

## Spiritual Exercises in Augustine's Later Works

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### INTRODUCTION

The spiritual exercises of the Greco-Roman tradition, the one that has drawn increasing attention from not only those with an interest in Christian spirituality but many scholars working in late antiquity, especially when we read some of Pierre Hadot's writings, such as *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford 1995) and *The Present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson* (Stanford 2011), in which he illustrates a complex set of these exercises and describes as 'voluntary, personal practices, intended to bring about a transformation of the individual, a transformation of the self' (*The Present alone*, 8). He also emphasises the need to consider a wider diversity of the practice within the very context of involving all facets of human thought and behaviour. Although primary attention should be given to the intellectual training of the intelligence or mind, the simplistic approach merits careful deliberation.

It is noteworthy that, in the fourth- and fifth centuries, Christian thinkers begin to pursue the matter in a more detailed way, despite the fact that the modification of these exercises appears from the result of reflection in classical antiquity according to the circumstances of Greek or Hellenistic philosophy. A crucial stage of the development seems to be prepared by Augustine. Provided some erudite and illuminating studies consider the exercises as being closely linked with the context of Augustine's concern for the classical dialogue tradition and Christological speculation, it seems to be legitimate to revisit the subject of its correlation in his later works. In this paper, I confine myself to Augustine's view of the spiritual exercises in his 'later' *Letters* and *Sermons* chronologically, both of which were written and/or preached around after the year 412 when the onset of the Pelagian controversy and the publication of the first books of his *City of God* occurred. For the sake of argument, I have divided these writings along thematic lines into three groups, and in each group I shall come to some understanding of the horizons on which Augustine makes use of the aspect in speaking about these exercise.

### INTELLECTUAL AND THERAPEUTIC ASPECT OF THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

The first evidence to be considered is the passage from *Letter* 102, dating from between 406 and 412, that is addressed to Augustine's fellow-priest, Deogratias of Carthage, and in his *Revisions* (2.31) he designated it as a book entitled *Quaestiones expositae contra paganos*. At the end of this letter, after considering six questions which might partially

derive from those of Porphyry (*Letter* 102.8, 28, and 30), he stresses the importance of those questions concerning the scriptures from the viewpoint of the exercises of mind: 'But clearly, once we already hold onto the faith, we should investigate those questions with great eagerness in order to bring the minds of the faithful to experience pious delight, and we should share without any arrogance or pride whatever light we find in them' (*Letter* 102.38). Augustine refers to the difficulties of resolving these problems he has faced, thereby expressing the therapeutic attitude to the relation between the intellectual training and the cultivation of the inner self: 'pious delight ... without any arrogance or pride'. It is the connection of the two, in the exercise process, that attracted his attention. Any attempt to disrupt such an interdependence would probably perplex him, because 'once we already hold onto the faith'.

Next I shall examine the *Sermon* 70, dating in 398, but supposed to be dated in 2 February 413 by O. Perler, which I follow, preached at Carthage, contains the exposition of the words from Matthew 11:28-30, thereby following the *Sermon* 69 on the same passage. In this short sermon, after revealing profound insights into how the Apostle had to have all those terrible and bitter experiences which are taken from two passages of 2 Corinthians (6:4 and 11:24-25), Augustine shows his hearers the manifold works of the Spirit the Apostle had with him: 'how comfortable was the yoke of Christ he [Apostle] bore, and how light the load' (*Sermon* 70.2). And he stirs up his congregations' minds by showing them the burdensome requirements imposed by their daily lives: the laborious works of the soldier, merchant, and hunter. It is noteworthy, however, that here Augustine adds an example of the burden which would not be grouped into the same category: 'To what torments of almost daily bearings are the tender years of children subjected! Again, how they are kept at work in schools, and harried with long hours and short rations—not to learn wisdom but to learn the use of numbers and letters and clever tricks of argument for the sake of accumulating empty riches and honors' (*Sermon* 70.2). This serves to remind us of not the harsh realities of his assembly but of the educational experiences during Augustine's schooldays. Although he may be critical both of its object as well as of the strenuous form of these exercises, the fact that at this stage he abruptly brings up the pedagogical aspect of these exercises does not invalidate the useful functions of these exercises. But, a further discussion cannot be detected from this sermon.

*Letter* 162, a part of the exchange between Augustine and his friend Evodius, the bishop of Uzalis, was written in 414/415. At the beginning of this letter, as a preliminary to replying to the questions Evodius asked him in the previous letters (*Letters* 159, 160, and 161), Augustine openly admits the fact that even those 'who are endowed with a mind that is less sharp and less well trained' (*Letter* 162.1) devote themselves to reading and understanding what he writes about complicated problems. He lists them later in this letter, such as the correlation between body and soul, Christ's conception and birth, and so on. He would reflect on them cautiously, thereby advising Evodius to have much care in writing to them who want to consider these questions.

Letter 193, in approximately 418 addressed to Marius Mercator, who is Catholic layman and the author of two treatises against Pelagianism (now not extant), also contains the pedagogical aspect of these exercises and its correlation with the audience for the writings of Augustine and other people: 'For we ought not to be teachers who cannot be taught, and it is certainly better that a little fellow be corrected than a rigid one be broken, for what we have written exercises and trains our weakness or that of others, even though our writings are not established with anything like the authority of the canon of scripture' (*Letter 193.4.10*).

The next reference to these exercises in *Letter 202A*, dating at the beginning of 420, written to Optatus of Milevis, is made in the similar context of pedagogical care for those who provide rashly and thoughtlessly an answer to a problem they do not know. Although he himself still has not found out how the soul derived original sin from Adam, Augustine clearly offers the proper place to stop their investigation, in which 'they either find what they want or exercise the keenness of their mind by investigation' (*Letter 202A.2.6*). With regard to such a crucial problem, therefore, those seems to be invited exclusively to the exercise of their mind by the enquiry.

*Letter 2\**, one of the so-called *Divjak Letters*, was written probably in 428, that is the last in time of the *Divjak Letters*, addressed to Firmus, a cultivated nobleman of Carthage, who had previously written to Augustine, sending a sample of his young son's declamation. After exhorting Firmus to receive baptism in the body of this letter (§ 3–11), Augustine finally points to the question of Firmus' unnamed young man. The natural talent, fine liberal education, and skilled in rhetoric of the unnamed young man is highly commendable. It seems noticeable that, a very kind remark made to him, Augustine does hope the young man may devote himself not only to eloquence (which Cicero regards as useless without wisdom), but to a more virtuous and moral character. Although he may be reminded of the benefit of the rhetorical exercises in his youth, he cannot leave behind the path to which the way of life should be led. Thus, he provides young man with same advice on the rectification of the mind as what he did to his fellow, Licentius (*Letter 26*, dating from the period 394/395).

#### EXEGETICAL ASPECT OF THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

We come now to consider the exegetical aspect of the spiritual exercises in his later writings. The first of these is *Letter 137*, addressed to the layman Volusian, which was written in response to Christological questions in 411/412. After discussing the issue of the growth of the Christian religion, in the end of this letter, he turns to Christ's twofold commandment of love of God and of neighbour, in which all wisdom of philosophy are embodied. He refers then to the simplicity of the scriptural language in contrast with the hidden truth in the scriptures: 'And it [sc. scripture] not only feeds them with the evident truth but also exercises them with the hidden truth, though it has the same truth in clear matters as in hidden ones. ... By these, evil minds are salutarily corrected,

little minds are fed, and great minds are delighted' (*Letter* 137.5.18). This is the place for both the unlearned and the learned to practice their exercises by approaching the 'lowly language' of the scriptures.

Next is concerned with the well-known contrast between the literal and spiritual interpretations. *Sermon* 23, preached at the Faustus Basilica in Carthage in 413, followed by the *Sermon* 53, treats with the vision of God. It is interesting that Augustine starts with the passage from 2 Timothy 3:16 'Every divinely inspired scripture is useful for teaching, for reproving, for exhortation, for doctrine.' Although we cannot interpret the scriptural texts at all, we have no ground for accusing it. Thus, he regards the 'mental exercises' as those that prepare the exegetes to interpret spiritually the texts 'in a crude, materialistic way in many places'. Again he appeals to the scriptural evidence: 'For the law is spiritual, but I am carnal' (Rom 7:14). Since the difficulties experienced by him in interpreting the scriptures are serious, he might be forced to understand the necessity and scope of these exercises.

Next two letters, *Letter* 149 and 199, deal with the obscure passages found in the scriptures. First, *Letter* 149, among the correspondence between Augustine and Paulinus of Nola, was written in 416 as reply to *Letter* 121 written by Paulinus, in approximately 413. Augustine's comprehensive response to the query contains the interpretation of difficult passages from Psalms (§ 3-10), Ephesians (§ 11), 1 Timothy (§ 12), Romans (§ 18-22), Colossians (§ 23-30), and the Gospel (§ 31-33). He closes the letter by explaining the significance of those interpretations connected with the exercises of mind: 'For, when you argue as you ask questions, you both ask with acuteness and teach with humility. It is useful, however, to discover many opinions on the obscure passages of the divine scriptures, which God wanted to be there in order to provide exercise for our minds, when different people have different views, though they are all nonetheless in accord with the teaching of sound faith' (*Letter* 149.3.34).

The similar references to the meaning of scriptural interpretations are found in *Letter* 199, written to Hesychius, bishop of Saloniae in Dalmatia, who had asked him about the end of the world: to the letter, he refers in the *City of God* 20.5.4, which dated to 418-420. In this long letter, being the size of a small treatise, Augustine attempts to interpret the Lord's eschatological discourse, thereby thinking carefully about which of those signs in various scriptural passages refers to which of those events at the second coming of the Lord (*Letter* 199.9.26). Then, he warns him 'not to be content with their [scriptural] surface meaning', because the exegete is required to exercise the mind by understanding the hidden meaning of the passages (*Letter* 199.11.42). The obscure passages in the scriptures express the intention of God, in which 'God has chosen to exercise our minds' (*Letter* 199.11.45).

Next *Sermon* 71, dating between 417 and 420, is concerned with these exercises in general and refers to the effects of these exercises. This sermon deals with the difficult problem derived from the passages of Matthew 12:32 'Whoever speaks a word against the holy spirit will not be forgiven, neither in this age nor in the age to come.' Augustine

takes up twice the strength of these exercises in this sermon, when he encounters considerable difficulty in exploring the meaning of the texts.

Obviously, what he [sc. God] wanted to do was to exercise our minds with a difficult problem not to deceive us with a false statement. (*Sermon* 71.10)

Actually in the whole wide field of the holy scriptures we are nourished by the passages that are clear, exercised by those that are obscure; the first kind relieve us from hunger, the second save us from boredom. (*Sermon* 71.11)

It is significant that Augustine articulates the effects of scriptural interpretation. Although he does not give any further explanation, it might be sufficient for him to encourage his assembly to think over the difficulties in the scriptures. Once again, in the conclusion of this sermon, he speaks of these exercises on behalf of the pious and devotional exegetes, then assigns two different tasks to them: one is 'to see that needed to be understood', and the other 'to explain it if I did understand' (*Sermon* 71.38).

At the beginning of the *Sermon* 156, preached two days after *Sermon* 155 in 419, is concerned with these exercises in general and refers to the effects of these exercises. Augustine makes an allusion to the passage from Matthew 7:7, as also mentioned in *Sermon* 80: 'The depths of meaning in the word of God are there to excite our eagerness to study, not to prevent us from understanding. If everything was locked up in riddles, there would be no clue to the opening up of obscure passages. Again, if everything was hidden, there would be nothing for the soul to derive nourishment from, and so gain the strength which would enable it to knock at the closed doors' (*Sermon* 156.1). It is significant that, either at the beginning of these sermons or at the concluding sections, we find the references to these exercises not only in *Sermon* 80, 71, and 156, but in *Sermon* 32, 156, and 363.

*Sermon* 4, probably preached before 420, gives the hearers a considerable long commentary on Esau and Jacob in Genesis 27:1-40, which he himself admits at the end of the sermon (*Sermon* 4.36). At the beginning of the sermon (4.1), before entering into the discussion of the issues, Augustine compares two contrasted methods for interpreting the scriptural texts: one is 'carnal', that is, 'literally' and the other is 'spiritually'. This distinction has been repeatedly referred to in his expositions of the method for reading the scriptures. Here Augustine defines the 'exercises of our minds' (*exercitatio animae*) as those that give adequate training to enable the mind of the exegetes to make sense of what they do not yet understand. This is the same case as that shown in the *Sermon* 32 and 23.

*Letter* 213, prepared by Augustine as the record of the ecclesiastical proceedings, is not included in the letter properly speaking. On 26 September 426, he summoned his clergy and laity to the Basilica Pacis in Hippo in order to designate the priest Eraclius (Heraclius) as succeeding him in the bishopric. And he intentionally produces this document so as to facilitate the change of leadership in the church and to remind Eraclius of this important ceremony. It may even be regarded as the remarkable

testimony, not only because the ecclesiastical secretaries were faithfully and attentively noting these Acta, but also because it expresses Augustine's own hope to which he would commit himself in the rest of his life: 'so that I at long last, if God grants me a little more time in this life, may not devote my remaining days to laziness or spend them in inactivity but may exercise my mind in the holy scriptures as much as he permits and grants' (*Letter* 213.6). Augustine denies that he retires from all administrative duties in the church and that new bishop should do them by himself alone. But, he asks his congregations' permission to turn his mind to his own matter: 'Let no one, then, begrudge me my leisure, because my leisure will involve important work' (*Letter* 213.6).

*Sermon* 140, preached about 428 on Christmas day, shows us in general the correlation between the exercises of the mind and the scriptural interpretation. This sermon explicates the words from the gospel of John and, at the end of the sermon, Augustine considers how the gospel 'puts our minds through their paces, planes them smooth and defleshes them' (*Sermon* 140.6). Here again, the spiritual interpretation is conflicted with that of the 'carnaliter' (carnally and literally).

#### PRACTICAL AND THE ESCHATOLOGICAL ASPECT OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Next group of letters which were between 411 and 415 rather pertains to Augustine's religious dimension of these exercises. *Letter* 130, dating not much later than 411, was addressed to a wealthy Roman widow, Anicia Proba Faltonia, who had fled to North Africa when the Goths attacked Rome. Augustine then, answering her question on the prayer to God, refers to the exercises of the mind by taking up the scriptural texts. The three passages given to her are 2 Corinthians 6:11, 1 Corinthians 2:9, and Romans 8:26. First, he stresses the discontinuity between our need for prayer and the knowability of God, who 'knows what we need before we ask him'. In fact, although God cannot fail to know what we have need of, this is not enough: 'our desire, by which we can receive what he prepares to give, to be exercised in prayers' (*Letter* 130.8.17). This leads Augustine to 2 Corinthians 6:11, 'Make your heart bigger so that you do not bear that yoke with unbelievers', which follows the explanation of the greatness of his gift: 'That which is, indeed, very great, "which the eye has not seen", because it is not a color, "and the ear has not heard", because it is not a sound, "nor has it ascended into the heart of a human being" (1 Cor. 2:9)' (*Letter* 130.8.17). This view of the relation between the need for prayer and its reward lies in fact at the centre of Augustine's religious and eschatological aspects of these exercises. Another text which is correlated with his view is Romans 8:26, 'We do not know what we should pray for as we ought', which would suppose those who do not know what benefit the vexations and troubles in this life provide. The belief in the magnificence of its reward occurs in the context of the exhortation to the prayer. Here, too, we find the statement that the affections, that is 'the swelling of pride' and 'patience', should be tested and exercised through the prayer in order to receive the

greatness of the reward.

The next letter in the group under consideration, *Letter 131* to the same widow in 411/412, contains the same passage from Romans 8:28. In agreement with her comment that the corruptibility of the temporal body (*corpus corruptibile*) is the burden to the soul, Augustine resorts to the texts of Wisdom 9:15, 'for the corruptible body weighs down the soul, and the earthly dwelling presses down the mind as it thinks of many things'. Again, he refers to the necessity of the exercises of our patience for 'the hope of the world to come'.

*Letter 137*, written in 411/412 and addressed to the layman Volusian, deals with the question of Christ of both divine and human nature. In the main part of this letter (§ 2-18), Augustine gives a careful account of the grounds for the central Christian beliefs, among which is the miracles of Christ. His argument against those who do not believe in the greatness of his miracles moves on to the description of the history of Christian religion, in which he suggests that the persecution and heresies have emerged as the touchstone of its teaching: 'In alternating times of adversity and of prosperity they vigilantly practice patience and temperance' (*Letter 137.4.16*). And not only does he accept the necessity of these exercises in the life to come but he can even situate the practice of these exercises in the salvific functions of the Church, imperfect and uncertain though they be, as a foreshadowing of the true reward to come.

*Letter 157*, written in 414/415 and addressed to Hilary, a Catholic layman from Syracuse in Sicily, deals with a series of questions about some Pelagian teachings which he had asked for Augustine. Part of his answer is that concerning the baptism of infants the Pelagians must not impede the salvation through the grace of Christ, and once again the focus is on the exercise of the faith (*Letter 157.3.19*). For in the case of those who are redeemed by the death of Christ, for the time being the temporal death of the body remains and the exercise of their faith should not be taken away. The reign of death is ended in the renewal of the body that the resurrection promises.

*Sermon 9*, preached around 420 in Carthage, provides a long exposition of the Ten Commandments, in which Augustine takes its cue from the ten strings of the harp in Psalm 143 (144): 'O God, I will sing you a new song, on a harp of ten strings I will play to you.' When he comes to offer the interpretation of the passage from Matthew 5:25 'Come to an agreement with your adversary quickly', once again he indicates the ways of purifying the soul through the ascetic exercises, thereby provoking his congregations onto almsgiving which is accompanied by some obligations such as the fasting and prayer: 'If any pleasure of the world creep into your thoughts, school yourselves in works of mercy, school yourselves in almsgiving, in fasting, in prayer. These are the means of purging ourselves of the daily sins which we cannot help creeping into our thoughts because of our human weakness' (*Sermon 9.17*).

The last sermon examined in this section is *Sermon 347*, unfortunately its date uncertain (but presumably in 420), treats with the fear of God so often mentioned in the scriptures. He takes up and interprets the passage from Psalm 111:10 'The fear of the

Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. His understanding of the wisdom granted only to those who fear God in the observance of the justice would help to confirm that the soul must ascend from the fear of God towards wisdom through the seven distinctive stages. The scriptural evidence for soul's ascension is provided from Isaiah 11:2-3 in which the prophet enumerates seven spiritual gifts in descending order. He asks the assembly, 'where do we have to climb to?':

What can this place be, but the place of rest and peace? There, you see, is to be found that bright and never fading wisdom. So it was to exercise us in successive steps of doctrine that Isaiah came down from wisdom to fear, from the place, that is, of everlasting peace to the vale of time-bound tears; ... (*Sermon 347.2*)

We find here the view that defines the ascending steps towards the wisdom as these exercises. This ascension clarifies how the soul directs itself to God and seeks its own purification. Humbled in the fear of God, the soul undertakes the hard tasks of penetrating spiritual realities under the guidance of spiritual gifts. With all the movements of the soul, it finally approaches its purification and holds fast to the 'full and everlasting peace' (*Sermon 347.3*). Although it is not clear whether he believes that the union with God is possible for us in this life, Augustine explicitly uses the 'spiritual exercises' to express the whole process of soul's purification.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Augustine's later *Letters* and *Sermons* we have considered so far give a relatively wide spread through his episcopal period that is dated from 412 to 428. In each group of his views, we have not obtained the confirmation of a development in his thought. Indeed, the earliest evidence in which Augustine exhorted his friend to the purification of the soul (*Letter 26*, which I have not examined in this paper) is closely linked with his sustained urge for these exercises in the letter of his old age (*Letter 2\**). Also, in one of his earlier sermon (*Sermon 50* in 396), he exhorts his congregations to share the possessions with the poor. This practical aspect of the exercises remains in his later sermons (*Sermon 9* in 420 and *Sermon 347* in 420).

It is noteworthy that his instruction sometimes correlates with the writings of Augustine himself (*Letters 162* and *193*). He is fully conscious of a hierarchy of the treatises: 'what we have written exercises and trains our weakness or that of others, even though our writings are not established with anything like the authority of the canon of scripture' (*Letter 193.4.10*). The idea that we should exercise the mind by reading and thinking about the theological problems is an essential one for his view. It can thus be seen how these exercises in question comes to be more highly estimated and subsumed under the urge for the scriptural studies (*Letters 137*, *149*, and *213*) rather than being tried separately. In his *Sermons*, the most distinguished aspect is the exegetical one. He repeatedly expresses his concern about a high reward of these exercises, thereby encouraging his assembly to interpret difficult passages. Concerning the eschatological



aspect of these exercises, we have only found them in the short period from 411/412 to 415. Here, too, Augustine expresses his interest in a high reward, thereby attempting to chart the course of exercises—such as the prayer to God and the exercises of patience and the faith—into the expectation to be realised at the time to come. Hence, though these aspects themselves—intellectual, therapeutic, exegetical, practical, and eschatological—suggest little evidence of a development, gradually they have converged to the point that stresses the synthesis of these exercises and values them within a theocentric perspective.

The description given for the spiritual exercises is not the major focus of Augustine's later *Letters* and *Sermons*, or rather seems to be inserted between the main topics of these works. He does not write and preach any letter and sermon devoted mainly to the spiritual exercises. This does not mean, however, that the account of these exercises has only the limited meaning for Augustine and his reader and his congregations. Continually written down between the lines, his explanations give them a further and renewed impetus for the revision and progress of their thought and behaviour. In our analysis of these writings, we have met some of the people who would lead their congregations and fellows into a life directed wholly towards God. Despite these exercises are limited to some of his *Letters* and *Sermons*, they seem to serve to fasten their affectionate spiritual relationships and to look back over their lives.