

# A Reading of Augustine's *Confessions* and Its Implications for Education

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Truth is that by which what is manifests itself. —*On True Religion* 36.

Because of its most sweet and happy contemplation of you, it firmly checks its own mutability. Without any lapse from its first creation, it has clung fast to you. —*Confessions* 12.9.9

It is silent to one, but speaks to the other. Nay rather, it speaks to all, but only those understand who compare its voice taken from outside with the truth within. —*Confessions* 10.6.10

Truth is loved in such wise that men who love some other object want what they love to be the truth . . . —*Confessions* 10.23.34

Your best servant is he who looks not so much to hear from you what he wants to hear, but rather to want what he hears from you. —*Confessions* 10.26.37

We also, who are spiritual as to the soul, being turned away from you our light, were sometimes darkness in this life. —*Confessions* 13.2.3

I delighted in truth, in such little things and thoughts about such little things. I did not want to err. —*Confessions* 1.20.31

This book changed my affections. —*Confessions* 3.4.7

In his *Confessions* Augustine fashions an account of the first thirty-four years of his life. He situates moments of his personal story within the dynamic whole of the cosmos as he comes to understand it through his exegesis of the book of Genesis. At the time he composed and published the *Confessions*, some ten to twelve years after the last historical events narrated in it, Augustine was the bishop of Hippo. However, the



*Confessions* is not primarily a book about the author's past. He is just as concerned that his readers follow him in his present meditations on the Word of God as with their interest in how the Word brought him to where he now is. In effect, we encounter two Augustines. First, there is the Augustine narrated, the boy and young man whose actions and thoughts and feelings are brought forth out of memory. Second, there is Augustine who is the mature, teaching bishop writing his *confessiones* and situating the biographical parts within the larger "speech act" of the whole of his work. It is the overarching intent of the text as a whole that carries implications for understanding the meaning and practice of education.

### I. A Reading of the *Confessions*

#### *Confessio* – Augustine's mode of discourse

As an entry to the meaning of the *Confessions*, I shall begin with remarks on its mode of discourse. Augustine's approaches in the genre and structure of his text are notably distinctive. In comparison with the philosophical tradition, he is doing something new and unprecedented.

*Confessio*—as to the character of his mode of discourse, James J. O'Donnell captures well its peculiarity: "It begins abruptly, with speech directed to a silent God—but speech chosen from the words of God himself. . . . This opening can give rise to the disconcerting feeling of coming into a room and chancing upon a man speaking to someone who isn't there. He gestures in our direction and mentions us from time to time, but he *never addresses his readers*." O'Donnell continues, "as a literary text, *conf.* resembles a one-sided, non-fiction epistolary novel, enacted in the presence of the silence (and darkness) of God."<sup>1</sup> What stands out in O'Donnell's parody, is the image of

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<sup>1</sup> O'Donnell, *Augustine Confessions*, Vol. 2 Commentary Books 1-7 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), pp 8-9.



a man's direct address to an unseen and unheard interlocutor, spoken with the conceit of other interested hearers listening off on the sides and out of the picture.

The mode of discourse is not accidental to Augustine's meaning. "*Confessio*" is the name for the way he makes his meaning clear, draws his hearers and readers into what he says, and appeals to them for their assent. It is a term whose ordinary meaning for us is distant from Augustine's original intention. He has located the engagement of mind and reality within the interiority of the inquirer's heart and mind, and he understands the truth as freely entering into the scene from without and above both the material world and the immaterial soul. His "staging" of truth's manifestation is an essential condition for the personal drama of the search for wisdom. Augustine's rhetorical form contrasts starkly with the public form of the Greek philosophical mind, evident in the classical traditions of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Epicureans, in which wisdom is achieved in the philosophers' conversations in the agora, the academy, the stoa, or the gardens. In the classical philosophical form inquiring minds become manifest to one another as reality becomes evident to them in their common inquiry. By contrast, Augustine's conceit has it that God's hidden knowledge of reality and of Augustine is the source of both reality and Augustine's knowing. "My confession is made in silence before you, my God, and yet not in silence. As to sound, it is silent, but it cries aloud with love. Nor do I say any good thing to men except what you have first heard from me; nor do you hear any such thing from me but what you have first spoken to me" (10.2.2).<sup>2</sup> The written word of the *Confessions* represents the third intention, as it were. What we read are words that Augustine first intends for God, and those words, more primarily intended in direct discourse with God, Augustine himself first receives

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<sup>2</sup> English translations of Augustine's *Confessions* are taken from *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, translated, with an Introduction and Notes by John K. Ryan (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Image, 1960).



from God's original word to him. Our only access to God's discourse with Augustine is through Augustine's personal testimony in his *confessions*.

We recall Augustine's very first words (which in fact are themselves words of Divine Revelation, Ps 47:2; 95:4; 144:3): "You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised: great is your power and to your wisdom there is no limit." (1.1.1). O'Donnell writes: "strictly speaking these two lines contain a complete confession . . . that renders the remaining 78,000 or so words of the text superfluous."<sup>3</sup> There is a perspective on the world in which the fullness of truth and wisdom is expressed in these 15 Latin words: *magnum es, domine, et laudabilis valde. Magna virtus tua et sapientiae tuae non est numerus.* In the first two sentences Augustine has said enough; it is, from a certain point of view, the sufficient confession. The spoken word achieves its end in such praise. The witness of praise is the sempiternal hymn of the heaven of heavens. It is also the end for which God created men and women.

Yet Augustine continues through the following 78,000 words. From what perspective, therefore, are the opening words *not* a sufficient confession? In the case of mankind, the disordered loves of sinfulness shut down that praise. The thirteen books are Augustine's account of God's action in the restoration of that praise. The witness of his own sinfulness and God's mercy is also one of the modes of Augustine's confession. What Augustine writes in the *Confessions* is his self-understanding before the mirror of God or the truth of his life in the light of God's Word. The truth of God's merciful love rouses in him the mixed strains of sorrow, gratitude, and praise for God's greatness. And because this account is spoken by a presiding bishop and shared in confident love with those who would recognize in it God's word, they too join in the confessions of sorrow for sin, gratitude for mercy, and praise of the greatness of God. Augustine's *confessions*, in sum, represent a complex "speech act" that establishes on the basis of

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<sup>3</sup> O'Donnell, vol 2, p 9.



truth a community of love, both between God and man, and man and man. They are a paradigm of Christian wisdom.

The divine creator's freedom lies at the basis of the truth about reality and the accessibility of Augustine's knowledge of it. In addition, Augustine's decision to become a "philosopher" in the Christian order of things, requires on his part a dramatic act of freedom. Many of these points are expressed in an instructive formulation of Thomas Prufer: "Augustine is paradigmatic for the theological form of mind in contrast to the Greek philosophical form." For the Christian theological mind, "questioning comes to rest in a freedom which could choose other than it does. If God were to choose that creatures not be, then all that "being" would mean would be God alone. On the other hand, for creatures to be is for them to be, without remainder or reserve, chosen by and manifest to another. There is no privacy: man is because he is manifest to another. But this publicity to God is as hidden as God Himself, unless God's eloquence manifests Him as our public and as the friend who confirms us in our knowledge of ourselves and one another."<sup>4</sup> In other words, if we grant that the human excellence which the Greeks called *arête* and the Romans *virtus* was achieved and manifest within a common public and a common world,<sup>5</sup> Augustine has radically transformed the conditions of publicity and worldliness for human excellence. The most essential condition is God's free decision to create, to reveal, and to restore. Augustine's responsive freedom is the second condition. He achieves his wisdom in conversation with God and he acquires his moral strength—his continence and steadfast love—in the interior encounters with God. From within this interior status his subsequent public confession builds up the bonds of unity and draws members of the community into a common wisdom.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Prufer, *Recapitulations: Essay in Philosophy* (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993) pp 28-9.

<sup>5</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1958) pp 48-55.



*Development through the thirteen books*

On first look, the structure of the *Confessions's* thirteen books strikes one as odd. We see the first nine books governed straightforwardly by the lineaments of Augustine's biography, from his infancy to his baptism and the death of his mother. Then the tenth book elaborates an account of memory as part of an analytical description of the hierarchy of being and the upward way of the mind's search for God. Just when it seems that Book Ten should bring the whole work to a conclusion (at 10.26.37), it opens up to a ranging discussion of the structures of sin. The final three books, under the rubric of a commentary on the Book of Genesis 1.1 – 2.2, take up a wide variety of topics, such as the Trinity, consciousness of time, principles of scriptural hermeneutics, and the office of the bishop.

Certain themes play a systematic role throughout the work as a whole. Of special interest are the *restless heart* (for instance at 1.1.1; 5.2.2; 13.1.1; 13.8.9; 13.37.52); *dispersion of soul*: "I spent my self upon the many" (2.1.1), "deafened by the clanking of my mortality . . . I wandered farther away from you and you let me go. I was tossed about and spilt out in my fornications; I flowed out and boiled over in them" (2.2.2); "my life is a distention or distraction . . . dissipated in many ways upon many things" (11.29.39); and *continence*: "there appeared to me the chaste dignity of continence" (8.11.27), "by continence we are gathered together and brought back to the One, from whom we have dissipated our being into many things" (10.29.40); "in you may my scattered longings be gathered together" (10.40.67); and the concept of *cleaving to or holding fast*: "See where a man's feeble soul lies stricken when it does not cling to the solid support of truth" (4.14.23), "I was not steadfast in enjoyment of my God: I was borne up to you by your beauty, but soon I was borne down from you by my own weight" (7.17.23), "True it is that [the heaven of heavens] suffers no temporal changes which so clings to the



immutable form that, although itself mutable, it is not changed" (12.19.28), "'Be light made,' and light was made, and every obedient intelligence in your heavenly city had cleaved to you and found rest in your Spirit, which is borne unchangeably over every changeable thing" (13.8.9).

The common themes and distinctive particulars of the *Confessions* are situated within an overarching dynamic pattern of the rational or intellectual creature's corrective or recovering ascent toward God as Truth and light from a prior tendency of descent and dispersion amidst the darksome depths (for instance, 2.10.18; 11.29.39; 13.8.9; 13.10.11; 13.14.15;). At the end stands the condition of steadfast love and praise of God. Augustine's personal narrative follows such a pattern of descent (bks 1-5) and ascent (bks 5-9)<sup>6</sup>. So also does the "heaven of heavens" reflect the dynamic structure in the very first moment of creation (12.9.9; 12.11.12; 12.15.19-21).

In mankind's case, the upward movement represents the rectification of disordered love. Establishing the proper ordering of the love of creatures and the love of the Creator is *the* ultimate task for rational, intellectual creatures. In a poignant reflection on the tortuous path he had travelled in following out the impulses of his own disordered loves, Augustine confesses: "Too late have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new, too late have I loved you. Behold, you were within me, while I was outside: it was there I sought you, and, a deformed creature, rushed headlong upon these things of beauty which you have made. You were with me, but I was not with you. . . . You have called to me, and have cried out, and have shattered my deafness. You have blazed forth with light, and have shone upon me, and have put my blindness to flight." (10.27.38). The implicit narrative is generated from the interaction of two vectors: Augustine's headlong embrace of the beauties of creation – which on the face of

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<sup>6</sup> See Frederick J. Crosson. "Structure and Meaning in St. Augustine's *Confessions*," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 63 (1989), 84-97.



it seems nothing bad – and God’s ongoing solicitude and illumination which Augustine in his thirty-four years of life has only lately acknowledged. He depicts God’s word as shattering a deafness and his light as putting to flight a blindness. It’s important to realize that the deafness and blindness are conditions willed by Augustine himself. He did not want God in the picture, at least not on God’s terms. “I preferred to think that even you were mutable, than that I was not that which you are” (4.15.26).

God’s absence in Augustine’s life represents a personal achievement to filter out the objective reality of God’s presence. There is a pattern or logic to the blocking of God’s reality from one’s life, which Augustine calls the three forms of temptations. They are the manifold pleasures of the flesh, vain curiosities of the intellect, and the proud ambitions of the will (10.30.41; 10.31.47; 10.35.54; 10.36.59). Later he characterizes them as the “motions of a dead soul” (13.21.30). They are also the agents of forgetfulness by which the disordered, inconstant heart hides the Truth from itself (10.2.2). One might think of them as the directive forces of the soul’s dissipation in its descent from God.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the narrative sections of the *Confessions* Augustine presents himself being entangled in the different forms of sin in the variety of their manifestations. We also witness the drama of his systematic liberation from their chains one by one.<sup>8</sup> The culminating moment of this long process of liberation occurs in the garden at Milan. There after an interior battle over his heart by his “lovers of old” (8.11.26) and “the chaste dignity of continence” (8.11.27), Augustine decides to love God *wholeheartedly*, to prefer altogether the love of God to the range of past loves that had claimed parts of his soul, as it were, to the exclusion of God. With that decision, “a

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<sup>7</sup> The three forms of sin are drawn directly from 1 John 2:16: “... all that is in the world, lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world” (Revised Standard Version).

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, 1.10.16; 1.19.30; 1.20.31; 2.2.4; 2.6.13; 3.3.5; 3.8.16; 5.3.4; 6.6.9; 8.11.26; 9.1.1; 10.30.41; 10.40.65; 10.41.66; 13.21.30-31.





peaceful light streamed into my heart, and all the dark shadows of doubt fled away” (8.12.29).

### *Truth in the Confessions*

The themes of truth and Augustine’s theory of illumination are too large even for this overly ambitious essay. But we must at least gesture in their direction in order to understand the essential rational component in the restless heart and the paths it leads us into.

From the start, man is a creature of desire, and he is especially drawn to pleasing and beautiful things. Unless one becomes a man of judgment, however, he becomes subject to the things he loves. Judgment enables one to question his loves. As Augustine puts it: to both the unreflective and reflective man a given beautiful thing appears the same, yet “it is silent to one, but speaks to the other. Nay rather, it speaks to all, but only those understand who compare its voice taken from outside with the truth within” (10.6.10). In other words, having judgment is here a matter of being able to question and hear the beauty in what we love. Judging, however, is a matter of comparing the given external manifestation of beauty with truth that appears only interior to the mind. In effect, it is through judgment that desires are brought into scrutiny under the light of truth.

One might reasonably ask: Why submit to an examination of one’s immediate pursuits and enjoyments? What’s the advantage? What’s the motivation? Augustine answers that everyone is drawn to happiness as the dominant, governing object of desire, and, furthermore, that “joy in the truth is the happy life” (10.23.33). It seems, therefore, that the early impulses that draw us to the beauties of the external world *need not* be resistant to the light of truth which judgment opens out onto our loves.

Yet this inward and upward turn to truth is not without its intellectual and moral



challenges. Morally, the exposure of our passions, desires, choices is unsettling. Augustine put it in the strongest term at the *Confessions'* great moment of decision: "I still hesitated to die to death and to live to life, for the ingrown worse had more power over me than the untried better. The nearer came that moment in time when I was to become something different, the greater terror did it strike into me" (8.11.25). Because exposing our "love-life" to the judgment of truth is so personally difficult, we have practiced tactics for avoiding it, in the ways we've already discussed. Here it is important only to add that the overall strategy of avoidance involves the willful manipulation of truth:

Truth is loved in such wise that men who love some other object want what they love to be the truth . . . and because they do not want to be deceived, they refuse to be convinced that they have been deceived. Therefore they hate the truth for the sake of that very thing which they have loved instead of the truth. (10.23.34)

Personal decision holds the keys to the sort of Truth and Wisdom sought by the philosophical and theological mind.

Intellectually, judgment is also difficult. It is just not easy to think beyond sensible, material, changeable realities. Grasping what is absolute or what is universal and necessary demands refined powers of abstraction. Augustine describes the process in his theory of illumination. Let me offer a basic synthesis through the eyes of Etienne Gilson.<sup>9</sup> As Augustine understands it, the mind is active. Not only does it animate the body and produce sensation as prompted by the body, more importantly, "it is active in regard to the particular images engendered by sensation; it gathers, separates, compares them and reads the intelligible in them. But then something appears in the mind which cannot be explained either by the objects which the mind ponders or by the mind itself

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<sup>9</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, translated by L. E. M. Lynch (New York: Random House, 1960, esp. pp 76-96.



which ponders them, and this is the true judgment and the note of necessity which it implies. The judgment of truth is the component the mind must receive because it lacks the power to produce it itself." (Gilson, 87) Divine illumination comes into play when ideas are held as truth that men ought to hold. It explains the sources of the universality and necessity of knowledge. Included here are our judgments that empirical particulars are beautiful. Similar ideas, independent of empirical particularity, include the good, the true, number, equality, likeness, and wisdom. As ideas, these notions are to be thought of not so much as content, but as concepts that provide the grounds for universal and necessary judgments, and as such they transcend what is given in them on empirical grounds. Nor could they be generated out of the created mind's mutable, fallible resources. "Experience and not illumination tells us what an arch or a man is; illumination and not experience tells us what a perfect arch or a perfect man ought to be" (Gilson, 90).

In the *Confessions* we find Augustine's characteristic pattern of reasoning at 7.17.23 as well as at 9.10.24, and in the sequence stretching though 10.6.8-10.26.37. His earlier *De libero arbitrio* 2.3-15 develops the argument in an elaborated form. Later in *De trinitate* 8.3, 9.6-7, he develops an especially interesting version, already adumbrated in *Confessions* 9.10.25. Inevitably, attractive objects appeal under the guises of truth or beauty. Augustine first spends himself on corporeal objects, then he turns inward and invests in furnishings, affections, and judgments of the mind. Objects of the external and internal spheres, however, offer only limited, temporary satisfaction. Finding no steady satisfaction in either of these two spheres, he enters into the final sphere by virtue of God's illumination and his own wholehearted decision to face the light.

*A new context for ongoing confessio – Book Eleven.*

It can seem that the autobiographical narrative of the first nine books is sufficient



for an understanding of the *Confessions*. It certainly suffices in the experience of many readers. Yet the final four books make up almost half of the whole. And there is a reason for the continuation. First of all, Augustine is acutely aware of the contingent status of his chaste continence. He is still susceptible to the temptations of lust, curiosity, and pride. The last half of Book Ten can be read as his examination of conscience on just this point. Moreover, he, Augustine the author-bishop, wants to deepen and extend his *confessio*. He desires to praise God even more for his greatness.

Up to this point in the *Confessions* (that is, up through Book Ten), the provocation of Augustine's *confessio* has been the manifestation of God in the narrative thread of his life, from birth to baptism. Now, at Book Eleven, it is Scripture that provides the evidence – the manifold in which God's Providence becomes manifest. We could say that there is still a biographical basis for the speech that carries through the next three books. But it is a slender thread, at least by contrast to the way narration dominates the preceding books. In 11.2.2 Augustine self-consciously represents himself in his office as a bishop, charged with preaching the Word and celebrating the Eucharist (*perduxisti praedicare verbum et sacramentum tuum dispensare*). He now finds it necessary<sup>10</sup> to devote precious hours to meditating on the law of the Lord and to let his understanding and his ignorance be the occasion of his confession. In short, Augustine wants to understand the Scriptures ("May your Scriptures be my chaste delight") and to put them to the service of fraternal charity. He feels deeply the fleeting character of time. And his meditations will take time, for God's Scriptures consist of many pages, filled with difficult and secret meanings. Yet he speaks directly to God, confident that God will give what he desires: "Grant what I love, for I love in the truth, and this too have you given to me." He couches his desire in the suggestive poetry of Scripture: "Nor are those forests to lack their harts, who will retire therein, and regain their strength, walk

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<sup>10</sup> O'Donnell III, 255-56.



about and feed, lie down and ruminate. Lord perfect me, and open those pages to me. Behold, your voice is my joy." In the last three books, Augustine will become the hart feeding on the forest vegetation (Ps 28:9).

In sum, Augustine will meditate on Scripture and confess to God and before the community of mankind the glory of God manifest in his Word. As he puts it, " Let me confess to you whatever I shall find in your books, and let me 'hear the voice of praise,' and drink you in, and consider 'the wonderful things of your law,' from the beginning, wherein you made heaven and earth, even to an everlasting kingdom together with you in your holy city." We might wonder whether in fact Augustine intends to confess what he finds in the whole of Scripture since he plans to explicate only the first chapter of Genesis. In fact, yes, he does so intend, insofar as his typological reading allows him to see the whole present in the beginning.<sup>11</sup>

Augustine ends his introduction (11.1.1 – 2.4) with a prayer to the Father calling upon the mediation of the Son. The Son, which is to say the Word, mediates between the Father and mankind two ways: (1) "through him you sought us when we did not seek you, and sought us so that we might seek you"—the theo-logic of the narrative of Books 1-10; and (2) "through whom you have made all things . . . through whom you have called to adoption a people of believers" (11.2.4)—the theo-logic of creation as well as the through-line of the history of Israel. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are concealed in the Word. It is this knowledge and wisdom that Augustine seeks in the books of Scripture. It is also the Truth and Wisdom that he will teach from his episcopal office.

Although Book Eleven is famously devoted to the consideration of time, interpreters' decided focus on the nature of time is in some way a distraction from Augustine's chief concern. After an original account of time (or is it *timing*?) as the

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<sup>11</sup> O'Donnell, III, 261.



distension of mind, Augustine transitions to considerations of the ascent to Truth against the human condition of distension of personhood. The argument rests on a parallelism: distension of the mind gives us the experience of time by sustaining the continuity of the passage of “presence” from non-being of the future into the non-being of the past. The present is given continuity and duration by attention of the present, anticipation of the future, and memory of the past. The things remembered, “contuited,” and anticipated leave residues or images in the mind which the mind holds together—as we experience, for example, the simple apprehension of the expression “*Deus creator omnium*” or in one’s recitation of, say, Psalm 95. In both cases there is a sustained governing intention that overarches and unites “before” and “after” in the temporal sequence. Were we unable to hold on to the first syllable until the last has been sounded, we would experience no word or enunciation. Each discrete syllable would disappear on its utterance and no whole word or expression would form. Analogously, any human person can lose himself in the moral distension of his personhood. The fullness of human existence is achieved in contingency, experienced as the gathering and sustaining of the unity of a dispersed self. This moral achievement parallels the metaphysical achievement of one’s existence in the creative (“let it be”) and gathering (“come to me”) sustenance of divine love. Anxiety over hovering non-existence is the condition of the experience of our personal contingency. On the one hand, anxiety derives from the need to trust in God’s creative, sustaining love, and on the other hand from our own willfulness. The task is not the futile attempt to sustain the temporal whole of one’s existence, but to transcend temporality and enter into the region of eternity: “gather together . . . to follow the One: (11.29.39), that “I may flow altogether into you” (11.29.39). By setting up the eternal sphere in a radical transcendent relation to the immanent (temporal) sphere as part of the God-gifted human experience of the continent heart, Augustine finalizes the most essential understanding of God as



Creator of heaven and earth. The creator does not know his creation in a temporal modality: “it is not as emotions or senses are distended in the expectation of words to come and in the memory of words just past in our experience of the singing or hearing of well-known psalms” —not in this fashion does God know his creatures (11.31.41).

In short, human life is inevitably conditioned by distention or distraction. Given our temporality, we human beings can move in one of two ways: either (1) steady attention can lead to an anticipation or foreshadowing of eternity, or (2) our distention can be nothing more than the distraction of dissipation. In this context, Christ (the Son) mediates between the Father (One) and men (Many). Through Christ we are able to apprehend the Father, even as we are gathered together from our former dissipation of self in order to follow the One. This transforming of the intellect and the will is an extension .

Philosophical insight or mystical intuition is not the way of Christianity. Even if Augustine may have encountered God in the philosophical reflection and mystical conversations of Books 7, 8, and 9, it is not the way of Everyman. Nor are they anymore the ways that Augustine encounters God’s Word. God is encountered in Scripture and in the Sacraments. The goal is to be brought into Divine Life. We have the mediation of Christ – as Word of Scripture and Priest/Victim of the Eucharist. For the member of the Christian community the task is for the soul to not release itself in dissipation, but to be gathered into the One. This will happen in the Christian life of the Church.

*Heaven of heavens in Book Twelve and the Word’s polysemy*

The content of Book Twelve interprets the first two verses of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and the darkness was upon the face of the deep (*in principio fecit deus caelum et terram. terra invisibilis erat et incomposita, et tenebrae erant super abyssum.*)” Augustine first of all (cc. 2-



13) establishes his own “best reading” of the text. He understands the lines to signify the creation of the intellectual heaven, the “heaven of heavens,” and the “proto-earth” which is invisible and without form—both realities created by God prior to the numerated days of creation (12.13.16). The notion of “the heaven of heavens” interests us because it establishes at the outermost reaches of the created universe a standard for the restless heart’s conversion to Truth (13.2.3 – 3.4).

Secondly (cc. 14-32), he introduces methodological considerations that conclude to a legitimate plurality of true interpretations of the same one text. He explains that in one and the same text, God reveals his truth to many hearers, but in ways such that the meaning which the different hearers receive through the text need not be identical. But they must be true meanings of the one text and intended for the individual hearer by God. Augustine has lovely ways of recommending his account of the polysemeous character of divine scripture. For instance, he speaks of how for pious but simple, untutored minds an especially literal understanding of the words function like a nest that protects the featherless birdling (12.27.37). Whereas, by contrast, for the sophisticated and learned hearer, God’s words are no longer the nest, but the shady bowers of the greenwoods where one might “see the fruits that lie therein and joyously fly about, and pipe songs and look carefully at them and pluck them” (12.28.38). Augustine wants to resist firmly a dogmatic insistence upon one of many legitimate interpretations. As he sees it, such insistence springs from self-will. Such insistence does not come from dogmatic interpreters “because they have a divine spirit and have seen in the heart of your servant what they assert, but [rather] because they are proud and have not known Moses’s meaning but love their own, not because it is true, but because it is their own (12.25.34).” It is easy to hear the echo of Augustine’s prior discussion of the willfulness by which we conceal the truth from ourselves (10.23.34). Within the community of interpretation, one must guard against those who would limit God’s





word from being heard truly in the several strains that communicate with the simple and subtle alike. "Amid this diversity of true opinions, let truth itself beget concord" (12.30.41).

*Episcopal office and Book Thirteen*

The continuation of Augustine's *confessio* in the last book takes the form of a complex allegorical interpretation of the seven days of creation. The interpretation is led by a literal recall of the Creator's formative work in each day. Each day's work is then paralleled by an account of the stages of spiritual conversion by which all spiritual beings are called back toward the rest and peace of life with God. The allegorical turning of the ontological creative formation to the moral redemptive conversion results in a depiction of the work of the Church with especial attention to the role of the preacher, the minister of the Word.<sup>12</sup>

Within the allegorical vision of Book Thirteen, it is the function of the Sacred Scriptures "to extend to man in the cosmos the illuminating, converting speech of the Word in human language" (DiLorenzo, 80). The process begins with God's "*fiat lux*" on the first day, in which "Spirit . . . dwells in us, because he was mercifully borne above our dark and fluid inner being" (13.14.15). This illumination represents "the archetype of Sacred Scripture itself" in which we witness "the unfolding of salvation history of the Church, a history which, furthermore, includes . . . Augustine's own life story." (13.12.13). The allegorical interpretations of the next five days portray the conversion of mankind in the temporal universe (Di Lorenzo, 79). On the second day, the allegory has it that God, "through the ministry of mortal men" stretches out the divine Scriptures

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<sup>12</sup> See Raymond D. DiLorenzo, "Divine Eloquence and the Spiritual World of the *Predicator*: Book XIII of St Augustine's *Confessions*" (*Augustinian Studies* 16 (1985): 75-89), Carl G. Vaught, *Access to God in Augustine's Confessions: Books X-XIII* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp 202-26, and O'Donnell's *Commentary III Books 8-13*, pp 362-421, especially his *conspectus*, pp 416-17.



like a firmament over the nations of world (13.15.16-18). Augustine confesses that there are no other “books which so destroy pride . . . I do not know any such pure words (*casta eloquia*) which so persuade me to make confession and make my neck meek to your yoke, and invite me to serve you without complaint.” (13.15.17). On the sixth day, Augustine situates the divine Spirit’s transforming light in the contemporary life of the Church’s ordained ministry. In the allegorical understanding God reveals how the eternal Word perfects the lives of those among the community of the baptized, and in their midst we see how the Word works through the Church’s ordained ministers, its *predicadores*. As he is writing these words, Augustine is decidedly self-conscious of his own conduct of his office as bishop. DiLorenzo describes well Augustine’s self-understanding at the end of the *Confessions*:

The new rhetoric of the *predicator* requires him to seek God so that his soul may be empowered by the Word to produce spiritual life in others. To Augustine, then, the work of the sixth day of Genesis figures the perfecting of spiritual life through the preachers. As they are perfected, so do they perfect. The way is twofold: (1) by continence, (2) by renewal of mind. (p. 85-86)

This is really not the makings of the classical philosopher. But it is the manifestation of one responsible before the Truth and active in the search for Wisdom in the Christian dispensation. We could call it Christian philosophy, if we wish.

*In sum*

Augustine’s autobiographical narrative and his interpretation of Genesis 1.1-2.2 belong to the same “speech-act,” the same *confessio*. They issue from Augustine’s silent, interior discourse with God. They reflect on and they express the insistent presence of God’s Word in his life, as a youth on the way to conversion and baptism and as the active bishop of Hippo. He understands his personal encounters as an instance of an



immense movement coursing throughout creation. His *confessiones* are themselves moments in that movement. They are the *predicator's* words mediating the divine Word within the community of Christian believers. Confession is the indispensable way of Christian wisdom. It is how Wisdom and Truth enter into and form the human community in the Christian dispensation.

## II. Implications for Education

The notion of education employed in this essay is an expansive one. It does not confine education to schooling. All human beings are educated, though not all are schooled. Education signifies the process, concerted activity, or achievement that befits or capacitates one for a more perfect or complete performance of some desirable or wished-for activity. In a broad sense, education is indispensable in becoming, for better or for worse, the kind of man, woman, friend, or citizen that each of us becomes. In a narrow sense, it is through education that one learns to read and write, the musician learns to play the instrument, the surgeon to perform heart operations, the minister to counsel his flock. We are born into the world completely dependent upon the care and good will of others. It takes many years to acquire the adult measure of physical, emotional, and intellectual maturity. Although conditioned by some natural necessities, it is a complex of individual and societal deliberations and choices that directs the process of education.

At the center of the process lies the student's desire for an increase in his or her own being and belonging in the world. The undeniable desire for increase that is part of the learner's personal make-up must reflect some attunement to the projected or promised achievements of education. It is of the utmost importance that the direction that this desire for increase takes should be a direction that ultimately reflects the student's own free decision. Here we touch upon the role of the learner's personal



freedom as an ultimate condition for education, especially for the sort of education that matters most. One of the paradoxes of education is that “others” — parents and elders in one’s community, stewards of the culture’s resources invested with authority—work toward their wards’ independence, their personal judgment and freedom. The implied bond of trust, fraught with the potential for manipulation and betrayal, stands as a primary concern for the understanding and practice of education.<sup>13</sup>

Drawing implications for the practical understanding of education from the *Confessions* can proceed from two perspectives. First, one might ask how one educates men and women of faith, those who are the members of the Christian community. This concern seems to be one that immediately preoccupied Augustine during the period of his life when he was cogitating and writing the *Confessions*. Secondly, one might look to the autobiographical, narrative sections of his *confessiones* and examine the steps of his own education on the way to his conversion and baptism. Are there pedagogical, curricular, or theoretical lessons to be learned, particularly applicable to the teaching of the unbeliever or the nominal Christian? The first way is the more important in that it establishes the end of education. It directly brings men and women into the experience of wisdom. The second way is perhaps the more necessary, for it would establish the predispositions toward participation in the community of Christian wisdom. Consideration of Augustine’s analysis of the intellectual, moral, and societal impediments that he encountered may prove to have relevance beyond his unique historical case. Likewise, in his education as a boy and youth, we may find positive contribution to the formation of a mind and heart disposed to love of God. In what follows let me propose some recommendations that would seem to follow from Augustine’s *Confessions*.

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<sup>13</sup> See Augustine’s sense of his own betrayal by elders and culture 1.12.19 – 18.29; 3.3.5 -6.



1. *Sacred Scripture* forms the outer skin of human cultures (13.15.16-18). It teaches the first truths about God and the human person. It is accessible to all mankind under two conditions: (1) one must have the ears to hear, which is a function of one's free decision to break from the self-will of concupiscence and pride, and (2) it must be preached, though everyone is disposed to it in principle by a congenital love of truth and desire for happiness. Scripture speaks a language accessible alike to the simple and the subtle, the unschooled and the schooled. The spirit of this hearing of God's Word does not point directly to the historical-critical study of the Bible, though such study will have its indispensable place in the schooling of the learned. Rather, to use the words of Joseph Ratzinger, it hearkens "to a voice greater than man's [which] echoes in Scripture's human words; the individual writings [*Schrifte*] of the Bible point somehow to the living process that shapes the one Scripture [*Schrift*]." Attending to Scripture in this spirit is a "personal search for 'the face of the Lord' (Ps 27:8)."<sup>14</sup>
2. *Nourish simple beginnings in the pedagogy of desire*.<sup>15</sup> Foster delight in the truth of even simple predications, wonder at the ingenuity of nature, the attractions of beauty in art and nature, pleasure in poetry and song, love of knowledge, joy in friendship's loving others and being loved by them. These initial, simple joys provide hard evidence of depths of the heart and of broader horizons for life. Augustine's remarks on his friendships are instructive. He recalls a conversation with his good friends Alypius and Nebridius (6.16.26). He marvels that with respect to his cognitive life, he was intellectually blind to the idea of "virtue and

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth. From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, translated from the German by Adrian J. Walker (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 2007) pp xviii, xxiii.

<sup>15</sup> The expression "pedagogy of desire" is taken from an audience of Benedict XVI. General Audience, Piazza di San Pietro, Vatican City 7 November 2012; [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/audiences/2012/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20121107\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20121107_it.html) accessed 7 November 2012.



beauty that must be embraced for its own sake” although in the practical order of personal experience he had no doubt that he “loved these friends for their own sakes, and that [he knew] that they in turn love me for my own sake.” Later he describes quizzing corporeal things; “to all the things that stand around the doors of my flesh I said: ‘Tell me of my God!’ With a mighty voice they cried out, ‘He made us!’ My question was the gaze I turned on them; the answer was their beauty.” (10.6.9)

3. *Interiority and silence.* In a fundamental sense Christian wisdom is first experienced in listening for God’s word. It takes place in the silence of one’s heart. Silence here means the literal absence of noise, but it more importantly signifies a mental space free of distractions or practical anxieties.
4. *Conversation.* Augustine was led into deeper realizations primarily through his conversations. Books seemed to have played a lesser, more supportive role. Conversations and personal exchanges that stand out are manifold. Let me signal a few of the more prominent among them: the ongoing conversations with the unnamed friend who dies, dialogues with Faustus, disputes with Alypius and Nebridius, exchanges with Vindicianus and Nebridius, consultation with Simplicianus in Milan, and reflections with Monica at Ostia.
5. *Books and schooling.* Cicero’s *Hortensius*, the books of the Platonists, the books of the sacred Scriptures played decisive roles in Augustine’s conversion; they inspired, corrected, and informed him at crucial moments of his life. He was gifted with a splendid mind, superb memory, and a studious disposition. His parents set him up with good teachers in good schools. He mastered the various requirements of Latin grammar, classical rhetoric, and Aristotle’s *Categories*. He acquired some competence in mathematics, music, and the teachings of natural science. He also had a broad acquaintance with Latin poetry and drama and the



books of Mani. If I understand him correctly, he saw in all of these studies little of intrinsic worth. At their best they were mostly useful and, in some respects, necessary. He believes that in his case the usefulness of these studies was largely misused in feeding his wanton pleasures, vanities, and vain curiosities. They led him astray (4.16.30). The point here is not to condemn books and liberal studies. However, he does not see in them something of intrinsic worth to be studied for their own sake. Their undisputed usefulness is a mixed blessing that can as easily serve the interests of the soul's dispersion as its continence.

6. *Philosophy.* The books of the Platonists, in effect, classical metaphysics, led Augustine to the recognition of incorporeal truth, precisely what he needed to make a clean intellectual break from Manichean materialism (7.9.13; 7.20.26). One gets a taste of their effect in the dialectical ascents described at 7.10.16 and 7.17.23. What we might consider Augustine's "mastery" of classical philosophy, however, puffed him up with presumptive knowledge (7.20.26). It was the Sacred Scriptures, and in particular the Apostle Paul, that checked his presumptive pride and stirred him to piety and a humbled heart (7.21.27). From pedagogical and curricular points of view, the intensive study of philosophy may be necessary for some, as it was for Augustine, but its tendency to feed pride and a spirit of self-sufficiency needs to be checked by the Christian pedagogy of humility. Despite his expressed reservations, however, philosophy's role in education should not be considered simply accidental to this or that person's preparation for the life of grace. First of all, it is philosophy that originally constitutes the ideal of the life of the mind and its rational pursuit of truth. Augustine's understanding of his conversion in the garden, and much that lead up to it, inhabits a logical space first carved out in Socrates' "examined life." As I have written elsewhere, "The examination Socrates has in mind requires a



measure of withdrawal from the passions that tie us to the ordinary loves of our life. The logical space created in this withdrawal encompasses two realities: the self's interiority and glimmerings of transcendent truth." The philosophical cast of mind, I believe, is an artifact of culture. And it should be among the first ends of education. "Truth makes difficult demands on personal being. Because the human heart suffers a profound contrariety at its core, the self's existential interests conflict with its essential teleology. Human life, in its individual and corporate forms, plays out the conflict of power under the sway of self-will and power subordinating itself to a transcendent truth. In favor of truth's cause lies the intrinsic beauty of truth itself and mankind's innate, even if inconstant, susceptibility to its allure." It is hard to see how Augustine's Christian mind is conceivable except as a transformation from within a prior philosophical mind.<sup>16</sup>

7. *Patience and Trust.* Learning, and especially moral education, has something in common with courageous action. It is a common mistake to think that progress in courage aims at eliminating fear. We can be tempted to identify fearlessness as a mark of courage. But in a real sense, courage embraces fear. One who is courageous is intensely aware of the harm that threatens him or her, and the consequent feelings of fear will be essential to the experience. The point of courage is not to not feel fear, but to not permit such feelings to deter one from doing what ought to be done. Similarly, an essential part of moral education aims not so much to prevent temptation and moral error, for responsibility for sinfulness and wickedness will be part of everyone's life. The biographical dimensions of Augustine's *confessiones* grow out of his profound moral realism. Following the example of Augustine's extended conversion, the point is to

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<sup>16</sup> William A. Frank, "The Catholic Mind: Culture, Philosophy, and Responsibility in Higher Education," *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice* 4:2 (December 2000), 210-11.





recognize our moral failures and not permit them from finally deterring us from advancing in the moral life. Parents, teachers, elders in general can be too preoccupied with the prevention of moral failures in their wards. In the face of inevitable moral failure, it is important for youth to have habits and dispositions for calling upon the resources of their own inner life and as well upon the counsel of friends and elders. The care of others and one's own inner resources that I have in mind are the sort that cause us to ask "Now, how shall I respond to that?" or as a friend of mine is fond of putting it, "What's the lesson here?" One can only ask such questions so long as care has been taken to install well in advance and to maintain active lines of reflective communication. Much like the father in the Gospel parable of the prodigal son, parents, teachers, and elders must learn to release those under their care to their freedom. This sort of care requires trust in the young person's responsible agency and patience in the process of finding one's way. One sees in the *Confessions* Augustine's progressive recognition and ownership of his personal responsibility for wicked actions. Ingredient in the narrative are the works of patience and trust on the part of friends and elders. I think it fair to say as well that patience and trust are also hallmarks of God's relationship with Augustine throughout his *Confessions*.

