

## Augustine's Quest for Perfection and the Encounter with *Vita Antonii*

Naoki KAMIMURA, Tokyo Gakugei University

### INTRODUCTION

In the book 8 of *Confessiones* (400-402), before narrating the *tolle lege* incident in a Milanese garden, Augustine explains how he becomes familiar with the Latin version of *Vita Antonii* by Athanasius of Alexandria (*conf.* 8.6.14-16). In the summer of 386, Augustine and his friend Alypius were visited by a fellow countryman and a servant of the emperor, Ponticianus, who told them about the story of Antony, an already well-respected Egyptian monk in ascetic circles. Ponticianus noticed, much to his surprise, that they had not known anything about the existence of a monastery in Milan, under the care of Ambrose (8.6.15). He proceeded to tell another story, in which two members of the emperor's court at Trier were led to the denunciation of worldly ambition by their reading of a manuscript of the *Vita* (8.6.15). Around a decade after the first encounter with Antony, in the preface to *De doctrina christiana* (396-397) Augustine succinctly referred to the Egyptian monk as a particular example of the reader of the scriptures (*doctr. chr.* pref. 4). He was especially impressed with a passage from the *Vita* (3.7), in which Antony was described as having the formidable memory which enabled him to remember the scriptures even though he lacked any knowledge of letters.

Outside these two texts — the preface to *De doctrina christiana* (396-397) and the book 8 of *Confessiones* (400-402) — references to the monk Antony are hard to find in his works. Consequently, it is very likely that for some time after his conversion Augustine could read the *Life of Antony* and be inspired by the ascetic legacy, mostly under the authority of the scriptures. Much ink has been spilt in the effort to assess the significance of Antony for Augustine in these texts, who announces the utility of guidance in the interpretation of the scriptures and speaks about the iconic figure of the monastic tradition towards his own conversion. How does Augustine evaluate the hagiographic text exerted on both the practice of biblical exegesis and the determination of his way of life? But, more interesting and significant is the process which would be necessary to provide such evaluation. Hence, we may ask, what process of Augustine's placing of Antony in the development of his early thought? In the paper which follows I have confined myself first to the description of the Egyptian monk in those two texts, and secondary to the process of his consideration. Finally, I shall again venture an explanation for its significance.

THE PREFACE IN *DE DOCTRINA CHRISTIANA*

Some scholars have attempted to explain the actual horizon of *De doctrina christiana*, thereby considering the problem of its intended audience. One would suppose that the purpose of this work is to construct the model for a widely recognised 'Christian culture', while the other claims that it should be regarded as the manual for the activity of preaching on biblical texts. Those have entered into an agreement with the abstract aspect of his language, and the issue is still open to dispute. It is because, in the prologue to this work, neither does Augustine dedicate it to a particular person nor refer to a specific reader by proper name. Instead, Augustine shows the three categories of possible critic, with which he replies beforehand to the objection that could be set against his undertaking. There are those who will reject his endeavour clearly because they could not understand what he has shown (pref. 3); those who might understand it, but not able to follow the 'rules for interpreting the scriptures' (pref. 1), thus regarding his exposition as useless (pref. 3); and those who would declare that their ability in interpreting obscure passages has no need of the precepts Augustine is explaining (pref. 4) as follows:

A third class of critic consists of those who either interpret the divine scriptures quite correctly or think they do. Because they see, or at least believe, that they have gained their ability to expound the holy books without recourse to any rules of the kind that I have now undertaken to give, they will protest that these rules are not needed by anybody, and that all worthwhile illumination of the difficulties of these texts can come by a special gift of God. (pref. 4)

It is admitted that the position of these critics is a challenge that troubles him much more than the previous categories. Augustine does indeed give a lengthy and detailed reply to this class of objectors. Who does belong to this class? Despite of the elusive expression in his response, there have been serious attempts to specify the third group. An interesting effort to identify them is that of Ulrich Duchrow (1963. 'Zum Prolog von Augustins "De doctrina christiana"'. *Vigiliae Christianae* 17: 165-72): according to him, those mentioned in the preface were the body of 'charismatics' mentioned by John Cassian in *De Institutione Coenobiorum*, written about in 420 (5.33-34). These monks devoted all their energy to the biblical exegesis, but only through divine illumination in their prayers. However, since there exists a similarity between the 'charismatics' and the third objectors, the other possibility should not be ignored. In *De opere monachorum*, written in ca. 401 by Augustine, the presence of these 'charismatics' is shown: they claim for their scriptural interpretation depend on a putative revelation obtained by divine gift through their prayers. The relation between the preface in *De doctrina christiana* and the reference in his monastic booklet seems to be more proximate in its chronological context.

Although these efforts to the identification of possible critics have not resolved the problem, through their investigations, I may rather realise the mutually exclusive ways of interpreting difficult passages in the scriptures: one is the way of exegesis, which does

not require any need of the kind of guidelines, yet inspired by the outpouring of divine gift, thus being properly designated as 'charismatic'; and the other is the way which is delivered by human teachers systematically, being appropriate for the methodical and technical practice of exegesis.

Yet that would be no good reason for them [sc. those who exult in their divine gift] to feel humiliated by the holy and perfect Egyptian monk Anthony, who, though lacking any knowledge of the alphabet, is reported to have memorized the divine scriptures by listening to them being read, and to have understood them by thoughtful meditation; ..... (pref. 8)

It is interesting to note that, in his criticism against the third class of objectors, Augustine draws the figure of Anthony. Does the mention of this exemplary character play a particular role in the emphasis not only on the uneducated, but even on the illiterate? Augustine, in fact, claims that those critics should not forget that they learned the alphabet with human help. Thus, I may wonder whether the reference to Antony may serve as a lesson for those who boast of their lack of human teaching. Why does Augustine present the figure in the advocacy of his methodical way of exegesis?

#### THE STORIES OF CONVERSION IN *CONFESIONES*

In the book 8 of *Confessiones*, several years after he wrote the prologue to *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine reminds himself of the first encounter with Antony occurred about fifteen years ago. In Milan, immediately before his final choice of a way of life, a casual guest, a fellow-African, Ponticianus tells Augustine and his friend, Alypius, the story of two colleagues at Trier. Their sudden experience of reading a manuscript of the *Vita Antonii* inspired them to renounce the world. When Ponticianus has finished the story and leaves Augustine standing in the garden with Alypius, Augustine is tormented by interior conflict and starts to talk to himself. This is not the first story of conversion that stimulates his own conversion. What is the initial one? As becomes clear from the preceding passage, Augustine struggled with it, when Simplicianus, a Milanese priest, told him the story of Marius Victorinus' conversion (*conf.* 8.2.3-8.4.9). Since he was a professor of rhetoric at Rome, sometime after his baptism, when a law was passed under the reign of the Emperor Julian that prohibited Christians from teaching literature and rhetoric, 'Victorinus had welcomed that law with open arms, and had chosen to abandon the verbiage of the schools rather than abandon your Word' (8.5.10). After hearing the story of Victorinus, Augustine was keen to imitate him by embracing the happiness he has been looking for so long. Victorinus' immediate resignation becomes an exemplar for Augustine in his hesitation. It is the stimulus which leads him to the renunciation of the world.

Any reader familiar with the story of conversion in *Confessiones* would be impressed with their reading of the *Vita* in the story of Ponticianus and regard the Egyptian monk as the prototype of the monastic way of life. Besides, it is easily seen that, within the

sequence of the conversion stories, not only two imperial officials at Trier but even Augustine himself, with Alypius in a garden, are affected by a decisive influence that this hagiographic text exerts upon the renunciation of the world. Does the model-monk make the same impact on these conversions? It is noticeable that both the imperial agent and Augustine raises the anxious questions about their situation. One of the officers says to his colleague:

'Tell me this: all these tasks we endure — where are they taking us? What is it we are looking for? For what reason are we in the Imperial Service? Can we have any greater hope at Court than of becoming Friends of the Emperor?' (8.6.15).

In like manner Augustine cries out to his friend:

'What is it we are enduring? What is it? What have you heard? The untaught arise and *lay hold of heaven* (Matt. 11.12) while we, for all our learning, have no heart — see where we wallow in flesh and blood! Are we ashamed to follow them, merely because they have gone first? Should we not rather be ashamed not to follow them?' (8.8.19)

Indeed, all of them are invited to the renunciation of the world. And after knowing and hearing the story of the Egyptian monk, they make their final choice of the monastic life. However, in the exclamation just before the decisive moment, Augustine refers to the conflict between the ignorance and the learning, the latter of which has occupies his mind and turns him into the state of a sinful life. Thus, his encounter with the *Vita* reveals the contrast between himself (and his friends) and the uneducated, the former of whom is anxious that 'the untaught' might be led to celestial life without any hindrance.

#### AUGUSTINE'S QUEST FOR PERFECTION

After his resignation from professorship, Augustine withdrew from Milan to the Cassiciacum estate with a group of his friends. During the rural retreat to the villa, he was acutely conscious of his duty as the 'disciplinary guide' for pursuing a good life. Thus, in the latter part of the Book 2 of his dialogue, *De ordine*, he emphasises the importance of having instruction in the liberal arts (e.g. *ord.* 2.16.44). This process of education is considered to be the indispensable preparation for the cognition of truth. Later in *Retractationes* (427), Augustine re-examines and criticises such heavy emphasis on the disciplines, whereas he confirms that 'many saintly persons do not know much' (*retr.* 1.3.2). Apart from such an approach, what evidence is there for the fact that Augustine's view of the ignorance after his encounter with the Egyptian monk contained some suggestions while being changed into a distinctively Christian concept? It must be seen that, in the late 380's, Augustine is becoming detached from his zeal for the liberal arts. First, in the earliest commentary *De genesi contra manichaeos* (388/389), and second, in the preface of the companion treatise *De musica* (387-390), he states that he should write in a simple way that those 'weak' and 'little' persons could understand without

difficulty. They are also called the 'unlearned' and the 'educated', who have not been well instructed in the liberal arts. In the former commentary, Augustine exhorts the 'little' ones not to be defeated by the Manichaeans who deceive them with false premises of their material way of thinking. An alternative way is suggested based on the biblical exegesis, which should presuppose humble belief. In the latter treatise, he advises the 'weak' ones not to devote themselves to the secular erudition. Instead, they would imitate those who are purified through their praise for the Trinity, following the authority of the scriptures. Therefore, despite of the difference in these advices, his understanding is that their path towards the one and true God requires the humble search of faith for understanding.

It is evident from the development of his early thought that Augustine repeatedly gave the descriptions of the human perfection from the sensible things to the divine contemplation. With his biblical, classical, and Plotinian predecessors, he shared the characteristics of the septenary ascending stage of the soul. The enumeration of the seven steps appears first in the earliest treatise *De quantitate animae* (33.70-76, written in 386/387), then in *De genesi contra manichaeos* (1.25.43, written in 388/389), in *De uera religione* (26.48-49, written in 390/391), in *De sermone domini in monte* (1.2.4-4.12, written in 393/395), and in *De doctrina christiana* (2.7.9-11, written in 396). According to the diversity of their subjects, the explanation of the seven steps differs respectively. For example, that of *De genesi contra manichaeos* is connected with the seven days of creation in Genesis, thus being defined as the temporal process of human perfection, while that of *De uera religione* relates to the two types of spiritual life in the economy of salvation, in which, based on the unity created by the Holy Spirit, the love of neighbour plays an essential role in the human progress. With regard to the issue in question, that is, the conflict between the ignorance and the learning, there has been a consistency in the combination of the humility and knowledge-based activities. Thus, if we pick up the stages in *De sermone domini in monte*, where, in his first extended exegesis on the New Testament, Augustine interprets the eight maxims in Matthew and shows the seven gifts for the soul's progress towards its perfection. The first and the third stages are described as follows:

1. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', the individual, dreading death and punishment, is converted to God through humility = Gift of fear.
3. 'Blessed are those who mourn', he understands the divine commandment of scripture, and laments its loss of the supreme good = Gift of Knowledge.

This correlation between the humility and the learning becomes indispensable for the explanation of human perfection: these stages clarify how the soul directs itself to God and seeks its own purification. Humbly subject to the divine order, the soul undertakes the difficult task of learning to penetrate spiritual realities. Not mutually exclusive way, but through the gradually ascending steps towards the law of God, both the humility and the learning serve as the complementary of its future perfection.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Augustine's approach to the encounter with Antony is influenced by the development of his early thought. His devotion to the liberal arts interacts with his deep concern about the perfection of human soul. The earliest Augustine expressed his positive attitude towards the liberal disciplines from the viewpoint of the constitutive in the philosophical tradition of Late Antiquity. But, through the recurring theme of the human perfection, which lies at the centre of the coenobitic way of life, what Augustine desires for both himself and his small community would be considered not as the conflict between the erudition and the ignorance, but as the spiritual quest of like-minded individuals. The instruction and human teachers is required by the soul to be one of the useful steps of an ascent. Augustine also realises that this dimension of the perfection should be anchored to the humble state of mind in regard to which significance of the faith in Christ would be exposed by the Pauline epistles. Thus, making progress his exegesis, Augustine's motif of the spiritual life is inspired by the immeasurable will of God.

From the description of the Egyptian monk in his conversion, it is quite likely that Augustine does not include him into those whose contempt of the secular erudition does not require any treatment of the precepts and human mediation.

Antony, on chancing to enter church in the middle of the Gospel reading, had taken heed of what was being read as if it were addressed to himself: *Go and sell all that you have; give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me* (Matt. 19.21). By this divine utterance..... he was immediately converted to you. (*conf.* 8.12.29)

After his monastic calling has been prompted by the hearing of the divine command, without any hesitation and with a humble attitude, Antony was subject to it. Despite of the fact that Antony appears to be an exceptional case of the uneducated, Augustine confirms that there exists no connection with the dangerous appeal of trying to ignore the imperfect condition of human beings, that is, the arrogance is the beginning of sin (*ciu. dei* 12.6).