

The role of guidance
in the aeneid,
confessions, and the
divine comedy



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Galileo Galilei once stated that “ all truths are easy to understand once they are discovered; the point is to discover them.” However, in order to understand and discover such truths, one needs the light of wisdom and the guidance of virtue. In Virgil’s Aeneid, Saint Augustine’s Confessions, and Dante’s Divine Comedy, all three protagonists are in need of guidance due to a lack of understanding on their respective journeys of discovery. Their guides, who are all figures whom they admire and respect, in turn possess such understanding and impart it unto the protagonists. In The Aeneid of Virgil, the figure of guidance for the protagonist, Aeneas, is his father, Anchises, especially in the form of visions and shades after his death. Although Anchises dies during the journey from Troy to Italy, he continues in spirit to help his son fulfill fate’s decrees. In Book V, shortly after the death of Anchises, Aeneas dreams of his father, who tells him to “ obey the excellent advice old Nautes gives” (958-959) to leave some Trojans – the elderly, the weak, and the women weary of sailing – in the care of Acestes, and “ take [his] chosen young men, [his] bravest hearts, to Italy” (959-960). Anchises’ image also directs Aeneas to visit him in Dis after arriving in Latium. In the underworld, Anchises “[reveals] the fame that is to come from Dardan sons and what Italian children wait for [Aeneas] – bright souls that are about to take [his] name” (VI, 999-11002). Finally, through the guidance of his father, Aeneas grasps the profound significance of his voyage to Italy and is ready to face the challenges that lie ahead. Anchises is able to act as a guide for Aeneas due to his status of authority and his ability to foresee events after his death. During his journey from Troy, Aeneas does not fully understand the significance of his voyage. He is uncertain about going to Italy and often “ his mind is torn apart by all his cares” (V, 949). However, after the vision of <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-guidance-in-the-aeneid-confessions-and-the-divine-comedy/>

his father, Aeneas makes up his mind immediately and “ at once calls his comrades... and tells... what he himself has now resolved” (V, 983-986). This illustrates the seniority of Anchises and the authority and status that come with it. Aeneas reveres his father and thus trusts and follows his advice willingly. In this way, Anchises serves as a wise counselor to his son, as Aeneas makes his way toward Italy. In Dis, Anchises once again displays his wisdom as Aeneas’ mentor when he guides Aeneas through the underworld, showing him what fate has in store for his descendants. As a living human being, Aeneas is unable to understand the future consequences of his journey and his actions in Latium. Anchises, on the other hand, is able to “[study] the souls of all his sons to come” (VI, 899-900). After passing on from the living world, he is able to see the future and thus understand the larger significance of Aeneas’ journey. Aeneas’ respect for and trust in Anchises and Anchises’ ability to perceive the fated significance of Aeneas’ present exploits make him a fitting mentor for Aeneas. In Saint Augustine’s Confessions, the guides for Augustine’s journey toward Christianity are his mother Monica and Bishop Ambrose. A devout Catholic who “ greatly put her trust in [God]” (I, 17), Monica accompanies Augustine on many of his moves throughout his life. Augustine gives great credit to Monica for being God’s instrument for his own salvation. She never stops encouraging him to convert to Catholicism: “ with a pure heart and faith in [God] she... [travails] in labor for [his] eternal salvation” (I, 17). Even during a time of “ darkness and falsehood” (III, 20) in Carthage, “ this chaste, devout, and sober widow... never [ceases] her hours of prayer to lament about [him] to [God]” (III, 20). In Milan, Monica leads a quiet and devout life, serving as a constant reminder to Augustine that he may well have been destined for Catholicism. During <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-guidance-in-the-aeneid-confessions-and-the-divine-comedy/>

this time, Augustine becomes increasingly open to Christian doctrine because of the influence not only of Monica but of Bishop Ambrose as well: “Every Lord’s Day [Augustine] [hears] him ‘rightly preaching the word of truth’ among the people” and “more and more [his] conviction [grows] that all the knotty problems and calumnies which those deceivers... had devised against the divine books could be dissolved” (VI, 4). Bishop Ambrose’s interpretation of the Old Testament has an immense impact on Augustine, who has previously dismissed the text because of its simple and apparently literal language. Bishop Ambrose interprets the scriptures in a much more abstract, spiritual sense: “the letter kills, the spirit gives life” (VI, 6). This approach allows Augustine to overcome Manichean objections to specific phrases in the Bible and “from this time on... [Augustine] now [gives] [his] preference to the Catholic faith” (VI, 7). Bishop Ambrose, along with Monica, is directly responsible for Augustine’s conversion to Catholicism. Monica and Bishop Ambrose act as figures of guidance for Augustine much in the same capacity as Anchises does for Aeneas. Monica, being a parental figure to Augustine, demands the same respect as does Anchises. Although at the time, Augustine never quite heeds her advice, he never dismisses it either. Her role as his mother puts her as a figure of high influence. Thus, Monica is able to guide Augustine’s actions, though in a much less overt fashion than Anchises, through her lifelong influence rather than direct instructions. Bishop Ambrose, too, is in a position of authority in his guidance of Augustine. As a bishop, he is a leader of the Catholic faith, and Augustine therefore takes his words and actions to be exemplary of the religion itself. In addition, like Anchises, both Monica and Bishop Ambrose have the ability to understand what Augustine could not. As a non-Christian, Augustine could

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not recognize God as a “ spiritual substance” (III, 12) and questions regarding the existence of evil, the form of God, and the like were beyond his comprehension. He has difficulties grasping the idea that faith, not reason, is the basis for true knowledge. As believers, Monica and Bishop Ambrose are able to perceive the truth because of their faith. It is this superior understanding of God, along with their positions of authority, that enable Monica and Bishop Ambrose to lead Augustine into the arms of the church. In *The Divine Comedy*, the figures of guidance for Dante on his journey through the world beyond death are Virgil and Beatrice. In Hell and through most of Purgatory, Virgil serves as Dante’s “ guide... governor... master” (Inferno, II, 140). Lost and in despair in the dark forest, Dante meets the spirit of the great Roman poet Virgil, who offers to “ guide [him], taking [him] from this place through an eternal place” (Inferno, I, 113-114). As they journey through Hell, Virgil leads and protects Dante through different gates and obstacles; for instance, Dante is able to get past Charon and Minos with Virgil’s help. As they visit the different circles of Hell and the different terraces of Purgatory, Virgil explains to Dante the various sins the tormented souls have committed in their lifetime to deserve their punishment. Virgil serves as Dante’s guide, showing him not only the physical route through Hell and Purgatory but also reinforcing their moral lessons. At the gate to Earthly Paradise, Virgil arrives at “ the place past which [his] powers cannot see” (Purgatorio, XXVII, 129); from there on, “ a soul more worthy than [he] [is] will guide [Dante]” (Inferno, I, 122). Beatrice now takes over the role as Dante’s guide through Heaven. Beatrice leads Dante through the different spheres of Heaven and answers Dante’s many questions, such as why there are dark spots on the moon, whether all spirits

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live in the Empyrean, and what the true nature of angels is. Through Beatrice, Dante learns more about the divine nature of Paradise. In the end, Beatrice brings Dante to his glorious vision of God. Like Anchises in The Aeneid and Monica and Bishop Ambrose in Confessions, Virgil and Beatrice are able to act as Dante's mentors because they are figures whom Dante reveres and they possess the wisdom and understanding that Dante, as a living being, does not have. Upon seeing Virgil, Dante is thrilled to meet the poet he most admires, "[his] master and [his] author" (Inferno, I, 85). Dante puts his complete trust in Virgil as his guide due to his high respect for him. Beatrice, too, is someone whom Dante loved and admired when she was alive, and remains his object of affection and inspiration after death. " Within her presence, [Dante] had once been used to feeling - trembling - wonder, dissolution" (Purgatorio, XXX, 34-35) and upon seeing her again in Earthly Paradise, he once again "[feels] the mighty power of old love" (Purgatorio, XXX, 39). Beatrice is in a position to guide Dante because of his love and admiration for her; on many occasions during his travels through Hell and Purgatory, Dante believes that he can go no further, but the promise of meeting Beatrice motivates him to continue, and the same enthusiasm propels him through his journey in Heaven. In addition to being people whom Dante looks up to, Virgil and Beatrice are both inhabitants of the world after death, and thus possess understanding which living human beings do not. As a spirit who dwells in Limbo, Virgil is "' wise; [he knows] far more than'" (Inferno, II, 36) Dante, as he is familiar with the way through Hell and can act as Dante's knowledgeable guide. Not only does Virgil have the knowledge of the Underworld, he also symbolizes human reason, which Dante currently lacks yet needs in order to navigate through the world of sin. However, at <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-guidance-in-the-aeneid-confessions-and-the-divine-comedy/>

the gate of Heavenly Paradise, Virgil becomes as ignorant as Dante because reason is powerless without faith in gaining access to Heaven. Here, the guide becomes Beatrice, who possesses the faith and understanding required to enter Paradise. Beatrice believes that Dante “ is... so astray” (Inferno, II, 65) from the path of righteousness that she needs to bring him on this journey so that he can gain the same understanding of the afterlife as Virgil and herself in order to be saved. In Virgil’s Aeneid, Saint Augustine’s Confessions, and Dante’s Divine Comedy, all the protagonists are in need of guidance due to a lack of understanding. They are ignorant because they have not experienced or perceived the consequences of their actions or the significance of their beliefs. The guides and mentors of the protagonists are all in positions of authority and are all people whom the protagonists have tremendous respect for. Furthermore, they are more experienced and have either gone through or have had visions of what the protagonists are attempting to achieve. Such things - the future of one’s descendants, the spirituality of faith, the realm after death - are beyond human comprehension without having experienced them, either first-hand or through visions. The guides in these works possess such understanding and are thus in the position to impart their wisdom unto the protagonists who lack it. Following this model, these three books thus mirror the pedagogical relationships in their texts because they act as the medium through which the readers undergo the experiences that they tell. The readers, who are inexperienced and ignorant to the stories told in these works, are like the protagonists, and they are able to gain understanding only by reading the texts, just as the protagonists do through their journeys, led by their guides.

The books themselves thus serve the roles of the guides in that they bestow
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knowledge and wisdom to the readers as they lead them through the book. These works act as the readers' guides and mentors as they direct the readers through the tales of the journeys of the protagonists, thereby allowing the readers to acquire the same wisdom and understanding as the protagonists. All three protagonists in *The Aeneid*, *Confessions*, and *The Divine Comedy* are able to acquire truth and understanding through the guidance of their respective mentors. Parallel to their journeys is the experience of the readers, who gain the same wisdom under the guidance of the texts themselves. Guidance from those who possess greater understanding than ourselves, whether in the form of another human being or of a book written long ago, is and will remain an indispensable element of human life as we navigate through the labyrinth of existence.