

The Teacher in St. Augustine's *Confessions*

In his *Confessions*, Augustine commonly uses the relationship of master and slave as an analogy for the relationship between God and man. I argue, however, that the text presents another, and more important, analogy: God as teacher and Augustine as student. Furthermore, I posit that it is because of his interactions with his teachers that the conversion of Book VIII takes place. After all, it was not until Augustine encountered Ambrose, who he describes as *doctorem veri* (*Conf*, 5.12.23), that he considered a life of celibacy as necessary for his spiritual development (*Conf*, 6.3.3). I analyze his interactions with four major teachers (the unnamed *magistri* from grammar school, Faustus, Ambrose, and finally Christ), and conclude that Augustine establishes five criteria of an ideal teacher: utility, eloquence, Christian substance, accessibility, and *disciplina*. Imagining God as a *magister* provides Augustine a balance between Christianity's absolute authority and Augustine's exercise of reason whereas that of master and slave suggests a complete domination of intellectual exercise.

The classroom in the ancient world was not a gentle place. Not only were students regularly beaten, but the knowledge of which teachers were the source "was systematized and shackled by iron rules. It was through the learning and application of rigid rules that students started to glimpse a world of higher literacy," (Cribiore, 2005). Augustine identifies an important connection between knowledge, authority, and the classroom. He admits that *curiositas* left unchecked can be more effective motivation than fear for learning, but, like the rods of schoolteachers (*ferulis magistrorum*), it is the laws of God that restrict (*restringit*) this freedom (*Conf*, 1.14.23). Therefore, following the path of one's *curiositas* alone will not lead to true

knowledge. The student needs an authority to discipline and guide that *curiositas* through law (*legibus*) and revelation (*veritate*).

Book VII marks Augustine's intellectual conversion, the moment in which he is able to grasp the immateriality of God with the help of the Neoplatonists, yet it is only by a force of will that he is able to convert to a life of celibacy in Book VIII. This bisected conversion demonstrates that Augustine's relationship to God maintains a certain freedom of one's reason (Book VII) in tandem with the limitation of the will through an external authority (Book VIII) and is therefore consistent with his presentation and understanding of *magistri*.

Despite his cold distance, Ambrose showed Augustine how to apply his mind in order to break free of his intellectual aporia (*Conf*, 6.3.3). But, in the words of O'Connell "something more is needed to tip the scales, and this requires that Augustine himself 'earnestly apply [his] mind (*animum*) to see if it were possible, by means of sure arguments (*certis aliquibus documentis*) to convict the Manichees of falsity'" (O'Connell, 1969). Therefore, like Ambrose, Augustine read far and wide until he encountered the works of the Neoplatonists and found the intellectual peace he sought from Ambrose (7.9.13). But it is not until Book VIII, when Augustine hears clearly the command of Romans 13:13 (a firm reminder not to prioritize 'play,' so to speak, over what is good) that he finds spiritual peace in a life of celibacy. It becomes clear that understanding does not provide him with the strength he needs to commit to this life (*sic aegrotabam et excruciar, accusans memet ipsum solito acerbius nimis ac volvens et versans me in vinculo meo; Conf*, 8.11.25). Despite possessing the knowledge of what is good, he requires the corrective authority of God, which he describes in terms reminiscent of the *magistrorum ferulis* of Book I (*et instabas tu...flagella ingeminans; Conf*, 8.11.25), to curb his desire for lesser things.

The closer he comes to Book VIII, the student-teacher relationship in the *Confessions* is increasingly tested and refined. His first three teachers he finds inadequate, but Christ reveals himself to be Augustine's ideal teacher, who fulfills the five criteria: utility, eloquence, Christian substance, accessibility, and *disciplina*. This relationship is crucial for understanding Augustine's spiritual and intellectual development since it is the crux between human Reason and divine Authority.

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