

Article

## Teaching Augustine's *Confessions* in the Context of Mercer's Great Books Program

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**Abstract:** Students in Mercer University's Great Books program read Augustine's *Confessions* in the third semester of a seven-semester sequence. Their previous reading of Greek and Roman epics and philosophical treatises as well as Biblical material equips them with a solid foundation for reading and discussing Augustine. This essay reflects on that preparation and models ways that instructors can use opening discussion questions related to those earlier readings to guide students into substantive reflection on the *Confessions*.

**Keywords:** Augustine; pedagogy; Core Texts/Great Books programs; History of Christianity

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### 1. Introduction

Undergraduate students at Mercer can choose one of two ways to fulfill their general education requirements. All students must fulfill requirements in math, science, and foreign languages. For the balance of their general education requirements, they may elect to follow the seven-course Integrative program (a distributional scheme) or follow a seven-course Great Books sequence emphasizing foundational texts in the Western intellectual tradition. This Great Books sequence moves students sequentially from Homer, Sophocles, and Thucydides to Dostoevsky, Weber, and Camus. Augustine's *Confessions* [1] is a central text in the third semester of the sequence, which students take in the fall semester of their sophomore year.

Mercer's faculty developed this sequence in consultation with Eva Brann, then a tutor at St. John's College in Annapolis, but decentralized faculty groups developed the particular reading lists for each course. The faculty shaped selections for the context of Mercer's College of Liberal Arts and the strengths of its faculty. They chose complete works where possible, considering the accessibility of

works for undergraduates as well as the way that texts might speak to each other across the curriculum. The guiding concern, however, was pedagogical. The faculty were less focused on the development of themes or a history of ideas than on choosing texts about which students could think and write as a means to a liberal education [2].

## 2. Opening Questions

In these Great Books classes, capped at eighteen students per section, students focus on reading and discussing the primary texts. Classroom instruction is not focused on lecture, but on guiding students to form and to engage questions that emerge from the texts themselves. Reflective inquiry on the texts and these questions leads students to engage the texts through discussion and subsequent writing.

As a teacher in these courses, one of my roles is to watch over and guard the discussion. Part of that task is finding ways to launch the discussion well. Often the key to an effective class discussion is an apt generative question that the teacher or a student poses at the beginning of the hour as a basis for discussion, in-class writing, or both. As my colleague Thomas Huber has written, good opening questions are questions upon which the teacher has reflected for a long time, “a question for which the teacher has no final answer yet, but one for which he or she knows, or at least strongly believes, the text has something important to say and probably quite a bit to say.” [3]. Huber encourages his students to “sound the depths possible from the opening question”, avoiding shallow engagement for a quest that is “intense, involved, and vital.” [3]. For me, effective questions must be both wide and deep, capacious and rich. As Gregory the Great once observed of scripture, good discussion questions must be like “a river...broad and deep, shallow enough here for the lamb to go wading, but deep enough there for the elephant to swim” [4]. Such questions have several possible points of entry and operate on multiple levels, so that responses can initially supply textual evidence and then move toward deeper analysis and reflection. The goal, of course, is that all may learn to swim like elephants.

## 3. The Confessions in the Context of Mercer’s Great Books Sequence

Mercer students who are in the third semester of this sequence of Great Books are well equipped to read the bishop of Hippo when they encounter Augustine’s *Confessions*. Their reading of three of Plato’s dialogues (*Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Meno*) as well as all of the *Republic* provides a strong basis for understanding Augustine’s Platonism. Their reading of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* gives them important categories and concepts for discussing friendship, a recurrent theme in Augustine’s reflections. Having read the *Aeneid*, these students can appreciate both Augustine’s tears at Dido’s death and the way Augustine’s own journey from Carthage to Rome parallels that of Aeneas.

In addition to their familiarity with these seminal works of the Greco-Roman tradition, the students in Mercer’s Great Books III have read significant portions of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, including Genesis, Psalms, the Gospels, and Romans. The Great Books program uses these scriptures as the initial reading for this third semester of study, and students move directly from their reading of the Bible and a brief examination of creeds to two or three weeks spent reading the *Confessions*, usually Books 1–10.

Because they have read seminal texts from the Greco-Roman tradition as well as the biblical texts, these sophomore students have a solid foundation for reading, discussing, and writing about the

*Confessions* on a level few contemporary American undergraduates experience. That foundation is one worth celebrating. I have remarked that the purpose of the first two and one-half semesters of the sequence is, after all, to equip students to read Augustine.

However, that jest is a serious one, for *Confessions* models a life of reflection on reading and writing. It is a book about books, a book about a life with and in books, a book in which books are quoted, studied, debated, and cherished. The plot turns on Augustine's reading of books, from Cicero's *Hortensius* to "the books of the Platonists" to Paul's letter to the Romans. The *Confessions* is, in short, a Great Book about the Great Books.

In reflecting on my own initial offering of this course, I realized I had done little to help students engage the "great bookishness" of the *Confessions*, to help them build upon their unique foundation for reading *Confessions* as readers of Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, and the Bible. I had not done the best job helping my students reflect on Augustine's own debt to the classical world or to the traditions of scripture. In my defense, I could raise the excuse that, as a New Testament scholar, Augustine is almost four hundred years later than my field of expertise. However, to be honest, my previous teaching in the Great Books sequence had been in the second semester—reading Plato's *Republic*, Euclid's *Elements*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*—and my own research has focused on the New Testament's own intertextual use of Hebrew Bible. So while teaching Augustine's *Confessions* might have been a new task, my work with these other texts in the tradition was not.

So I began to develop new opening questions for class discussion or for in-class writing exercises that would engage the *Confessions'* use of these other texts the students had read in ways that would allow them to grasp Augustine's biography and thought more deeply and reflectively. What follows here is a sample of five questions and some initial reflections about them.

#### 4. Sample Questions

Question for Day 1 (Books 1–2): Compare and contrast the opening paragraphs of *The Confessions* (Book 1, Chapters 1–5) with Psalm 139. What similarities do you see, and what differences? What do these texts say about the relationship between God and human beings? Are Augustine and the psalmist writing in the same genre? Why or why not?

Reflection: The goals of this prompt are to open up a conversation about both the ideas and the genre of the *Confessions*. Students in the Great Books program have read epics and philosophical texts, but this is their first exposure to autobiographical writing in the sequence. In the past, some of them have been struck by the connection to the Psalms and their interior focus. This prompt encourages students to engage the rich biblical intertexture of the opening paragraphs of the *Confessions*, which include well over a dozen references to the Psalms as well as allusions to or quotations from Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Job, Jeremiah, the Gospels, and the letters of Paul. Despite these other allusions, it is the voice of the psalmist that predominates.

Although the allusion to Psalm 139 is not Augustine's first reference to the Psalter, it is a crucial one that leads to a key Augustinian theme, as Augustine begins to reflect on the relationship of his consciousness of God and his consciousness of self: "Not yet am I in hell, after all, but even if I were, you would be there, too; for if I descend to the underworld, you are there." ([1], *Conf.* 1.2.2). The interplay of awareness of God and self lies at the heart of the psalm and the opening paragraphs. Thus

the prompt has the potential to generate discussion of a significant Augustinian insight as well as raise questions of Augustine's genre and purpose for writing.

Question for Day 2 (Book 4): Although Augustine finds little profit in reading Aristotle, as he recounts in Book 4 ([1], *Conf.* 4.16.28), he and Aristotle do share a significant common topic: that of friendship. Reflect on your reading of Aristotle's discussion of friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics*. How would Aristotle evaluate Augustine's friendships at Thagaste, particularly with his friend who dies ([1], *Conf.* 4.4.7)?

Reflection: Admittedly, the connections are less apparent than those in the previous example, and Augustine's own understanding of friendship draws more from Cicero than Aristotle. However, this example effectively introduces the theme of permanence and transience as a key Augustinian theme, and the students have read Aristotle rather than Cicero on friendship. The two books that treat friendship are generally the parts of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that generate the most student interest and reflection. That encounter is often the first time they have reflected systematically on friendship. As one student told me, "I never knew you could *think* about friendship." Such reflection occurs at a formative point for these students as they are moving away from their families of origin to establish new relationships with others as independent young adults. Reading Aristotle, they have pondered friendships of use, pleasure, and virtue, friendships between people of unequal status, and the relationship of friendship and happiness or human flourishing. Thus this question provides a way to connect their previous reading with an analysis of Augustine's experiences and may lead to an investigation as well of Augustine's lack of happiness and flourishing.

Question for Day 3 (Book 5): In the first book of *Confessions*, Augustine praises his early lessons in literacy, valuing them more than his later reading of Virgil. He complains that "I was forced to memorize the wanderings of some fellow called Aeneas, while forgetting my own wanderings, and to weep over Dido" ([1], *Conf.* 1.13.20). Does your reading of Books 3 to 5 bear out such a negative assessment of Virgil? Or are there ways that the particular episodes in these books or the shape of Augustine's own story resembles the great Roman epic? What does Augustine's relationship to Virgil's epic suggest?

Reflection: Michael McCarthy, among others, has written about the "Augustine's mixed feeling" with respect to Virgil [5]. The discussion of Books 3 through 5 is an apt point at which to raise that issue. Students can reflect on the opening lines of Book 3, where Augustine speaks of "the din of scandalous love affairs" in his student days at Carthage ([1], *Conf.* 3.1.1). They may note that he, too, establishes an intimate relationship with a woman in Carthage (the mother of Adeodatus). They may also, with some prompting, note the parallels between the grief and cries of Dido and Monica when their loved ones sneak away from Carthage and head to Rome ([6], *Aeneid* IV, lines 403–978; ([1], *Conf.* 5.8.15). At stake in this question is not simply the issue of Augustine rewriting the journey of Aeneas (which itself was a rewriting of the journey of Odysseus). The discussion hopefully opens out onto the deeper issue of Augustine's complex relationship to the values of Rome over against the values of the city of God. Students may reflect on the younger Augustine's attraction to Rome and Milan and his career aspirations in contrast to the later Augustine's assessment of those passions.

Question for Day 4 (Book 7): In Book 7 ([1], *Conf.* 7.9.13), Augustine praises God for leading him to "some books of the Platonists." But as he discusses what he learned from these books, he—not once, but four times—quotes from the opening lines of the Gospel of John to identify what he did and

what he did not learn from the Platonists. At first glance, that seems like an odd way of expressing Platonist philosophy. Why does Augustine take that approach? How are the ideas of the Platonists related to the words of the Fourth Gospel?

Reflection: This prompt seeks to lead students to explore the dimensions of Augustine’s intellectual conversion that he presents in Book 7, where he discusses the way that he has come to God “from the Gentiles” ([1], *Conf.* 7.9.15), using the “gold of the Egyptians.” In Book 7 ([1], *Conf.* 7.10.16), Augustine recounts his vision of “incommutable light” in language that strongly recalls Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” ([7], *Republic*, Book 7, 514a, 2–517a, 7) but at the same time echoes the prologue to John’s Gospel that he has quoted earlier. This passage, indeed, most of Book 7 of the *Confessions*, presents both the confluences and the tensions of these two traditions—the classical Greco-Roman tradition and the Christian tradition—which Augustine subsumes and transforms. Gaining a sense of this Augustinian amalgam—and its significance for the West—is crucial for any reader of the *Confessions*. Another question for this day might focus on the resonances with the “Allegory of the Cave”, which students read the previous semester in their time spent with the *Republic*. However, a question focused solely on Platonism would miss the dynamism of Augustine’s intellectual conversion in which the books of the Platonists and their advice “to seek for truth beyond corporeal forms” ([1], *Conf.* 7.20.26) lead Augustine toward the reality of the Christian God.

Question for Day 5 (Books 8 and 9): At the end of Book 7, Augustine discovers the writings of Saint Paul. He reports that as he began to read, he found there “every truth I had read in those other books”, but also that as he read Paul, “the least of the apostles”, he “was filled with dread” ([1], *Conf.* 7.21.27). Why is Paul, both as a convert and as an author, so important for Augustine and his conversion?

Reflection: This prompt seeks to provide several points of entry into a discussion of the conversion, not simply of Augustine’s intellect, but of his will. The conversions of Paul and of Antony, as well as those of Victorinus and the friends of Ponticianus at Trier (through their reading of *The Life of Anthony*) form richly textured interlocking conversion narratives. For both Antony and Augustine, the words of scripture are central for conversion. For Antony, it is the Gospel lesson he hears the day he arrives late for worship; for Augustine, it is the words of Paul’s letter to the Romans that he takes up and reads ([1], *Conf.* 8.12.29). Thus, Augustine frames his conversion narrative with his reading of Paul. Augustine will go on to become, for good or ill—indeed for good *and* for ill—Paul’s most significant interpreter in the West. What is it in Augustine that so resonates with the experiences of and the writings of the apostle to the Gentiles? Plumbing that question is vital for students’ understanding of Augustine, but also for their understanding the history of scriptural interpretation and theology in the West.

## 5. Conclusions

Mercer’s Great Books program offers a unique context for reading Augustine’s *Confessions*, but instructors of other kinds of undergraduate courses may adapt these opening questions for different contexts. Assigning shorter readings drawn from Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, and the Bible before assigning the *Confessions* may create a context in which these or similar questions can guide students into rich discussion of Augustine’s life and thought. Teachers might develop a list of other texts to provide a similar entrée into discussion for *The City of God* or Augustinian texts. One goal of this exercise is to

foster thinking and writing about the connections between different texts that students have read across time, with the aim that they will develop the ability to connect past reading to their current reading—in whatever context they find themselves. My ultimate goal, of course, is that my students and I may engage these questions and other substantive ones that will abide with us, trouble us, and guide us as we, like Augustine, seek to find our way to that peaceful homeland, walking “steadily in the way that leads there, along the well-built road opened up by the heavenly emperor” ([1], *Conf.* 7.21.27), knowing that our asking, seeking, and knocking will at last bring our restless hearts to that place of receiving and finding where the door is opened to us ([1], *Conf.* 13.38.53).

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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