**The *Confessions* of Augustine: The Self, Time, and Eternity**

**Arts and Sciences 1138.xx, First-Year Seminar**

**1 Semester-hour Credit**

**Day, Time, and Room TBA**

Instructor: David Brakke, Department of History & Center for the Study of Religion

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**Course Description**

What does it mean to be a human being within a limited time span in an eternal universe? How does my individual experience combine with the flow of all creation to create my individual self, that is, the unique person that I am? Why do I consistently fail to be the kind of person that I want to be or know that I should be? How can the path of my life be changed? Does an authentic life require something eternal to ground it?

These are hard questions, perhaps even unanswerable ones, but the humanities—especially the study of art, literature, history, philosophy, and religion—are in part designed to addressed them. Augustine of Hippo (354–430), one of the greatest intellectuals in Christian history, tackled these issues in his *Confessions*, which he wrote in his forties. This classic work begins as an astonishingly frank autobiography about his childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, but it ends with profound reflections on the problem of memory, time, and loss and on what Augustine found as the source of meaning for him—the creation of this world by a God outside time as found in the book of Genesis. We need not agree with Augustine’s answers, but his reflections on sin and forgiveness, sex and friendship, ambition and ideals, memory and loss, and time and eternity can help us start to find our own answers.

**Textbook**

You should purchase the following book:

Augustine, *Confessions: A New Translation* (translated by Sarah Ruden)

Modern Library 2018

ISBN 978-0812986488

There are several translations of the *Confessions* that are available in inexpensive paperback editions (like this one). It is important, however, that we all have the same edition and translation if we are to have good discussions

**Course Objectives**

The goals for this course are for each student to

• read, understand, and analyze a written work from a different time and place

• engage in shared and individual reflection on important questions of human existence

• gather relevant information about an ancient person, place, or group and convey that information in a short oral presentation to peers

**Course Policies and Expectations**

The instructor and students are expected to

• attend class faithfully

• come to class having read and thought about the assigned text carefully

• participate in discussions generously and constructively

• listen and respond to each other respectfully

Students are expected to

• submit through Carmen within 48 hours after each class meeting a journal entry of 250–350 words that reflects thoughtfully on the reading and/or the class discussion; such reflection may agree or disagree with an idea of Augustine or consider one’s own experience in light of Augustine’s

• make an oral presentation of 5–10 minutes to the class on a person or group relevant to understanding Augustine’s world and/or the *Confessions* (see below)

The instructor is expected to

• offer timely and constructive feedback to journal entries and oral presentations

• be available to individual students for consultation during office hours and by appointment

**Grading**

The course grade will be Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory and will be determined by the following weighting:

Attendance and participation: 40%

Journal entries: 40%

Oral presentation: 20%

**Oral Presentations**

Each student will give an oral presentation of 5–10 minutes on a person, place, or group relevant to understanding Augustine and his world sometime during Weeks 3–11. Students will select which presentation they will give in an order determined by lot in class in Week 2. Your job is to find out basic information about the person or group (I’ll help!) and then present that information to the class. You may want to use a handout or PowerPoint slides to help you.

**Academic Misconduct**

It is the responsibility of the Committee on Academic Misconduct to investigate or establish procedures for the investigation of all reported cases of student academic misconduct. The term “academic misconduct” includes all forms of student academic misconduct wherever committed; illustrated by, but not limited to, cases of plagiarism and dishonest practices in connection with examinations. Instructors shall report all instances of alleged academic misconduct to the committee (Faculty Rule 3335-5-487). For additional information, see the Code of Student Conduct[**http://studentlife.osu.edu/csc/**](http://studentlife.osu.edu/csc/).

**Students with Disabilities**

Students with disabilities (including mental health, chronic or temporary medical conditions) that have been certified by the Office of Student Life Disability Services will be appropriately accommodated and should inform the instructor as soon as possible of their needs. The Office of Student Life Disability Services is located in 098 Baker Hall, 113 W. 12th Avenue; telephone 614- 292-3307,[**slds@osu.edu**](mailto:slds@osu.edu);[**slds.osu.edu**](http://slds.osu.edu/).

**Biographical Statement**

I am a historian of Christianity who specializes in the first five hundred years of Christianity. I have published books and articles on Gnosticism, the development of orthodoxy and heresy, the formation of the New Testament, and monasticism (Augustine was a monk as well as a bishop). For undergraduates I teach an introduction to the history of Christianity (“from Jesus to Joel Osteen”), more specific courses in Christian history (for example, early Christianity, the Reformation, women and gender in Christianity), and courses on theory and method in history and religious studies. I have a special interest in making the study of ancient Christians like Augustine relevant to modern people of all faiths and of no faith, and so I have made three video courses for “The Great Courses” series of The Teaching Company.

**Weekly Schedule**

Week 1: Meeting Augustine and his World

Who was Augustine? Why should we care about him? What was going on when he wrote *Confessions* in the late 390s?

READ: Sarah Ruden, “Introduction” to *Confessions: A New Translation*

Week 2: Infancy and Childhood

Are people basically good or bad? Are infants and small children “innocent,” or did I act selfishly and aggressively from birth?

READ: *Confessions,* Book I

Week 3: Adolescence

Why do people do bad things for no good reason at all? What responsibility can I attribute to my parents for the stupid things I did as a teenager?

READ: *Confessions*, Book II

Presentations: Constantine I the Great, Theodosius I the Great

Week 4: College

How do I find my own philosophy of life? Must I inevitably turn away from and disappoint my parents? Where’s the line between love and lust?

READ: *Confessions*, Book III

Presentations: Carthage, Cicero

Week 5: Career and Friendships

How much should I compromise my beliefs to further my career? What does it mean to lose friends as I get older? Have I lost part of my own past in losing them?

READ: *Confessions*, Book IV

Presentations: Mani, Aristotle

Week 6: Evil and Personal Guilt

If a good God made this world, where does evil come from? If evil is out there in the world as a strong force, how is it my fault that I do bad things?

READ: *Confessions*, Book V

Presentations: Milan, Ambrose of Milan

Week 7: Ambition and Addiction

What choices do people make to fulfill their ambitions for success or wealth or approval? Why is it so difficult to stop making the same bad choices? Are ambition and integrity incompatible?

READ: *Confessions*, Book VI

Presentations: Plato, Plotinus

Week 8: Evil and Personal Guilt Again

What if the Platonists are correct and there’s no evil other than what I do? What if I can’t bring myself to do good?

READ: *Confessions*, Book VII

Presentations: Paul the Apostle, Antony of Egypt

Week 9: Conversion

Is an authentic self a singularly devoted self? Is it OK to be divided in what I love and value, or should I devote myself entirely to one highest good, like a God? If the latter, how is that possible, and what would that mean for loving my friends and family?

READ: *Confessions*, Book VIII

Presentations: Marius Victorinus, Pelagius

Week 10: The Loss of the Past

How do my parents connect me with my past? How do I accept their imperfections? When they die, do I lose only them, or do I lose a part of myself as well?

READ: *Confessions*, Book IX

Presentations: Empress Justina, Arians

Week 11: Memory and the Loss of Self

Without my parents and many of my old friends, I have only my memory. But what is memory? How does it work? If I forget things, have I lost my former self? What is my “self” anyway?

READ: *Confessions*, Book X

Presentations: Hippo Regius, Donatists

Week 12: Time and Eternity

What is time? Does the present even exist, or does it vanish as soon as I become aware of it? Do I need the idea of an eternity to ground my identity?

READ: *Confessions*, Book XI

Week 13: Outside Time?

Can there be an existence outside time? How can there be a “beginning” if we exist in time? How can people find such truths in a written text?

READ: *Confessions*, Book XII

Week 14: The Power of Words

How can that which is eternally true find expression in words that come and go in time? Do I need a story to understand my true self—a story not just about me, but about all people or even all creation? What if we twenty-first century people lack such a story? How can we find meaning without an eternal divinity?

READ: *Confessions*, Book XIII