as a mirror account of what occurred to Augustine as a boy receiving the sign of the cross (*signum crucis*) – "the humility of our Lord God, coming down to our pride."[49] The two *doctrinae*, that of pride and that of humility, are identified by their respective *signa* of the veil and the child. Christ calls the latter to himself and indeed came with humility to Augustine as a child with the *signum crucis* to conquer pride (*superbiam nostram*).

The *doctrina humilitatis* has a pedagogical method that corresponds to that of the *doctrina superbiae*. Augustine recounts his fear of being caned at school for not learning his lessons, since as a boy he preferred playing over studying. Indeed, Augustine had "no love for reading books and hated being forced to study them"[50]: "I learned nothing unless compelled."[51] These disciplinary experiences as a schoolboy make for a literary devise concerning the *doctrina* of Christ, which likewise does not come easily. The human will is recalcitrant and stubborn and prefers the *amor ludendi*.[52] Augustine writes, "By your laws we are disciplined, from the canes of schoolmasters to the ordeals of martyrs. Your laws have the power to temper bitter experiences in a constructive way."[53] Thus, Augustine prays not to be crushed under the Lord's discipline (*disciplina tua*), but that the discipline given by God (*tu disciplinam dabas mihi*) may rather be turned to good use.[54] The *disciplina* of Augustine's classical education provides a literary analogue to the *doctrina* of Christ and his *disciplina*.

[47] *Conf.* I.13.22 (CCSL 27.12).

[48] *Conf.* I.19.30 (CCSL 27.17). *humilitatis ergo signum in statura pueritiae, rex noster, probasti, cum aisti, 'talium est regnum caelorum'. Conf.* I.19.30 (CCSL 27.17).

[49] *Conf.* I.11.17 (CCSL 27.9).

[50] *Conf.* I.12.19 (CCSL 27.10).

[51] *Conf.* I.12.19 (CCSL 27.11).

[52] The phrase *delectabat ludere* occurs in *Conf.* I.10.15 (CCSL 27.9) and *amor ludendi* in *Conf.* I.10.16 (CCSL 27.9) and *Conf.* I.19.30 (CCSL 27.16).

[53] *Conf.* I.14.23 (CCSL 27.13).

[54] *Conf.* I.15.24 (CCSL 27.13).

The Positive "Use" of the Liberal Arts

Book One of the *Confessions* presents us with a puzzle. Augustine expresses his disdain for classical education. The *doctrina superbiae* is marked by the *signum* of veils that hide its error, and the goal of classical education is worldly success and human praise. Strangely, this withering critique is interjected with quotations from Virgil's *Aeneid* and filled with oblique references to Cicero's orations, dialogues of Plato, the playwright Terence, and Seneca's philosophy. What do we make of what seems a rather blatant inconsistency? It is as if in his very denunciation of classical education, Augustine is eager to represent himself as possessing *savoir faire* in the literary tradition, a genuine heir of classical *doctrina*, a man of the greatest eloquence and learning.[55]

Augustine's critique of classical education in 397 is not directed at the study of the liberal arts per se, however, but at their ill *use*. When such education is sought after for self-praise in the service of *superbia*, one is "swept along by vanities."[56] *Laudare* and *inuocare*, on the other hand, are the proper *telos* of *doctrina*. This principle is embodied in Augustine's prayer, "Turn to your service whatever may be of use in what I learnt in boyhood. May I dedicate to you my power to speak and write and read and count."[57] The difficulty with classical education lies, for Augustine, in the fact that the prevailing *ratio* for this *doctrina* is worldly success. Augustine was sent to school to learn to speak eloquently, that he might flourish in the world (*saeculo florerem*), receiving human honors and guileful wealth.[58] Nevertheless, the liberal arts taught in the *doctrina superbiae* are treasures that can be well used: "For later I was able to make good use of letters, whatever might be the intention of my adult guardians in wanting me to learn them."[59] Augustine writes,

[55] Cf. *An. quant.* 33.70: *uir eloquentissimus ac doctissimus.*

[56] *Conf.* I.18.28 (CCSL 27.15).

[57] *Conf.* I.15.24 (CCSL 27.13).

[58] *Conf.* I.9.14 (CCSL 27.8). *honorem hominum et falsas diuitias famulantibus.* Augustine's father, Patricius, proved to be especially devoted to Augustine's education and exceedingly generous with his resources thereto. However, his support for his son's education was misplaced: "At that time everybody was full of praise for my father because he spent money on his son beyond the means of his estate, when that was necessary to finance an education entailing a long journey. Many citizens of far greater wealth did nothing of the kind for their children. 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." *Conf.* II.3.5 (CCSL 27.20).

[59] *Conf.* I.10.16 (CCSL 27.9).

> They gave no consideration to the use that I might make of the things they forced me to learn. The objective they had in view was merely to satisfy the appetite for wealth and for glory, though the appetite is insatiable, the wealth is in reality destitution of spirit, and the glory something to be ashamed of. But you ... used the error of all who pressed me to learn to turn out to my advantage .... So by making use of those who were failing to do anything morally right you did good to me.[60]

Augustine's presentation in Book One of the *Confessions* regarding the value of the *liberales disciplinae* is a literary expression of themes that he articulates with theological clarity in other concurrent works such as *De doctrina Christiana*, where he gives his well-known justification for "plundering the Egyptians" to describe the Christian use of classical learning.[61] Despite the polemical rhetoric against the classical *disciplinae* in much of the *Confessions*, O'Donnell is correct when he writes, "[T]here is no reason to think that these ideas about the liberal disciplines were in any essential way incompatible with the practice and belief of Christianity in [Augustine's] time."[62] A close reading of Augustine's critique of the liberal arts in the first book of the *Confessions* affirms this judgment. Despite his demurral, Augustine continued to hold the *liberales disciplinae* in high repute and accorded them great value. My argument for Augustine's valuation of the liberal arts in Book One fits in with the broader consensus in scholarship that Augustine judges the arts according to the register of "use." Pierre-Marie Hombert's study of the teleology of Augustine's theology has made clear that the recurring theme in the African bishop's oeuvre is the glory and praise of God.[63] My reading of Book One supports Hombert's overall thesis. The purpose of God's

[60] *Conf.* I.12.19 (CCSL 27.11).

[61] *De doctrina Christiana* 40.60. Augustine writes that not only have the Platonists "said things which are indeed true and well accommodated to our faith ... but also the liberal disciplines [are] suited to the uses of truth, and some most useful precepts concerning morals. Even some truths concerning the worship of one God are discovered among them. These are, as it were, their gold and silver, which they did not institute themselves but dug up from certain mines of divine Providence." Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), p. 75. For Augustine's valuation of the liberal arts in *De doctrina christiana* see the excellent overview in the commentary by Isabelle Bochet and Goulven Madec, *La doctrine chrétienne, De doctrina christiana* (Bibliothèque Augustinienne 11/2; Paris: Institut des Études Augustiniennes, 1997), pp. 528-46.

[62] O'Donnell, *Confessions Commentary*, p. 271.

[63] Hombert, *Gloria Gratiae* (see fn. 10).

glory and praise is the standard by which Augustine values the "use" of the liberal arts in the first book of the *Confessions*.

To be sure, the exact value that Augustine accorded the liberal arts did evolve with time. Prior to his baptism, during his retreat at Cassiciacum, the liberal arts played a particularly exalted role in his mind. *Contra Academicos*, *De beata uita*, *De ordine*, and the *Soliloquia* express a confidence that study in the *liberales disciplinae* can bring about spiritual growth and enlightenment.[64] Upon becoming a "man of the Church" (*uir ecclesiasticus*) at his ordination, Augustine tempered his earlier zeal for the *liberales disciplinae*. There was no decisive break with the arts; rather, ecclesial affairs occupied all his time, and the leisure of Cassiciacum had ended. Further, Augustine knew people such as his mother Monica, who, having no *disciplinae*, nevertheless ascended to a knowledge of the incorporeal nature of God.[65] The necessity of the *liberales disciplinae* became increasingly attenuated for Augustine as he became a bishop.[66] They were *useful* only insofar as they helped to interpret Scripture. As bishop, Augustine began to show increasing reluctance to interact with pagan literature on account of the pride that lurks in the *liberales disciplinae*. In fact, of his writings at Cassiciacum Augustine would later say, "But they still breathe the spirit of the school of pride, as if they were at the last gasp."[67]

[64] Augustine's project of the *disciplinarum libri* is outlined in *De ordine* written in 387. Augustine explains in the *Retractationes* that he intended to create an encyclopedic work following Varro's model for the study of the liberal arts (*retr.* 1.6). Although Augustine only ever wrote volumes on grammar and music, he writes in *Retractationes* 1.3 that the *ordo studiorum* is intended to guide reason in its movement from temporal corporeal knowledge toward eternal incorporeal knowledge. Already in *De musica* book six Augustine argues that the liberal arts are anagogical in character; their use is the drawing up of the mind to God. Cf. Jean Doignon, "Grandeur et décadence de l'*eruditio* aux yeux d'Augustin du *De ordine* au *De musica*," in *Interiorità e intenzionalità in S. Agostino*, ed. L. Alici (Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1990), pp. 21-33.

[65] *Ord.* II.17.45.

[66] As priest and bishop, Augustine began to question whether the katharsis offered by the arts could really offer the knowledge of God and the soul that he had been so ardently seeking. Frederick Van Fleteren suggests that upon studying the epistles of St. Paul, Augustine came to a deeper appreciation of the role of grace in divine disclosure and came to see that true knowledge of God was not found in the *liberales disciplinae* but was reserved for the beatific vision. Frederick Van Fleteren, "Augustine, Neoplatonism, and the Liberal Arts," in *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*, ed. Duane Arnold and Pamela Bright (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 19. See also the discussion by Michael P. Foley, "St. Augustine, the University, and the So-Called Liberal Arts," in *The Idea of the American University* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), pp. 129-39.

[67] *Conf.* IX.4.7 (CCSL 27.136).

While *De ordine* suggests that the "reasonable lies" of the poets might be tolerated on account of their philosophical truth,[68] Augustine later explicitly retracts this opinion.[69] Indeed, that the stories told by the poets were not true began to trouble Augustine immensely, as we read in his autobiography.[70] In the *Confessions*, stories about the "wanderings of Aeneas" are dismissed as "error" covered up.[71] Augustine denounces "people who sell or buy a literary education," because questions concerning the historical truth of the narrative are circumvented in the process.[72] "Empty fables" (*illa inania*) were chosen over "useful studies," complains Augustine, as he recounts with remorse how "delightful was the vain spectacle of the wooden horse full of armed soldiers and the burning of Troy and the very ghost of Creusa."[73] In addition to protesting their historical falsehood, Augustine remonstrates against the moral turpitude to which the accounts give license. Homer's stories of the gods give "divine sanction to vicious acts,"[74] and the playwright Terence refers to "Jupiter as a model for his own fornication."[75]

Already early in his ecclesiastical career, Augustine hesitated to "baptize" pagan literature on account both of its mendacious historicity and its moral baseness. Sabine MacCormack argues convincingly that after becoming rooted in the life of the Church, Augustine took on a new set of authorities and exemplars. Where previously he emulated the style of Cicero, Virgil, and other Latin authors, he now looked to the "men of the Church."[76] The writings of the *ecclesiastici uiri*, which were now to be imitated in Christian rhetoric, were marked by their humble style (*sermo humilis*).[77]

This *use* of rhetoric was fundamentally different: it was not the preserve of the cultural élite, but intended for all. Robert Kaster expresses this well, "[T]he style of the Christian message [was] humble

[68] *Ord.* II.14.42.

[69] *Retr.* I.3.2.

[70] Cf. Sabine MacCormack's careful tracing of the evolution of Augustine's thought on this matter: *The Shadows of Poetry: Virgil in the Mind of Augustine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 53-73.

[71] *Conf.* I.13.22 (CCSL 27.12).

[72] *Conf.* I.13.22 (CCSL 27.12).

[73] *Conf.* I.13.22 (CCSL 27.12).

[74] *Conf.* I.16.25 (CCSL 27.14).

[75] *Conf.* I.16.26 (CCSL 27.14).

[76] In *De doctrina christiana* II.40.61, Augustine refers to Cyprian, Lactantius, Victorinus, Optatus and Hilary as the "men of the Church" to be emulated.

[77] Cf. Erich Auerbach, "Sermo humilis," *Romanische Forschungen* 64 (1952), 304-64.

in its descent from the shimmering, timeless standards of classical correctness and adornment down to a language intent on making the Truth plain and immediate to a heterogeneous congregation."[78] The *superbia* of the learned was unmasked through Augustine's homiletic mode. The shift in understanding the *use* of rhetoric is expressed in the first book of the *Confessions*, where he recounts having to exegete a passage from the beginning of the *Aeneid*, in which Juno voices her anger and frustration over the Trojans' impending success in Italy.[79] Augustine writes about the assignment: "The speaker who received highest praise (*ille dicebat laudabilius*) was the one who had regard to the dignity of the imaginary character, who most effectively expressed feelings of anger and sorrow, and who clothed these thoughts in appropriate language."[80] This pedagogical method, perhaps referencing that espoused by Quintilian,[81] fosters the flaunting of rhetorical style and suavity, thus lending itself to the *disciplinae superbiae*, insists Augustine. Despite the fact that his "recitation was acclaimed beyond many others of my age group," Augustine at once dismisses the entire exercise as "smoke and wind"[82] because its *use* ended in self-praise rather than praise of God:

> Was there no other subject on which my talent and tongue (*ingenium et lingua mea*) might be exercised? Your praises, Lord, your praises (*laudes tuae, domine, laudes tuae*) expressed through your scriptures would have upheld the tender vine of my heart, and it would not have been snatched away by empty trifles.[83]

[78] Robert A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 83. Cf. Wilhelm Blümer, "Eloquentia," *AugLex*. Augustine's maturing account of the "use" of rhetoric and the perennial tension between the "humble style" of Christian kerygma and the classical rhetorical tradition is well presented in E. T. Flood, "Augustine and the classical tradition of rhetoric," *History of Education* 11 (1982), 237-250; O. Costas, "Influential Factors in the Rhetoric of Augustine," *Foundations* 16 (1973), 208-221; Maurice Testard, *Saint Augustin et Cicéron* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1958). The dialectic between the classical rhetorical culture and Christian presentation of the faith is obviously most directly addressed by Augustine himself in *De doctrina christiana*. Cf. David Foster, "*Eloquentia nostra*: (DDC IV.VI,10): A Study of the Place of Classical Rhetoric in Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* Book Four," *Augustinianum* 36 (1996), 459-494; and Goulven Madec, "L'Idéal de l'orateur chrétien," *Bibliothèque Augustinienne* 11/2 (1997), 581-90.

[79] Concerning this passage that he had to exegete Augustine remarks, "I had understood that Juno never said this." *Conf.* I.17.27 (CCSL 27.15). Here again Augustine demonstrates his intent to safeguard the historical nature of truth and his hesitancy to embrace a canon composed of fables.

[80] *Conf.* I.17.27 (CCSL 27.15).

[81] Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 10.5.2.

[82] *Conf.* I.17.27 (CCSL 27.15).

[83] *Conf.* I.17.27 (CCSL 27.15).

The classical canon that was upheld to Augustine for his imitation (*imitandi proponebantur*) is contrasted here with the unadorned elegance of Scripture.[84] The difference lies less in style than in *use*: the one is used to "praise and congratulate themselves (*laudati gloriabantur*)"[85]; the other is used to praise the Lord. Michael Roberts correctly notes, "Ultimately Augustine's objection was not to the style itself but to the ends it served."[86] When God is praised rather than self, classical learning finds its proper use.

Modeling the "Use" of the Liberal Arts

Augustine's critique of the *liberales disciplinae* and their accompanying rhetoric, I have suggested, is directed at the ill-use of the rhetoric, which ends not in *confessio* and *laus* but in pride and worldly success. In the first book of the *Confessions* Augustine offers a model in his own writing of how the liberal arts might function positively. His remarks regarding a quotation from *Eunuch* are paradigmatic for his overall thought: "I bring no charge against the words which are like exquisite and precious vessels, but the wine of error is poured into them for us by drunken teachers. If we failed to drink we were caned and could not appeal to any sober judge."[87] The marvelously composed style of this sentence underscores Augustine's principle. He clearly values the intricate, classical rhetorical and literary devises as "exquisite and precious," because we see their masterful use in this very sentence. A developing linguistic trope is presented: Augustine employs *adiectio* to expand the simile of the "precious vessels" into a grand metaphor (*transmutatio*) of a raucous scene of "drunken teachers" (*ebrii doctores*)—a case of situational irony—forcing students, helpless without any "sober judge" (*iudices sobrii*), to drink. The elegant prose reinforces Augustine's point: he takes no umbrage to *eloquentia* and *rhetorica* – as his developed conceit clearly

[84] Kaster writes, "Augustine shows that the traditional standards of correct speech refer to a man-made order and so strips them of their veneer of permanence." Kaster, *Guardians of Language*, p. 84.

[85] *Conf.* I.18.28 (CCSL 27.15).

[86] Michael Roberts, *The Jeweled Style, Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 129.

[87] *Conf.* I.16.26 (CCSL 27.15). *non accuso uerba quasi uasa electa atque pretiosa, sed uinum erroris quod in eis nobis propinabatur ab ebriis doctoribus, et nisi biberemus caedebamur, nec appellare ad aliquem iudicem sobrium licebat* (CCSL 27.14-15).

demonstrates – but to the abuse of language for the "wine of error" (*uinum erroris*).

This principle of the use of the liberal arts is operative throughout the narrative of the first book of the *Confessions* and is clear especially in Augustine's interaction with Virgil's *Aeneid*. With a homophonic wordplay Augustine compares himself to Aeneas, the hero of Rome's epic poem, who "wandered" from Troy to Italy to found the city he was destined to build: "I was later forced to learn about the wanderings of some legendary fellow named Aeneas (forgetful of my own wanderings)."[88] Like the Latin hero, Augustine "wandered" far from God – in moral and philosophical *errores*; like the Latin hero, Augustine "wandered" all over the Mediterranean in search of *requies*; and like the Latin hero, Augustine watched a woman on the shores of Carthage pleading for him to stay while he set sail to Rome.[89]

Augustine recalls his emotional response as a boy to the *Aeneid*, weeping as he read of Dido killing herself on account of her lost love:

> In reading this, O God my life, I myself was meanwhile dying by my alienation from you and my miserable condition in that respect brought no tear to my eyes. What is more pitiable than a wretch without pity for himself who weeps over the death of Dido dying for love of Aeneas, but not weeping over himself dying for his lack of love for you, my God.[90]

The story of Dido's demise is used by Augustine as an image of his own contorted love. Like Dido, Augustine was dying and alienated; yet, worse than she, he was unaware of his spiritual death, as he states in a wordplay (*miserius misero non miserante*). Both were dying on account of love twisted in on itself in alienation. Augustine notes the irony that he wept on her account – reading a story without historical

[88] *Conf.* I.13.20 (CCSL 27.11). O'Donnell notes the dominance of the word *errores* in the *Confessions*, which is contrasted with *peregrinatio*. The *Library of Latin Texts* indicates lexical forms of the word *errores* appear 28 times. O'Donnell, *Confessions Commentary*, p. 77.

[89] Augustine snuck out one night while his mother Monica stayed in Carthage, "praying and weeping." "The wind blew and filled our sails and the shore was lost to our sight. There, when morning came, she was crazed with grief, and with recriminations and groans she filled your ears." *Conf.* V.8.15 (CCSL 27.65). This account mirrors that of Dido's grief. Aeneas, enticed as he was by the sound of the west wind blowing through the sails, deferred his mission no longer and left Dido enraged beyond sense on the shores of Carthage. MacCormack suggests some of these parallels in *Shadows of Poetry*, pp. 96-97. Cf. Camille Bennett, "The Conversion of Virgil: The *Aeneid* in Augustine's *Confessions*," *Revue des études augustiniennes* 34 (1988), 47-69.

[90] *Conf.* I.13.20-21 (CCSL 27.11).

truth – while oblivious to his own misplaced love, alienation and spiritual death.[91]

By placing himself in the characters of both Aeneas and Dido, Augustine tempers his dismissive posture to the classical canon. Although he claims to "much prefer to forget the wanderings of Aeneas" and the "empty fables" of Virgil,[92] he is all the while skillfully weaving Virgil's epic into his own narrative with adroit rhetorical and stylistic grace. In his own writing Augustine demonstrates the principle that the *liberales disciplinae* ought to be used "like exquisite and precious vessels" in the service of the *doctrina humilitatis* that ends in confession and praise.

Conclusion

In summary, I have presented a reading of Book One of the *Confessions* as two competing accounts of *doctrina*. The first, the *doctrina superbiae* in which Augustine was schooled, seeks its own praise and glory; its goal is worldly ambition and success. The *doctrina humilitatis*, on the other hand, is ordered to praise God, to confess Him, and, finally, to seek rest in Him. Augustine situates his discussion regarding *doctrina* immediately after his acclaim of the greatness of God; to know and understand (*scire et intellegere*) Him who is infinitely beyond the mortality and sin of the human person requires the humility of faith. Augustine's infancy narrative accentuates this requisite humility that is propaedeutic to education. Augustine is at pains to emphasize the epistemological triad of memory, trust, and experience necessary even to know about himself as a baby, and most certainly to know God.

The relation of *signa* to *doctrina* is established after the infancy narrative. As a baby, Augustine's limited signs were ineffective; it was not until he was boy that he was capable of communicating by signs and so ready for *doctrina*. The *signum crucis* by which he was marked as a boy denotes for Augustine the humility of the Lord coming down to human pride. And so the "child" becomes not only the subject of the *doctrina humilitatis*, but also the chosen sign thereof. Here Augustine refers to Jesus' calling the children to himself. The *signum* of the child who represents *doctrina humilitatis* is contrasted

[91] Augustine thus compares Dido both to his mother, Monica, standing on the shore of Carthage, and to himself dying on account of alienation from love.

[92] *Conf.* I.13.22 (CCSL 27.12).

with the *signum* of the *uela*, representing *doctrina superbiae*, which hang in front of the literature schools and cloaked the pride therein.

Classical learning seems prima facie to be dismissed on account of its pride, in the first book of the *Confessions*. Indeed, Augustine is quick to dismiss his study in literature as a pursuit of vanity and falsehood. At the same time, however, we see him eager to demonstrate his familiarity with this disparaged *doctrina*; he quotes poets and philosophers and even identifies himself with the characters of the *Aeneid*. I have suggested an interpretation of *Confessions* One as presenting binary accounts of education. This new interpretation of educational themes in Book One as two contrasting *doctrinae* helps elucidate what seems initially a blatant inconsistency; it is the "use" of the liberal arts that endows them with worth. Further, Augustine offers us an exemplary model in his own narrative of the "use" of the classical canon.

In this study I have limited myself to considering *doctrina* in Book One of the *Confessions*. However, these conclusions have bearing on Augustine's autobiography as a whole. There are many angles from which one can fruitfully engage educational motifs in the *Confessions*. Augustine's own life, too, is here presented as that of a student and teacher and, more importantly for our thesis, we find in his life portrait someone devoted to discovering truth through growth in humility. Maturation in *doctrina humilitatis* is a journey that takes Augustine to the Manicheans, the Platonists, and finally, the Catholic Church. Throughout the *Confessions* Augustine demonstrates that his past learning is not abandoned but transfigured to serve the Catholic faith. Michael Roberts summarizes the African bishop's stance well: "Augustine consistently assesses the value of secular learning against the principle of *utilitas*."[93] The value accorded the *liberales disciplinae* lies, for Augustine, in their use: when classical *doctrina* is puffed up with pride to serve worldly ambition, the vessels become filled with *uinum erroris*, but when employed in *doctrina humilitatis* for praise and confession, the *liberales disciplinae* are as "treasures of the Egyptians" to be plundered or "exquisite and precious vessels" that can be filled with good teaching.

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[93] Michael Roberts, *The Jeweled Style, Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 127.