The few and the many: A motif of Augustine’s controversy with the Manichaeans

It is one fundamental conviction of ancient philosophy that, in contrast to the vast majority, only few are able to gain knowledge of truth. This axiom, which also underlies Cicero’s Hortensius, is adapted by the young Augustine. When looking for a concept of truth that combines the ideal of a philosophical existence with Christianity, he decides to join the Manichaeans. As opposed to the ‘mainline church’ of the catholica in which ‘the many’ are gathered, the Manichaeans appear to him as a small, elitist Christian community meeting higher intellectual as well as ethical demands. This claim seems to be particularly and impressively confirmed by the ‘pauci electi’. Their approach has apparently strengthened Augustine’s belief that true, higher Christianity is to be found amongst the Manichaeans. When he later devotes himself to the catholica and leads the fight against the Manichaeans, Augustine adheres to the conviction of the ‘few wise’. Also within the catholica only few attain maximum insight and lead an appropriate life. At the same time, however, Augustine increasingly considers ‘the many’ as positive. These two aspects are combined in his epistemological concept of ‘actoritas’: by means of their auctoritas, the few ‘wise’ within the Catholic Church are supposed to guide the many towards truth on their journey of faith and cause them to improve their moral conduct. Its big success is a major argument for the catholica, whilst the ‘paucitas’ of the Manichaeans (and all heretics) can be considered evidence of the groundlessness and absurdity of their doctrine.

Introduction

At first glance, the concepts of the ‘few’ and the ‘many’ appear to be a very special side issue. But from my point of view, this first impression needs to be revised on closer inspection. The contrast of the two groups is not only a topos of ancient philosophy in particular (Voigtländer 1980), but the comparison itself and its judgements play a repeated and important role in Augustine’s intellectual biography. My focus will be on the significance of the contrast in the progression of the young Augustine from the Hortensius to Manichaeism and in his anti-Manichaean struggle. The following major questions have to be considered: What is the significance of the motif of the few and the many in Augustine’s intellectual development? What influence does it have on his fight against Manichaeism? Which role does it play in his return to the catholica and in his later fight against Manichaeism?

Hortensius

Together with the impulse to search for truth, the Hortensius leads Augustine to the conviction that this truth can only be found amongst the ‘few’. ‘The gods have given philosophy only to a few’ and this is the greatest gift they gave to the humans and the greatest gift they could have ever given. Augustine himself ascribes this statement to Cicero in De ciuitate dei, unfortunately without indicating any sources. Grilli included this passage into his edition of the Hortensius as fragment 111, combining it with a statement by Cicero that was preserved by Lactantius and claims that philosophy is not vulgaris, because only scholars can achieve it.2 It is however controversial whether these two fragments can really be attributed to Hortensius or not (cf. Doignon 1999:169–171; Straume-Zimmermann 1990:328). But according to my point of view it is obvious that the ‘elitist’ trait of philosophy corresponds to the overall intention of the Hortensius and is also clearly expressed by Cicero. According to fragment 115 (ed. Grilli), which is explicitly considered a Hortensian utterance the philosophical existence (uita contemplatia) presents very high challenges, both intellectually and ethically:


2.Cf. Cicero, Hortensius fragment 111 (ed. Grilli). Augustinus, De ciuitate dei 22, 22, 4): ‘... (philosophia) quam dii quibusdam paucis (at Tullius) veram dederunt; nec hominibus (inquit) ab his aut datum est donum malus aut potuit ullum dare’; Cicero, Hortensius fragment 88 (ed. Grilli) [Lactantius, Divinarum institutiones 3, 25, 1]: ‘summus ille nostrae Platonis imitator existimavit philosophiam non esse vulgarem, quod eam non nisi docti homines assequi possint’; cf. also fragment 89, below footnote 3.

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The one who 'lives in philosophy' – and the fortune which all people desire can be found herein – has to be concerned with the search for truth ‘day and night’, to sharpen one’s comprehensive capabilities and pay attention to constantly keep up these standards. A thorough education in the sciences is a crucial precondition for this objective and the intellectual efforts must be linked to a lifestyle determined by the virtues. Earthly goods, such as reputation, wealth, gain or pleasure are certainly not part of that, but the masses consider these worldly possessions signs of happiness and pursue them. Cicero forcefully warns against them (especially against sexual desire as the ‘greatest voluptas’, contradicting reasonable thought and being its strongest enemy) (Cicero, Hortensius fragm. 84 [ed. Grilli] = 84, in Straume-Zimmermann 1990). True wealth can be acquired only through the possession of virtues. Anyone who stays on track, that is, who is determined by reason and the constant search for truth, does not get involved with the delusions and vices of ‘mankind’ (Cicero, Hortensius fragm. 115 [ed. Grilli] = 102, in Straume-Zimmermann 1990). This manifests the contrast between the few who are able to lead such a life and the broad, non-philosophical masses.

Thus, there can be no doubt concerning the ‘elitist’ attitude of the Hortensius. This attitude furthermore corresponds with a widely accepted axiom in philosophy. Cicero follows the platonistic tradition. Only few can philosophise, the broad masses are unable to do so (cf. esp. Plato, Respublica 6, 491ab; 494a; cf. Fuhrer 1997:102–105). Also Lactantius refers to this principle and adds the hint that the Stoics and Epicureans promoted it as well. Lactantius concludes referring to Cicero, that philosophy is inaccessible to the masses.3

Manichaeism

Prompted by religious memories of his childhood, which were roused by the reading of the Hortensius, Augustine started to search for truth within the realm of Christianity. ‘Within a few days’ he affiliates himself enthusiastically not with the catholica, but with the Manichaeans.4 Apparently, the Manichaean community clearly differentiate within their community between the ‘ordinary’ auditores and the pauci electi. Both the intellectual and the ethical demands of the Manichaeans are Augustinian’s central motifs to affiliate with Manichaean Christianity and both are tightly connected with the motif of the few and the many.

**Intellectual demand: The few ‘enlightened’**

There is a lot of evidence for the intellectual demands of the North African Manichaeans (cf. Hoffmann 2001:77–85). The promise to provide reasonable insights into truth is based on the gnosis, the scientia which was brought by Mani. Mani is the Paraclete who has been augured by Christ and who guides ‘into all truth’ (Jn 16:13). The Manichaean Felix decidedly phrases this fundamental conviction:

In his proclamation, Mani taught us (docuit nos) about the beginning, the middle and the end; he taught us (docuit nos) of the creation of the world, why (quare) it was created, what it was created from and which powers shaped it; he taught us (docuit nos) why there is day and night; he taught us (docuit nos) about the course of the sun and of the moon. As we neither find this with Paul nor in the writings of the other apostles, we are urged to believe that Mani is the Paraclete.5

In this context, ‘the whole truth’ is understood in a very pointed manner. The teachings of Mani fill in the gaps left by the New Testament of the catholici (the Old Testament is to be rejected anyway); they illustrate the beginnings, explain the present along with its cosmic phenomena, and inform about the eschata. The anaphora of docuit nos and quare underlines the rational character of this message. The proceedings of the world are supposed to become comprehensible by means of the teaching of the two principles. According to Fortunatus, the scientia rerum, the knowledge of matters, which is able to explain the natural state of the world, lies in the cognition of this dualism (cf. Fortunatus, in Augustinus, Acta contra Fortunatum Manicheum 14.20). This thesis is reminiscent of the Ciceronian ideal of cognition concerning the ‘understanding of both divine and human matters and their causal relations’ (Cicero, Hortensius fragm. 94 [ed. Grilli] = 6, in Straume-Zimmermann 1990). Within the Manichaean tradition, however, cognition is based on the revelation which is given by the Paraclete’s proclamation. It is, and that is entirely in accordance with the Gnostic self-conception, redeeming knowledge. The Epistula fundamenti distinctly expresses this basic conviction: anyone who listens to the words of the Paraclete Mani, ‘believes’ in them and observes them (in their conduct of life) will not be subjected to death. They gain a liberating, ‘divine knowledge’ which enables them to stay within the realm of eternal life (cf. Epistula fundamenti fragm. 2, in Feldmann 1987). By listening to the epistula, the

3 Cf. Lactantius, Divinae institutiones 3, 25, 7–12 [Cicero, Hortensius fragm 89 [ed. Grilli]]: ‘... Ob eam causam Cicero ait abhorrere a multitudine philosophorum.’


5 Augustinus, Contra Felicem Manichaeum 1, 9: ‘Et quia Manicheans praeclaram cogitationem docuit nos inhumum, medium et finem; docuit nos de fabrice mundi, quae facta est et unde facta est, at quae fecerunt; docuit nos quare dies et quare noc; docuit nos de cursus solis et lunae: quia hoc in Paulus non audimus nec in celebrorum apostolorum scripturis, hoc credimus, quia ipse est paracletus.’
individual is initiated, achieves the previously mentioned knowledge, and thereby comes into ‘enlightenment’. This distinguishes the disciples of Mani from ‘almost every people’ in terms of his discipleship and this is the reason why the Manicheans make for a small, exclusive group in contrast to the rest of the world.  

**Ethical demand: The few ‘saints’**

The Manichean claim for ethical exclusivity is also obvious. Especially Secundinus and Faustus reflect the self-conception of the Western Manicheans. For Secundinus, who is an auditor himself, the ‘people’ in its entirety (populus), the ‘crowd’ (multitudo), the ‘masses’ (turba), especially the mass of women, cannot attain virtue, virtue remains beyond their reach. The strict demands of Manichean ethics have to be complied with in order to reach eternal life, but only the few are able to manage this.  

Secundinus makes use of Matthew 7:13f. to support his contention: the devil tries to lead people astray from the ‘narrow path of the saviour’ and therefore Secundinus urgently summons Augustine, his former brother in faith, to follow the narrow path (Secundinus Epistula 1.3). With this argumentation he fosters the contrast between the many walking on the broad path and the few walking on the narrow path and justifies it with reference to Jesus’ sayings.

Faustus proves that the Manicheans are a minority as opposed to the mainline church, which is mainly due to their higher ethical demands. He deals with the reproach that the Manicheans would not accept the gospel, because they do not believe in Jesus’ (physical) birth: 

... et tamen age, ponamus, quia ita uis, duó haec partes esse fidei perfectae, quamar una quidem constet in uerbo, id est fateri Christum natum, altera vero in opere, quid ergo est, quod me lacessis, si difficiliorem fidei efficaciorem puto et plerumque artam uitam incedunt. Nec enim virtus est, ad quam tu uide cum leuissimam et faciliorem. nec sin it sit in uerbo, sed in uirtute. quid ergo est, quod me lacessis, si difficiliorem fidei efficaciorem partem elegerim; tu uide quam leuissimam et faciliorem. nec... sunt uocati, paucae autem electi. Faustus, in Augustinus, Contra Faustum Manicheum 15.

Faustus emphasises in his counter argumentation that the ‘acceptance’ of the gospel includes two dimensions, namely the ethical demands. Faustus argues that the Manicheans are the few because of their high ethical demands. In doing so, the Catholics have chosen the easier way: ‘The masses (plebs) therefore rightly turn to you and away from me, not knowing that the kingdom of God does not depend on words, but on behaviour.’ So the Manicheans are the few because of their high ethical demands.

Within the borders of the small Manichean communities, the ‘pauci electi’ have to be distinguished from the auditores, as they have to meet even higher ethical demands. As opposed to the auditores, they are considered the ‘few saints’ (pauci sancti) (cf. Augustinus, Contra Adimantum Manichei discipulam 15). The Codex of Tebessa addresses the topic of the ‘two classes’ within the Manichean communities and their mutual relations. In this dichotomous church, the Electi are the ‘perfect’ (perfecti) disciples:

... sunt [eni(m)] / et opibus pauperes et[i] / numero pauci et pl[e]r[i] / artam uiam incedunt[t]/ [a][augusto tam[t]/ [a]non] stipati sunt... / /... / et sunt pauci /... / /... / / fie[i]des, qu[i]d in reg] / / [nu]m caelorum in ingre[- / /dj][luntur, sic[t dic] / tum est: quantum qui- / /dem sunt uocati, pau- / /cit autem electi. (Codex Thevestinus A 43,4–16 [Stein])

The Electi are poor as far as worldly possessions are concerned and they are few in numbers. The text underlines this with several allusions to central New Testament passages: firstly the picture of the small path (Mt 7:14) that leads to life and is walked upon only by few, secondly Jesus’ warning that only few will enter the kingdom of heaven, although many counted themselves as belonging to the Lord (Mt 7:21f.), and thirdly Matthew 20:16 and 22:14, which deals with the ‘chosen few’ in contrast to the many who were invited. With that, the ‘Electi’ as the few who are explicitly connected to Jesus himself and the contrast to the many is implied, yet not particularly mentioned.

It is highly likely that Augustine draws on his biographical background when depicting ‘chaste life’ as one of the Manicheans’ finest enticements (cf. Augustinus, De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum 1, 2). One can therefore proceed on the assumption that to the young Augustine the Manicheans seemed to be the small elite, which makes both higher intellectual as well as ethical demands than the catholica, which again functions as venue for the ‘many’ who are not able to conceive of higher standards. They correspond to the essence of the Hortensius also in this aspect. This might have additionally fostered Augustine’s impression that with them he found a group conforming to the Ciceronian ideal. Belonging to this elitist group certainly had its own attractiveness.

**The Few and the Many in the controversy with the Manicheans**

When he realises that they can neither meet their intellectual nor ethical standards, Augustine breaks with the Manicheans. Whatever Platonici libri Augustine has read in Milan – Plotin and also Porphyrios readopt the platonic concept of the few who have these cognitive faculties, and they even intensify the idea. So the elitist trait in Augustine’s thinking

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is supported by neoplatonic literature. In his early writings, which are considerably characterised by an epistemological optimism, Augustine reserves the knowledge of truth for the ‘few’ with harsh judgements. Truth only reveals itself to the ‘very few and chosen admirers’ (Augustinus, Solutioquia 1.22). As opposed to them, the ‘stupid’ and ‘simple-minded’ make for an ‘incredibly large mass’. 8

But how does this fit together with Augustine’s affiliation with the ‘mainline church’ of the catholica? Does he thereby not align himself with the ‘many’? His controversy with the Manicheans plainly reveals that Augustine has dealt with this tension consciously. His argumentation in De utilitate credendi against Honoratus, ‘Still-Manichean’ and friend of his youth, shows that Augustine is aware that this topic is central at least to the educated and philosophically trained. ‘But truth can only be found among the Few’ (Augustinus, De utilitate credendi 16) – this prejudice can potentially blight every approximation to the catholica in the search for truth.

Considering the most important lines in Augustine’s argumentation, one observes the tendency to stick to the principle of the perfect few and to complement or soften this principle by the positive assessment of the many. The background seems to be the argument of the consensus omnium (Oehler 1961:103–129).

The core argument regarding the elitist-rational approach is: actually there are only few ‘wise men’ amongst the catholica who have come to know truth, that is, God. These few possess a certain authority, that is, a personal effective and persuasive power enabling them to impress the many and to guide them towards truth. 9 Although the masses are not able to ‘comprehend’ this truth intellectually, they ‘believe’ in it, that is, they accept it as truth and try to realise it in their lives. The background to this is Augustine’s epistemological approach of the two ways of cognition, credere and intelligere. They are directly linked with the two cognitive powers fides and ratio as well as with the concept of auctoritas (cf. TeSelle 1996–2002:119–131; Lütcke 1986–1994:498–510; Hoffmann 2007:461–466). It is possible to reach truth by means of cognition (intelligere) or faith (credere). The former option is obviously to be valued higher, but only the few manage to walk this way. The latter approach is valued lower, but it is the only one for the many. Therefore, Augustine demands them to follow an authority. Accepting a reliable authority, that is the catholica, is thus the ‘more salutary’, if not the only possible option for the uneducated masses (cf. Augustinus, De ordine 2, 26; cf. Trelenberg 2009:273–276). So the catholica is the Christian community in which the multitudine fills the churches, but only few attain maximum insight and also guide the many there (cf. Augustinus, De utilitate credendi 16).

Augustine uses the same approach with Honorus regarding ethics. The hint at the great success of the catholica, however, is a lot more explicit here. Just like in other anti-Manichean passages Augustine emphasises the high ethical achievements of members of the Catholic Church. The creed of the indiscernible, immaterial God corresponds with the ethical dissociation of everything physical-material and of the ‘world’. As concrete examples, Augustine mentions asceticism in terms of the renunciation of food and sexuality, the willingness to suffer, charity as well as the contempt of worldly affairs. By listing the extremes, he illustrates on the one hand that these ethical demands can compete with those of the Manichean Electi, and on the other hand he clarifies that there is a certain span in realisation. This establishes the basis for the conclusion:

Pauci haec faciunt, pauciores bene prudenterque faciunt, sed populi probant, populi laudant, populi favent, diligent postremum populi, populi suam inbecillitatem, quod ipsa non possunt, non sine proiectu mentis in deum nec sine quilibudam scientia virtutis accusant. (Augustinus, De utilitate credendi 35)

Augustine underlines the contrast between the ‘few’ and the ‘many’ by means of stylistic devices: the anaphora of ‘populi’ is followed by the climax ‘pauci – pauciores’. These two groups form content-related contrasts (sed), but they are embraced by the alliteration (‘pauci – pauciores – prudenter – populi – populi – postremum populi – populi – possunt – prorectu’). The first three statements about the peoples are parallel and isocemic; they are followed by two further statements with a pointed chiasm emphasising the ‘peoples’ appreciation (diligent) of the ethical ideals of Christianity. Again, the core thought is that the elite of the few should convert the masses and improve them ethically.

This lays the basis for a positive assessment of the great number of those who have joined the catholica. The Catholic Church gains a large number of members who reach the truth and improve ethically by following its doctrine. This is particularly hard to reach and hence particularly notable (cf. Augustinus, De utilitate credendi 35). Here the catholica reaches what Plato and his school could not reach and even did not dare to reach, and this is a strong argument against the Platonicists. In contrast to the Manicheans he underlines that incredibly many, especially also simple catholici, achieve the highest ethical standards (Augustinus, De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum 1, 65–71.77). Augustine opposes Faustus’s claim to meet Jesus’ radical ethical demands as Manichean Electus with a forceful iteration stressing how many Catholics actually meet these demands. The Catholic Church can therefore boast an extraordinary (God-given) ‘progress and success’ (profectum fructuose) (Augustinus, De utilitate credendi 35). This success gives the church credibility and authority and suggests that the truth seeker should start searching here.

By implication, the negative evaluation of the ‘few’, which also and particularly concerns the Manicheans, results from the same argument. They do not have any authority whatsoever to support their doctrines or sacred writings, precisely because they are ‘only few’. 10 In his answer to...
Secundinus Augustine takes up Secundinus’s claim who asserts that as Manichaeans, he belongs to the few walking on Jesus’ narrow path (Mt 7:14). Then, however, he turns the claim into the warning not to belong to the group of the few very bad people. Only few are without sin (innocentes), but at the same time only few are felons. Amongst those who do something wrong are fewer murderers than thieves, fewer commit incest than adultery, fewer women are like Medea and Phaedra or men like Orest (Ochos) and Busirisides than other criminals. The paucitas is hence a two-edged category. The Manichaeans are indeed few, but they belong to a ‘negative elite’ advocating lunatic ideas. It is even more wondrous that people fall for them at all, than the mere fact that they are few. The few saints walking on the narrow path are definitely not the Manichaeans, but those amongst true Christians who fulfil the commandments. As opposed to the vast number of sinners, the righteous are the few. Augustine does not delude himself about this and freely admits it in front of the Manichaeans. The righteous will be revealed at the Last Judgement.

This presupposes Augustine’s conviction that the Manichaeans’ standards are untenable both in the intellectual and in the ethical realm. The reasonable insight is an unjustified ‘presumption’ (praesumptio) and a ‘promise’ (pollicitatio) which they do not keep. Particularly the radical ascetic ethics of the Electi is fictitious. Augustine goes so far as to claim that the Manichaeans had big problems spotting only one Electus amongst their ‘paucitas’ who meets the ethical standards of Manichaeism (cf. Augustine, De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum 1,75; De utilitate credendi 2.21.36). These harsh and partly also unfair accusations show Augustine’s great personal disappointment about his own deception, which is now mixed with the pastoral endeavour to preserve others from the same mistake.

Conclusion

The motif of the few and the many can be found throughout Augustine’s intellectual biography. In the beginning, there is the defining axiom of the few wise men and the unphilosophical masses. The young Augustine adopts this conviction from his reception of the Hortensius and abides by it until his time as mature theologian. It is certainly also due to this basic conviction that the Manichaeans seemed more attractive to him than the catholic, who gather the many, and the fact that he joined them. They appear as a small Christian community with elitist aspirations, explaining the world and all its proceedings from the macroscopic movement of the stars to the microcosmic human nature and yielding the highest ascetic performances. The appreciation of the few is supported by neoplatonic writings. In his steering towards the catholic, Augustine holds on to the elitist approach. Nevertheless, he develops a complementary line in which he evaluates the multitudo positively. The consideration of philosophical schools, in particular the Platonists, and the controversy with the Manichaeans have largely contributed to this notion. It is decisive for the balance of the two arguments that Augustine integrates the few and the many in his hermeneutic concept of the two approaches to truth. Those who obtain the highest possible insight by their respective moral conduct are also considered the few ‘wise’ (or saints) within the catholic, but they impress the many and guide them towards truth, which they accept in their faith. Augustine increasingly rates the big success as an argument for the authority of the catholic. This concept combines the principle of the perfect few with the positive assessment of the many followers. Thus, the controversy about the Manichaeans considerably contributes to the development of this concept. Augustine can make use of this argument against them as well as against ‘all heretics’ who praise themselves in front of the catholic because of their paucitas (Augustinus, Contra adversarium legis et prophetarum 2, 42).

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