

Essential Letters

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THE WORKS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE

A Translation for the 21st Century

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New City Press
Hyde Park, New York

Published in the United States by New City Press
202 Comforter Blvd., Hyde Park, New York 12538
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Library of Congress Control Number: 2021910807
Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo.

Essential Letters
The Works of Saint Augustine.

“Augustinian Heritage Institute”

ISBN 978-1-56548-508-2 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-56548-511-2 (e-book)

Printed in the United States of America

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LETTER 3

Augustine to Nebridius, Augustine's close friend (387)

In early 387 Augustine replies from Cassiciacum to a letter of Nebridius that has not survived. He tells his friend that he does not deserve to be called happy (paragraph 1). He explores where one may find the happy life (paragraphs 2 and 3) and appeals to a favorite argument to show that happiness is to be found in the immortal mind (paragraph 4). Finally, Augustine wonders whether his friendship with Nebridius should not be counted as a good of fortune, the sort of good a wise man should not desire (paragraph 5)—a topic that raises a point of Latin grammar.

*Augustine sends greetings to Nebridius.*¹⁶¹

I. I remain uncertain whether I should think it the effect, so to speak, of your persuasive words or whether it really is the case. For it came upon me suddenly, and I did not sufficiently consider to what extent I ought to believe it. You are waiting to find out what this is. What do you think? You almost convinced me, not, of course, that I am happy—for that is the lot of the wise man alone—but that I am at least like someone happy, as we say that a man is like a man in comparison with that true man whom Plato knew, or that those things that we see are like something round or something square though they are far distant from those that the mind of the few sees.¹⁶² For I read your letter after supper by lamplight; it was almost time for bed, but not also time to go to sleep. Once having gotten into bed, I long considered with myself and had these conversations, Augustine with Augustine: Is what Nebridius holds not true, namely, that we are happy? No, of course not. For even he does not dare to deny that we are still foolish. Well, then, do the foolish also attain the happy life? That is hard to accept. As if folly itself is a small unhappiness or as if there is any other unhappiness but folly. Why, then, did he think this? Did he, after reading those writings of mine, dare to believe that I was happy? He is not reveling in premature joy, especially since we well know the ponderousness with which his thoughts proceed. This, then, is the answer: He wrote what he thought would be most pleasing to us. Because whatever we put in those writings was also pleasing to him, he wrote filled with joy, and he was not concerned about what he should have committed to his joyous pen. What if he read the *Soliloquies*?¹⁶³ He would have rejoiced much more

161. Nebridius was a close friend of Augustine from his student days in Carthage.

162. Augustine alludes to the Platonic doctrine that things in this sensible world are merely copies or images that resemble their true archetypes, the Ideas, which are seen only by the minds of the few.

163. Augustine wrote the two books of the *Soliloquies* in 387; *The Immortality of the Soul* was intended as a draft for a third book.

exuberantly, and he would not have found anything better to call me but happy. He, therefore, quickly bestowed that title on me, and he did not hold back anything that he might say of me if he were even more joyous. See the effects of joy!

2. But where is this happy life? Where? Where is it? Oh, if only it consisted in rejecting the atomism of Epicurus!¹⁶⁴ Oh, if only it consisted in knowing that there is nothing below but the world! Oh, if only it consisted in knowing that points on the top and bottom of a sphere turn more slowly than those around the middle! And other similar things that we know. But now, how am I happy or what sort of a happy person am I who do not know why a world this great exists? For the intelligible patterns of the shapes that cause it to exist do not in any way prevent its being greater to the extent anyone might wish. Or would it not be objected to me—in fact, would we not be forced to admit that bodies are divisible to infinity so that from a given base, so to speak, we would get a determinate number of bodies of a determinate quantity? Hence, since no body is permitted to be the smallest, how shall we allow one to be the largest than which there cannot be one larger? Unless perhaps what I once said to Alypius¹⁶⁵ in complete secrecy has great force, namely, the intelligible number increases to infinity, but is not, nonetheless, decreased infinitely, for it is not possible to break it down past the monad.¹⁶⁶ A sensible number, on the other hand, can decrease infinitely, but cannot increase infinitely. For what else is a sensible number but the quantity of bodily things or of bodies? And perhaps for this reason philosophers rightly assigned riches to intelligible things and neediness to sensible ones. After all, what is more wretched than always to become less and less? What is better than to increase as much as you wish, to go where you wish, to return when you wish, as far as you wish, and to love very much that which cannot be decreased? For whoever understands those numbers loves nothing so much as the monad, nor is this surprising since it is what makes the other numbers loveable. But why, nonetheless, is the world this great? For it could be larger or smaller. I do not know; for it is this way. And why is it in this place rather than in that? We should not raise a question on this point, for whatever the answer to it might be, there would still be a question. That one idea bothered me much, namely, that bodies should be infinitely divisible. And I have perhaps got an answer to it from the contrary power of intelligent numbers.

3. But wait a minute; let us see what this idea is that comes to mind. Certainly the sensible world is said to be the image of an intelligible one. What we see, however, in the images reflected by mirrors is surprising. For, though the mirrors are huge, they do not reflect images larger than the bodies set before

164. Epicurus (ca. 342/1-271/270 BC) was an Athenian philosopher who defined philosophy as the attempt to gain happiness, understood as freedom from fear (*ἀταραξία*) and the absence of pain (*ἀπονία*).

165. Alypius was a friend of Augustine from boyhood; he became the bishop of Thagaste

166. The monad here seems to be the intelligible One of Plotinian thought; see *True Religion* 32, 60-34, 63, where Augustine uses similar language in speaking of the One.

them, even if the bodies are very small. But in small mirrors, such as in the pupil of the eyes, a very small image is formed in accord with the size of the mirror, even if a large face is set opposite it. Hence, the images of bodies may become smaller if the mirrors are smaller, but they cannot become larger if the mirrors are larger. There is surely something hidden here, but now I must go to sleep. I do not, after all, seem happy, even to Nebridius, when I am seeking something, but I do perhaps when I find something. But what is that something? Is it perhaps that little argument which I often cherish as my sole resource and in which I take too much delight?

4. Of what are we composed? Of soul and body. Which of these is better? The soul, of course. What is praiseworthy in the body? I see nothing else but beauty. What is beauty in the body? The harmony of the parts along with a certain pleasing color. Is this form better where it is true or where it is false? Who has any doubt that it is better where it is true? Where is it true? In the soul, of course. The soul, therefore, should be loved more than the body. But in what part of the soul is the truth found? In the mind and intelligence. What is opposed to this? The senses. Must, then, one resist the senses with all the strength of the mind? Obviously. What if sensible things cause too much delight? Let them stop causing delight. How does this come about? By the habit of doing without them and of desiring better things. What if the soul dies? The truth, therefore, dies, or the intelligence is not truth, or the intelligence is not in the soul, or something can die in which there is something immortal. But none of these is possible. Our *Soliloquies* already contain this, and it has been sufficiently proven. But because of our familiarity with evils we are frightened and wavering. Finally, even if the soul dies, something that I see cannot happen in any way, it has been sufficiently shown in this period of leisure that the happy life does not consist in the enjoyment of sensible things. For these and similar reasons I perhaps seem to Nebridius to be happy or at least somewhat happy. I wish that I seemed so to myself as well. What do I lose from this, or why should I refrain from having a good opinion of myself? I said these things to myself; then, I prayed as was my habit and went to sleep.

5. I wanted to write these things to you. For I am delighted that you thank me when I conceal from you nothing that crosses my mind, and I am happy that I please you in that way. In whose eyes, then, should I more willingly write nonsense than in the eyes of him whom I cannot fail to please? But if it lies in the power of fortune that one person loves another, see how happy I am who find so much joy in goods of fortune, and I desire, I admit, that such goods of mind richly increase. But the most truly wise men, whom alone one may call happy, wanted that the goods of fortune neither be feared nor desired—you worry about whether “desired” should be *cupi* or *cupiri*.¹⁶⁷ This is fortunate. For I

167. Augustine is apparently puzzled over whether the present passive infinitive of *cupio* should be formed as a verb of third or fourth conjugation.

want you to inform me about the conjugation of this verb. For when I conjugate similar verbs, I become uncertain. After all, *cupio* is like *fugio*, like *sapio*, like *jacio*, and like *cupio*, but I do not know whether the infinitive mood is *fugiri* or *fugi*, *sapiri* or *sapi*. I could have followed *jaci* and *capi*, if I were not afraid that someone would catch me and throw me where he might want,¹⁶⁸ as if in a game, if he proved that the supines *jactum* and *captum* are different from *fugitum*, *cupitum*, and *sapitum*. Likewise, I do not know whether these three should be pronounced with a long and accented penultimate syllable or with a short and unaccented one. I would like to provoke you to write a longer letter. I beg that I may read your writing for a little longer. For I cannot say how great a pleasure it is to read your letter.

168. The infinitives *capi* and *jaci* are from verbs that mean “to catch” and “to throw.”

LETTER 4
Augustine to Nebridius (387)

Again writing to Nebridius from Cassiciacum, most probably in early 387, Augustine explains the slow progress he has made in distinguishing sensible and intelligible natures (paragraph 1) and appeals to a short argument from the superiority of the mind or intelligence to the eyes of the body and their gaze, an argument that convinces him that eternal things are as present to us as we are to ourselves (paragraph 2).

Augustine sends greetings to Nebridius.

1. It is at least surprising how unexpectedly it happened that, when I asked which of your letters was left for me to answer, I found only one that still holds me indebted to you. In it you ask that, with our leisure, a leisure as great as you think you have or desire that we have, we indicate to you the progress we have made in distinguishing sensible nature and intelligible nature. But I do not think that you are unaware of the fact that, if anyone is more deeply immersed in false opinions to the extent that he is involved with them longer and with greater familiarity, the same thing happens much more readily to the mind with the truth. In that way, nonetheless, we gradually make progress with age. Though there is, of course, a great difference between a boy and a young man, no one who is asked daily from boyhood on will on a certain day say that he is now a young man.

2. I do not want you to interpret this in the sense that you think that we have come by the strength of a more solid intelligence, as it were, to a certain manhood of the mind. For we are boys, but, as it is often said, good boys and not bad ones. For the troubled eyes of my mind are filled with the concerns of wounds inflicted by the senses, but they are often revived and raised up by that little argument, which you know so well, that the mind and intelligence are better than the eyes and this ordinary looking. This would not be the case, unless those things that we understand had more being than these things which we see. I ask that you consider with me whether there is any strong opposition to this argument. Meanwhile, refreshed by this argument and having implored God's help, I begin to be raised up both to him and to those things that most truly are true, and I am at times filled with so great a foretaste of imperishable things that I am surprised that I at times need that argument in order to believe that those things exist that are in us with as much presence as each of us is present to himself. Please check for yourself—for I admit that you are more cautious about this matter than I am—lest, without knowing it, I am still owe you answers. For the sudden release from so many burdens, which I had at one point counted, does not make me confident about this, though I do not doubt that you have received letters from me for which I do not have replies.