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Augustine's Epistemology & Rhetoric in Conversation with Scripture

There are few figures at the intersection of Christian religion, philosophy, and rhetoric as prominent and influential as Augustine of Hippo. Not only was he particularly knowledgeable in terms of both classical and contemporary theories of rhetoric, he applied these theories to his biblical hermeneutic and epistemology. His work has influenced many since his death: secular philosophers, Catholic theologians, and Protestant reformers alike have read and dissected his many treatises on philosophy and theology. Because he was not a Christian for his entire life—much less his entire philosophical and ecclesiastical career—however, there is measurable change between his pre- and post-conversion understanding of rhetoric and epistemology. His prior understanding of was greatly influenced by Manichaean teaching as he was an adherent of the sect, while his post-conversion understanding was palpably influenced by his newly acquired Christian beliefs and by the Christian scriptures. His understanding of rhetoric and epistemology was not based solely on Christian scriptures, as it might have been in the case of other theologians. Because of his unique position as both a rhetorician and a theologian, his philosophies originated from both classical rhetorical theory and various strains of Christian theology. Augustine's view of rhetoric and epistemology post-conversion was influenced not purely by scripture, but by the Neoplatonist rhetoricians he read in conjunction with his conversion.

Augustine of Hippo was born on the 13th of November in 354 CE to a devout Christian mother and a secular father in Thagaste, a city in what is modern-day Algeria. While he was installed as a catechumen as a child, he was unimpressed with the Christian faith and eventually joined a religious sect known as the Manichaeans circa 373 CE (Torneau). This philosophy was considered a heresy by the church and has a unique epistemology that would influence Augustine's later philosophies.

Manichaeism was founded by a Mesopotamian man named Mani, who believed himself to be the "Paraclete," a helper promised by Christ in the Upper Room Discourse in John 16. Using this position, he claimed special revelation from God and began to teach others the Manichaean epistemology, which is to say a method of knowing or understanding the truth. This epistemology was gnostic-adjacent and taught that you could know and understand truth not only through the teachings of the Paraclete but also through an ascetic approach to the physical world (Clark). One was to divorce oneself from pleasures and physical facts of life so as to become closer to the spiritual, and in so doing one might be able to understand truth as expressed by the Paraclete. This epistemology, especially the near-gnostic elements of divorce from the physical in order to achieve understanding, is profoundly un-Christian.

After nine years as a member of the Manichaean sect, Augustine found himself drifting away. In 373, he moved to Milan after he was offered a position as a professor of rhetoric; it was in Milan that he encountered the Christian Bishop Ambrose. As previously mentioned, Augustine had become dissatisfied with Manichaeism and had begun to feel that it was intellectually insufficient as both a philosophical method and a religion. In discussion with Ambrose and other Christians in Milan, he was introduced to Neoplatonist philosophies of rhetoric and epistemology, and he began to adopt these as his own. In 386 CE, Augustine

officially gave up his position as professor of rhetoric in Milan and converted to Christianity (Torneau). The Neoplatonist ideals that he was introduced to in the company of Ambrose influenced his perception of rhetoric and his epistemology for the rest of his philosophical and ecclesiastical career.

Augustine's understanding of rhetoric was based greatly in Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy. Most notably, one can see in the fourth book of *On Christian Doctrine* an incorporation of Cicero's ideas of eloquence in rhetoric. This idea itself was similar to the Aristotelian understanding of audience, in that both philosophies encouraged an awareness of those receiving a speech or piece of writing; they recommend that that awareness influence the composition, word choice, and structure of the work (Augustine, 384-385).

His epistemology, too, was influenced by the Neoplatonist ideals. In his work *Contra Academicos*, he argues that truth is attainable (unlike some contemporary philosophies) and espoused a non-empiricist epistemology known as "illumination." In this system, he divides observation into two categories: first-hand, and second-hand. Anything that we can observe first-hand we can consider ourselves as having knowledge of. Anything we have a second-hand account of, even if it is eminently reliable, we cannot have knowledge of. Instead, we relate to things we have second-hand account of through belief. Thus, in order to have genuine knowledge of something, Augustine argues that we must put in the personal, intellectual work in order to search out and move towards the truth. Similar to Plato's philosophy of rhetoric as epistemic, Augustine states that the individual must parse through information, whether that be information or observation, in order to arrive at the truth for his or herself. Without this first-hand discovery of the truth, we do not have knowledge, we only have belief. We do not know that something is true, rather we only believe that it is true (Torneau).

For Augustine, this eventual arrival at the truth is made possible through the Holy Spirit, whose presence in the life of a Christian is attested to in Christian doctrine and in Scripture. This understanding is in and of itself a drastic departure from his previous philosophy; in the passage in John 16 that Mani used to proclaim himself the Paraclete, orthodox Christian teaching understands the “Helper” mentioned by Christ to be referring not to a man, but to the Holy Spirit, who is a member of the trinity and thus God Himself. In ascribing the ability to understand and know to the Holy Spirit instead of to the teachings of the Paraclete or to extreme asceticism, he demonstrates a movement not only religiously but philosophically.

Because Augustine is best-known for his work in rhetoric and philosophy after his conversion to Christianity, it would be remiss not to compare his rhetorical and epistemic ideas, detailed above, to the view of rhetoric and the epistemology expressed in scripture. Without examining the epistemology and rhetoric in scripture itself, it would be impossible to identify the ways in which Augustine’s own views were influenced by systems other than scripture.

First is the scriptural view of rhetoric. If we understand rhetoric to be using language so as to effectively persuade an audience, as Augustine likely would have, then the best way to understand scriptural rhetoric is in examining the application of rhetoric to the construction of the biblical text. To do this we will examine the Pauline epistle of Romans. The book of Romans (hereafter referred to as “Romans”) was written by the Apostle Paul circa 57 CE to members of the Christian church in Rome. It was written as a systematically reasoned argument for the need for God’s power of salvation, and the manner in which that salvation is accomplished (*English Standard Version*, Introduction). Paul addresses this in a systematic manner. He begins in chapter one by laying out the state of man and explaining why they need salvation. He moves from there to explaining the method of salvation, namely faith, in chapters three through five,

and the consequences and result of this salvation in chapters six through eight. What is more, it is written not only in a systematically reasoned manner, but in a manner catered to its audience, namely Roman Christian. Paul understood the disagreements and struggles of the particular church and tailored his argument to them. This can be seen in the numerous rhetorical questions presented throughout the book, as well as chapters nine through eleven, in which Paul addresses significant theological questions and difficulties pertaining to the relationship between Jewish Christians and Gentile questions. This is important because this was the audience he was addressing—a mix of Jewish and Gentile Christians—and Paul knew that this would have been an issue for them. Paul anticipates the responses of the readers, and provides detailed rebuttal (*English Standard Version*, Romans 6.15-23). He moves from there into application in chapters, providing practical application for the truths he just expounded and persuaded his audience of. In reading Romans one can see an approach to rhetoric that is not only systematic, but considerate of the audience; because of these two key elements of the biblical approach to rhetoric, it is extremely effective.

In comparing this to Augustine's own views of rhetoric, one finds little difference between the two. This is quite possibly because many of the early writers of scripture were also influenced by classical rhetoric, and so in both philosophy and structure incorporated classical rhetoric. Both the Bible and Augustine place a degree of importance on the audience, writing persuasively with the audience in mind. They also both focus on the manner of argumentation, a topic Augustine refers to as "eloquence" and seen in Romans through the systematic organization and skillful presentation of the argument.

Second, one must examine a biblical epistemology. Epistemology is, as previously stated, the manner in which we come to know and understand truth. Instead of examining method, as

with rhetoric, the best way to understand a biblical epistemology is to examine the claims of the text itself. The easiest statement to make is that a biblical understanding of truth is that scripture itself is truth, and apart from scripture one cannot know truth. First, in the Book of John Jesus himself tells his disciples, and subsequent believers, how they can find truth. He says “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth” (*English Standard Version*, John 8.31-32). So, it is clear that through study of Christ’s words that the Christian will know the truth; how then are we to know what are Christ’s words? Well, 2 Timothy tells the reader that “[a]ll Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (*English Standard Version*, 2 Timothy 3.16). It is to be understood, then, that the entire council of scripture is the word of God, and orthodox Christianity teaches, as John 1.1 states, that Jesus Christ is himself God. All of scripture then is the Word of God, and in studying it one can know truth. Furthermore, biblical epistemology states that one cannot understand the truth in scripture without the presence of the Holy Spirit. It says in John 14 that “...the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” and in 1 Corinthians that scripture is imparted “...in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (*English Standard Version*, John 14.26, 1 Corinthians 2.13). It is the word of God in conjunction with the Spirit of God which provide both knowledge of the truth and understanding of that truth according to a biblical epistemology.

It is here, rather than in rhetoric, that one sees a degree of difference between the Bible and Augustine. While both see truth as attainable, the manner through which it is attained differs between them. Augustine sees truth as attainable through first-hand experience and study, but

this study is of the world in general. The Bible argues that truth is only attainable through the study of Scripture as it is the word of God, and in so doing makes a claim that there is no truth apart from God. This is not a claim that Augustine makes; rather, he agrees with the idea of Platonic ideas, arguing that there are ideal forms that exist and are expressed in a lesser way on earth, although he does argue that these forms exist in the mind of God (Torneau). Biblical epistemology and Augustine's epistemology do share the manner of attaining understanding of truth, however, and that is through the Holy Spirit.

While it is clear that Augustine experienced a measurable and dramatic shift in his views on rhetoric and epistemology during his conversion from Manichaeism to Christianity, it cannot be said that the entirety of his new views sprung from the Christian scriptures. Rather, they are a combination of the teaching of the Bible, such as the necessity of the Holy Spirit and God being the essence of truth, and of Neoplatonist philosophy. Elements such as the Platonic ideal forms and an audience-and-language-focused approach to rhetoric were taken from the Neoplatonist philosophers and rhetoricians that he read in conjunction with his conversion to Christianity and applied to the teachings of the Christian scriptures. Whether this is because he felt they were compatible, or whether it was a conscious hermeneutic decision cannot be said, but it must be concluded that Augustine's views on rhetoric and epistemology are not from scripture alone, but also from Neoplatonism.

Works Cited

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