Augustine on Pagan Studies

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A professor of theology at a Christian college or university more often than not does not have to make too much of a case to justify why St. Augustine should be taught in his courses—though occasionally a case for this needs to be made. I once had a conversation with a particularly diversity-minded colleague in the theology department in which I teach who claimed that we should not teach Augustine because “he is just so different than us that he doesn’t really speak to our students.” To which, I quickly responded “you mean because he is African?” Based on the look that immediately came across his face, I knew that this is not what he had in mind. Despite my colleague’s protestations, the argument that learned, or potentially learned, Christians should read Augustine goes all the way back to Augustine’s own day. No less a towering figure in the early Church than St. Jerome argued that Augustine should be read and revered “as the second founder of the ancient faith.” Knowing what we do about Jerome’s prickly nature and general unwillingness to heap praise on anyone other than God, his words ought to give us pause.

The case is different, however, when a professor of theology is asked to justify why his students ought to read the great writings of the classical pagan thinkers. I say thinkers because the great pagan writings of antiquity include the writings of the classical philosophers and the classical poets. They include works like the *Republic* and works like the *Aeneid*. If time permitted, I would talk about Augustine’s argument as to why Christians should read both the classical pagan philosophers and the classical pagan poets. But it does not. For that reason, I will limit my remarks to limning Augustine’s argument about why Christians should read the great philosophic literature of pagan antiquity.

One answer to my question, of course, is that you can better understand Augustine’s writings if you have some understanding of the authors that he himself read. But this answer, I think, is ultimately unsatisfying. It reduces the reading of fundamental texts by classical pagan authors to an instrumental tool. It asserts that the *Metaphysics* or the *Ion* should be read because they help us situate the Christian thinker under consideration in his proper context. Put a bit more bluntly, this approach implicitly denies that the student of Christian theology has something to learn from reading a classical author who is allowed to speak on his own terms. C.S. Lewis perceptively diagnosed the intellectual poverty of this approach in *The* *Screwtape* *Letters*. Lewis there has Screwtape tell his young charge that there is no need to worry about what academics may learn when they read a great text from antiquity due to something called “The Historical Point of View.” According to this view, “when a learned man is presented with any statement from an ancient author, the one question he never asks is whether it is true. He asks who influenced the ancient writer, and how far the statement is consistent with what he said in other books, and what phase in the writer’s development, or in the general history of thought, it illustrates . . . and so on.”

Fortunately, one of the things one finds when he reads Augustine is an argument about why those Christians who are able ought to read the great pagan writers of classical antiquity. But in listening to this argument, we do well to remember that the case for Christians reading pagan classical literature was far from self-evident to the early Christians and the Christians of Augustine’s day. Tertullian spoke for many Christians, lettered and unlettered, when he asked what Athens has to do with Jerusalem. In other words, we should take seriously the fact that the early Christians were frequently, and perhaps with some reason, less than flatteringly described as “theologizing fisherman.” That Christians had such a reputation in the first place can, in part, be traced back to the surface presentation of the Bible’s teaching. While the Scriptures speak of such things as the nature of truth, the structure of the whole, and the form of human perfection, they do so in a noticeably non-philosophical way. When judging the merits of Augustine’s argument about why Christians ought to read the writings of classical pagan thinkers, then, we should not forget that the Bible does not engage in anything like philosophic speculation. Further still, the Bible does not labor to present proofs for the teachings it contains.

At the risk of oversimplifying Augustine’s argument too greatly, we can say that Augustine advanced two general arguments about why Christians should read the works of the classical pagan philosophers—both of which, surprisingly enough, Augustine draws principally from the Scriptures. Partly on the basis of his study of the Scriptures and partly on the basis of his study of the classical philosophers, Augustine believed that man was created with an ability to know the truth that precedes God’s gift of faith. The perfected use of unassisted, and hence limited, human reason, for Augustine, was manifested most vividly in the works of the pagan philosophers—although he never missed an opportunity to point out that the genuine achievements of philosophic reason, while not being negated, had been transformed and transcended by the dispensation of the Christian faith. In short, on the basis of the Scriptures, Augustine advanced the argument that God, through the very act of making himself known to man in the Bible and in his definitive revelation in Christ, positively enjoins the use of reason to acquire human knowledge. Consequently, Christians could be encouraged to read the writings of the classical pagan philosophers in an effort to further refine their reason and thus live as the rational beings they were created to be.

Augustine’s second argument turns on the nature of Christian revelation itself. Christianity comes to sight, first and foremost, not as an all-encompassing Divine legal code, but rather as what St. Paul repeatedly calls “a sound doctrine.” Thus, while theoretical speculation is neither indigenous to, nor required by, the Scriptures, there is something about the nature of the Christian revelation that renders theological speculation indispensable in the long run. The reason for this is that the Bible, particularly the New Testament, regularly speaks of God in a manner that differs from the way in which human beings are accustomed to speaking. To take the most obvious example, an example that Augustine comes back to again and again, the Trinitarian God who is revealed in the New Testament appears to imply the existence of three gods, a prospect that the Bible’s clear insistence upon monotheism flatly denies. Augustine consequently argued that a form of theoretical reflection was needed to move from the mere restatement of the teachings contained in Sacred Scripture to a clearer and more systematic understanding of the less than transparent tenets that Christianity claimed were so vital to a man’s salvation. This, according to Augustine, is the deepest reason why those Christians who are able ought to study the writings of the classical philosophers with great care. The desire (and the need) to achieve a greater degree of clarity about the very content and meaning of Christian revelation thus required that Scriptural admonitions that seemed to forbid the reading of texts from “Athens”—like that found in Paul’s *Letter to the Colossians—*be interpreted so as to assure Christians that the Bible, to use Augustine’s words, did not condemn “all philosophers and all of their writings.”

Augustine accordingly argued that Christians should read the great writings of classical pagan philosophy because the wisdom contained in the writings could help to cast light on the wisdom revealed in the teachings of the Christian faith. When studied carefully, the writings of the pagan philosophers, he maintained, could help make the faith ineligible both to the Christian and the non-Christian. For by reading classical pagan thinkers, a Christian could perhaps further develop what was underdeveloped, but present, within the fullness of truth disclosed by the Christian faith. To a great degree, Augustine’s argument hinged on the claim that just as the necessarily imperfect knowledge that human beings naturally possess points towards faith as its fulfillment, so faith seeks a more perfect grasp of its own principles through pondering the kind of arguments one frequently finds in the writings of the classical philosophers.

Augustine goes on to argue that Christians ought to read the works of the classical philosophers not only to elucidate what he regularly calls the “mysteries” of the faith, but also because the Christian revelation says relatively little about how Christians should live their day to day lives in human society. Given that the political and religious realms often intersect in the Christian’s daily life, Christians find it necessary to draw on both the political writings of the classical philosophers and Christian revelation in order to conjugate the proper relation of the temporal and the spiritual orders. Augustine’s insistence on this point is what allows him, at times, to be so effective in using the classical philosopher’s own arguments against them in defense of the reasonableness of the Christian faith. Inasmuch as classical philosophy claimed to base its arguments on principles that were accessible to all men at all times, the arguments contained in the writings of the classical philosophers provided a common ground, Augustine argued, on which the pagan and the Christian who read these writings could meet, and if necessary debate.

It was on this common ground that Augustine delineated the limits of just what Christians could and could not ultimately learn from reading the great works of the classical philosophers. And as anyone who has read his *Confessions* and his magisterial *The City of God* knows, he built this case around the question of human goodness. I can here only offer a thumbnail sketch of Augustine’s argument on this score. But I think that this thumbnail sketch will allow us to see something of the qualified nature of Augustine’s argument about the reading of classical pagan literature.

Augustine routinely pointed out to his Christian readers that, in their writings, the classical philosophers periodically defined happiness in terms of virtue and human excellence. Yet, more often than not, when Augustine did this he also pointed out that while these writings spoke of happiness as the highest goal to which human beings can aspire, these writings were, in the end, incapable of showing the actual way to these goals. By contrast, Christianity taught that the solution to man’s desire for happiness and wholeness was found in following Christ, who, the religion teaches, reveals the true end of man’s existence and therewith provides the means by which that end can be attained.

It is here that Augustine draws the line about what Christians can and cannot learn from reading the writings of the classical pagan philosophers. It is here where he fundamentally qualifies his argument about the internal interest Christianity has in its followers reading classical pagan texts. For Augustine insists that the solution to the problem of human goodness requires faith in an unproved revelation. While the Christian as Christian freely does this, the classical philosopher as classical philosopher, as Augustine frequently points out, is unwilling to do this. For the kind of arguments the pagan philosophers advanced in their works typically disincline their reader from having faith in an unproven revelation. Emphasizing this point in his *Confessions*, Augustine states that philosophers “want to provide their own happiness,” and therefore refuse to believe that “only God can lavish such a gift.” Confronted with the question of whether or not he would accept the salvific truth of Christian faith, Augustine argues, the classical philosopher is likely to ask why he needs to be saved in the first place.

By his own accord, Augustine seems to know of what he speaks. Chapters 4 and 5 of Book III of his *Confessions*, after all, give a first-hand account of both the rewards and the dangers that Christians face when they read the arguments found in works of classical philosophy. In these chapters we learn that the young Augustine—a cauldron of illicit loves—stumbled upon Cicero’s exhortation to philosophy, the *Hortensius*. This work, Augustine tells us, “changed the direction of my mind, altered my prayers to You, O Lord, and gave me a new purpose and ambition . . . I longed for immortal wisdom . . . the one thing that delighted me . . . was that I should love, and seek, and win, and hold, and embrace, not this or that philosophical school, but Wisdom itself, whatever it might be.” Augustine credits Cicero with initiating what he will later describe as his intellectual conversion. Yet as soon as Augustine report this, he proceeds to criticize the very model of philosophizing that he just movingly described. For the type of argumentation he encountered in Cicero’s work, he relates, quickly disinclined him from taking the claims to truth found in the Scriptures seriously. If we are to take Augustine’s words and his deeds seriously, it seems that reading classical pagan philosophic texts is both indispensable for Christians seeking to gain further insight into the nature and meaning of the Christian teaching and potentially hazardous to the faith of the man prone to reading these texts.

What, then, are we to make of Augustine’s argument about why Christians should read the great works of classical philosophy? On the one hand, Augustine brings to the fore reasons why Christianity itself encourages its adherents to read the great works of classical pagan philosophy. On the other, he shows us the risk that Christians run when they reads these works. In one moment, he calls attention to the common ground and overlapping teachings that the Scriptures and the writings of the classical pagan philosophers seem to share. In the next, he focuses our gaze on just how far apart the Bible’s and the classical philosophers’ writings are on the question of what truly perfects man and what truly makes man happy. At a minimum, we can say that in making the case for *why* Christians should read the great works of classical philosophy, Augustine is forced to make the case as to *how* Christians should read the great works of classical philosophy. Put somewhat differently, we can say that Augustine’s Christian argument in defense of the legitimacy, and qualified necessity, of pagan studies leads him to emphasize the promises as well as the perils that await those Christians who, in charitable service to the faith, dare to breathe the air of philosophic antiquity. By so doing, Augustine not only presents himself as a guide for Christians who would turn to the philosophic writings of pagan antiquity, he indirectly reminds Christians that they will continually stand in need of such a guide. At this point, however, it should become clear that we have returned to the question from where we began: why would a Christian read the great writings of a classical pagan thinker?