St. Augustine of Hippo is considered one of the greatest of the Church Fathers. He has played many roles in his life: pastor, monk, preacher, bishop, teacher, and theologian. However, there is a role that not many people think of. This would be a psychologist. He uses experiences in his own life to discover the cause of his problems; internal and external. He conveys the thought that the struggle to know God is the root of all the problems in the world.

Psychology can be simply defined as the study of the human mind and of human behavior. St. Augustine states that “because of fallen nature…people are naturally inclined to sin and are all in need of the grace of Christ in order to overcome this weakness and turn ourselves back towards God”.  

Christianity’s view on human nature can be defined as an analysis of the soul’s strengths and weaknesses, and suggests means for strengthening, repairing, and cultivating the soul. Psychology can be seen as somewhat similar. A psychologist’s job is to analyze a person’s behaviors and mental state and then determine what it is in their life that is making them act in a way that society does not consider normal. St. Augustine does this in his own life through his book, The Confessions.

In order to understand St. Augustine’s thought process, one must understand his history. St. Augustine was born in a time of turmoil for the Church. Born shortly after the edict of Milan, St Augustine spent his life seeing the Church being torn up

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by different heresies.\(^3\) Even at his death in hippo, the city was being invaded by Vandals. Throughout this time, St. Augustine stood out as a voice of reason for the Church. This is one of the reasons he is called a Church Father. In order to see himself through this time, St. Augustine looked inward to self-reflection to determine his own problems and problems within the Church.

St. Augustine was born in the year 354 in Thagaste in northern Africa.\(^4\) He was born to a pagan father and Christian mother, St. Monica. Throughout his youth, he fell into what was considered normal by social standards. In his adolescence, he fell into a lifestyle of sexual promiscuity. It’s said that when he was in the bathhouse, his father saw that he was pubescent and went home rejoicing that his first grandchild was not far off.\(^5\) Marrying young and producing offspring quickly was a part of the culture of the time. The culture was such that his first marriage was one to a woman of a lower social class. This meant that if the opportunity for a better marriage came to be, which it did for St. Augustine, he was allowed to dismiss his first wife and marry again.\(^6\) It was acceptable for his age and rank to be promiscuous with many women. While it was not openly encouraged, it was assumed that this was what many of the young men of the time did. He was among the privileged class of his youth. His parents saw his talents at a young age and tried to give him the best education possible. He was sent away to study at schools in towns such as Madauros and

Carthage. It was during his studies that he fell into Manichaeism. This was when he was around the age of twenty.

His brief decade of studying Manichaeism played a major role in how he came to approach his Catholic faith later on in his life. In Manichaeism, they believed that their god was trapped in the material world, held hostage by the devil. It was the duty of the followers to join in the “struggle to liberate that god” and this in turn would liberate them. On Augustine’s return home, he started teaching his beliefs in Manichaeism. He would give public performances and eventually write a book on it. He then left for Carthage and then to Rome. It was in Rome where he grew impatient for his career to take off and left for Milan to become a professor of rhetoric. It was here in Milan where his conversion to the Catholic faith occurred.

It is said that he heard a voice of a young boy which instructed him to ‘take and read’. He then picked up a bible and opened it to a random passage. This was a reading from Romans 13:13, which read, “let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.” Augustine took this as a sign to change his ways and turn his will to God. His friends and colleagues at the time instead saw this experience as a loss of will. St. Augustine, from this point on, abandoned his life of

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sin and turn towards the road to holiness.\textsuperscript{12} In 387, St. Augustine and his son Adeodatus, from his first marriage, were baptized by St. Ambrose. The following year, Augustine’s mother, St. Monica, died after a lifetime of praying for her son’s conversion.\textsuperscript{13} Although they were never close, at his mother’s death, St. Augustine felt a twinge of guilt that he wept so little for his mother who “wept so many years” for him.\textsuperscript{14} His son also died that same year. After this series of unfortunate events, Augustine returned to his town of birth and established a monastic community. This community set a monastic rule that was later followed by the Dominicans, the Augustinian canons, hermits and friars.\textsuperscript{15} During his time as a monk, he went on a visit to Hippo and was seized by the people. He was immediately ordained a priest by Bishop Valerius. From here, he went on to become ordained to the episcopacy and became coadjutor for Valerius. Naturally, he then succeeded Valerius as the new Bishop of Hippo.

His becoming the bishop was highly controversial. Many people knew about his past, especially his days as a promiscuous youth. Many also argued that he was not fit to be a bishop due to his years of faith in Manichaeism. It was in the year 392 where he laid some of these suspicions to rest. It was here where he entered into a public debate with Fortunatus, a Manichee priest. This was a public way for people to see him attacking his old faith and defending his new Catholic faith. It is stated that

Augustine opened the debate by saying “What I used to think was true, I now think is wrong.” It is said that Augustine walked away from the debate in high praise from the crowd but then again, this is taken from Augustine’s own account of the story so it could be a tad exaggerated. A few years later in 397, Augustine published his book, Confessions, which is the main work by him that portrays his psychological thought process. This autobiography was unlike anything else written at the time. Usually when writing about the life of a saint, one can skip over the first half of their life and go straight to their martyrdom or works they created. Here, St. Augustine’s past is just as important as his future.

In Confessions, St. Augustine uses his personal experiences to persuade the reader want to know and love God. He is the first person to share the story of his struggle to know, love and enjoy God. Throughout Confessions, he talks about psychology in terms of our spiritual health. St. Augustine went inside himself to find God. He saw that he was at war with himself. This meaning that his actions were what was causing him to stray from a good relationship with God. His whole psychological thought can be organized into an assessment of love. “His greatest psychological insight is that a disordered self is the result of disordered desire; and

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disordered desire us the source of our misery and suffering in life.” 21 In order to repair the soul, one must reorder the love in their life. Love can be given to things as well as people. People can give their love to things such as money, sex, and other people. St. Augustine claims that our love and desire must be redirected to God. At the very core of all his teachings is that “God is the beginning and the end of our life.” 22 According to St. Augustine, the only obstacle people really face is themselves. He claims that there is no one else to blame. “True Happiness is to dwell in God forever.” 23

There are two types of therapists that St. Augustine can be seen as; eclectic and behaviorist. With eclectic therapy insight is required. One must realize there is a problem and want to solve it. 24 The next step according to St. Augustine would be to turn to God for the answer. As a behaviorist therapist, St. Augustine thinks that in order to repair the soul, one must live a Christian life under the guidance of Christian teachers. These teachers can help people understand the healing powers of Scripture, catechize an unbaptized person, and socialize new people into Christian lives. This all occurs under the guidance of the Church which provides sacraments, worship and homilies. 25

By examining his own life, St. Augustine invites the reader to do the same in hopes that they will grow in their own relationship with God. The only warning he inadvertently gives is for self-reflection not to turn into self-absorption. While he encourages one to look into themselves for answers, he states that if one looks too far, they could lose the world around them and miss the point altogether. The therapeutic process must move from within oneself to without. Without “means God encountered through Scriptures well interpreted.” While Augustine points the way towards healing of the soul, he still stresses the fact that God is the therapist and “the Incarnation is the hook by means of which God catches our attention and burrows into our souls.” It is through God that people can be healed and saved from themselves.

St. Augustine also shows his psychological thought in some of his other works such as On Trinity and On Christian Teaching. Both of these works display St. Augustine as a psychotherapeutic teacher. While On Trinity is mainly about the defense of the Nicene faith and then the treatment of moral psychology. Here he emphasizes that the God one needs to seek is a triune God meaning people need to seek God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Again St. Augustine emphasizes that to truly know oneself, it must happen “through knowing and living into the truth of the triune God revealed in Scriptures about Israel and the Incarnate Son of God.” He also

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speaks again about the reordering of love. God’s love for all humans and their love in return trump all other loves. If one loves God above all else, the other loves in one’s life will fall into place.

On Christian Teaching is mainly a set of rules for interpreting Scripture. However, St. Augustine uses this as an opportunity to express that one must explore Scripture correctly in order to fully love God. He claims that Scripture was not meant to be read without a helpful guide. Scripture is too complex for one to read by themselves. This set of rules is a way to know God better through Scripture.31

St. Augustine sets an example for loving God not only in his writings but in his life as well. In Confessions, he stresses the point that a life without God is an empty and unhappy one. He finds this out through psychological analysis of his life. He looks inward in order to find what has been missing in his life. It is through psychology that St. Augustine finds the answers he has been looking for. He is a prime example of Christian Psychologists. Instead of focusing on mental or emotional problems, St. Augustine focuses on spiritual healing. It is through this spiritual healing that all other kinds of healing fall into place.

Works Cited: St. Augustine of Hippo


