At first glance, the concept of the “few” and the “many” appears to be a very special side issue providing some interesting individual observations, but it does not seem to be of vital importance. In 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, but the comparison itself and its judgements play a repeated and not unimportant role in Augustine's intellectual biography. It is not restricted to the function of a merely effective literary device. At the latest since the reading of Hortensius, the question of truth is at the center of the Augustinian thinking. All of his further life is influenced by the endeavour for “wisdom”. According to Cicero, this wisdom comprises in a broad sense “the knowledge of divine and human matters as well as their causal relations”. This endeavour is, as is also shown in the Hortensius, an intellectual and practical-ethical undertaking at the same time. An insight into truth can only be gained if the search for knowledge is accompanied by a corresponding life style, thus the intellectual and the ethical aspect are interconnected.

The Hortensius therefore launches the search for truth in Augustine, which will remain a driving force throughout his entire life. The several stations of this search for truth from the reading of Hortensius to the return to the catholica are widely known and the internal relations have been clarified by many investigations. Hence, the following considerations aim...
at completing the picture by an aspect that has been little noticed so far. The motif of the few and the many can be found in the intellectual development from the young Augustine to the mature theologian. 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? Which influence does it have on his shift towards Manichaeism? Which role does it play in his return to the catholica and in his later campaign against Manichaeism?

1. Hortensius

Together with the impulse to search for truth, the Hortensius leads Augustine to the conviction that this truth can only be found among 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 frg. 111, combining it with a statement by Cicero which was preserved by Lactantius and claims that philosophy is not “ulgaris”, because only scholars can achieve it. It is however controversial whether these two fragments can really be attributed to Hortensius or not. Besides the fact that Augustine could as well have encountered them within


5 Cf. Aug., ciu. 22,22 (CCL 48 l. 121–124): “(philosophia) quam dì quibusdam paucis, ait Tullius, eram dederunt; nec hominibus, inquit, ab his aut datum est donum maurus aut potuit ullam dari.”

6 Cf. Cicero, Hortensius frg. 11 (Grilli).

7 Cf. Cicero, Hort. frg. 88 (Grilli) = Lact., inst. 3,25,1; cf. also Cic., Hort. frg. 89 (Grilli) (Lact., inst. 3,25,12).