

Editorial

## Teaching Augustine—Introduction

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**Abstract:** This introduction to the Special Issue “Teaching Augustine” summarizes the volume’s essays and discusses the conference at which they were initially presented.

**Keywords:** Augustine; humanities; pedagogy; general education curriculum

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The role of the humanities in university curricula has been the topic of much national debate, with politicians predicting the imminent demise of liberal learning, a fate feared by some and perhaps welcomed by others. Even if one stops short of such apocalyptic scenarios, core and general education courses that promote a humanities-based liberal arts education are under tremendous pressure to justify themselves in an environment where dollars are tight and professionalization is all the rage. Concurrently, humanities departments feel a similar push, urged by their administrations to pitch their disciplines more for the skills they develop than the dispositions they cultivate, or the questions they inspire. In this context, it is more important than ever that liberal arts courses not only be taught, but taught well.

In October 2014, Samford University hosted a conference entitled *Teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition: Augustine Across the Curriculum*. The first in a planned series of conferences focusing on commonly taught figures and movements from the Christian intellectual heritage, the meeting was designed to help non-specialists teach the writings of Augustine more effectively in undergraduate core

and general education classes. The papers gathered in this Special Issue of *Religions* include the two keynote addresses and a selection from the more than fifty papers presented at this conference.

Why Augustine? For many teachers a more appropriate question may be “Who else?” Living as he did in the twilight of Roman imperial power, and standing as he does at the headwaters of the Western Christian tradition, Augustine has long been the standard source for offering students a quick summary of late ancient Christian attitudes. On topics ranging from politics to predestination, sexuality to music theory, his shadow looms large. It goes without saying that Augustine would not have imagined himself in this position; his world was filled with unresolved theological and political conflicts. Manichees, Donatists, and Pelagians offered strong alternatives to Augustine’s Christianity, and it was not a foregone conclusion that his brand would survive and thrive. But thrive it did, in no small part to his own contributions. Like Augustine or not, a historian wishing to argue for an inconsequential Augustine would have an uphill climb indeed.

Yet it is hardly surprising that freshmen, bombarded as they are with cultural messages that privilege the present and future over the past, might question the relevance of dusty tomes written by a North African bishop sixteen centuries ago. In high school they were told to structure their interests and activities to become suitably competitive for college. Now having arrived, and even before taking their first class, they are encouraged think beyond graduation towards employment and professional life. Education, they are told, is valuable not for the experience it provides but for the outcome it produces: a job. Are we surprised, then, that so many students fail to appreciate college as a time to contemplate life’s deepest questions, much less still as an opportunity to engage in a sustained critique of education as nothing more than the acquisition of skill sets?

Fortunately, such an instrumental understanding of education cannot fully kill the spirit. Many students quickly discern that they can orient those skill sets toward lofty goals, and they maintain a hearty optimism that the world they are inheriting might become a better place—more humane, more sustainable, more just—and that they might help to make it so. Before long, though, consideration of the messy mechanics of world-changing leads to a more fundamental question. Can governments and the politicians that direct them make the world a better place? Or to reduce the abstract to the existential, should undergraduates, struggling with what Kristen Deede Johnson suggestively labels the “*temptation to change the world*” (emphasis added), pursue a career in politics or a similar avenue of power running parallel to the political? Alternatively, do they take a left (or right) turn, avoiding entangling alliances with worldly powers, and seek to change the culture by focusing their energies outside, against, or in spite of those powers? It is here that Augustine can enter the conversation, the first of many ways in which he can enrich a student’s experience across the curriculum.

Augustine’s view of the utility of political power is the question that yokes together the two keynote addresses included here, and each argues in its own way for the continuing relevance of Augustine’s political thought. As Peter Iver Kaufman observes, Augustine was no stranger to the pressures of careerism faced by the modern undergraduate. As Augustine pondered his own turn from politics and rhetoric toward a contemplative life, he offered much in the way of raw material for subsequent thinkers who have struggled with a similar predicament. Kaufman’s Augustine might have been neck-deep in the political struggles of North Africa as he worked to establish his brand of Christianity against rival Donatists and pagans, and he was certainly not hesitant to call upon local officials to aid his cause. Yet Kaufman suggests that behind Augustine’s tactical maneuvering lay a more fundamental

concern with the nature of the political life, which was controlled by what Augustine deemed the “lust to be first” (*libido principandi*) and the “lust to dominate” (*libido dominandi*). Indeed, these broken desires were so foundational to political life in the city of man that even a celebrated Christian leader such as Constantine is discussed by Augustine with a relatively dispassionate tone. He takes note of Constantine’s political accomplishments, yet Augustine reserves his highest praise in the *City of God* for the emperor Theodosius, and precisely for the virtue that Augustine judged to be lacking in so many leaders: humility. To put it another way, Theodosius was at his best when he was at his weakest, politically speaking: on his knees as a repentant sinner begging Bishop Ambrose for forgiveness for his transgressions as a leader.

What use, then, should moderns make of Augustine’s emperors? Kaufman rejects those who use Augustine as a clarion call for a remade political order, one purged of lusts for power. Find enough pious and humble leaders, such proponents argue, and the city of man might begin to take on a heavenly glow. Similarly misguided, Kaufman avers, are those who employ Augustine to establish secular power and influence for the church over the state. Instead, Kaufman argues for an Augustine who models the twin attitudes of “recoil and reorientation,” recoil from the status quo of the powerful always striving for more power, and reorientation of one’s interests in the context of communities shaped by the “virtues of humility, compassion, and forgiveness.” It is this Augustine who speaks to the modern condition and provides a way forward.

Whereas Kaufman resurrects Augustine’s emperors to explore questions of political order, in the other keynote Kristen Johnson turns to Augustine’s writings on justice to engage students with “the difficult questions that arise as they face the reality of injustice and ponder what it means to change the world.” She orients her argument around the twin poles of justice and power. Both are from God and hence good, but humans must pay close attention to the proper ordering of these two goods. Perfect possessor of both, God nevertheless chose justice rather than power to defeat evil in the world. Herein lies the rub, according to Johnson. In Augustine’s view, humans are so fatally flawed that they cannot overcome their own desires in order to imitate the divine. Their loves are fundamentally disordered, with the love of power swallowing up the love of justice. Power, and a corrupted power at that, thus takes pride of place in the city of man, and true justice is found only in the city of God. On earth, it appears, might does indeed make for right. Or does it? Johnson finds a limited redemption in Augustine’s thoughts on the nature of peace, a type of which he allows is attainable in the earthly city since people in their own self-interest tend to prefer peace to war. This type of peace may be but a shadow of the true peace of the city of God, but Christians may rightly view it as “a good suitable to the temporal life and a good they seek to foster.”

Alongside her reading of Augustine “the idealizer,” Johnson turns to Augustine’s letters to find evidence of a political theorist who subverts his own idealizations. Taking the example of slavery, she finds that Augustine’s understanding of justice “as an eschatological reality does not prevent him from working towards a form of what we would call justice in this earthly city, nor from finding in the tension between [the two cities]...aspirations for just outcomes.” She concludes by suggesting that students might invoke as muse both Augustine the idealizer and Augustine the subverter; the former to provide a standard by which to judge the world’s brokenness while reassuring them that they are not responsible for the eschatological remedy, and the latter as a prod to avoid despair as they seek the good in and for their communities.

The remaining essays collected here complement the larger questions raised by Kaufman and Johnson, and draw us toward particular contexts, questions, works, and classroom assignments. For instance, one group centers on how studying Augustine's writings raises important contextual issues for undergraduates. Allan Fitzgerald argues that introducing Augustine to undergraduates often requires us to point to those moments when Augustine insists on the deeper, unknowable mystery of things, a turn that helps many students to move past their resistance to Augustine as a dogmatic, orthodox theologian. For Fitzgerald, it is important to present Augustine as "fully human before discussing the issues that are often seen in controversial terms," and focusing on Augustine's intellectual humility provides one way to do so. Caleb Clanton and Ian Clausen alert professors to other fruitful contexts, with Clanton placing Augustine in conversation with Plato and Aristotle on the nature of *akrasia* and the will, and Clausen situating Augustine in a larger discussion of conscience in higher education. Clanton acknowledges that his approach to Augustine may generate more questions than answers and does not fully settle the issue of whether Augustine's account of wrongdoing is fully distinct from his Greek predecessors; still, Augustine's "sufficiently different" approach to the question is helpful for core curriculum teachers who want to broaden the discussion of Socratic and Aristotelian *akrasia*, which many students find "counterintuitive." For Clausen, a key question for professors should be, "Does conscience have a place in liberal arts higher education?"—and, if so, "What kind of 'place' does it refer to or designate, and why does it matter?" Although Augustine's writings cannot answer the more ambitious, two-fold question as to "what extent conscience operates in the Academy, and what are the conditions for its retrieval and flourishing," his works can "shed light on the process by which human beings *become* agents in the morally relevant sense," thereby helping teachers to understand that the education of our students "can only be anticipated not achieved or controlled for—and...for the simple reason that it involves the work of conscience." Finally, Peter Busch examines the perennial philosophical question of happiness to contrast Augustine with the modern age, which Busch argues is heavily indebted to a Hobbesian understanding of happiness as a restless and endless search for that which satisfies. However, Hobbes' definition can leave students dissatisfied and, Busch argues, better prepared for an encounter with Augustine's account in the *Confessions* of a restless heart that reaches its final goal in the ultimate good that is God.

Other essays in this Special Issue see the authors turning from standard texts such as the *Confessions* and *City of God* to consider what might be gained by teaching the less commonly read works of Augustine. For Daniel Burns, Book I of *De Libero Arbitrio* is an ideal text for introductory courses on political thought and the theology of social life, providing students an entry point for considering the intimate connection between political citizenship and moral philosophy. "Wonderfully compact," this work presents fewer pedagogical difficulties than the more ambitious and, for students, more daunting *City of God*, and it shows, through the struggles of Evodius, a less dogmatic and confrontational Augustine grappling with our "elementary moral experiences as individuals and citizens." For Robert Anderson, *On the Teacher* serves multiple ends. In addition to being an underutilized introduction to Augustine's thought in general, this work helps students to better understand their own intellectual journeys, highlighting such virtues as persistence, interest, and conversation as vital to both the student and the teacher. Ultimately, however, this work drives students to see that "genuine education is an activity in which [they] are always the primary agents," a journey that is often "mysterious" as it moves from "external conversation" to "internal dialogue." John MacInnis makes a similar plea for *De Musica*

as useful for generating student reflection about the goals of education, noting how the work emphasizes the spiritual benefit of academic study and praises the cultivation of music for promoting Neo-platonic insights into the created order and higher realities of the cosmos. Employing *De Musica* in both music history and literature courses, MacInnis has introduced his students to rich insights into art and aesthetics, as well as truth, beauty, and goodness.

Some essays model specific assignments that help students to engage in substantive reflection on Augustine. In his contribution, Bryan Whitfield situates the *Confessions* in the third semester of Mercer University's seven-semester Great Books Program. By their third semester, Whitfield's students have read four Platonic dialogues (*Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Meno*, and the *Republic*), as well as *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Aeneid*. They begin the term with significant portions of the Old and New Testament before spending two or three weeks with the *Confessions*. In his essay, Whitfield describes a series of questions he uses at the beginning of class to connect the *Confessions* to these earlier works, prompting his students, for instance, to compare "the relationship between God and human beings" in the first five chapters of Augustine's autobiography and Psalm 139, or to reflect on how Aristotle would evaluate Augustine's friendships. Mark Scott offers us a different strategy for teaching the *Confessions*, focusing not on how to guide students through the work, but on how to help them absorb the meaning of the full work by assigning them the task of composing their own "confessions" or life narratives. The purpose of the assignment is twofold: first, to help students to "overcome their resistance" to Augustine and to "view him more as a fellow quester after truth rather than as a moralizer," and, second, to facilitate a "heightened sense of self-knowledge" by engaging students with the course's guiding question: "Who am I?" Because the *Confessions* contains various and "subtle strategies for self-reflection," students can borrow from those strategies, be encouraged to develop their own new strategies, and, finally, learn how to cultivate a sophisticated self-awareness. Finally, Maria Poggi Johnson describes a series of exercises focused on addiction and silence. Frustrated by her students' repeated complaints that Augustine was "not relatable," Johnson developed her exercises to address this problem, seeking a way for her students to make an "explicit personal connection" to the text. These exercises, which required students to wrestle with their own weaknesses and shortcomings, helped them to understand themselves as a collection of "variously flawed, confused, [and] conflicted" individuals, who, like Augustine, "are mysteries to [them]selves." In the end, this exercise not only deepened her students' appreciation of the *Confessions*, but also helped them to move toward a better understanding of their own difficult quests for self-knowledge.

The remaining two essays examine the place of Augustine in two very different curricular locations, one familiar and one foreign. Michael Chiariello steps back from his position as developer and administrator of a core curriculum program at a Catholic university to consider how the writings of Augustine have fared within the program over the past two decades. Chiariello's observations highlight the difficulties of maintaining a coherent narrative in a core curriculum as different faculty cycle through in the program. Nevertheless, he maintains that Augustine can offer a model for integrating the personal, spiritual, and intellectual growth that occurs during the undergraduate years. Thomas Nordlund uses his background as a physicist to explore how Augustine's reflections on time might provide a useful entrée into the sciences for religion and theology students. His proposal touches on topics ranging from the philosophy of science to the nature of time and space. By doing so, he reminds readers that the

disciplinary divides of today's academy were not present in Augustine's world and so provides a fitting conclusion to a collection dedicated to promoting cross-disciplinary conversation and innovation.

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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