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Augustine and Ignorance: Two Roman Cases in the *City of God*[*]

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ABSTRACT. This paper argues that Augustine is consciously careful when associating Romans of pre–Christian times with ignorance in *De civitate Dei*. After proposing three types of Augustinian ignorance based on *De libero arbitrio*, I examine the case of exemplary pagan Romans in *De civitate Dei*, Book V, where their inherited deep ignorance leads to a positive assessment. Then, I examine the negative perception of Varro, representing erudite pagan Romans in the same work, linking it to Augustine's views on the ascent of the soul to God. Lastly, a comparative analysis of Augustine's Varro in *De consensu evangelistarum*, Book I and his "updated" Varro in *De civitate Dei*, Books VII and XIX shows that he deliberately reverted Varro to a state of ignorance after he reviewed Varro's identification of Jupiter with the God of the Jews.

Keywords: *Augustine, ignorance, pagans, pre–Christian Romans*, exempla, *Varro*, De civitate Dei, De consensu evangelistarum

For Augustine, man is necessarily an ignorant being. Of course, it is easy to attribute ignorance to man in general, given the common understanding of the noun *ignorance* as the absence or lack of knowledge[1]: there is always something we are ignorant about or ignore, and our knowledge of things is far from complete.

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[1] For a brief but thorough introduction on the meanings of ignorance and the state of "ignorance studies", see Selena Arfini, *Ignorance*, in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of the Possible*, edited by Vlad Petre Glăveanu, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, 711–719.

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But to a Christian thinker and especially to Augustine, who dedicated much of his work to interpreting the Genesis creation narrative[2], it is clear that this trait carries an additional layer of necessity, as it is part of the punishment God inflicted upon Adam and Eve – and through them upon all of mankind –, because of their original transgression. As far as a complete knowledge is concerned (that is, one that does not miss any parts), it was through disobedience that the pair gained it and, consequently, it was swiftly taken away from them. The nature of future humans then became, in a way, synonymous with their penal condition[3], one of mortality and weakness, and, most importantly here, one of ignorance and difficulty. As such, it seems impossible to view ignorance as something positive as long as it is someone's state or trait, but can ignorance in the right context enable positive assessment of its bearers? To show that, under certain conditions, ignorance can indeed call forth not just blame, but even praise in Augustine's writing, I propose a closer look at two distinct cases from *De civitate Dei*, in which Augustine refers to ignorant pagan Romans of pre–Christian times. I argue that Augustine transforms ignorance into the basis for sincere praise when he talks about non–intellectual pagan Romans in Book V of *De civitate Dei* (Case 1), while in the case of intellectual pagan Romans, such as Varro especially in Book VII, ignorance becomes an insurmountable limitation, rendering any praise they receive in the work doubtful (Case 2). To underline how intentional Augustine's differentiation is, I also offer a comparative analysis of Varro's portrayal in *De consensu evangelistarum*, Book I and *De civitate Dei*, Books VII and XIX (as an extension to Case 2), which shows Augustine revising his thoughts on Varro's condition, after revisiting the latter's work in preparation for *De civitate Dei*.

[2] Augustine's interest in Genesis interpretations, especially in the literal sense, is rooted in his anti-Manichaean polemic started soon after his conversion to Christianity and it resurfaces in works as late as *De civitate Dei*; it is central in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, *Confessiones*, Books 11–13, *De Genesi ad litteram libri XII*, and *De civitate Dei*, Book 11.

[3] To follow Augustine's own words, 'human nature' can refer to the original, innocent state of man, as well as to his fallen, punished state, characterised by mortality, ignorance and difficulty; see *De lib. arb*. 3.19.54.185 (for the current paper, I am using Peter King's English translation: Augustine, *On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings*, Cambridge University Press, 2010). Notably, Augustine shares this view with Ambrose, as they both view the Fall as a corruption of behaviour, on a strictly moral dimension of man, rather than a corruption of his nature, therefore evil and sin imply straying from man's good nature, not inflicting a change upon it; see, for example, Andrew Lenox-Conyngham, *Sin in Ambrose*, in *Studia Patristica* 18.4, edited by Elizabeth A. Livingstone, Cistercian Pub. & Peeters Press, 1990, 173–174.

The only ignorance that matters

First it is important to review what "Augustinian ignorance" refers to. In the third book of *De libero arbitrio*, ignorance (*ignorantia*) and difficulty (*difficultas*) form a pair of penalties inflicted by God upon Adam and Eve, and consequently upon all their descendants. While difficulty has a more straightforward meaning and role, ignorance as it is encountered even in this early treatise of Augustine invites the reader to notice its multiple degrees and dimensions. The quote below can serve as our guiding light in understanding this contrast between the two penal conditions:

> *Here there arises a disparaging question that people who are ready to lay the blame on anything but themselves for sinning often mutter to one another: "Suppose Adam and Eve sinned. What did we unhappy people do, on our part, to be born with the blindness of ignorance and the torments of trouble? First, not knowing what we should do, we fall into error – and then, once the precepts of justice begin to be revealed to us, we will to do these things but we cannot, held back by some sort of necessity belonging to carnal lust!"*[4]

Here Augustine intentionally separates this kind of reply from his own character in the dialogue and that of his friend Evodius[5], giving it to the voice of unbelievers who became gradually familiar with Christian teachings, but did not submit their wills to that of God, so as to invite His help to overcome human weakness. This reply, in context, hints at one of the core beliefs of Manichaeans, the implied main opponents in *De libero arbitrio*[6], who find evil in matter (in something external to the soul), but not, as suggested here, in themselves (in the will of the

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[4] *De lib. arb.*, 3.19.53.180 (King, 109): *Hic occurrit illa quaestio quam inter se murmurantes homines rodere consuerunt qui quodlibet aliud in peccando quam se accusare parati sunt. Dicunt enim: 'Si Adam et Eva peccaverunt, quid nos miseri fecimus, ut cum ignorantiae caecitate et difficultatis cruciatibus nasceremur et primo erraremus nescientes quid nobis esset faciendum, deinde ubi nobis inciperent aperiri praecepta iustitiae, vellemus ea facere et retinente carnalis concupiscentiae nescio qua necessitate non valeremus?*' For the Latin text, I am using the CCSL edition: *De libero arbitrio*, edited by W.M. Green, in Sancti Aurelii Augustini *Contra Academicos, De beata vita, De ordine, De magistro, De libero arbitrio*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 29, Brepols, 1970, 211–321, here 306).

[5] Both Augustine and Evodius were already baptised Christians by the time Augustine began and finished *De libero arbitrio* (Book I: 387–388; Books II–III: 391–395); cf. James J. O'Donnell, "Evodius of Uzalis", in *Augustine Through the Ages. An Encyclopedia*, edited by Allan D. Fitzgerald, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009 (hereafter *ATTA)*, 344.

[6] See also *Retr.*, 1.9.2, 1.9.4 and 1.9.6, where Augustine explicitly mentions this.

human soul)[7]. It also indirectly addresses both penal conditions of mankind that Augustine began to establish gradually in the dialogue, starting roughly from *De libero arbitrio*, 3.18.51.172: ignorance as a culpable lack of knowledge and difficulty as culpable desire[8]. But this ignorance is not simply a lack of general knowledge or a lack of a complete knowledge; instead, it is the lack of a very particular *part* of what a complete knowledge would entail for us nowadays. Shifting our attention away from ignorance's purely epistemic dimension, the opponents' reply, carefully and concisely phrased by Augustine, emphasises its moral and eschatological dimension. This ignorance is deeply connected to what Augustine views as the rightful most important concern a man should have regarding his own soul, namely its salvation, and therefore it becomes the ignorance of crucial information necessary for reaching this particular goal. I view this Augustinian ignorance as having three distinct states: (1) unwilful ignorance of *what* to rightfully worship (namely, God Himself), (2) unwilful ignorance of *how* to rightfully worship it (namely, according to His will, as expressed in the Scripture), and, most importantly, (3) wilful ignorance of the *what* and the *how*[9]. The key to noticing this ignorance's threefold nature lies in how the opponents are described to feel about their own situation. The reply suggests that the opponents consider they have overcome the first two states of ignorance already, but are displeased that they can still err. However, if the opponents had not been in an additional, *third* state of ignorance, they would have not been been displeased; in fact, in that scenario, they would have been ideal Christians in Augustine's eyes, content with their dependency on grace[10], and it would have been unnecessary to

[7] On Manichaean doctrine and Augustine's relation to it, see, for example, J. Kevin Coyle, "Mani, Manicheism" and "Anti-Manichean Works", in *ATTA*, 520–525 and 39–41, respectively.

[8] Difficulty makes man subject to strong, troublesome desires, that are, since the Fall, always present in the human soul and only partially, if at all, controllable. Augustine refers to these harmful desires most commonly using the term *concupiscentia*, as well as *libido*. For an overview of this concept in Augustine's thought, see Peter Burnell, "Concupiscence", in *ATTA*, 224–227.

[9] I propose categorising Augustinian ignorance this way for the current paper, so as to be able to identify subtle differences and implications when comparing communities or individuals Augustine associates with ignorance throughout *De civitate Dei*. Since I focus on pre–Christian Romans, the first and second state often "fuse" into what scholarship usually calls "deep (inherited) ignorance", but this, to me, seems too broad of a concept when discussing detailed cases. However, separating Case 1 from Case 2 based on these types is crucial for understanding Augustine's radically different expectations for the Romans implied in them.

[10] Even in his fallen state, in which man is unable to perfectly express and follow his true nature, which is good, he is not deprived of means to 'repair' it. But on his own this is possible only partially: through inquiry of useful things and recognition of his weakness (*De lib. arb*., 3.19.53.182), he can prepare himself to be as receptive to divine help as possible, as any real "repair" of his inherited incomplete knowledge and necessary hardship depends on God's acts of grace (*Retr*., 1.9.6), that is, gifts He freely bestows upon man despite his postlapsarian unworthiness. See also chapters 6

mention them in the dialogue. It seems that overcoming the first two states of ignorance amounts to nothing, if after such achievement the third state of ignorance is not discarded too. What makes this third ignorance so critical to the salvation of the soul?

The first two states of ignorance are essentially a lack of particular information and thus privative in a familiar, epistemic sense. Both of them are also nonvoluntary: they are part of an ignorance the opponents, like all people, are *born into* and so they can be understood as states of deep ignorance,[11] an aspect I will return to shortly. However, the third state is unquestionably voluntary, an ignorance characterised by the lack of *assent* to the information of (1) and (2). In other words, in this third state, one possesses the information of the *what* and the *how* (separately or together), but does not "believe" them. Therefore, the resulting ignorance becomes a mark of the absence of faith in God and, furthermore, it becomes a mark of the "failure to believe the truth"[12], here where God and Truth are, for Augustine, identical. But what is interesting is that, according to this model, a person becomes a bearer of these marks only after reaching this third state of ignorance and willingly leaving it unresolved[13]. This state is, consequently, deserving of blame, but what about the first two? Leaving aside the tricky question whether deep ignorance of

("The Fall") of Carol Harrison's *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*, Oxford University Press, 2008, 167–197.

[11] In using the term "deep ignorance", I think of what Rik Peels called the "New View on Ignorance", where (propositional) ignorance is considered the absence of true belief, and different sufficient conditions are formulated for when an epistemic subject can be called ignorant of something (see Rik Peels, *Ignorance. A Philosophical Study*, Oxford University Press, 2023, 48–72). Among the sets of conditions Peels cites as examples are those of René van Woudenberg, where the case of deep ignorance entails that "(iiib) S never so much as entertained p and accordingly neither believes nor disbelieves p" (cf. René van Woudenberg, "Ignorance and Force: Two Excusing Conditions for False Beliefs", in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 46(4)/2009, 375, cited in Rik Peels, *Ignorance*, 50–51). While my discussion certainly concerns different subjects, I find the material that Augustine offers to be compatible with the interests of contemporary studies on ignorance.

[12] cf. Michael J. Zimmerman, *Living with Uncertainty: The Moral Significance of Ignorance*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, ix, cited in Rik Peels, *Ignorance*, 50.

[13] However, one must note that even after these three types of ignorance have been hypothetically resolved and a man is no longer ignorant in the Augustinian sense, he remains far from omniscient and can still err not only regarding *how* to worship, but also *what* to worship. See, for example, *De civ.*, 15.7, on the many ways one can err in a cultic act of sacrifice, despite it being consciously directed to the one true God, and 15.22, where Augustine points out how quickly man can fall into the error of worshipping not God, but a substitution of Him, that is still believed to be Him; these mentions are made whilst discussing the first biblical generations. See also, more recently, Katherine Chambers's examination about Augustine and sinning through ignorance in the case of Christians, in Katherine Chambers, *Augustine on the Nature of Virtue and Sin*, Cambridge University Press, 2024, 313–326.

the *what* and the *how*, of God and His precepts, is still possible after the coming of Christ and the spread of Christianity[14], in pre–Christian times pagan people (or any people outside of the Jewish tradition) can be more easily described as people in deep ignorance because they were not meant to have such knowledge by Providence, and exceptions can only be searched for among individuals with intellectual inclinations, or so Augustine – more or less hesitatingly – believes[15].

I now propose focusing on the aforementioned cases from *De civitate Dei*. Both of them feature pre–Christian pagan Romans, yet there is a stark contrast between them and how they appear in the work. On one hand, the first case relates to the first two states of ignorance (unwilful ignorance of the *what* and *how* to rightfully worship), while the second relates to the third state of ignorance (wilful ignorance of both). On the other hand, as I shall show, the first bears witness to Augustine's reluctance to blame the deeply ignorant from that period of time and his contextualised sincerity when praising Roman virtue, while the second offers a testimony to one of Augustine's many revisions regarding his own optimistic past judgements about the intellectuals' capacity to seek, find and acknowledge God by reason alone. But in both cases ignorance plays a central role in shaping Augustine's perception towards the two groups of people.

Case 1: exemplary pagan Romans in *De civitate Dei*, Book V

Thematically, Book V of *De civitate Dei* consists of a first part in which Augustine refutes the astrological and philosophical definitions of fate (*fatum*), and a much longer second part in which Augustine denies pre–Christian Roman virtue (*virtus*) the full credit for the success of the Roman empire. Instead, this success is viewed as a gift God bestowed upon the Romans all according to His divine plan. Largely following Sallust's historical writings, but also invoking Vergil and Cicero[16], Augustine aims to paint a credible portrait of the predecessors of his pagan Roman public, but the making of such a portrait is, in this context, a much more delicate matter than one would expect at first: it seems that an acknowledgement of their *virtus* is unavoidable in the speech, and yet *virtus* as a whole needs to be redefined

[14] In that regard, see Chapter 9 of Katherine Chambers's study, mentioned in the previous note.

[15] See our discussion in Case 2 below, together with note 41.

[16] On Augustine's classical sources for *De civitate Dei* in general, see Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, 2020, 11. Influences and Sources, 265–297, and Harald Hagendahl, *Augustine and The Latin Classics*, Volume I: Testimonia, Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, Göteborg, 1967.

in light of the now revealed and already dominant *vera religio*. Those Roman pagans were driven not by love for God or Truth, but by their love for glory, and if indeed "true virtue presupposes true religion"[17] in Augustine's view, then their *virtus* must be retroactively rendered false. However, within the same book, Augustine repeatedly concedes to the virtuous Romans of those times the value of their achievements, always taking into consideration that it was impossible for them to know and do better at that time:

> *However, men who do not obtain the gift of the Holy Spirit and bridle their baser passions by pious faith and by love of intelligible beauty, at any rate live better because of their desire for human praise and glory. While these men are not saints, to be sure, they are less vile.*[18]

> *Those Roman heroes were citizens of an earthly city, and the goal of all their loyal service to it was its security and a kingdom not in heaven but on earth. Since there was no eternal life for them, but merely the passing away of the dying, who were succeeded by others soon to die, what else were they to love apart from glory, whereby they chose to find even after death a sort of life on the lips of those who sang their praises?*[19]

It is here that the question of Augustine's sincerity becomes intriguing: are those positive acknowledgements mere rhetoric and strategic flattery to win his Roman audience over? are they a display of Augustine's own patriotism[20]? or are they sincere in the sense that Augustine knew his speech would not lose coherence if he grants them to the Romans of the past? I argue for the latter: there is an observable sincerity in this regard in Book V, rooted in internal, long-term coherence, because Book V's speech happens within the same early framework of Augustinian ignorance, and Augustine has a very specific category of Romans in mind.

Chapter 12 marks the beginning of the second thematic part of Book V: Augustine openly addresses the transition he is about to make, and then begins the second part with a concession:

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[17] To use Michael Moriarty's elegant way to sum up Augustine's view on virtue; see his book *Disguised Vices: Theories of Virtue in Early Modern French Thought*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 64.

[18] *De civ.*, 5.13, in William M. Green's translation, 209 (Augustine, *City of God*, Volume II: Books 4–7, translated by William M. Green, The Loeb Classical Library 412, Harvard University Press, 1963).

[19] *De civ.*, 5.14 (Green, 215).

[20] Here I allude to what Robert Markus observed was Augustine's own pride as a Roman citizen, which manifested as a certain sense of patriotism in his work; see, for example, Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 57–58.

> *Although the ancient Romans of the earliest times worshipped false gods—as did all other races except one, the Hebrew race,—and sacrificed victims not to God, but to demons, nevertheless, as their history declares with approval, "they were eager for praise, generous with money, and sought unbounded glory, and riches honourably gained." This glory they most ardently loved.*[21]

This concession is particularly noteworthy, because it forms the basis of Augustine's whole discussion on glory in Book V, which is the fact that past Romans were subject to a necessary ignorance shared by all peoples with the exception of the Jews. The mention of the latter is likewise noteworthy, because it implies that the knowledge of the *what* and the *how*, of the true God and His precepts, was present and being transmitted on earth, and thus a new problem is tacitly established, that of the accessibility of said knowledge. Like the first biblical generations, the Jews could maintain contact with the doctrine that contains indication of what to rightfully worship and how to worship it, and thus they had the possibility of reversing their inherited penal ignorance through faith and observance[22]. Outside this group of people, everyone lacked access to this knowledge of crucial eschatological importance, just as they lacked awareness of their lack of access in itself. Mass–access to that key information started being actively cultivated only after Christ's coming and redemption of the nations, and Augustine frequently emphasises the importance of the written word in this process, as well as in general. In *De civitate Dei*, his preference for written culture fuels his critique of the scarcity of writings within Roman polytheism[23], in contrast to the wide spread of the Scriptures, to him one of Christianity's core aspects. This preference is also tied to the idea of an open,

[21] *De civ*., 5.12 (Green, 191); here Augustine includes a quote from Sallust, *Cat*., 7.6.

[22] For Augustine, Jews, like all nations after the spread of Christianity, had the option to remain wilfully ignorant or discard that state by converting to the true religion. Additionally, one must take divine justice and its temporal dimension carefully into account when discussing the ignorance of the Jews in general, and this particular analysis is not within the scope of my paper. For further discussion, see, for example, Chambers, *Augustine on the Nature of Virtue and Sin*, 317–319, on how Augustine viewed the Jews' role in Christ's crucifixion. As Chambers argues (318), they sinned by *maliciously* condemning an innocent man, whom they rightfully considered judged guilty, as far as temporal affairs were concerned. Augustine's critique of them focuses on this aspect rather than on their ignorance that he was the Son of God (an ignorance imposed by Providence).

[23] The subject of committing especially moral laws to writing is already a frequently recurring one in the first books; see, for example, *De civ*., 1.6, 10, 14, 20, 2.3, 7, 22, 25, 3.10 and 4.1. On Roman polytheism and written tradition in the last three centuries BC, and then its contrast with the material accessibility of Scripture, see, for example, Jörg Rüpke, *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion*, translated by David M.B. Richardson, Princeton University Press, 2018, 158–182, and Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 2nd edition, Blackwell, 2004, 62–63, respectively.

universal doctrine as opposed to closed circles of knowledge transmission, rooted, in *De civitate Dei,* in Augustine's perception of pagan cults as operating under local, numerical and ritualistic restrictions[24].

But in this case the times were fundamentally different. Pre–Christian Romans did not and, by Providence, were not meant to have mass–access to that particular information[25]. Their deep ignorance made it impossible for them to even consider rearranging their lives according to man's true supreme good, so they came up with a supreme good of their own: glory. Augustine presents this scheme keeping close to the heart of Romanness as reflected in the works of its most important authors, here mainly Sallust, given how central his historical works were to the Roman education Augustine and his audience shared[26]; therefore, in Augustine's speech, Rome's predecessors were – to no one's surprise – inclined *naturaliter* to the pursuit of glory. Borrowing Sallust's active, soldierly understanding of *virtus* for this portion of the speech[27], Augustine presents the past Romans as heroic representatives of a people who *earned* God's reward of earthly glory despite their deep ignorance, and in this Augustine moves from addressing them as a collective to singling out individuals, in a recurring rhythm noticeable in chapters 12 to 18, doubled by a recurring sense of dissatisfaction projected upon the state these heroes belonged to. Rome had no means to properly reward the virtuous Cato[28], and likewise was famously ungrateful toward Camillus[29], but statements like these are paired with concessions enabled by their condition of deep ignorance: they had no other *patria* to love and serve, they knew no other homeland to live in; in short,

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[24] See *De civ*., 2.26.

[25] See especially the end of *De civ*., 5.14, together with the start of 5.15.

[26] Augustine notably underlines Roman education as a fundamental thing he and his audience share, for example, in *De civ.*, 2.8, 2.19, and 3.17.

[27] See D.C. Earl, *The Political Thought of Sallust*, Adolf H. Hakkert – Publisher, 1966, 10–12, and Viktor Pölsch, *Grundwerte römischer Staatsgesinnung in den Geschichtswerken des Sallust*, Walter de Gruyter, 1940, 20–22.

[28] In fact, Rome's set goal of glory and its tight association with military victory (see, for example, John Rich, "Fear, greed and glory: the causes of Roman war-making in the middle Republic", in *War and Society in the Roman World*, edited by John Rich and Graham Shipley, Routledge, 1993, 54–55) can be seen as what drove Cato Minor to his suicide, denying Caesar a proper defeat of his enemy and, thus, any glory derived from it. However, this mechanism also denied Cato proper praise of his own virtue within the city, so, in Augustine's eyes, historians like Sallust undertook that task in writing; see *De civ*., 1.23–24, together with *De civ*., 5.12.

[29] *De civ*., 5.18: "After Furius Camillus had cast from the necks of his countrymen the yoke of those bitter foes, the men of Veii, he was condemned and banished by his rivals. But though his country was thus ungrateful, when she was attacked by the Gauls, he freed her a second time, since he had no other country in which he could live with more honour" (King, 227–229).

they did not have the luxury of choice. Similarly, when Augustine states that the virtue of Scaevola, Curtius and the Decii was outdone by that of the Christian martyrs, he immediately underlines that this is the case now only because those Romans had no other option than to seek glory on earth, one of the many goals they could select from, all of them wrong in hindsight[30]. All past Romans like them displayed a type of virtue while seeking glory the honourable way[31]: it was inferior to the true virtue rooted in Christian faith, but a palpable, commendable virtue nonetheless, so the least Christians can do in present times, Augustine repeatedly says[32], is to "outdo" them in that regard, only this time pursuing the rightful love they had the temporal or "historical" privilege to know.

In all this, Augustine finds a favourable context for tacitly establishing a certain blamelessness of past Romans. While glory in itself was a civilizing goal to follow[33] among earthly things, its love, that is, the will to attain it, was easily corruptible, an idea any reader of Sallust should have been familiar with well before being confronted with Augustine's remarks on it. And while past Romans could be reasonably blamed for many historical instances when they erred loving glory through *ambitio*, they could not be reasonably blamed for turning away from a supreme good they were unaware of[34]. Blameless in relation to what matters the most for Christians because they were deeply ignorant by necessity, remarkable Romans of the past thus become worthy of emulation, a striking suggestion that is

[30] *De civ*., 5.14: "Since there was no eternal life for them, but merely the passing away of the dying, who were succeeded by others soon to die, what else were they to love apart from glory, whereby they chose to find even after death a sort of life on the lips of those who sang their praises?" (King, 215).

[31] The honourable way (*virtus*) and the dishonourable way (*ambitio*) to gain glory, as well as the good arts (*bones artes*) and bad arts (*malas artes*) are "mechanics" Augustine borrows from Sallust's historical model. Augustine explicitly mentions Sallust as his source at the beginning of this section of Book V (*De civ*., 5.12); in the case of *virtus*, he follows Sallust's understanding until later, in *De civ*., 5.18, where he reverts to his usual, "Ciceronian" understanding of *virtutes* as spiritual qualities (plural) instead of *virtus* as an active behaviour (singular).

[32] Particularly in *De civ*., 5.18.

[33] *De civ*., 5.12, 23 and 17.

[34] In earlier books too, the Roman ancestors' deeply ignorant condition enables shifting blame away from them in subtle ways that did not go unnoticed. For example, as Gerard O'Daly mentions in his reading of Book III, even there, Augustine intentionally avoids presenting the sufferings the Romans endured throughout their history as punishments (cf. Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide*, 108). It can also be linked to rhetorical considerations, based on his opponents' psychological profile, if to a "practical, straightforward Roman mind" it would appear ridiculous to abruptly render all of pre–Christian humanity as punished for someone else's (Adam's) fault: here we recall the phrasing (in quotes) used by Andrew Lenox-Conyngham when he described Ambrose's own "Roman mind" approaching the subject of Adam's fall; see Andrew Lenox-Conyngham, *Sin in Ambrose*, 174).

interwoven with an intense critique of earthly glory as a *current* goal, especially in chapter 18. This chapter has the highest "concentration" of individualised virtuous past Romans in Book V. From early Roman history to the 3rd century BC, the 12 exemplary figures (*exempla*) invoked range from legendary to historical: they are, in this order, Junius Brutus, Titus Manlius Imperiosus Torquatus, Marcus Furius Camillus, Gaius Mucius Cordus "Scaevola", Marcus Curtius, Publius Decius Mus (both the father and the son), Marcus Horatius Pulvillus, Marcus Atilius Regulus, Publius Valerius Publicola, Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, and Gaius Fabricius Luscinus[35]. These Roman *exempla* are invoked in order to strengthen the contrast between the earthly city and the heavenly city from one particular perspective. The conditions to gain glory are no longer the same as they were in the earthly city, in past Roman ways, and no longer would it "require" to do actions ranging from retiring to the modest life of a farmer to killing one's own sons (traitors of the state or not), because with the coming of Christianity, glory – *true* glory – universally ceased to be something that humans could amass: all glory is God's and ought to be redirected to Him[36]. Therefore, regarding the *exempla,* what remains worthy of emulation by Christians despite the change of times is the ardent way they loved glory[37], the one thing they could not, at that time, know anything "better than".

Amidst many warnings to current Christians to be wary of love for glory, both the praise of past Romans as a society and the suggestion of emulation of their exemplary citizens are made possible only thanks to the deep ignorance Augustine attributes to them right from the start of this section of Book V. This way, Augustine establishes bridges where there could have been ruptures: between an exceptionally rich, albeit pagan, past culture and current, Christian times, as well as between his pagan Roman audience and him as a representative of the Christian community. Moreover, he avoids painting past Romans as a people collectively punished for a distant action that was wholly outside their personal control, namely Adam and Eve's transgression. Much later in *De civitate Dei*, moving away from discussing Roman history, Augustine argues much more directly and freely that one's virtue is true only when his will follows the only rightful love, that of God[38], but in this phase of his enormous work, the continuous taking into consideration of past Romans'

[35] As an extension to Fabricius's example, one can add the unnamed reference to Publius Cornelius Rufinus, whom Fabricius as censor expelled from the Senate, despite Rufinus having a remarkable military career that his remarkable avarice nonetheless outshined.

[36] *De civ*., 5.14. This idea is repeated much more frequently in the second half of *De civitate Dei* (see De civ., 14.28, 15.21, 17.4–5, 18.32 etc.).

[37] *De civ*., 5.12.

[38] *De civ*., 5.19 and 19.25, with Michael Moriarty, *Disguised vices*, 64–67.

deep ignorance lessens the impact of rendering their *virtus* as false when related to the now revealed Christian doctrine, seen as the container of truth, and so this ignorance, paradoxically, works much to the advantage of their general image, painting them in a distinctly positive light in the context of Augustine's apologetic work. This is only possible because their ignorance is of the first and second type: they cannot be blamed for their unwilful ignorance of *what* to rightfully worship as humans and their unwilful ignorance of *how* to worship it, but they can be openly praised for their virtuous behaviour and achievements in temporal affairs – by a Christian bishop no less – precisely because of these two states they carried, unaware.

Case 2: erudite pagan Romans – Varro in *De civitate Dei*, Books VII and XIX and *De consensu evangelistarum*, Book I

It is an early belief of Augustine that the availability of key information for the soul's salvation is different when individuals of remarkable erudition and intellect are concerned, and this would apply to non–believers from all periods of time, as I shall discuss below. Consequently, access to that key information was not, in fact, *completely* out of question for pagans in pre–Christian times. Augustine's attitude is indeed strikingly different in the second case I shall now discuss, that of the antiquarian and scholar Marcus Terentius Varro. I shall first analyse the way he is portrayed in *De civitate Dei*, focusing especially on his presence in Books VII and XIX, while putting Augustine's remarks in the work's general context, as well as that of his views on the soul's possibility to ascend to God through reason. Then, as an extension to Case 2, I shall focus on how Varro is depicted in another, earlier work, namely *De consensu evangelistarum*, Book I, and show, through a comparative analysis, how Augustine parted from his earlier vision of Varro when revising his ideas years later for *De civitate Dei*.

Despite being a pre–Christian pagan Roman himself, thus born with the same deep ignorance as his ancestors, Varro's antiquarian occupation and his status as the *sine dubio* most erudite Roman[39] radically affect the "resistance" of the condition he inherited – that is, its resistance to change. Within Augustine's discourse, there is indeed a noticeable difference between Varro's case and that of the heroic past Romans: none of the virtuous Romans collectively implied throughout Book V and none of the Roman *exempla* ennumerated, for example, in *De civitate Dei*, 5.18

[39] *De civ*., 6.2, as well as many other places where Augustine offers this kind of title to Varro: see Daniel Hadas, "St. Augustine and the Disappearance of Varro", in *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 60(2)/2017, 80.

were philosophers, antiquarians or, more generally, known specifically for being intellectuals, but Varro himself belonged to this category and was a representative of it without a doubt. The former were exemplary Romans known for mainly their political and military careers; Varro, on the other hand, from the moment he is properly introduced in Book VI[40], stands as a self–evident case of an extraordinary scholar, a researcher, and a collector of the widest range of information and doctrines, investigating all kinds of subjects and cults. But that same laudatory introduction quickly embraces a critical tone, pointing out that, in his *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*[41], for the sake of political stability (an otherwise historically understandable aim in the Late Republic's context), Varro proposed a tripartite theology[42] in which he was willing to selectively undermine what Augustine perceives as parts of a single unchanging truth. In Book VI, these "parts" of the truth refer to the real relation between mythical theology and civil theology, the latter deriving much of its ritualistic contents from the former, and both of them revealing the false and morally reprehensible nature of the Roman gods and pagan religious practices upon closer inspection. Varro's biased behaviour in Book VI, perceived so negatively by Augustine, forms the basis for a much harsher critique in Book VII, when Augustine examines Varro's treatment of the remaining part of his tripartite theology, that is, his account of natural theology. And for our present discussion on ignorance, a very particular, yet very important part of this account is especially relevant.

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[40] *De civ*., 6.2. Of course, Varro is already mentioned in earlier books (see *De civ*., 3.4, 4.1, 9, 22, 31 and 33), but only in Book VI does Augustine offer him a dedicated portion of his discourse, with the appropriate weight to underline his importance as a most erudite person, seeing that during an excursion in *De civ*., 4.1, which alludes to the contents of Book VI, his first short introduction begins with a typical mention of his erudition, but ends with emphasis on his inescapable Romanness, alluding both to the real object of his love, Rome and its glory, and to the fact that he is "enslaved" to it as a writer, with limited freedom to express views contrary to its *traditio*. For the purpose of separating his audience from their cultural pillars, Augustine strategically makes Varro repeatedly appear in *De civitate Dei* as a writer constrained by the tradition of his city, much like other Roman literary authorities he invokes; see, for example, *De civ*., 4.1, 31, 6.5–6, 7.17 and 28.

[41] This major work of Varro – no longer extant, but intensely quoted – survives in fragments, for which I am using Burkhart Cardauns's Latin edition (M. Terentius Varro, *Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum*, Teil I: Die Fragmente, edited by Burkhart Cardauns, Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur/Franz Steiner Verlag, 1976).

[42] Varro's tripartite theology included mythical theology, as transmitted in the works of poets, natural theology, as transmitted by philosophers, and civil theology, as transmitted by rulers of the state; see *De civ*., 6.5–6, as well as 4.27, where Augustine describes the tripartite theology developed by Scaevola Pontifex, potentially the base for Varro's own model. On this topic, see Emanuele Stolfi's commentary of *De civ*., 4.27, that is, F. 102 in Quintus Mucius Scaevola, *Opera*, edited by Jean-Louis Ferrary, Also Schiavone and Emanuele Stolfi, Scriptoris iuris Romani 1, «L'Erma» di Bretschneider, 2018, 412–415, and Jorg Rüpke, *Religion in Republican Rome. Rationalization and Ritual Change*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, 172–175.

Varro, "the most learned man" among the pagan Romans, was certainly deeply acquainted with philosophical ideas thanks to his antiquarian occupation and his interest to give Rome a functional state theology. In its tripartite form, it included one part, natural theology, that heavily borrowed from natural philosophy. As such, it was meant to supplement the civil theology by making its "physical interpretations" of the Roman gods available to those who desired a more rational, rather than accidental, background for Roman polytheism[43]. Of course, Varro is not considered a philosopher in *De civitate Dei*; in fact, he is called a historian[44] by virtue of him chiefly making (preferably uncritical rather than reflective) records of the past. Nonetheless, given that Varro selectively incorporated contents of the philosophers' natural theology into his tripartite model, he is portrayed as a learned man who voluntarily and consciously came into contact with philosophical doctrines, even of the kind that was, according to Augustine, compatible with Christian thought: the rather nebulous "Platonic philosophy", in Augustine's own, particular understanding.

Throughout his life, Augustine believed in the possibility of reaching awareness and understanding, albeit limited, of God[45] – that is, the possibility of overcoming ignorance of *what* to worship – by use of reason alone. This is a concession that Augustine makes to philosophers, especially to (his version of) the "Platonists"[46]: he generally sees them as capable of grasping God's immateriality, immutability and immanence through inquiry of his creations[47], as well as capable of recognising Him as the origin of the soul and its faculties and source of happiness by participation. Thus, to Augustine, it is more proper for a Christian to hold a debate with *these* philosophers about *what* to worship, because their concept of the supreme being is, at the very least, compatible with Christian monotheism[48], while the fact that their philosophy has a strong ethical component would only bring the two groups closer. Augustine himself succeeded in grasping God's immateriality initially through what he calls "Platonic" philosophy[49], and so, by projecting his own, personal example as a rational, contemplative man onto other such people, he (at first) considered

[43] See Claudia Moatti, *The Birth of Critical Thinking in Republican Rome*, translated by Janet Lloyd, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 18–19.

[44] *De civ.*, 18.17.

[45] On Augustine and ascents of the soul to God, see Alfonso Herreros Besa, "Augustine on pagan knowledge of God and the Trinity", in *Studium. Filosofía y Teología*, 38/2016, 245–260.

[46] On this topic, see Luigi Gioia, *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's De Trinitate*, Oxford University Press, 2008, 50–58.

[47] See *De Trin.*, 4.20–23. See also Luigi Gioia's analysis of Books IV and XIII of *De Trinitate*, in *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's De Trinitate*, 41–47.

[48] See *De civ.*, 6.1 and 8.1.

[49] *Conf.*, 7.9.13–7.10.16.

this road to God was open for this type of people regardless of when or where they lived, or what knowledge and sources they had access to. To him, what lies at the end of the *truly* philosophical road is the one, unique Truth that the Scriptures also point to[50]. Since this applies to Varro the scholar as well, what is criticised in his case is then that he *voluntarily* preferred other things (Rome and its tradition) to said unique Truth, despite recognising it at the end of his intellectual journeys into the philosophers' soothing (because coherent) domain[51]. What is worse, Varro *subordinated* it to the contents of civil theology. The process of selection already betrays a careful examination and, for Augustine, the fact that a deep understanding of the things voluntarily chosen or avoided was reached[52], and so Varro becomes accountable based on the selections he made and for the ignorance he chose to maintain.

One selection of this kind, that Augustine gave particular attention to, is Varro's transmission of the identification of Jupiter with the God of the Jews[53]. This example changed its form and value as Augustine matured; when analysed across works, it can shed light on Augustine's rethinking of the limit between ignorance and its complete elimination in learned pagans, and so I propose a brief parallel analysis of this point in two Augustinian works.

The identification of Jupiter with the God of the Old Testament is an extensive key argument in an earlier work, namely in *De consensu evangelistarum*. This makes its complete absence in Book VII of *De civitate Dei* all the more striking, since Book VII can be considered the "proper" place to include such argument in this later work, given that Book VII is the place where Augustine discusses each of the twenty selected gods (*dii selecti*) proposed in Varro's *Antiquitates*[54] and what natural principles or things they are thought to represent. Instead, this supposed identification reappears in a modified form much later, in Book XIX, and, as we shall see, its modification indicates the fact that Augustine's perception of Varro, the limits of ignorance, and the ascent of the soul have received an "update".

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[50] In the same manner, a *true* philosopher – a *true* lover of wisdom – is, to Augustine, a lover of God (*De civ.*, 8.1).

[51] *De civ.*, 7.23.

[52] It is so in the case of Scaevola Pontifex too (*De civ.*, 4.27). On the topic of selections such as Varro's leading to canonisation in religion and culture, see Alessandra Rolle, "Coming Home: Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* and the Canonisation of Roman Religion", in *Canonisation as Innovation. Anchoring Cultural Foundation in the First Millenium BCE*, edited by Damien Agut-Labordère and Miguel John Versluys, Brill, 2022, 263–284.

[53] Varro, *RD*, fr. 14, 15, 16* (ed. Cardauns).

[54] *De civ.*, 7.2; these gods are Janus, Jupiter, Saturn, Genius, Mercury, Apollo, Mars, Vulcan, Neptune, Sol, Orcus, Liber, Tellus, Ceres, Juno, Luna, Diana, Minerva, Venus, and Vesta.

Around 10 years prior to when Augustine began composing *De civitate Dei*, he argued against pagan Roman critics (and Manichaeans, once again) in the first book of *De consensu evangelistarum* (dated ca. 400–405[55]). There he argued against those who recognised Christ as the wisest man, but not as a god, who saw Him as a *magus* and author of books on the magical arts, or who were suspicious that the New Testament included things outside His teachings, like precepts against idolatry presumably added by his disciples. The last point led Augustine into a large digression that shapes the entirety of the first book, which is thematically distinct from Books II–IV; the subject demanded the defense of the identity between Christ and the God of the Old Testament, which in turn led him to invoking several classical references to support the idea that the God of the Jews was indeed a god already recognised by his adversaries' authorities. Among them – it seemed to Augustine at that point in time –, Varro too understood Him as the equivalent of Jupiter, just by another name. Augustine turns to Varro's testimony to illustrate this one view among the numerous views Roman pagans could hold regarding God (other identifications such as that with Saturn or the world soul), but he does so in a manner that indicates recalling Varronian ideas from memory rather than from texts consulted specifically for formulating his arguments. This lies in a stark contrast to how he returned to such works in preparation for *De civitate Dei*[56]. The same thing happens regarding a later point in *De consensu evangelistarum*, which also makes an updated appearance in *De civitate Dei*: regarding Varro's supposed Euhemerism, it has been shown that Augustine misunderstood Varro in *De consensu evangelistarum*[57] and later corrected this himself on this point in *De civitate Dei*. But Varro's identification of Jupiter with the God of Israel is likewise a point that Augustine carefully reframes (and even avoids) in *De civitate Dei*.

In his earlier work, Augustine optimistically reports that the most erudite of "their" authorities recognised the God of the Jews as the supreme god, by understanding the implications of the idea of a god of which nothing higher (*nihil superius*[58]) can be conceived, and then grasping this aspect of God through his similar understanding of Jupiter as the king of gods and omnipresent vivifying spirit.

[55] cf. Mattias Gassman, "The Composition of *De consensu euangelistarum* 1 and the Development of Augustine's Arguments on Paganism", in *Augustinian Studies*, 54(2)/2023, 157–175.

[56] In our current context, see especially Richard M.A. Marshall's article "Bi-Marcus? The two Varrones of Augustine and Nonius Marcellus", in *Res Publica Litterarum: Studies in the Classical Tradition*, 39, 2016.

[57] *De cons. ev*., 1.32–33, with Richard M.A. Marshall, *Bi-Marcus?*, 193–195.

[58] *De cons. ev*., 1.30; see also 1.31 and 42.

The steps this "first Varro"[59] had taken to reach this knowledge of God are somewhat similar to Augustine's steps towards this knowledge in the *Confessions*, thus overcoming his ignorance of the *what*. Next, Varro's awareness of Jewish worship could have made him overcome his ignorance of the *how*, but that is not a primary concern in this case. However, Augustine's comment on Varro's fearfulness in front of His greatness can be read as a shy suggestion of a more personal acknowledgement of God as supreme deity, an assent even if it is only based on rationally following definitions (of a "highest being") through to their logical end. Moving over to *De civitate Dei*, Augustine's presentation of Varro in this regard is much less optimistic:

> *But let us listen, rather, to the physical interpretations with which they try to colour their foul and miserable error, making it looks like a more profound doctrine. First of all, Varro commends these interpretations by saying that the ancients designed the images, attributes and ornaments of the gods so that men who had approached the mysteries of the doctrine, when they considered these visible things, might gain mental insight into the world and its parts, that is, the true gods. (…) But, O most accute of men, (…). Your soul was learned and naturally gifted, and for this reason we deeply grieve for you, but that same soul was quite unable to reach its God through these mysteries of pagan doctrine—(…).*[60]

The fragments quoted above set the tone of Augustine's perception of Varro in Book VII, and are in fact an "organic" consequence of previous critiques form Books IV and VI. This "second" Varro is presented as someone who did not undo his ignorant condition, because he turned away from the truth once he reached it (or, rather, Him) at the end of his arduous research. As such, there is no mention in Book VII of anything similar to the idea that Varro once entertained and assented to the thought that the Roman Jupiter refers to the same deity as the God of the Old Testament, just by a different name. Varro's identification of Jupiter with the God of the Jews curiously reappears only very late in *De civitate Dei* in an explicit form, in

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[59] Just like Richard M.A. Marshall proposed "two Varrones" in his *Bi-Marcus?* article, where he reffers to "one Varro" as portrayed in Nonnius and "another Varro" as portrayed in Augustine, I find working with the idea of "two Varrones" efficient even when focusing on Varro's portrayal within the same author's works, given that there are significant differences that justify treating them as "separate people" on a methodological level. The one anchored in Varro's identification of Jupiter with the God of the Jews is one such difference, and one that Marshall mentions, but does not analyse further in his article (*Bi-Marcus?*, 192, 196), focusing on Varro's mistaken Euhemerism in Augustine instead. He convincingly shows that Augustine corrected this misattributed Euhemerism in *De civitate Dei* after revisiting the antiquarian's work, whereas pre–412 he relied on his memory. I now propose that Augustine also corrected the significance of Varro's aforementioned identification and the limits of his understanding of a (or, rather, *the*) supreme deity.

[60] *De civ*., 7.5 (Green, 391–393).

Book XIX. There, Augustine's reference to Varro is very similar to that from *De consensu evangelistarum*, 1.30, but with the notable remark that Varro did not know what he was talking about. This important difference becomes immediately clear when comparing the two relevant quotes (see below):

> *[De cons. ev.] But their own Varro, than whom they can point to no man of greater learning among them, thought that the God of the Jews was Jupiter, and he judged that it mattered not what name was employed, provided the same subject was understood under it; in which, I believe, we see how he was subdued by His supremacy. For, inasmuch as the Romans are not accustomed to worship any more exalted object than Jupiter, of which fact their Capitol is the open and sufficient attestation, and deem him to be the king of all gods; when he observed that the Jews worshipped the supreme God, he could not think of any object under that title other than Jupiter himself.*[61]

> *[De civ.] But the reply may be made: "Who is this God, or how is he proved worthy, and no other god besides, of the worship an sacrifices of the Romans?" He must be very blind who still asks who this God is. He is the very God whose prophets foretold the things that we behold. (…) He is the very God whom Varro, most learned of Romans, thought to be Jupiter, albeit knowing not what he said; a fact which I deemed worth mentioning merely because a man of such learning was unable to deny the existence of this God or to think him of no worth, inasmuch as he believed him to be the same being as his supreme god. (…)"*[62]

And so, many books later, Augustine comes to address this point he much relied on in his previous work and now openly, decisively abandons his earlier perception that Varro successfully reached awareness and acknowledgement of God. But any key knowledge that Varro could have gained by reason and inquiry alone has already been declared null in Book VII, only there it was already disconnected from the Jupiter–God identification; Varro not only had no knowledge of God as supreme deity, but also no knowledge of Him as the one source of happiness and the creator of all things, including all souls. These and other more particular aspects that Varro did not grasp are presented extensively in the powerful rhetorical sequence in Book VII we already partially encountered, quoted above, where Varro is addressed directly. Below is the full fragment that we can now see in a larger context:

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[61] *De cons. ev.*, 1.30, in S.D.F. Salmond's English translation, 89 (Saint Augustin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, translated by S.D.F. Salmond and edited by M.B. Riddle, in Saint Augustin, *Sermon on the Mount, Harmony of the Gospels, Homilies on the Gospels*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 6, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956, 77–236).

[62] *De civ.*, 19.22, in William Chase Greene's English translation, 213–215 (Augustine, *City of God*, Volume VI: Books 18.36–20, translated by William Chase Greene, The Loeb Classical Library 416, Harvard University Press, 1960).

> *But, O most accute of men, (...). Your soul was learned and naturally gifted, and for this reason we deeply grieve for you, but that same soul was quite unable to reach its God through these mysteries of pagan doctrine—the God, that is, by whom it was made, not with whom it was made, the God of whom it is not part, but the creature, the God who is not the soul of everything, but who made every soul, the God by whose light alone the soul gains happiness, if it is not ungrateful to his grace.*[63]

Varro is portrayed as the tragic case of a man who, by reason alone and with philosophy and pagan doctrine at his disposal, ended up failing in his quest to understand God. This is because the lack of a personal assent to the very important information he came in contact with nullifies any prior victory over ignorance of the *what* and the *how* that was achieved by him. Had the assent existed, there would have been changes in Varro's behaviour and preference for civil theology too, yet no such thing happened – much like in the case of the unbelieving Manichaeans, who remained disatissfied despite overcoming their ignorance of the what and the how. And so, to this "second Varro", it seems that the knowledge necessary for his own true well–being and happiness is unattainable, and Augustine can only declare his pity for him, in a rhetoric infused with sincerity, as he reverts Varro to a state of permanent, wilful ignorance. Any praise offered to him in *De civitate Dei*, while well-deserved and sincere in relation to his intellectual work, consequently stands in the shadow cast by his ignorance, leaving the intended pagan Roman readers with a negative image, only amplified by his internal contradictions and concessions to tradition that Augustine hunts down in his *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* and presents to his educated public.

Conclusions

Not ignorance in the general sense matters the most to Augustine, but only ignorance of key information that has eschatological value, in a Christian framework. With this in mind, and based on *De libero arbitrio*, 3.19.53.180, I proposed three distinct states of "Augustinian ignorance": (1) unwilful ignorance of *what* to rightfully worship (namely God), (2) unwilful ignorance of *how* to worship it (that is, according to His precepts), and (3) wilful ignorance of both (a voluntary refusal to accept this knowledge on a personal, interior level). All humans before the coming of Christ, with the exception of the Jews, were born subject to the first and second types of ignorance, but, as I have shown, this condition's resistance to change and implications differed based on the personal occupation of its carrier.

[63] *De civ*., 7.5 (Green, 393–395).

In Case 1, I discussed how Augustine was aware that pre–Christian exemplary pagan Romans (*exempla*, meaning legendary and historical heroes, virtuous citizens of Rome and other such models) had no means to overcome their deep inherited ignorance, and how that same condition, paradoxically, enables a favourable assesment of them in *De civitate Dei,* Book V. In Augustine's eyes, exemplary Romans such as those ennumerated in *De civitate Dei*, 5.18 clearly demonstrated *virtus* despite their deep ignorance – an earthly virtuous behaviour, because of Rome's goal of earthly glory, but real and admirable nonetheless. Ignorance of the first and second kind is what Augustine repeatedly concedes to them throughout Book V, and this, in turn, makes direct praise of them possible, despite their pagan beliefs and wrong supreme good. However, in the case of intellectuals such as Varro – invoked as literary authorities – that same ignorance works exclusively to their disadvantage, because theirs is a wilful ignorance and a voluntary distancing from the truth they could nonetheless approach by reason alone. Focusing in Case 2 on Varro's portrayal in *De civitate Dei*, I first contextualised his inherited ignorance within Augustine's views on the rational ascent of the soul to God and showed how, from Augustine's perspective, Varro's occupation as a scholar presented him with an open path to the key knowledge that was out of reach for others, such as the exemplary Romans of Case 1. To demonstrate how intentional this is on Augustine's part, I compared his representation of Varro from *De consensu evangelistarum*, Book I with that from *De civitate Dei,* Books VII and XIX. Inspecting Varro's identification of Jupiter with the God of the Jews in both works, I argued that Augustine actively revised the limits of Varro's capacity to reach an understanding of God by reason by the time he worked on *De civitate Dei*, concluding that he is a voluntary "prisoner" of the third type of ignorance. Given that Varro is representative for all pagan scholars, by extension this ultimately renders them all undesirable to emulate (unlike in the exemplary Romans' case) and unreliable as authorities, effects that serve Augustine's purpose of distancing present pagan Romans from their "guides to Romanness". Augustine warns that these ignorant guides would only lead them back to a place where they will not find the knowledge required for the start of a truly virtuous, happy life.

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