

The *exercitatio animi* (or *mentis*) of Augustine in the *City of God*

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INTRODUCTION

The *City of God* (*De ciuitate dei*) of Augustine is one of the most comprehensive in the corpus of his works. It enables the readers to appreciate the ways in which he explores a wide variety of themes such as criticism of pagan thought, apologetic theology, biblical exegesis, political and historical issues, and eschatological ideas. When he chose to write it around 412, after a psychologically motivated event of the sack of Rome by Alaric and his Gothic army in August 410, Augustine gave every promise of a monumental work to his trusted friend: 'O Marcellinus, most beloved son ... the work is great and arduous (*magnum opus et arduum*)'. Books 1-3 of the work could have appeared in late 413 or in 414. This work of twenty-two books was to take him about fourteen years, even sporadically to fully complete in 427.

It seems natural that the readers are led astray by the seemingly recursive and complex structure of the massive work. But, two pieces of evidence for the retrospective summary of the work show the existence of a well-planned scheme. First, in the *Retractationes* (2.43, 426-427), written after the completion of the *City of God*, Augustine explains the overall structure of the work. Second, the same account is taken from the *Letter 1A** written to Firmus. Augustine clearly articulates the work which falls into two main parts. The argument of the first part (Books 1-10) is directed against the claim that the cult of pagan deities is necessary for Rome's prosperity and well-being. The second main part (Books 11-22) deals with the origin, growth, and destined end of the two cities (*civitas*): one is the city of God and the other the earthly city.

I have been concerned with thinking of the 'exercise of the mind' (*exercitatio animi* or *mentis*) in the writings of Augustine, the theme which has received considerable interest, especially when we appreciate Pierre Hadot's work, *Exercices Spirituels et Philosophie Antique* (Paris 1993), in which he illustrates the fundamental aspect of the *exercitatio* and defines it as a 'metamorphosis of our personality'. It has often been regarded by some scholars as the purely intellectual training of the intelligence or mind. Primary attention should be given to it. All the same, Hadot stresses the need to consider a wider diversity of the training and purgation of the soul within the context of involving a complicated set of thought and moral attitudes. Although this erudite and illuminating study describes the exercise as being closely correlated with *a way of being* in its existential dimension, thereby conforming to the spirit in its totality, in the

writings of Augustine, the correlation still remains in question. Thus, it seems to be legitimate to revisit the subject in the *City of God*, especially in the Books 8-10 Augustine begins his argument by following a discussion of philosophers proclaiming the 'entire effort of philosophy' made first by Socrates (*ciu. dei* 8.3). Since there emerges a series of explanations of the exercise in this work, how does he attempt to think about it?

The purpose of this paper will be to attempt to come to some understanding of the use that Augustine makes of its dimension and goal in speaking about the spiritual exercise. I shall first examine what Augustine understands by the outcome of Platonists' philosophical reflection; then I shall ask whether there emerges a wider exercise of the soul in the latter part of the work. Finally, I shall consider the principal feature of the *exercitatio* from the viewpoint of the authority to which the human soul is subject.

AUGUSTINE'S CRITICISM OF ANCIENT 'PHILOSOPHY' AND THE 'SPIRITUAL EXERCISE'

In the Book 8 of the *City of God*, Augustine begins his argument by admiring the 'entire effort of philosophy' made by Socrates. He is described as the first to change the focus of philosophy from physics to the 'correction and regulation of morals' (*ciu. dei* 8.3, Dyson 314). He might believe, as Augustine explains, that it must have been difficult to answer for physical questions on eternal and divine things. Socrates' concentration on ethics comes to the realisation that 'these [*sic.* the causes of things] could not be comprehended other than by a mind which has been cleansed'. (*ciu. dei* 8.3) The same understanding of the purification is found also in the thought of Platonists. (*ciu. dei* 8.5-6) Because of their opinions about the incorporeality of God, the philosophy of Platonists surpasses the 'mystical' and the 'civil' theology. The Platonists thought that no corporate body was God and, in going beyond all material things, they had searched for God.

Hence, able and learned men, well versed (*exercitati*) in these things [*sic.* philosophical investigations], easily came to the conclusion that the Primary Form does not exist in those things which are mutable (*ciu. dei* 8.6, Dyson 322)

But at the end of the schematic account of Platonism where Augustine is faced with the obscurity of Platonist opinions about divine nature and the relation of human beings to the gods or demons, as well as about the nature of 'perturbations' and control over them, he offers advice on the value of Christian 'discipline' taught by the 'true religion'. (*ciu. dei* 8.17) Again, in the Book 10 where he is concerned with Porphyry's opinion about the worship of demons, Augustine sees Porphyry's inconsistency of 'a certain kind of purification of the soul by means of theurgy'. (*ciu. dei* 10.9, Dyson 404) Porphyry is rather equivocal about the need for a mediator, so that human beings may become purified and freed from emotions. Unlike Porphyry and the Platonists, having stressed the importance of the role of grace, that is the 'good and true Mediator' Lord

Christ (*ciu. dei* 10.24), Augustine offers the ‘true religion’ as the ‘universal way’ of the soul’s liberation.

This way cleanse the whole man, and prepares each of the parts of which a mortal man is made for immortality. our most true and mighty Purifier and Saviour took upon Himself the whole of human nature. formerly, it was foretold that these things would come to pass, and then it was announced that they have come to pass — (*ciu. dei* 10.32.2, Dyson 446)

all these things were foretold and promised in the Scriptures of this way [*sic.* universal way]. And we see so many of these promises fulfilled that we righteously and piously trust that the rest will also be fulfilled in time to come. As for those who do not believe, and therefore do not understand, that, according to what is truly foretold and proclaimed in Holy Scripture, this is the way of righteousness which leads directly to the vision of God and to eternal union with Him: these may assail us, but they cannot overthrow us. (*ciu. dei* 10.32.3, Dyson 447)

This view that, in search for the vision of God, the universal way of soul’s purification is prepared in the things foretold and proclaimed in the scriptures may afford the clear insight into the ‘exercise’ which will be realised by the exegetical engagement with the scriptural texts. The general prescription for the ‘exercise’, that the human soul should follow the only reliable way of purifying and redeeming itself through the divine aid of mediator, is indeed given a certain direction in the second half of the work.

In the Book 11 in which he examines a series of Trinitarian analogies in created things, Augustine finds difficulty in investigating the suggestion of the Trinity in the works of the creation. After some indication of his interpretation of the divine goodness is given (Gen. 1: 31 ‘And God was everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good’), the effect of the scriptural interpretation is clearly shown as follows:

But if the divine goodness is nothing other than holiness, then certainly it is a careful use of reason, and not a presumptuous boldness, to see a suggestion of the Trinity expressed in the works of God as if by a veiled mode of speech: a mode intended to develop our understanding when we ask, of anything whatsoever that God has created, Who made it? By what means did He make it? and, Why did He make it? (*ciu. dei* 11.24, Dyson 481)

After he offers the possibility of multiple interpretations of the opening verses in Genesis, again Augustine thinks about the theme of the Trinity, thereby referring to the effect of scriptural interpretation on the exegete’s mind or intellect.

Let each interpret these words as he will, then. For they are so profound that they can give rise to many different opinions which are not at odds with the rule of faith; and this is a challenge to the intellects of those who read them. (*ciu. dei* 11.32, Dyson 493)

Other references to the difficulty in interpreting the scriptural passages, though not numerous, confirm the same effect of these engagements on the soul. Augustine seems

to appeal to the audience to discern the usefulness of the 'exercise', when they encounter the considerable difficulty in finding the meaning of the texts.

Thus, even though we have no clear evidence that any godly race of men existed at the time when Babylon was being founded by the ungodly, this obscurity serves not to thwart the interest of the enquirer, but, rather, to stimulate it. (*ciu. dei* 16.11, Dyson 715)

'The shady and close mountain' is indeed capable of being understood in several ways, but I prefer to take it as referring to the sublimity of the Divine Scriptures in which Christ is prophesied. For there are certainly many 'shady and close' passages in these Scriptures, to exercise the mind of the inquirer. (*ciu. dei* 18.32, Dyson 864)

In this book called Revelation, there are indeed many obscure statements, intended to exercise the mind of the reader, ... (*ciu. dei* 20.17, Dyson 1004)

ANOTHER 'SPIRITUAL EXERCISE' IN THE *CITY OF GOD*

But apart from such repetition of the intellectual 'exercise' taken through biblical exegesis, what evidence is there for the possibility that Augustine's view of the 'exercise' contains some recognisably different characteristics while nevertheless being directed towards the union with God? It must be understood that to divide the intellectual from another element in this way is a mere classification but one which may help us to understand the different strand in his view of the spiritual exercise.

It is not only in the criticism of Platonists' philosophy referred to above that the emphasis on the role of divine grace is given. Indeed, it is the unique mediator who accomplish the moving to the immaterial things regarded as the universal way of the soul's deliverance.

But not only do we have this capacity to live well and to achieve immortal happiness by means of those arts which are called virtues, which are given only by the grace of God, which is in Christ, to the children of the promise and of the kingdom. In addition, there are the many great arts invented and exercised by human ingenuity, some for necessary purposes and other for pleasure. The mind and reason of man shows great excellence in contriving such things, even though they may be superfluous, or even perilous and hurtful; and is not this excellence evidence of a great good which man has in his nature, whereby he is able to discover, learn and exercise those arts? (*ciu. dei* 22.24, Dyson 1161-1163)

Although the 'mind and reason of man' may serve as a capacity for having 'invented and exercised' the various arts (*artes*), which include language, music, philosophy, and so on, this is not enough. The true aim of these arts is to become endowed with virtues and to fix the desire on the good (*ciu. dei* 22.24), whereby the human souls will make themselves fit to to attain to the beatitude. Augustine seems to take the path through the scriptural interpretation to the nourishment of the virtue.

While maintaining the aim of carrying out the exercises of exegete, Augustine shows that he values the humility of the inquirer highly, as he demonstrates clearly in the Book 15, in which he thinks of the divine anger as a judgement of God.

But if Scripture did not use such terms, it would not communicate its meaning so clearly to all the race of men for whom it has care. If it did not first bend down and, as it were, descend to the level of the fallen, it would not terrify the proud, arouse the negligent, exercise the inquirer and nourish the intelligent. (*ciu. dei* 15.25, Dyson 686)

Such is the way Augustine defines the scriptural narrative as making the various impacts on the widest possible audience: 'to all the race of men for whom it has care'. In adding a creative process of the audience to his view of biblical exegesis, he makes it a more dynamic connection between the narrative and the reader's mind than in the general impression. This element is of course paralleled by the humility of the scriptures for they read the texts because the scriptures 'descend to' them despite their arrogance. Although they may be terrified because they are proud of themselves, they may be encouraged in order that they might be virtuous.

The connection between Augustine's view of the exercise and his view of the nourishment of the virtue may be illustrated by some passages from the work. It is evident that he often refers to the correlation between the adversity in human affairs and the exercise by which people are urged to cultivate the virtues.

As we know, the lack of those things necessary to sustain the living, such as food and clothing, does not undermine in good men the strength of their endurance and patience, even though such lack is a grave affliction. Nor does it blot our piety from the soul: on the contrary, it renders it all the more fruitful by cultivation. (*ciu. dei* 1.13, Dyson 22)

The wicked brother, however, in the person of his son — that is, in his works — is the servant, that is the slave, of the good brothers. And what this means is that the good are to make intentional use of the wicked, to train themselves in patience or to increase their own wisdom. (*ciu. dei* 16.2, Dyson 696)

When faced with adversity these people are expected to receive the training for their tolerance and intelligence. Although it may test and aggravate the sufferings, the appropriate attitude to the adversity is encouraged. The tendency to generalise the adversity in this world rather than particular individuals is also evident in the work.

In this way, then, divine providence admonishes us not to condemn things thoughtlessly, but rather to inquire with diligence into the utility of things. Also, where our own intellect or weakness is to blame for our lack of knowledge, we should believe that a utility exists even though it is hidden, as we have found to be true of other things that we have discovered only with difficulty. This concealment of utility is a means of either exercising our humility or overcoming our pride. (*ciu. dei* 11.22, Dyson 477)

we might suppose that those who were not to suffer eternal torments hereafter were either being afflicted by temporal ills as a penalty for whatever sins, however small, they had committed, or trained by them to bring their virtue to its fullness. (*ciu. dei* 20.2, Dyson 968)

It is in the very case that Augustine attempts to define the exercise as the cultivation of the virtues. He is primarily concerned with a change of the attention in their minds, rather than defusing the trouble with which the people are faced, because he holds the belief that the universe, including its harmful components, is good and forms an ordered whole. Thus, this allows him to perceive the hidden meaning behind adversity, thereby reflecting on the necessity of the exercise. The sharp contrast between the limits of human knowledge and the atemporality of God's knowledge that knows temporal things always and timelessly serves to justify the absolute necessity for the exercise of pious humility with which they will be led to the wisdom and truth. The dispensation of divine providence for creatures permits any endorsement of its requirement.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Throughout the books of the *City of God*, Augustine has had confidence in the usefulness of the 'exercise' keeping the focus on the scriptural interpretation and this, together with the belief that the trainings are those directed towards the purification of the soul, explains his determination to encourage the audience in their exegetical attempts, with which may be compared some references in his *Sermons* and the *Letters* in which, even occasionally, Augustine has expressed concern about a high reward of the exercise, thereby admonishing his assembly and correspondents for interpreting the obscure passages. This exercise appears to be an exclusive endeavour and not to intend to stretch beyond a few ones, because it is not easily carried out by most people and requires in fact some methodological skills. However, Augustine speaks of the essential characteristics of the scriptures as humble and familiar to all classes of people. By aiming for the widest audience possible, he does also regard scriptural texts as those which 'foretold and promised' all things indispensable to anyone being strived for the fulfilment of divine promises. (*ciu. dei* 10.32) Thus, all are encouraged to do it, in order that they might follow the universal way of soul's deliverance.

It is noteworthy that divine providence also granted that the exercise should be taken by other means, as Augustine says in the very beginning of the work, after juxtaposing the scriptures and the *Aeneid* of Vergil.

God resisteth the proud but giveth grace unto the humble. (James 4: 6)

To spare the humble and subdue the proud. (Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.853)

For divine providence often corrects and destroys the corrupt ways of men by wars, and tests the righteous and praiseworthy by such afflictions of this mortal life, either

conveying them to a better world when they have been proved, or detaining them still on this earth for further service. (*ciu. dei* 1.1, Dyson 4)

The view that the exercises of the virtues, especially of the humble attitude before God, are brought about by the temporal dispensation in this world is consistent in the *City of God*. Despite a wide variety of adversity may cause pain and suffering, it is firmly admitted that divine providence governs all created things beyond the scope of human knowledge, driving to the same goal of 'exercising our humility' and of 'overcoming our pride' (*ciu. dei* 11.22). It can thus be seen how in his view the exercise comes to be more closely linked to the prophecy and promises narrated in the scriptures rather than to the current situations. For the scriptures replace all other evidences and provide standards by which to measure all temporal things. Also, the value attached to the exercise by Augustine may encourage the audience to emphasise a privileged strand of the scriptures. Although the explanations given for the spiritual exercises is not the major focus of the work, this does not mean that these descriptions have only the limited significance. Directly or indirectly, the 'spiritual exercise' shows a clear appreciation of the authority with which Augustine endowed the scriptural narratives. It supplies crucial testimony to the submission of human mind to it.