AUGUSTINE AND THE CURE OF SOULS

Revising a Classical Ideal

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Introduction

Who, then, will be this doctor of souls?
What will his drugs be like, and what form will the regimen he prescribes take?

—Maximus of Tyre, Diss. 28.1

Rhetoric and Christian Identity in the Roman Empire

The sudden, extraordinary influence of Christian bishops in the fourth and fifth centuries was due in no small part to their ability to make the publicly recognized practices and strategies of the Greco-Roman orators and philosophers their own—even as they adapted them to conform to Christian principles.1 Christian bishops who were versed in classical rhetorical and philosophical literature became a public presence as Christianity emerged as the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.2 Research on their public affairs has revealed their involvement in a wide range of remarkable activities as they exercised their office under the pervasive patronage systems of the Empire.3 Aside from their responsibilities regarding the Church’s teaching and worship, they created programs concerned with the welfare of the poor,4 founded hospitals,5 held their own courts to arbitrate disputes,6 and ransomed those taken prisoner.7

As Christianity asserted itself in the Roman Empire and embraced its newly acquired status as a legal religion, it struggled with the challenge
of redefinition that came with its new, more public presence. It is no coincidence that an unprecedented number of theoretical texts on Christian ministry come from this time period. Indeed, the very instability of these changing times forced upon the minds of serious Christians the question of what form Christian leadership ought to take in a culture that already had well-established and vigorous political, religious, and philosophical traditions of its own. The relationship between Christianity and the other religious and philosophical traditions that surrounded it in this pluralistic environment remained unclear. This situation was further aggravated by Emperor Julian’s prohibition of Christians from teaching the classic texts of the Empire, separating them from a literary inheritance they had, by and large, taken for granted. Confronted by the increasing prominence of Christians, pagans found themselves struggling with their own identity as their founding traditions appeared to be receding into a “classical” past.

Among Christians and their leaders was a wide diversity of opinion concerning their relationship both to Roman culture and to the classical traditions undergirding it. Questions abounded regarding how to relate the Church of the martyrs to the newly born Church of the Empire. Christians still remembered how in former times Tertullian famously exclaimed that truth was found in Jerusalem rather than Athens and that the seed of the Church was the blood of Christian martyrs. The uneasy relationship between Christianity and Roman culture is evident in the debate between two of the leading Christian scholars of the fourth century, Rufinus and Jerome. Rufinus chastised Jerome for teaching pagan texts in his monastic community in Bethlehem to “young boys who had been entrusted to him that he might teach them the fear of the Lord.” Rufinus recounts that when the well-respected Christian scholar visited him in Jerusalem, Jerome brought with him “a book which contained a single dialogue of Cicero and also one of Plato’s in Greek.” For Rufinus, Jerome’s fondness for classical learning marked him as a Ciceronian rather than a Christian. Jerome responded by inquiring from where Rufinus had “obtained that flow of words, that lucidity of thought, that variety of translation” he used to write his attacks. Jerome continued, “I must be very much mistaken if you do not study Cicero in secret?”

As a bishop in Tertullian’s North Africa—where a rigorous Christianity had existed for centuries—Augustine of Hippo found these ques-
tions to be particularly acute during his episcopacy. The North African Christians whom Augustine referred to as “Donatists” criticized the Empire as well as the apparently compromised position of Catholic Christians in relation to it. As a bishop, Augustine adopted the strategy modeled for him by his mentor, Ambrose of Milan, of wide-ranging engagement in the Empire’s philosophical and political life, but brought to it North African concerns regarding the purity of Christian identity. The “social implications of Christianity itself” were at stake. One finds in Augustine’s leadership a sophisticated struggle to form in his hearers a vital Christian identity as they remained actively engaged in the imperial culture which was spread across the whole Roman world. The bishop sought to further a Christianity that could sustain intermingling with the wider culture without so diminishing its critical edge that it became merely “cultural.”

Although Augustine was never a professional philosopher, he was—prior to his conversion—a professional orator paid to deliver public speeches that were both persuasive and entertaining. His skill at this craft was such that by it alone he rose to the proximate edges of imperial power in the Roman capital. This professional experience and the intellectual formation that made it possible undoubtedly “left a permanent mark on his later years as a Christian priest and bishop.” After he abandoned his imperial careerism, Augustine never ceased giving persuasive speeches. He drew upon the expertise of his former profession as he sought to influence and shape the Roman world. Indeed, the most abundant and direct evidence of the appropriation of the practices and strategies of classical rhetoric by late antique bishops is provided by their own sermons. Preaching was one of the principle means by which Christian bishops engaged their surrounding culture and extended the influence of Christianity throughout the Roman world. The immense quantity of homiletical material produced (and preserved) during this period testifies both to the great value ascribed to public oratory in late antiquity and to the extensive time and effort Christians devoted to preaching.

A scant few years after Augustine’s death, Possidius, Augustine’s fifth-century biographer, drew the attention of his readers, above all, to the bishop’s preaching and to the harmony between his words and deeds. Possidius noted that during his nearly forty years as priest or bishop Augustine “preached God’s word in the church right up to his last illness
unceasingly, vigorously and powerfully, with sound mind and sound judgment." Possidius continued: “No one can read what he wrote about divinity without profit. But I think that those were able to profit still more who could hear him speak in church and see him with their own eyes. . . . Truly, he was indeed one of those of whom it is written, ‘speak this way and act the same way’” (Jas. 2:12).20 As a result of the very talent and dedication described by Possidius, “the largest body of oratory surviving from any ancient speaker” is the Christian preaching of Augustine of Hippo, some 1,000 surviving sermons.21 Although these preserved sermons are only a small number of those he preached over the course of his thirty-nine-year ministry, they still amount to “more than a third of A[ugustine]’s own surviving œuvre.”22

Despite this large quantity of material and the importance ascribed to it at the time of its composition, when compared with the amount of secondary literature concerned with other sources, late antique sermons are relatively little studied. Augustine’s sermons amount to, in the words of J. J. O’Donnell, “long known but under-studied masses of texts.”23 In the epilogue to the recent second edition of his influential biography of the bishop of Hippo, Peter Brown states that if he were to write it over again, he would take more account of the sermons.24 It is not at all surprising that he did not make much use of these materials in the 1960s. In fact, to this day, scholarly attention given to homilies continues to lag behind that given to other early Christian literature such as the apologetic, doctrinal, polemical, or political works.

This neglect has occurred and continues to occur for understandable reasons. For one, although collections of homilies circulated through the centuries, it has been a daunting task to sift through such collections, determine which sermons are authentic, and establish reliable texts for them. Second, once one has reliable texts of authentic sermons, the sermons themselves are often impossible to date precisely because they nearly always lack internal references that can be securely connected to external, verifiable facts or events.25 Third, the sermons almost universally have an exegetical quality to them whose logic continues to remain obscure. For example, in his biography of Augustine, Peter Brown has likened such scriptural exegesis to Freudian analysis of dreams (far from an exact science).26 Fourth, the sermons have a “popular” feel to them. While this makes them more accessible to a general audience, they can lack the precision necessary for them to be that useful to historians, philosophers,
or theologians. Finally, since they were oral performances, only the notes made by those who originally heard them survive. Contemporary readers are consequently in a position not unlike that of paleontologists examining the bones of some ancient creature and attempting to imagine what it actually looked like.

The studies of Augustine’s homilies tend to fall within two categories: those concerned with philology, authenticity, and dating or those that employ the sermons in service of some other project whether doctrinal, thematic, or sociological. Most prominent among the former is Dom Pierre-Patrick Verbraken’s fine work. Studies of the latter category have found the sermons to be a rich source of information about the liturgy of Augustine’s time as well as providing further discussions of topics present in the written treatises. The investigation of late antique homilies by social historians that has only just begun promises to expand knowledge of late antique life all across the Empire.

What remains elusive is how one would study the homily itself, on its own terms. While assessing the state of research on late antique Christian bishops, Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer conclude that a comprehensive pastoral theory uniting their diverse activities remains a desideratum. They attribute this in part to the manner in which scholars experienced in the practice of pastoral care tend to bring with them little understanding of the world of late antiquity and instead are concerned primarily with modern questions and presuppositions about effective pastoral counseling. While specialists in late antiquity have avoided imposing on the period such contemporary concerns, they “have made no attempt to examine pastoral care in this setting in its own right,” preferring to explore particular practices “without in any way attempting to pull these fragments together or to formulate a theory which might make coherent sense of them.”

Historians know all too well how perilous it is to assume that current practices correspond with those of antiquity. If it has become obvious that the meaning has shifted of such common societal conditions and practices as gender and meals, it would be foolhardy to assume that the delivery and hearing of late antique sermons in any way mirrors our present-day experience. To preserve this historical distance, it is appealing to resort to the methods and insights of the social sciences. From this perspective, late antique sermons are examples of ideological legitimation, buttressing and defining the identity of Christian communities. To be sure, sermons
are such examples and may be used in this general sociological category to explain a great deal about the late Empire. To use homilies only as supporting texts, however, neglects the study of the internal structure and distinctive genius of the late antique Christian sermon.

Thus, what is needed is a clarification of the theory informing the original composition of the sermons themselves, one that situates them within the philosophical and social constraints of the time.35 Throughout his works, Pierre Hadot has warned that overlooking the centrality of certain cultural assumptions of late Roman antiquity easily obscures important features of the literary evidence. He contends that “in order to understand the works of the philosophers of antiquity we must take account of all the concrete conditions in which they wrote, all the constraints that weighed upon them: the framework of the school, the very nature of philosophia, literary genres, rhetorical rules, dogmatic imperatives, and traditional modes of reasoning.”36

Understanding a work of antiquity requires placing it in the group from which it emanates, in the tradition of its dogmas, its literary genre, and requires understanding its goals. . . . For the ancient author’s art consists in his skillfully using, in order to arrive at his goals, all of the constraints that weigh upon him as well as the models furnished by the tradition. Most of the time, furthermore, he uses not only ideas, images, and patterns of argument in this way but also texts or at least pre-existing formulae.37

Taking Hadot’s admonition seriously requires the interpreter of Augustine’s sermons to be attentive to the skillful way the bishop employed the formal assumptions and methods of the classical traditions that he and other Christians inherited.

For centuries discussions of philosophical therapy in Greek and Roman philosophical schools addressed how the philosopher could most effectively employ speech to guide students in the philosophic life. In a well-regarded study, A. D. Nock points to the continuity between later Christian homiletic and its philosophic predecessor, remarking: “A man who heard Musonius Rufus or Epictetus at Rome was doing the thing most nearly equivalent to hearing a Christian sermon later: the technique was in fact inherited.”38 George Kennedy characterizes an oration of Dio Chry-
sostom at the Olympic games as “in fact, a pagan sermon, preaching the faith of Hellenism, its gods, its poetry, its art, and its culture as a whole.”

In his cultural history of the second sophistic, Graham Anderson demonstrates how prevalent sophistic oratory and presuppositions were in the first four centuries of the Christian Church. Hellenistic rhetoric was a resource so flexible that it was used to a greater or lesser extent by each of the Hellenistic philosophical schools, Platonic, Stoic, Epicurean, Cynic, and Peripatetic. Likewise, Hellenistic rhetoric was no less amenable to being employed by “educated and eloquent Jewish and Christian performers.” Anderson describes sophists as such “familiar figures” that it was “inevitable that any educated Christian should find himself either using or reacting to the tools of the sophists’ trade. Where there was Christian rhetoric, one would expect an element of ‘Christian Sophistic,’ of cultural or ornamental display in the service of Christ.” This led to an “unexpected cultural convergence” where the founder of Christianity could be perceived by educated pagans to be “a crucified sophist” who was “during his lifetime a popular public speaker with an inner circle of disciples.”

In such times, “anyone with serious educational aspirations” could “import these into their Christianity, and in the event this was clearly done.” Christians internalized not only sophistic reflexes and habits of thought but fundamental presuppositions regarding the nature of speech itself and its effects upon the soul (for better or worse).

Classical traditions of philosophical therapy have been referred to as “psychagogy” in recent scholarship. Abraham Malherbe states, “The constant attention philosophers devoted to their followers’ intellectual, spiritual, and moral growth resulted in a well-developed system of care known as psychagogy.” In fact, these psychagogic traditions were so widespread and influential that they are present in the Christian New Testament itself. Indeed, the ideal of an orator who cures the souls of hearers in the same way that a physician cures the body both preceded Christianity and influenced its earliest expressions. Malherbe continues, “The psychagogic tradition became increasingly important to Christians in later centuries [after the New Testament] as more structure was given to the spiritual life by developing devotional and spiritual exercises.” Ilsetraut Hadot describes a process whereby the “highly developed practice of spiritual guidance was completely adopted by Christians, albeit with different premises.” In succeeding centuries, “the figure of the philosopher as spiritual
guide with the philosophical schools as the center of his activity” was eventually “replaced by the person of the clerical spiritual guide.”

To use the term “psychagogy” in this manner to refer to a “well developed system of care” is to give the term a precise range of meaning that it did not have in antiquity. In its earliest usage, it was “a term from magic; it is the raising of spirits of the deceased.” Psychagogy later came to be used in rhetoric and poetics to refer to the influencing of the souls of the living: “bringing into ecstasy (the mind of) the audience by the magic of speech, carrying it away to the fictitious world that one (as a poet) has created, or to the emotional state that will make it take the decision one (as an orator) hopes for.” This kind of ψυχαγωγία, this seductive enchantment, often carried with it negative connotations of manipulation, flattery, or beguilement as well.

The term seems never to have shed entirely its unfavorable associations in antiquity. Accordingly, when someone sought to cure souls through the use of psychagogy, it meant engaging in more ambiguous practices than what is implied by the alternatives of pedagogy, education, or even dialectic. Only one who believed that the human condition was such that appeals to reason alone were therapeutically ineffective would resort to such measures. Rational arguments were thus thought to need supplementation by various techniques consciously designed to enlist the non-rational faculties of the human person into the therapeutic process and assimilate them to its therapeutic aims. Unlike the straightforward value of rational argumentation, psychagogy involved one in a complicated, indirect, time-consuming process. Christian and non-Christian alike were suspicious of the conscious use of non-rational means of persuasion due to the considerable potential for abuse. For this reason, the extent that philosophers and Christian leaders believed that human flourishing necessitated psychagogic methods is all the more striking.

Psychagogy is, therefore, a useful term for identifying specific practices and strategies employed by classical and late antique philosophers, poets, and rhetoricians. A working definition would be that psychagogy refers to those philosophically articulated traditions of therapy—common in Hellenistic literature—pertaining to how a mature person leads the less mature to perceive and internalize wisdom for themselves. These traditions, moreover, stress that for therapeutic speech to be effective, it must be based on knowledge and persuade by adapting itself in specific ways both to the psychic state of the recipient and to the particular occasion. Thus, as
a contemporary investigative category, psychagogy is a distinctive use of rhetoric for philosophic or religious ends. It can be difficult to identify since powerful movements in recent centuries set up a binary opposition between rhetoric and reality separating the art of persuasion from disinterested logic and observation. As John Locke declared, “[I]f we would speak of Things as they are, we must allow, that all the Art of Rhetorick, besides Order and Clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of Words Eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong Ideas, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheat.” To understand ancient psychagogy requires one to set aside such polarities and imagine the possibility of a kind of speech whose persuasiveness does not diminish its truthfulness. In this case words would lead to, or even mediate, the apprehension of “things as they are.”

The primary venue of ancient rhetoric was the day-to-day business of civic life, whether in legal proceedings, deliberative bodies, or any number of public occasions. As will become clear in the opening chapter, the line between psychagogy and rhetoric (much as that between philosophy and sophistry) is difficult to draw. Those practicing psychagogy—Socrates and Augustine included—were usually quite ambivalent about rhetoric itself and keenly sensitive to the many ways it could be used in the service of any unjust cause. In practice, psychagogic speech deployed many of the same strategies and even commonplace examples as other forms of rhetoric. What distinguishes psychagogy from rhetoric is its fairly narrowly defined end, namely, the inculcation of the philosophic life. It should, therefore, be kept in mind that the use of words for psychagogic purposes was a real but minority tradition within ancient rhetoric that, as argued here, was especially influential upon early Christians.

The early chapters of this study pay substantial attention to Augustine’s predecessors on their own terms. This is necessary not only to prove how classical psychagogic traditions were transmitted to Augustine, but also to add to our understanding of him. The difficulty of obtaining an accurate image of Augustine should not be underestimated. Much like gaining perspective on a mountain, it is always tempting to marvel at the peak rather than doing the work of tracing the whole figure rising from the plain. Despite the astonishing manner in which Augustine towers over history and casts an unusually immense shadow, he truly had a local context and all of his thoughts and feelings grew organically out of the actual life he lived. The more at home one can become with the antique, florid rhetoric
of Cicero, the arcane, strangely insightful philosophy of the Platonists, and the urbane, sophisticated Christianity of Ambrose of Milan, the more likely one will be able to see Augustine as he was. The wide-angle lens employed here, therefore, is not meant to take the focus away from its subject, but to accurately take him in. Through examining classical psychagogic traditions in their own right and delving into those with which Augustine was familiar, the true shape of his own initial revision of the methods and aims of philosophical therapy becomes apparent. Of special note is Augustine's retreat from public life at Cassiciacum where he gathered his friends and students around him and made his first steps not as a teacher of rhetorical techniques alone, but as one who used rhetorical techniques in the service of the philosophically informed Christian life. In the first five years after his conversion, Augustine gradually formulated a brilliantly Christian appropriation of the psychagogic tradition in which both the methods and aims of the Hellenistic philosophical schools, especially those of the Platonists, are visible in his description of the fleshly expressions of the divine rhetoric.

Augustine's life and thought, however, underwent a profound shift in the 390s primarily due to his ordination to the priesthood and then to the episcopate. His reflections on spiritual guidance came to maturity in the context of his duties as a Christian bishop. Like other bishops of his day, Augustine engaged in a wide range of activities caring for the souls and bodies of those for whom he was responsible, including assorted forms of charity and social welfare, hearing legal cases, preaching, leading liturgical rites, ransoming captives, and offering personal guidance to individuals. Augustine made these often-burdensome duties the subject of inquiry and developed a sophisticated pastoral theory in which these ministries of cura could be understood as various expressions of more fundamental convictions regarding the soul’s cure. Indeed, in Augustine’s Latin, the word cura had two distinct but overlapping meanings. On the one hand, it meant “to be charged with administration.” On the other hand, medically, it meant “healing treatment.” In time, the cura animarum became synonymous with Christian ministry itself. For this reason, one seeking Augustine’s advice could readily appeal to him as a “physician of the soul” (medicum spiritalem).

Augustine’s fame is attributable less to his ministries of care than to his written works whose insights into psychology, politics, philosophy, and
theology continue to interest readers. For centuries Augustine has been approached theologically beginning not with his rhetorical practice, but with his most characteristic doctrine: his teaching on grace and the further corollaries, predestination and perseverance, harnessed by him to protect this insight from critics. Of course, subsequent Christian writers found these topics so rich in meaning that for more than a thousand years after Augustine’s death there was a continuous series of treatises interpreting his teaching on how creatures are moved to know and love God. As this topic in Augustine’s writings generated such interest and controversy, it tended to become so central to perceptions of him that it obscured the very context in which his convictions originally developed.

Stephen Duffy has lamented how aspects of Augustine’s doctrine of grace have over time “been disengaged from his total vision and have become influential in a one-sided way in later presentations” — especially when “deployed as weaponry in polemics.” This disengagement continues to present the danger of imbuing his teaching on grace and its corollaries with a freestanding quality. This risks detaching them from their original context within the bishop’s ministry and his more basic conviction in the incarnation of the divine Word: a Word spoken rhetorically, adapted to the human condition, and meant to persuade us. It is this Word who sought to “entice” us and “enkindle” love in us by flirting with us through the window of our own flesh. The very eloquence of this divine Word is what both reveals the world as the contingent sign Augustine perceived it to be and heals by becoming the ultimate object of creaturely desire. In this way, rhetorical theory is so internalized by Augustine that it not only expresses his theological vision, but also informs it. Moreover, even as it is employed, rhetoric itself is revised and infused with theological content. The deep philosophical link between language, vulnerability, and desire is one of Augustine’s chief insights. For Augustine the Christian, these underlying existential particulars cohere in the manner in which the divine Word becomes present to our all-too-fleshly desires by becoming vulnerable.

The following pages seek to retrieve the living context of Augustine’s theological conclusions by, among other things, showing the cure of souls to be an enduring commitment of his — from his earliest pre-baptismal writings to his final acts as bishop. This retrieval entails investigating how this fundamental concern was borne out in the variety of contexts in which
Augustine functioned, whether as the brilliant young rhetorician, the teacher of Christian philosophy at Cassiciacum, the newly ordained priest, or the formidable Catholic bishop. This study demonstrates that, rather than rejecting his earlier ideals, Augustine adapted them to inform his mature pastoral theory and his homiletical practice. Formal features of classical philosophical therapy persist in Augustine’s homilies, but they have been materially altered and recontextualized as an exegetical exercise in the Christian liturgy. Augustine’s acceptance of the tasks posed to him by this classical tradition accounts for certain structural features of his homilies even as he undertook these tasks in new ways. The full integration of Christian exegetical and sacramental traditions into his classically informed psychagogy is the hallmark of his homilies.

Sources and Method

Although many leaders of late antique Christianity were capable, philosophically informed orators, Augustine is particularly suited for this study due to the preservation of homilies in which his own practice can be observed as well as a number of theoretical works where he addresses the task of preaching. The abstract discussion of psychagogic tasks and methods that follows should not obscure the personal setting in which such theory was realized. Graham Anderson describes the second sophistic as producing “a literature of performance which requires almost as much of a skene, a stage-set, and a sense of audience and occasion as the dramatic genres.” He laments, “It is a pity that our appreciation of sophistic literature should so seldom take this living context into account.”58 This sentiment is no less applicable to Christian materials.

Augustine himself warns his readers against drawing hasty conclusions from his theoretical writings without first consulting his sermons—“if anything in us has so pleased you that you want to hear from us some plan to be observed by you in preaching, you would learn better by watching us and listening to us when actually engaged in the work itself than by reading what we dictate.”59 This study takes up the bishop’s suggestion by observing him at work and discerning the structural features of his actual homilies. The bishop, nevertheless, could have added that his theoretical works supply a conceptual clarity and a wider perspective that are unavailable in the homilies themselves.
This study seeks a balance between two modes of inquiry: one devoted to Augustine's reception of classical traditions of the cure of souls and another to his transformation of these classical traditions in his Christian rhetoric. It is quite possible, on the one hand, to overemphasize the first and be content merely to document a genetic connection without doing the hard work of establishing what has changed in the process. In such a study, Augustine and his sermons would be a footnote to the philosophical tradition. On the other hand, overemphasizing the uniquely Christian aspects of Augustine's homilies risks obscuring those features derived from Roman culture that made them intelligible to their original audiences. In short, my inquiry strives to respect the integrity of the homily itself, in its original context, as its own discrete task, measured by its own criteria of effectiveness.

Rather than using contemporary models to understand late antique preaching, I appeal to theories derived from the culture itself that were well known at the time. This research is possible only because of the current revival of interest in post-classical philosophy and its practices. The following chapters especially clarify the manner in which Augustine shared the concern of the Hellenistic philosophical schools to pass on spiritual practices that foster a way of life in harmony with doctrinal principles drawn from a distant past. Situating Augustine's sermons in their native philosophical and liturgical context allows us to understand them through the criteria that informed their original composition. Viewing them in this manner not only illumines their formal and material features, but also makes more intelligible the logic informing the scriptural exegesis that pervades them. Moreover, the following chapters show the extent that powerful classical ideals informed both Augustine's theoretical speculation and his public activities at each stage of his development. His engagement with classical traditions of philosophical therapy influenced both his early rhetorical career and his philosophical leisure at Cassiciacum. Rather than receding into the background, in his Christian preaching such traditions became more manifest, even as he transformed them in the process. Even as Augustine openly accepted inherited philosophical categories, he often simultaneously pointed out their limitations and relativity, and nearly always made them his own to such a degree that they become nearly unrecognizable.

The available sources themselves present the researcher with at least the following formidable obstacles. First, in determining the extent to
which classical traditions of philosophical therapy inform Augustine’s works, it is necessary to discern clearly how they were transmitted to him. Fortunately, the literary sources directly available to him have been the subject of much study. The classical sources employed from the third chapter forward will be limited to sources that can be shown to be ones of which Augustine was directly aware, primarily Cicero, Seneca, and Ambrose supplemented by portions of Plotinus. All of these contain sufficient material for Augustine to have assimilated psychagogic traditions. In the very sources that Augustine himself read, therefore, it is possible to trace philologically the use of the characteristic vocabulary of the psychagogic traditions he inherited such as the stock metaphors used to describe the process of reforming the soul drawn from medicine and athletic training and the particular use of terms to refer to sources of belief such as rumor, opinion, truth, rhetoric, and philosophy as well as the vocabulary related both to the function of beliefs and to methods that aim to bring about a harmony between beliefs and deeds.

Sources to which Augustine did not have firsthand access, such as Plato’s *Phaedrus* and the *Orations* of Dio Chrysostom, will be used in the first chapters because they clarify and inform the materials that he did have. In treating such materials, the Platonic (and secondarily Cynic-Stoic) trajectory of the psychagogic tradition is privileged because the psychagogy Augustine learned was one principally shaped by this tradition. While there are overlaps with other philosophical traditions (such as use of frank speech and adaptation), there are some distinctive features as well (primarily its cognitive ascent and understanding of the telos of human life). Consequently, I omit much that could be said regarding classical psychagogy, especially in reference to the different ways of life arising from the diverse doctrines of the Hellenistic schools.

After determining that Augustine knew the relevant classical traditions, in turning to Augustine’s sermons, one discovers that they are notoriously difficult to date, and no study at this time would be credible whose conclusions relied on asserting precise dates for many of the homilies. This problem becomes acute when combined with perhaps the most perplexing question in Augustine scholarship—how to understand the development of Augustine’s thought. Near the end of his life, Augustine himself suggested that if his future readers read his works “in the order in which they were written,” they will discover how he “progressed while writing.”

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It has been customary to locate the critical juncture of Augustine’s development in the 390s, the decade between Augustine’s first written works at Cassiciacum and his writing of the Confessions. Thus, Peter Brown, in a poignant chapter entitled “The Lost Future,” described how “Augustine moved imperceptibly into a new world,” surrendered “the bright future he thought he had gained,” and abandoned the “long-established classical ideal of perfection.” Echoing Brown, Robert Markus has emphasized the same decade: “His re-reading of Saint Paul in the mid-390’s is one of the great divides of Augustine’s intellectual development. It marks the end of his belief in human self-determination and the beginnings of the theology of grace he would deploy against Pelagius. . . . Augustine came to abandon his previous confidence in man’s intellectual and moral capabilities.” Accepting this particular understanding of the development of Augustine’s thought means that anyone examining a specific topic within it must, in one way or another, write a “history of the way Augustine coped with the intellectual landslide brought about in his mind by the collapse of this vision.”

While for the most part following Augustine’s advice to read his books in order, this study does not find the kind of radical discontinuity in Augustine’s thought that has become traditionally accepted. In fact, Augustine’s use of psychagogic traditions reveals a profound continuity in his fundamental concerns. The most conspicuous changes in his Christian thought are largely adaptations to the different contexts in which he lived. The structural features of Augustine’s psychagogy were already in place by the time he preached his first homilies. Certainly, Augustine grew and developed as he wrote, and the writings he composed in the first years following his ordination to the priesthood are especially important in showing how he adapted his earlier insights to his ecclesial role, but this growth is best understood as a deepening or enriching of his pre-ordination practice. Accordingly, this study takes its place in a series of studies that have underscored the continuity in Augustine’s thought and rhetorical methods. Rather than tracing how the early “philosopher” was superseded by the strident “theologian,” the following pages reveal an early Augustine that was more Christian than is often assumed and a later Augustine that remained highly philosophical to the end.

Finally, one needs to keep in mind that although most of the homilies retain the shape of a spoken address, others have been more or less heav-
ily redacted to take on a more literary form (primarily *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 55–124, portions of the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, and his *De sermone domini in monte*). Such redaction did not always erase their original oral quality. It did, nevertheless, make these materials less helpful in capturing Augustine’s manner of oral performance, yet they remain valuable in determining Augustine’s homiletical concerns and the sort of things he regularly preached. Difficulties like these require the researcher to be circumspect.