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Augustinian Approach to Holistic Christian Pedagogy

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Augustinian Approach to Holistic Christian Pedagogy

Abstract

Presenters explain how in their CORE philosophy class they seek to demonstrate that their students' real life-spiritual life distinction is symptomatic of a dualism endemic to contemporary Christianity (section 1), and that their reading of Augustine's *Confessions* can provide a unified and holistic corrective to it (section 2) and that doing so helps students see a more radical vision of Christian faithfulness, one that calls for a holistic, life-wide response to the work of Christ that will not allow for an easy distinction between 'spiritual' life and everyday life (section 3).

Keywords

pedagogy, Augustine, Confessions, holistic education, philosophy, general education program, Dordt College

Disciplines

Christianity | Curriculum and Instruction | Higher Education | Philosophy | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

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Teaching the Christian Intellectual Tradition 2014: “Augustine Across the Curriculum”

October 2-4, 2014

An Augustinian Approach to a Holistic Christian Pedagogy

Introduction

Ask the participants in nearly any Christian Liberal arts college to describe their life five years after graduation and they will likely discuss their career trajectory, matrimonial plans, and even their preferences for transportation and housing. However, this conversation will likely go into extra-innings long before they bring up their hypothetical household's tithing practices, church attendance, or even their personal Christian formation. When pressed to explain the strange phenomenon, one of our students a few years ago responded in a surprisingly erudite manner arguing that the students had assumed that we had been asking about “real life—as opposed to church things.” The problem is the perception of a radical disjunction or even antithesis between the purposes, priorities, and goals of everyday life and those of a spiritual life. This Cartesian notion, however prevalent and even historically conditioned in Christianity, results in the privileging of those activities distinguished as “spiritual” at the expense of all other expressions of human life.

In our CORE philosophy class we seek to demonstrate that this real life-spiritual life distinction is symptomatic of a dualism endemic to contemporary Christianity (section 1), and that our reading of Augustine's *Confessions* can provide a unified and holistic corrective to it (section 2). Doing so helps students see a more radical vision of Christian faithfulness, one that calls for a holistic, life-wide response to the work of Christ that will not allow for an easy distinction between ‘spiritual’ life and everyday life (section 3).

What we're trying to do in CORE 200

The philosophy CORE class (CORE 200) is situated in the middle of our CORE program. Overall, the purpose of this CORE program is to instill in students a neo-Kuyperian understanding of Christian calling: we are called, by God, to serve the Kingdom in everything we do, all the time.

In CORE 200, we take our task to be two-fold: 1) to teach sufficient critical thinking skills to enable 2) students to discern/evaluate whether they actually believe the “Dordt Speak” they’ve been taught, and whether they want to. Each of these tasks have their own challenges, most notably: 1) with no previous philosophical background, they are ill prepared to do the kind of (philosophical) critical thinking we will ask them to do in this class; and 2) students are so tired of hearing the ‘Dordt Speak’ that they think they know it all already, and so can’t be bothered to think seriously about it now.

To address the critical thinking task, we’ve given the course an under-riding theme of hypocrisy as hypo-critical thinking. Since most of our students have grown up in the church, they are well aware of the hypocrisies at work within it. Suggesting that these hypocrisies arise, not from ill will or malicious intent, but from a lack of critical thinking regarding the relationships of people’s beliefs, words, and actions allows us to show them why philosophical critical thinking skills are important to them, even if they’ll never become philosophers themselves.

To address the discerning/evaluative task, the course is organized around two main questions: 1) Are we more than DNA (which deals with questions of metaphysics and philosophical anthropology); and 2) (Why) Do we Need Faith (which deals with questions of philosophy of religion, as well as politics and ethics). Under each question, we offer a series of distinct options that provide a sort of continuum on which they are to locate their own position, and explain why they land there and not elsewhere on that continuum.

For the DNA question, our students learn about a strict materialist understanding of the person (Dawkins), as well as a Platonic account (from the Republic—a sort of ‘soft dualism’ approach) and a Cartesian account, in which I am, really, my soul, that is, an immaterial, eternal,

and separable ‘thinking thing.’ With materialism and immaterialism/spiritualism as the two extremes, we then try to show that both these ‘extremes’ actually stem from the same philosophical background: they are both dualistic approaches, they just choose for different horns of the dualist dilemma (with materialism positing that the other ‘horn’ is an empty set). We then try to present an account of personhood that is wholly non-dualist. Basing it on the Biblical understandings of *nephesh* and *psuche*, and developing them through the work of thinkers like Kuyper, Dooyeweerd and Olthuis, we give a view of humanity as heart-ed, that is, as necessarily expressing, in all the various kinds of things they do, a spirit that flows through their core. This account tries to show that spirituality and materiality are not at odds with each other, but rather can be understood as working together: the material is inherently spiritual and vice versa.

The Faith question then develops the concrete implications of these different anthropological claims. After first introducing (and debating the merits and detriments of) the notion of faith as “belief without sufficient evidence,” we try to develop an alternate account of faith, one that builds on the non-dualist anthropology of being heart-ed. We call this account “faith as love” or “faith as what we love most ultimately.” The idea here is to show that, if we are not in fact dualistic creatures—part material body, part immaterial soul—but rather holistic ones, then our lives cannot be split into ‘everyday life’ and ‘spiritual life.’ The question of spirituality, then, is not what are the ‘spiritual’ things I should do in this life, and at the expense of which non-spiritual things; rather, the spirituality question is about which spirit(s) will be expressed in all my various actions (or, as we phrase it in this section, what will we love most ultimately). Once this is developed, the students will then have an adequate continuum regarding faith (from faith as belief to faith as ultimate love) on which to place their own views. In doing so, they will have taken a position on their own beliefs (as compared to the neo-Kuyperian claims taught in Dordt’s CORE program), and have done some reflection on the implications of holding those beliefs for what they think, do, and say, thus fulfilling both tasks we set for CORE 200.

Augustine's Confession answers the question "What changes as one become Christian?"

Augustine's Confessions are remarkable for their detailed retelling of Augustine's conversion and even more so for their candor in that account. For these reasons, the Confessions are an excellent real world "case study" in which to examine what exactly changes when one become a Christian.

As such, Augustine (and others working in the Augustinian tradition) is central to how we pursue the faith question. Our claim is that, in Augustine, we see that life is driven, not primarily by what we think (though certainly that has a big part to play) but by what we love. Therefore, if we want our faith, our Christianity, to be the most important thing in our life, it must deal not just with thoughts (though it will certainly have implications for how we think) but primarily with these fundamental loves.

We start by having the students read the end of Book II of the Confessions, as well as the beginning of Book III. This allows us to discuss the Pear incident, the low-point of Augustine's 'love' life, since here he loves nothing but doing bad itself: "[w]e carried off a huge load of pears. But they were not for our feasts but merely to throw to the pigs. Even if we ate a few, nevertheless our pleasure lay in doing what was not allowed." (II.iv.9) As Augustine is quick to point out, the theft is committed not for any rational reason (like hunger or profit) but for the love of rebellion—a desire to be the kind of person who is not bound by anyone else's rules.

The picture that Augustine paints is of a young man who is intellectually aware of the unreasonableness of his actions, yet persists because his loves—rather than his mind—are driving his actions. What he wants trumps what he knows.

The rest of Augustine's story is a rehearsal of trying to love good—but not ultimate—things at the center (or source) of his life. Book III recounts the young Augustine's attempts to place love as a thing in itself at the center of his life. Later in that same book, in Section II, paragraphs 3-4 he recounts his attempt to escape into the tragic as he dedicates himself to the theater. Finding both these ultimately unfulfilling he pursues truth itself, first in the philosophy of Cicero's Hortensius (III.iv.7) and later in the philosophy of Manicheism (III.vi.10). Finally,

Augustine recounts his attempt to place another person in that place when he centers his life around his friendship with Honoratus (IV.vi.11). While all these things and people are good, they ultimately leave Augustine unsatisfied and restlessly casting about for the next good until he finds his rest in God.

After using this portion of the Confessions as a case study of love as being what is central to our lives, we then discuss Books VII and VIII. This further shows that knowledge is not enough; at the center of our lives, of our faith, must be love. Augustine acknowledges this explicitly at the beginning of Book VIII when he says: “My desire was not to be more certain of you, but more stable in you” (VIII.i.1). After his conversion, Augustine finally loves God above all else. This puts us in position to ask: “So, what changes when I love God above all else? That is, what difference does my religious faith really make in my life?”

Here, we focus on the notion of the *ordo amoris*, the order of loves. Augustine affirms that loving God is the only ultimate satisfaction. To love God most ultimately is not to love only God, but to love all things rightly.

These inferior goods have their delights, but not comparable to my God (...) Sin is committed for the sake of all these things and others of this kind when, in consequence of an urge at the bottom end of the scale of good, we abandon the higher and supreme good (...) (II.v.11)

When we desire (love) God as our highest good, we are satisfied and our restlessness is gone. However, we do not cease to love other things—indeed we are commanded expressly to love our neighbor—and all creation is called by God “good.” Sin, then, is not so much loving something that is not good, but loving something good in the wrong way—allowing it to occupy that highest place that should be occupied by God alone.

From Augustine’s treatment of the order of loves we derive a notion of faith which is nothing more or less than the way in which we act, think, and plan. Our faith is in the ultimate object of our love—the fundamental or foundational vision of what we want, what we want to be, and want to be with. In such a definition, it should be obvious that faith cannot be abstracted

from life as a mere “part” of life; rather, the whole of life is the expression of our love/ desire which is our faith.

Implications

This notion of faith as (ultimate) love, then, enables us to see that our faith leads directly to all our other engagements. Everything we do, we do because of what we love most ultimately, and as a way of loving what we love most ultimately. Once this point is understood, we are able to shift gears a bit (toward ethical and political questions) to really drive home the implications of this notion of faith: if all of our actions reflect what we actually love most ultimately, as Augustine claimed, then what do your actions demonstrate that you love most ultimately? That is, what is your faith really in?

For most of our students, the answer to this question is, in some way shape or form, money. What we want is to have more money, and we’ll do whatever it takes to get it (including sitting through a philosophy class at 9 am!).

Using Augustine, then, we can help students see that their faith is not just the things they think about God and Jesus, but rather is the force/desire that ultimately drives their lives. Put this way, consumerism, individualism, etc., are unmasked not merely as defects in my religious life, but as competitors vying with God to be my fundamental love. That is, Augustine enables us to see that consumerism, etc., can be idolatrous (and not just sinful), and can be that even if I still think that God exists and that I love Him. To help them begin to discern where their own heart lies, we ask the question: “Do you make God fit your pursuit of the American Dream, or do you make the American Dream fall in line with your love of God? What changes and what stays the same? That helps you learn what you love most fundamentally.” A number of our students find this way of thinking about faith very disturbing as the scope of Christianity is expanded to include areas of their lives not previously considered “spiritual.”

Other students wonder if one's fundamental love is impure can their action remain good. That is, may a person succeed to doing (limited) good in the world—even contributing positively

to the Kingdom of God—while loving money, power, success, or security more. Others struggle to see as “evil,” actions which cannot easily be characterized in spiritual terms. For example poverty is readily seen as unfortunate but rarely seen by our students as an expression of evil per se. Appealing to our neo-Kuyperian tradition, we would answer a resounding “Yes” for God's persistent, common grace insures that His purposes are not thwarted. But how might Augustine answer?

In summary, in this view there can be no division between spiritual and material for all that is material is inherently spiritual. Similarly, no thought, action or habit, indeed no expression of one's humanity, can fail to demonstrate one's faith commitment. Indeed, what this reading of the Confession contributes to is nothing less than the blueprint for a Christianity that is a holistic, life-wide response to the work of Christ that will not allow for an easy distinction between spiritual and everyday life. So, asking our students at the end of the semester that we ask in the beginning, “how would you describe their life five years after graduation?,” we wouldn't necessarily expect students to immediately revise their discussions of career trajectories, matrimonial plans, or life in the suburbs—but would anticipate students should begin to understand those goals in a radically new way: as being either in service of their love for God or recognizing the idolatry of disordered loves they might represent.