Augustine, Ethos and the Integrative Nature of Christian Rhetoric

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Augustine of Hippo has long been recognized as an important figure in the history of rhetoric. Some scholars believe that without his influence, rhetoric, the central study in the Roman educational system, might not have survived into the Christian era. Certainly the fact that the most influential theologian of the time had been a professor of rhetoric meant that someone who really knew what was at stake came to guide the thought of his day. Disillusioned though he was with the rhetorical practice of his own time − the self serving rhetoric of display practised by the orators of the second sophistic period − Augustine yet knew what the value of rhetoric was. His famous defence of rhetoric in *On Christian Doctrine*[1] establishes the importance of the art of speech as central to the Christian cause. Neutral in itself, as Augustine believed, it could be used both for good and for evil: the refusal of Christian orators to use it would give the enemy − the servants of Evil − a dangerous advantage.

Yet rhetoric, as it was reworked by Augustine to be consistent with Christian culture, was in many ways radically different from the old rhetoric of the classical era, as well as from

[1]St Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine,* trans. D.W Robertson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1984) IV II.

the sophistic practice of Augustine's own day. The old mentors and models − Cicero and Quintilian, for example − were now challenged by new ideas coming from a very different perspective, a Hebraic one. In as much as communication was practised by the ancient Hebrews, that culture had a rhetorical practice, if not a rhetorical theory; but although there are analogues to classical concepts at every point, the perspective is altered by the inclusion of the divine in the whole process. Classical rhetoric (except, possibly, in the theory of Plato) was centred upon human needs: it was concerned with morality, certainly, but it was not concerned with theology. Hebrew, and later, Christian rhetoric, on the other hand, was centred upon the divine. George Kennedy goes into some detail about the differences, discussing them in terms of three of the key theories of rhetoric, as identified by Aristotle. Thus ethos, which has to do with the character and reliability of the speaker, is in Hebrew rhetoric fundamentally the ethos of God. "Thus saith the Lord," say the prophets: it is His reliability that certifies the truth of the message, not that of the prophet himself. Similarly, the speaker does not invent, or find the message: that is given by divine revelation. As for pathos, the address to the audience's emotions − that too is controlled by God. It is He, for example, who hardens the heart of Pharaoh so that he will not let the children of Israel go.

One of the ways in which Hebrew rhetoric differed from classical was in ideas about the relationship between speaker and audience. Here (following Kennedy) we must make a distinction between three different strands of theory and practice in the rhetoric of antiquity in the pre-Christian era: technical, sophistic and philosophical.[2] Technical rhetoric is concerned with the speech, or text, itself: it is prescriptive, setting forth procedures for the production of discourse. It is at its strongest in the Roman republican period. Early Cicero and the pseudo-Cicero wrote in this tradition. It can be a valuable resource, but it easily degenerates into an

[2]George A Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1980) 16, 17. Further citations appear in text.

obsession with the observation of rules. Sophistic rhetoric focuses on the speaker: it is typically practised during those times when rhetoric as a force of public power in politics and law is in abeyance. Its stress is upon the expertise of the orator, and his reputation for eloquence: the orator as celebrity. It was this kind of rhetoric that was practised in Augustine's time, and in which he was trained, and he has bitter things to say about it in the *Confessions*. For Augustine saw rhetoric − the use of the Word − as a holy undertaking, and wresting it away from the service of God to inflate human pride was for him a form of blasphemy. The third strand of rhetoric is the philosophical: it is seen as superior to the other two because it focuses upon rhetoric as a way of trying to bring about peace, prosperity and justice. It entails a vision that goes beyond personal ambition on the one hand and a preoccupation with rules on the other.

The classical rhetoricians I shall discuss may all be seen as belonging to the philosophical strand, though there are elements of the other two in Cicero. Kennedy distinguishes philosophical rhetoric from the technical and sophistic largely on its overriding concern for the audience. Here is what he says about it: "It tends to de-emphasise the speaker and to stress the validity of his message and the nature of its effect on an audience . . . its natural topic is deliberation about the best interests of the audience. . . .The emphasis in philosophical rhetoric on what hearers should believe and do parallels the rhetoric of religious movements like Judaism and Christianity"(Kennedy 17). Obviously, Hebrew and Christian rhetoric has more in common with philosophical rhetoric than with the other two strands. Yet even here there are vast differences; and Margaret Zulick has suggested that what distinguishes Hebrew rhetoric is not simply, as in the classical model, a concern for good of the audience, but a recognition of its power. Indeed, she believes that for Hebrew

rhetoric, persuasion is vested in the audience, not in the speaker.[3] Assuming that Zulick is correct, I want to explore some of the implications of this radical change as they relate to considerations of audience in Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* and *Confessions.* But first it is necessary to look in more detail at classical theories of audience.

For the most part, classical rhetoric was concerned with public address; and it had to do with power: power in politics, and power in the law courts. It is important to bear this in mind as we look at the theories of the great founders of the rhetorical tradition. But we begin with an exception: Plato, drawing upon Socrates, who is one of the most important of the early theorists, is more interested in rhetoric as the means of communicating the truth. He speaks in the *Phaedrus* of the pains "which the wise man will undergo not with the object of addressing and dealing with human beings but in order to be able to the best of his power to say and do what is acceptable in the sight of heaven."[4] Furthermore, he also defines rhetoric very broadly, not limiting it to public address, but also including private uses of discourse: he defines it as "a method of influencing men's minds by words, whether the words are spoken in court of law or before some other public body or in private conversation" (*Phaedrus* 261). But although Plato's attitude to rhetoric was different from that of nearly every other theorist, it was he who began to ask the questions and address the issues taken up later, in particular, of course, by Aristotle. Plato's devotion to absolute truth made him suspicious of ethos: what, he asks, does the character of the speaker matter as long as the truth is spoken? (*Phaedrus* 275). But he was one of the first to point out that anyone who engages in persuasion must understand the nature, characteristics and values of the person or people addressed. He thus recognizes the importance of rhetorical pathos, the appeal to the

[3]Margaret D. Zulick, "The Active Force of Hearing: The Ancient Hebrew Language of Persuasion," *Rhetorica* 10.4 (1992): 367-380, 368. Further citations appear in text.

[4]Plato, *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, trans. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1985) 274. Further citations appear in text.

emotions. “The function of speech is to influence the soul. It follows that the would-be speaker must know how many types of souls there are” (*Phaedrus* 271). Furthermore, it is important to match the different personalities to the different kinds of speech: "For such and such a reason, a certain type of person can be easily persuaded to adopt a certain course of action by a certain type of speech, whereas for an equally valid reason a different type cannot” (*Phaedrus* 272).

Aristotle takes the theory of pathos somewhat further: he distinguishes different kinds of audience in an elementary way − basically, young versus old − and pairs different kinds of emotions which might appeal to them.[5] He is concerned with the public speech rather than private discourse. Also, unlike Plato, he recognizes, though reluctantly, that ethos is important. The nature of the speaker is a very powerful means of persuasion. On the question of audience, however, Aristotle's most important contribution is his theory of the enthymeme the handling of which he sees as the really vital attribute of the successful speaker. In order to use enthymemes successfully, the speaker must understand the root values of the community that he addresses so that he can present his case as consistent with those values. The audience becomes therefore a willing participant in its own persuasion. The important thing to notice, however, is that for Aristotle the understanding of how enthymemes work gives power to the speaker, allowing him to manipulate the audience because of his superior understanding of the process by which he is persuading them. Not that this means that the speaker is abusing his audience, using them only to achieve his own ends: Aristotle, like other philosophers of rhetoric, insists that the good of the public must be served. Nevertheless, it is not, fundamentally, the audience which makes the decisions, but the speaker manipulating the audience, even if for their own good.

[5]Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and Poetics*, ed. Edward P.J. Corbett (New York: The Modern Library, 1984) II. 1389-1390.

The theory of ethos − the reliability, the trustworthiness of the speaker − as it developed in the classical period had three elements: intelligence, integrity and goodwill. The speaker must be in command of his subject, must know the background of his topic, must to some extent be a wise, not merely an eloquent, man. Cicero, for example, would deny that the moving speaker who is ignorant, who lacks wisdom, is a true rhetor at all: on the contrary he is a danger to the state.[6] Similarly, the orator must display integrity: he must be morally trustworthy, having a sense of public duty and responsibility, and not merely serve himself and those whom he represents. Quintilian would deny that the speaker who lacked integrity was a true orator.[7] In addition to wisdom (knowledge of relevant facts and good judgement) and integrity, the orator must also demonstrate goodwill. That is, he must be motivated by a desire not only to do good in general, but also to do good in particular to this specific audience. Rhetoric is distinguished from dialectic partly by this consideration − the immediate context, the immediate audience, the application of a general principle to a particular situation. If a speaker is satisfactory on all three counts, he can expect that the audience will reciprocate by evincing attentiveness, receptivity, and again goodwill. Notice that here too the power remains with − in fact is engaged by − the speaker: the ideal audience is expected to be compliant, obedient, and docile. Audiences are there to be persuaded. The general sense of the function and practice of the orator, at its classical best, is well expressed at the beginning of Cicero's greatest work on rhetoric, *De Oratore*. Crassus (Lucius Crassus who was Cicero's admired model) speaks in this work for Cicero himself. Here are the words that Cicero gives him: "[T]here is to my mind no more excellent thing than the power, by means of oratory, to get a hold on assemblies of men, win their good will, direct their inclinations wherever the speaker wishes, or divert them from whatever he wishes. In every

[6]Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. E.W. Sutton (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1976) I ix 38. Further citations appear in text.

[7]Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H.E. Butler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989) II. xv. 2.

free nation, and most of all in communities which have attained the enjoyment of peace and tranquillity, this one art has always flourished above the rest and ever reigned supreme" (*De Oratore* I. vii. 30).

As is apparent in this quotation, the underlying metaphor for the relationship between the audience and the speaker, founded as it is on power, is one of combat. The audience is the potential enemy; there is a contest: who is going to win? The very name that Cicero uses for this public rhetoric is *contentio* − a fight, a struggle. It is easy to see how this approach to rhetoric came about: the fundamental social function which rhetoric served from its very beginnings in 4th century BC Sicily was forensic: Corax taught his clients how to argue − how to win their cases − in court. And wherever rhetoric has most flourished ever since, its use in the lawcourts has been dominant. Now in legal practice this contentious rhetoric can be seen as legitimate: it is a form, almost a game; and although it can be very wounding − see Cicero's *Second Philippic*, for example − it does not involve a direct confrontation with the audience. The party to be overcome is the other side − the defence if you are the prosecution, and vice versa. The audience is the jury, or the judge, who is being appealed to, but not attacked. The triadic nature of the courtroom rhetoric − three parties, not two − to some extent mitigates the impact of sheer power. It is distributed more evenly; there are two speakers, not one, and the presiding judge (or jury) ultimately makes the decision. The case is quite different when the situation is dyadic, when there are only two parties. But because the basic rhetorical practice was the forensic, this hostility, this confrontation between speaker and audience, became engrained not only in practice but also in theory. The audience is typically seen as potentially a body to be won over by the exercise of good rhetorical technique.

We can see at once that Augustine's relationship with the audience is quite different, in a variety of ways. First, Augustine is committed not only to the long term good of the audience as a community − that of course − but also to the eternal welfare of

each member of that audience. The object of the Christian preacher's address is not the winning of agreement to his favourite solution to a political or social problem, but the conversion and sanctification of particular human beings. This tenderness for the individual members of his audience is most apparent in Chapter X of Book IV of *On Christian Doctrine.* In this passage, Augustine is following up the implications of his principle of clarity. In his discussion of diction in Chapter X, 24, he substitutes this principle of clarity for Quintilian's principle of correctness: "Good teachers have, or should have, such a desire to teach that if a word in good Latin is necessarily ambiguous or obscure, the vulgar manner of speech is used so that ambiguity or obscurity may be avoided and the expression is not that of the learned but of the unlearned" (*On Christian Doctrine* IV.X. 24). That he is concerned with the individuals in the audience is made explicit in the passage which immediately follows, where he extends this principle of audience comprehension to the practice of memorizing:

> This principle [of clarity] is valid not only in conversations whether with one person or with several, but it is to be insisted upon much more when sermons are delivered to the people so that we may be understood. But where all are silent that one may be heard and all are intent upon him, it is neither customary nor proper that anyone inquire about what he does not understand. For this reason the teacher should be especially careful to assist the silent learner. However, an attentive crowd eager to comprehend usually shows by its motion whether it understands, and until it signifies comprehension the matter being discussed should be considered and expressed in a variety of ways. But this technique may not be used by

> those who have prepared what they have to say and memorized it word for word. (*On Christian Doctrine* IV.X. 25).

One key difference in the relationship with the audience, then, is that for Augustine the individual member of the audience is of the greatest importance. This is connected with another extremely important change: for Cicero the glory of the orator was in his power over audiences, to "direct their inclinations " or "divert them from whatever he wishes" (*De Oratore* I. vii. 30). Augustine specifically denies the acceptability of this practice for the Christian orator: "This eloquence is to be used in teaching . . . [not] that [the listener] may do what he has hesitated to do, but that he may be aware of that which lay hidden" (*On Christian Doctrine* IV. XI. 26). The object is to enlighten the audience, not to persuade: to empower by knowledge the individuals who compose it, not to transfer their power to the orator. Augustine believes that normally the truth itself is all that is needed to bring about the desired outcome. Only in exceptional cases must the grand persuasive style be brought into play.

According to Zulick, this vesting of persuasion in the audience rather than in the orator is typical of Hebrew rhetoric. "When Hebrew narrative describes a situation in which persuasion takes place in an ethically positive way, it does so by ascribing the decisive action to the hearer rather than to the speaker. It does so through the verb 'sama' to hear. The verb 'sama' means 'hear,' 'listen,' 'pay attention to,' and by extension 'consent,' or 'obey'" (Zulick 376). It is not that the Hebrew culture recognized no other form of persuasion: rather, it was, according to Zulick, that other forms were seen as to some degree exploitive, and therefore ethically questionable. If power in classical rhetoric is vested in the speaker, in Hebrew rhetoric it seems to have been otherwise:

power belongs to the recipient, "making the hearer rather than the speaker the deciding figure in the rhetorical act" (Zulick 377). Thus the power of *judgement* is vested in the audience. It is not simply a question of rhetorical pathos, emotional appeal. The members of the audience are not manipulated; it is they who, under God, will ultimately decide whether or not what is being said is acceptable. "Words carry weight; they convince because they are the right words, the authoritative words, not because of the persuasive art of the orator" (Zulick 377). As in the passage from *On Christian Doctrine* quoted above, what is important is the revelation of the truth: Augustine's listener becomes aware of what lay hidden. It is, ultimately, the truth that convinces.

Among the possible influences on Augustine who were concerned with enlightenment were the Neoplatonists. However, I do not think it is very likely that the influence here is a Neoplatonic one. The fourth book was written at the very end of Augustine's life. According to Martin Camargo, "in the interim between his conversion and his writing the *De doctrina,* the *libri Platonicorum* have been superseded by the Scriptures, in particular by the writings of Saint Paul."[8] Certainly by the time he wrote the fourth book of *On Christian Doctrine*, towards the end of his life, he had gone beyond Neoplatonism and seen the important ways in which it was fundamentally inconsistent with belief in an incarnate God. Augustine's rhetoric is firmly grounded in his theology, and in particular in his principle of love. Here he makes it clear that our relationships with other human beings − our neighbours − are dependent upon, integrated with, our relationship with God:

[8]Martin Camargo, "'Non solum sibi sed aliis etiam': Neoplatonism and Rhetoric in Saint Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*," *Rhetorica* 16.4 (1998): 393-408, 397.

> Thus there is a profound question as to whether men should enjoy themselves, use themselves, or do both. For it is commanded to us that we should love one another, but it is to be asked whether man is to be loved for his own sake or for the sake of something else. If for his own sake, we enjoy him. But I think man is to be loved for the sake of something else. In that which is to be loved for its own sake the blessed life resides. (*On Christian Doctrine* I. XX II. 20)[9]

Intimately bound up with idea of love is the concept of the neighbour, whom Scripture enjoins the Christian to love as the self. Augustine extends this idea to include God Himself as the neighbour, recalling perhaps − though he does not cite it at this point − the passage of Scripture in which Christ identifies Himself with the needy: "In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25: 40). In the parable of the Good Samaritan, however, it is the helper of the needy who is said to be the neighbour: "Which now of these three . . . was neighbour unto him that fell among thieves?" (Luke 10:36). It is this idea of the neighbour as the giver of help, rather than the receiver, that Augustine picks up and develops as part of his discussion of love. His interpretation of the parable is that it is humanity who is the traveller waylaid by thieves, and it is God in the person of Christ who is the Good Samaritan, the rescuer:

> Our Lord God Himself wishes to be called our neighbour. For Our Lord Jesus Christ signified himself to be the helper of the man lying dead in the road afflicted and abandoned by thieves. . . . He shows mercy in

[9]St Augustine argues that only God is to be enjoyed, or loved, for His own sake in *On Christian Doctrine* I. V. 5 and I. XXII. 21.

> accordance with His own goodness, while we show mercy for the sake of His goodness rather than our own; that is, He has mercy on us that we may enjoy Him, and we have mercy on our neighbour so that we may enjoy Him [that is, God]. (*On Christian Doctrine* I. xxx. 33)

Since those the Christian preacher addresses are his neighbours, and since the relationships to the neighbour and to God are so intimately connected, the power relationship as it existed for the classical rhetorician cannot continue. Power is not vested ultimately in the speaker, but in the audience as indwelt by the Holy Spirit. That this is Augustine's position is made clear in the *Confessions*: "Although I cannot prove to [my readers] that my confessions are true, at least I shall be believed by those who ears are opened to me by charity. . . .Charity which makes them good tells them that I do not lie about myself when I confess what I am, and it is this charity in them which believes me."[10] The goodwill which according to the classical theory of ethos characterizes the speaker-audience relationship is thus transformed into that love which subsists between the Christian speaker and his audience. Since both the speaker and the audience of Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and both equally are informed by the love of God, the relationship between the speaker and the audience is necessarily evened up: the success of the communication depends upon God, operating both in the speaker and in the audience. It has sometimes been said that *On Christian Doctrine* is principally a work about conversion; but even if it is true that the audience here is not yet necessarily Christian, it seems clear that God is nonetheless present in that audience, directing its response.

[10]Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine Coffin (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1961) 10.3. Further citations appear in text.

Moreover, the speaker is not the privileged superior. It is God's message; the speaker therefore cannot take any credit for it even if he should wish to − and of course as a Christian he should not wish to. If the Ciceronian position which saw the orator as invested with power is thus overturned, so is the sophistic position which saw him as invested with glory. It was specifically this latter position which Augustine had to reject, since he had been trained in the sophistic tradition: "It was my ambition to be a good speaker for the unhallowed and inane purpose of gratifying human vanity," as he tells us in the *Confessions* (3.4). In both the Ciceronian and sophistic traditions, therefore, the relationship between audience and speaker is characterized by a necessary imbalance which empowers the speaker and leaves the audience as at best a passive participant. The Christian revision of rhetorical theory evens up this imbalance, and recognizes the active role of the listener.

To understand how Augustine came to this understanding, we cannot do better than look at the *Confessions* as the model for communication: perhaps we may speculate that Augustine learned respect for his audience from his experience of addressing God; for it is God who is his audience in the *Confessions*. Here indeed the classical privilege of the orator is entirely reversed: the speaker is inferior in every conceivable way to the audience − ignorant, sinful, inglorious, having nothing to tell that the audience does not already know far better, having as his purpose not the enlightenment of the audience, but his own. Here indeed the orator might learn to respect his audience and to recognize its power. Yet there is another consideration: embedded within the *Confessions* is a different discourse, in which God is the speaker and Augustine the audience. Running through the *Confessions*, Augustine's address to God, and intertwined with it, is a parallel account of

God's address to Augustine. The events of his life, the people he meets, the books he reads, his dreams and visions − all these he sees retrospectively as God's communication with him. For example, the doctor who gave him the wreath for winning a poetry competition is seen as the vehicle of God's message: "You did not fail to use even that old man to help me, nor did you cease to give my soul through him the medicine which it needed" (*Confessions* IV. 3). This doctor explains to Augustine the operations of chance, answering his question as to why astrological predictions are sometimes correct. In commenting upon this, Augustine says: "This answer which he gave me, or rather which I heard from his lips, must surely have come from you, my God. By means of it you imprinted on my mind doubts which I was to remember later, when I came to argue these matters out for myself" (*Confessions* IV. 3).

It appears possible, therefore, that Augustine's model for the rhetorical relationship between the source and the recipient was modelled on his own experience of his relationship with God. The secular relationship, even at its best, as in the theory and practice of Cicero, was adversarial, assuming a fundamental resistance, if not outright hostility, as a necessary part of the communications process. The secular classical model is fundamentally competitive. It is an agonistic relationship of winners and losers, and it is a persistent model, even within the Christian era. We are familiar with it still, for example in the saying: "the pen is mightier than the sword." Too often rhetoric was seen as a weapon of domination, a way of withdrawing power from others to bestow it upon oneself.

Illuminating here is the modern − that is, twentieth century − rhetorical theory of Kenneth Burke. The old model of rhetoric, according to Burke, was persuasion; the new

is identification.[11] Burke's theory of identification assumes that rhetoric arises from our partial, but only partial, identification with one another. A certain amount of commonality is a prerequisite if communication is to happen: we must share a time, a place, and a medium, such as language, or find techniques for overcoming the problems imposed by the lack of such sharing For example, writing (and today electronic technology) overcomes barriers of time and place, translation overcomes barriers of medium. But if there were complete commonality, there would be no need to communicate. It is because we are partially divided from one another that communication is necessary; it is because we are partially united that it is possible. He calls this situation the invitation to rhetoric; and the object, the purpose, of rhetoric is to bring about a greater degree of unity, or, as he calls it, identification. One of the features of this theory is that it typically perceives communication as taking place most effectively when the power is most evenly distributed between the source and the recipient. That Burke's theory connects with Augustine's is no accident: Burke was himself a student of Augustine and his *The Rhetoric of Religion* draws upon Augustine's work. The theological nature of his theory of Identification is apparent in his alternative term for it: Consubstantiality.[12] He does not, so far as I know, specifically attribute this theory to the influence of Augustine, but for anyone familiar with the work of both, that influence strongly suggests itself.

Thus the introduction of the transcendent element, the divinity, in Augustine's Christian theory, equalizes the rhetorical relationship of speaker and audience, and leans

[11]Marie Hochmuth Nichols, "Kenneth Burke's Dramatistic Theory of Rhetoric," *The Rhetoric of Western Thought*, 4th ed., ed. James L. Golden, Goodwin F. Bergquist and William E. Coleman (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt,1989) 318-331, 323.

[12]Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1950) 21.

towards a model of Identification. In this it seems that it is consistent with the integrative nature of other parts of the Augustinian theory of rhetoric, based as it is upon the principle of charity. It might even be said that the supreme act of identification − the equalizing of the sender and the recipient − is the incarnation: here indeed the divine humility brings itself down to a level at which communication becomes possible in an entirely new way. And it is this model which seems to be at the heart of Augustine's rhetorical theory.

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