



BOOK VI: Augustine and the Drunken Beggar

Confessions 6.6.9 - 6.6.10; Boulding Translation, pp. 101-102

Passage Summary

Augustine, in deep doubt over his secular ambitions, encounters a drunken beggar on the streets of Milan. He reflects on this encounter in terms of happiness and prosperity.

App Integrations

- Digital Highlighting & Annotation
- Synchronized Audio
- In-App Commentaries
- In-App Teaching Tips

Learning Objectives

- Close reading of primary texts
- Personal reflection
- Use of secondary source(s)

Further Connections

Confessions: Augustine's confrontation with himself in this scene is but the beginning, and becomes more urgent upon listening to the *Life of St. Antony* in Book VIII. Comparing Antony to the beggar is a useful exercise, since the two share certain virtues though with different points of reference.

Augustine and Culture: Cicero's *On Duties* deals with questions of status, public service and generosity; Jane Austen's *Emma* deals with issues of social class and superiority; W.E.B. Dubois' *On the Souls of Black Folk* gives a critical assessment of the American Dream, comparing well to Augustine's notion of secular ambition; in a different direction, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* protests the fawning over a cramped and deprived existence, such as many women experience, but which Augustine may be neglecting in this passage.

Commentaries: John Fantuzzo's commentary is a useful summary and critical engagement with the passage.

Out-Of-Class Assignment Suggestions

- Read Augustine's account of his encounter with the beggar.
- After reading, listen to the audio, starting at the second paragraph in 6.9.
- Highlight the contrasts Augustine draws between himself and the beggar.
- Using the App Annotation, summarize these contrasts in your words.
- Read John Fantuzzo's commentary (Brown 6) on Augustine's account. Consider Fantuzzo's question about the relevance of the scene today; are there any important differences between Augustine's time and ours?
- This passage might be useful as a prompt for a personal response, connecting to themes of the "life well-lived" and the question of happiness.

In-Class Assignment Suggestions

- This passage is particularly relevant for university students, as it calls into question the "temporal happiness" they seek through degrees and future employment. Invite students to talk about the value of "secular ambition."
- Read out loud (or listen to) Augustine's account in 6.9. Invite students to cite the differences between Augustine and the beggar.
- Should we "envy" poor beggars who appear to be happier than us (or at least less stressed than us)? How would you "update" this scene for the present-day? Might the roles be reversed in any way?
- Invite students to talk about the virtues of the beggar, if he has any, compared to Augustine's way of life at the time.