

ARTIKLAR

NESCIO. THE PEDAGOGY OF IGNORANCE IN AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONES*, BOOK X*

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Non sunt hi sermones confessionum mearum si tibi non confiteor, "nescio".¹

Confessiones, XII.30.41

Approaching Augustine

John Cavadini notes that there is only one thing more common in Augustine scholarship than reflections on Augustine and the self, and that is reflections on Augustine and sex!² The latter needs no justification, but why the persistent interest in Augustine's views on selfhood? Much of the preoccupation with the so-called self arguably

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¹ "These writings are no true confession of mine unless I confess to you, 'I do not know.'" I use the Latin edition of James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 3 vols. Introduction, text, and commentary, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1992, and rely for translation into English on Maria Boulding, O.S.B., *The Confessions*, New York: New City Press, 1997.

² John Cavadini, "The Darkest Enigma: Reconsidering the Self in Augustine's Thought", *Augustinian Studies* 38:1 (2007), 119–132. Cavadini observes that there is no direct Latin equivalent to the English phrase 'the self'.

results from treating Augustine primarily as an important philosopher in the history of Western thought, more or less wrested from his theological embeddedness, and above all concerned with interiority, subjectivity, and knowledge.

What such over-epistemologized and de-theologized readings of Book X of the *Confessions* risk missing is what is arguably one of Augustine's most important insights, namely the idea of a radical (and phenomenologically sensitive) *self-questioning as a spiritual discipline or pedagogy*. On such a reading, the primary purpose of the text is to open the reader to the need of having oneself reconstituted by God through a continual conversion, which it is the purpose of confession to facilitate. Put differently, by focusing exclusively on what the text is *saying* about knowledge of God and self one risks missing what the text is *doing*, that is, what it hopes to achieve. From this perspective, the enigmatic nature of the text is not accidental; the way in which it raises more questions than it provides answers is integral to its purpose. As such the pedagogy of the text hinges upon what I shall call a confession of ignorance.

The theme of ignorance is deeply imbedded in the structure of the *Confessions*, and is particularly pronounced in books X and XI. Nonetheless, it is a neglected theme both in Augustine scholarship, which has focused on other aspects of the memory-investigation, and in the common philosophical reception of Augustine. There is, in fact, a widespread superficial understanding of the Augustinian 'turn within,' with echoes in serious scholarship as well, and it goes something like this:

Augustine is disillusioned with the possibility of reaching knowledge of God through the experience of things external to his senses, through the natural world. This motivates his turning within, to interior experience, where he finds God. And this finding of God occurs as he explores his own mind – or rather that part of mind which he calls *memoria*. Getting to know himself he is progressively led beyond himself to God. Thus the knowledge of self precedes the knowledge of God. Even Peter Brown, who is otherwise more nuanced, says about this in his great biography: "The *Confessions* are a manifesto of the inner world. ... A Man cannot hope to find God

unless he *first* finds himself.”³ But does Augustine really want to say that a man can find himself *first*, before he finds God? (Or even vice versa, that he can find God *before* he finds himself?) This all depends on what is meant by *finding oneself*. Does it simply amount to the mind’s presence to itself in remembering itself, what Charles Taylor calls ‘radical reflexivity’ (the awareness of one’s own awareness) and which Augustine is said to be the first to have discovered?⁴ In that case the ascent through the layers of memory would imply first finding oneself. But, as I shall argue – and Brown is well aware of this – what Augustine has in mind when he speaks here of the human enigma – the *magna questio* that he has become to himself – is something significantly richer than mere self-reflexivity, and something much more existentially disturbing. Taylor downplays this element, as well, understanding Augustinian memory as a place where “our implicit grasp of what we are resides, which guides us as we move from *our original self-ignorance ... to true self-knowledge*.”⁵ Thus, ignorance gives way to knowledge, and there is little consideration of the Augustinian theme of the undoing of self-knowledge in the storms of temptation and the abyss of memory.

Closely related to this account, Augustine is often read in light of what modernity made of him, in such a way that the turn within – the radicalization of subjectivity – is understood as in some sense a *foundation*. A foundation, that is, for selfhood and knowledge of self, as well as a foundation for knowledge of God. In this light, Book X is seen as primarily a piece of theological epistemology. Hence the need to have Augustine discover himself, a more or less stable entity which can be encountered in the interior ‘space’ of memory. In other words, self-awareness becomes awareness of that permanent kernel which appears as my true identity.⁶ The problem with this is that it belies a very prominent dynamism in Augustine’s thought, according to which we are not simply who we are, but we are constantly, through an on-

³ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 2nd ed., Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press 2000, 162 (my emphasis).

⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989, chap. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 135 (my emphasis).

⁶ For a critique of this tendency, see Cavadini, “The Darkest Enigma”.

going conversion, to be made (formed) into what we are truly and finally to become.⁷ There is, in fact, for Augustine no place to permanently stand; rather, we are either continually being made, or else we are being unmade, slipping back into the nothingness from which we came. Therefore, as Augustine says: “we ought always to go on being made by him, always being perfected by him.” (*De Gen. ad litt.* VIII.12.27)⁸

However, a number of scholars are now stressing the fundamental point that Augustine was first and foremost a theologian, that the Augustinian problem of ‘the self’ is primarily its estrangement from God, and that the problem of knowledge is intimately related to salvation.⁹ Supposing, then, that we are attuned to the theological context of Augustine’s thought, what shall we make of his profound meditations on the interior life of human beings in Book X? What is certain is that Augustine is paradigmatic of a tradition of Christian thought, according to which knowledge of God and knowledge of self are deeply intertwined. So, for instance, Calvin introduces the *Institutes* by saying that

our wisdom ... consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.¹⁰

On the reading I would like to propose, however, the text actually moves in a more apophatic register than has often been noted, and serves primarily, not to ground the knowledge of God in human

⁷ This theme is traced in Marie-Anne Vannier, ‘Creatio,’ ‘conversio,’ ‘formatio’ chez S. Augustin, Éditions Universitaire Fribourg Suisse 1991.

⁸ In *On Genesis*, translated by Edmund Hill, O.P., New York: New City Press 2002.

⁹ See Lydia Schumacher, *Divine Illumination: The History and Future of Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2011; Janet Soskice, “Augustine on Knowing God and Knowing the Self”, in: Simon Oliver, Karen Kilby, & Thomas O’Loughlin (eds.), *Faithful Reading: New Essays in Theology in Honour of Fergus Kerr, OP*, London: T & T Clark 2012; and particularly Jean-Luc Marion, *In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2012.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Louisville: Westminster John Know Press 1960, 35.

interiority, but to break interiority open for a radical receptivity. As I read it, the text performs a pedagogical function, wherein the reader follows Augustine ever deeper into the enigma of the human mind and in the process discovers its own lack of stable foundations.

Modes of Confession

While the practice of 'confession' predated Augustine, he invested it with a particular kind of logic that we need to grasp in order to approach our text. It is often noted that Augustine operates with two basic modes of confession: the confession of sin (*confessio peccati*) and the confession of praise (*confessio laudis*).¹¹ To this we may add that the *Confessions* as a whole obviously constitutes a confession of the bishop's Christian faith (*confessio fidei*), "with my pen before many witnesses". (X.1.1)¹² But this is not enough; at least two other modes of confession can be discerned in the text: the confession of knowledge and in particular the confession of ignorance:

Let me, then, confess what I know about myself [*quid de me sciam*], and confess too what I do not know [*quid de me nesciam*], because what I know of myself I know only because you shed light on me, and what I do not know I shall remain ignorant about until my darkness becomes like bright noon before your face. (X.5.7)¹³

How are these modes of confession related in the intricate structure of

¹¹ Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 13.

¹² It should be remembered that one reason for Augustine to write the *Confessions* was to explain himself to an audience perplexed and somewhat suspicious of this rather recently converted bishop of Hippo. He writes: "There are many people who desire to know what I still am at this time of writing my confessions, people who know me without really knowing me. ... None of these have laid their ears to my heart, though it is only there that I am whoever I am. They therefore want to hear from my own confession what I am within." (X.3.4)

¹³ The argument here is obviously not that Augustine has a fixed schema of confessional modes into which he positions his writing; I am rather suggesting that it is possible to distinguish a number of confessional modes, sometimes clearly and other times with much overlap, and that they evince a certain internal coherence.

Augustine's *Confessions*? In the first place, it would seem that the confession of *sin* requires a certain knowledge of self, as is evident from X.30.41–41.66, in which Augustine searches himself in order to ascertain and confess his present involvement in certain categories of sin – concupiscence of the flesh (*concupiscentia carnis*), concupiscence of the eyes (*concupiscentia oculorum*), and worldly pride (*ambitione saeculi*). Interestingly, however, this section includes confessions of ignorance, as Augustine has to admit that he still does not know himself very well: “I have become an enigma to myself [*mihi quaestio factus sum*].” (X.33.50) In this way, the confession of sin comes with confessions of knowledge and ignorance as well; indeed, all are intimately related.

In the second place, the confession of *praise* is also connected to knowledge and ignorance, for it is through the confession of sin that praise emerges. It is in knowing and confessing my wretched state that I can properly praise the God of salvation. Hence, after confessing what he knows of his present condition, as well as all its uncertainties, Augustine concludes Book X with a meditation on the Mediator between God and humankind – Christ.

You know how stupid and weak I am: teach me and heal me.
Your only Son ... has redeemed me with his blood. ... I dispense
it to others, and as a poor man I long to be filled with it among
those who are fed and feasted. And then do those who seek him
praise the Lord. (X.43.70)

In this way a knowledge of self as still weakened by the grip of sin is the condition of possibility of the confession of praise rendered to God as saviour.

However, God is not only praised as saviour, but as creator, as the last three books of the *Confessions* demonstrate. And in this confession of praise the whole of creation joins in, though in order to perceive it Augustine must cultivate a particular kind of hermeneutic, positioning himself alongside all created things in the recognition of being given existence and form by God's grace alone. It is in fact with this theme that Augustine introduces the memory-investigation of Book X.

And to all things which stood around the portals of my flesh I
said, “Tell me of my God. You are not he, but tell me something
of him.” Then they lifted up their mighty voices and cried, “He

made us." My questioning was my attentive spirit, and their reply their beauty. Then toward myself I turned, and asked myself, "Who are you?" And I answered my own question: "A man." (X.6.9)

This knowledge of being created out of nothing, along with the rest of creation, also carries within itself a recognition of the utter existential givenness of all things: "I did not even exist to receive your gift of being; yet lo! Now I do exist, thanks to your goodness." (XIII.1.1) As we shall see, this in turn implies a certain kind of nescience, since it precludes us from finding a sure footing within ourselves – morally as well as ontologically. In other words, the polyphonous confession of praise to God – as saviour and creator – is conditioned upon the intertwining of knowledge and ignorance.

The confession of ignorance (*confessio ignorantiae*) has been strangely neglected by Augustine scholarship, although it runs like a thematic thread throughout the *Confessions*, being particularly pronounced in Book X and XI, on memory and time respectively.¹⁴ Perhaps this is because it sits ill with the modern attempt to read Augustine primarily as a theological epistemologist. But as I will argue, the confession of ignorance is paradoxically a condition both of self-knowledge and knowledge of God, and hence is intimately related to the basic modalities of confession – of sin and of praise. If that is true, the confessional logic of Augustine cannot be adequately understood unless the dimension of ignorance is attended to in its own right. By way of anticipation, my claim will be that the confession of ignorance serves an important pedagogical function within the overall structure of the *Confessions*.

The confession of ignorance raises the question of *mystery*, understood as *magna questio*, and its place and function in the thought of Saint Augustine, and in his confessional pedagogy of conversion. The importance of this theme is noted by Martin Heidegger when, in his lectures on Augustine and Neoplatonism from 1921, he seeks to show how "the confiteri [confession] is motivated in its basic starting

¹⁴ For a discussion of this neglected mode of confession and its literary context, see David van Dusen, *The Space of Time: A Sensualist Interpretation of Time in Augustine, Confessions X to XII*, Leiden: Brill forthcoming 2014, chap. 3.

point: *quaestio mihi factus sum* [I have become a question to myself].¹⁵ This is a mode of confession that is signalled by questions such as the one cited above: “Who are you [*tu quies es*]?” It is the enigma of his own life that Augustine questions, such as in the passage in Book IV, where Augustine exclaims: “I had become a great question to myself [*factus eram ipse mihi magna quaestio*].” (IV.4.9). And in Book IX: “But who am I, and what am I [*quis ego et qualis ego*]?” (IX.1.1) Or again, in Book X: “What I am, then, O my God? What is my nature? [*quid ergo sum, deus meus? quae natura sum?*]” (X.17.26)

Let us therefore walk through the memory-investigation of Book X of *The Confessions* with particular attention paid to the muted theme of ignorance. Book IX, to recapitulate, has ended with the death of Augustine’s mother, Monica, and the grief of the now converted Augustine. This concludes the retrospective part of the *Confessions* and leads to Book X, in which Augustine sets out to confess what he is now, rather than what he has been.

X.1.1–5.7

At the outset, Augustine declares that he will confess what he knows about himself, but also, and significantly, what he does *not* know about himself. In fact, only the Lord knows everything about a human being, because he has made it. We notice three things immediately: 1) The primary context is clearly moral or existential, rather than epistemological – its *modus* is confessional. 2) Reference to creation is there from the start, which is significant in that it situates Book X in the overall context of a meditation on creation, as a lead-in to the topic of the last three books of *The Confessions*. 3) The theme of a confession of ignorance appears already at the outset. As Augustine says:

“No one knows what he himself is made of, except his own spirit within him, yet there is still some part of him which remains hidden even from his own spirit [*tamen est aliquid hominis quod nec ipse scit spiritus hominis qui in ipso est*]; but you, Lord, know everything about a human being because you have

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, “Augustine and Neoplatonism”, in: *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2004, 185.

made him." The task is therefore to "confess what I know about myself [*quid de me sciam*], and confess too what I do not know [*quid de me nesciam*]. (X.5.7)

X.6.8–7.11

There immediately follows a confession of ignorance about the being of God: "What am I loving when I love you [*quid autem amo, cum te amo*]?" (X.6.8) Thus, the twin themes of what Augustine is and what God is, the focal themes of the investigation, are interrelated from the start.

Augustine then relates how he has asked all the beautiful things that "stood around the portals of my flesh" – the earth, the sky, the winds, the sea – about what God is. And they have replied in a unanimous confession of their own: "We are not the God you seek ... He made us [*ipse fecit nos*.]!" (X.6.9) Once again, then, allusion is made to the doctrine of creation that will occupy Augustine in the next three books.

He then turns to himself and asks himself: "Who are you [*tu quies es*]?" (X.6.9) And he decides to search for God in that highest part of himself which is his soul, or more precisely his mind, and in particular that part of his mind which he calls *memoria*. It is not entirely clear from the text why he turns to mind here, but he suggests that it is because mind is more like God in that it is immaterial, and also that it is something that he knows intimately rather than through mediation of images. There is, of course, a Neoplatonic precedent. But there is also an important hermeneutical insight in this passage, where the human, precisely in virtue of mind, is described not only as a questioner, but as a judge: "Creatures do not respond to those who question unless the questioners are also judges [*nec respondent ista interrogantibus nisi iudicantibus*]." (X.6.10) Augustine makes it clear that only humans have the ability to respond to these questions, but only insofar as they are governed by the right order of love – right desires.¹⁶ The possibility of interpreting the natural world and oneself as created, therefore, is conditioned upon love of God, which cannot simply be

¹⁶ On the Augustinian topic of the order of love, see the classic treatment of John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine*, Eugene: Wipf and Stock 2007.

taken, but which rather involves the questioner in the *drama* of salvation. Prefacing the investigation of memory with such hermeneutical reflections would seem to place the entire text under the sign of uncertainty; it is not a question of a neutral access to the world and oneself, but of a contested interpretation.¹⁷ In view of the tendency to read Augustine as a (modern) epistemologist, this is a point well worth noting.

X.8.12–17.26

Then follows the first important transition in the argument, when Augustine arrives in “the fields and vast mansions of memory [*campos et lata praetoria memoriae*],” as he puts it, and thus begins the memory-investigation as such. Very briefly, what he finds in memory are the following: images of all things sensed; affective states lived through; intellectual knowledge, such as that learned through a liberal arts education, and the truths and laws of mathematics and so on; and, most importantly, he encounters himself in recollection – what he has done, where, when, and how he felt about it. In his interior he comes to meet himself. In other words, he ascends through the different layers of his experience of imaginal, ideal, affective and reflexive memory.

This exploration of the contents of memory leads immediately to awe and wonder – and, again, to confessions of ignorance:

[Memory is] a vast, infinite recess. Who can plumb its depth?
This is a faculty of my mind, belonging to my nature, yet I
cannot myself comprehend all that I am [*nec ego ipse capio totum
quod sum*]. Is the mind, then, too narrow to grasp itself, forcing
us to ask where that part of it is which it is incapable of

¹⁷ Jean-Luc Marion speaks of the confession of praise as the “liturgical condition for the possibility of recognizing creation” as such. *In the Self's Place*, 237. We can go further and add that truly recognizing oneself – as well as the rest of creation – for what it is, requires all the complex modes of confession, not least the confession of ignorance. As I shall argue further on, ignorance, for Augustine, becomes a condition of possibility for recognizing his own groundlessness and therefore utter dependence on God. Thus, in a sense, it is the undoing of self-knowledge that facilitates a deeper approach to the truly liberating mystery.

grasping? Is it outside the mind, not inside? How can the mind not compass it? Enormous wonder wells up within me when I think of this, and I am dumbfounded. (X.8.15)

Next, Augustine's encounter with certain *aporiai* should be mentioned. For instance, one can be happy in recalling a past sadness, such that the one mind is somehow simultaneously both happy and sad. Or take the more important case of memory and forgetfulness [*oblivio*]. How can forgetfulness, which is loss of memory, be remembered? There is something self-defeating in the fact that when I remember that I have forgotten, memory and forgetfulness are simultaneously present in the one mind. Now, I don't think this is intended as a rigorous demonstration. For it would be quite easy to suggest a solution to the problem, depending as it does on the equivocation between particular instances of forgetting on the one hand, and forgetting in an absolute sense on the other. The point of this long *exercitatio animi*, rather, is to underline the sheer mysteriousness of the operations of the mind, and it leads once more to a confession of ignorance:

In the end, who can fathom this matter, who understand how the mind works? [*et hoc quis tandem indagabit? quis comprehendet quomodo sit?*] This much is certain, Lord, that I am laboring over it, laboring over myself, and I have become for myself a land hard to till and of heavy sweat [*factus sum mihi terra difficultatis et sudoris nimii*].

And he continues:

What can be nearer to me than I am to myself? Yet here I am, unable to comprehend the nature of my memory [*et ecce memoriae meae vis non comprehenditur a me*], when I cannot even speak of myself without it.' (X.16.24–25)

There are, however, other important reasons for Augustine to introduce the *aporia* of forgetfulness at this stage: Both because it leads him on to a discussion of the possibility of a trace in memory of what is otherwise forgotten, and because it nicely ties in with formulations he will use to conclude the exploration at the end of the book – namely, the forgetfulness of oneself and one's true good that is the

essence of sin and its resultant dispersion, and which can finally only be overcome as the scattered human being is recalled and recollected by God.

X.17.26–19.28

Another important transition now takes place. Impressed by the enigma of the mind, Augustine asks: “What shall I do, then, O my God, my true life?” He suggests that he must pass beyond even the faculty of memory: “I am climbing through my mind to you [*per animum meum ad te*] who abide high above me.” (X.17.26) But this immediately results in another aporia, which I think is the most important one – the fact that if God is to be found beyond memory, or the mind, then it is impossible to be mindful of him. If God is not in memory, then, necessarily, we are forgetful of him. The upshot seems to be that God cannot be entirely out of mind, as it were. Where, then, is God to be found?

Augustine appears to be recoiling from the radical suggestion that he seek God beyond the mind, though he doesn’t say in so many words. Instead, he turns to the gospel parable of the woman who lost a coin and searched for it until she found it (Lk 15:8), and he extracts from it the possibility that even though something we once knew has fallen out of mind, into the abyss of forgetfulness, it might have left a trace in memory, a trace we may be able to follow to its source and so retrieve what we once lost. There is clearly an allusion here to the *imago dei* within the human mind, as the trace we would be able to follow to its original. James J. O’Donnell even provides the following interpretation of this section:

When we lose something from sight, we recognize it again when we compare it with its *imago* within. So too, there is an *imago* of God already there in the self: when, and only when, *it* is found (authentic self-knowledge), God can also be found.¹⁸

This is no doubt a valid theological interpretation of this passage, but it must be admitted that it goes well beyond what the text is actually

¹⁸ O’Donnell, *Confessions*, vol. 3, 189.

saying (and doing). It is as if Augustine's various commentators cannot resist filling in the lacunas in the text so as to make it coherent, on the assumption that this once professor of rhetoric in the great cities of the Roman empire lapsed into carelessness when he produced this highly elliptical text. But what if the elliptical and enigmatic nature of the text is precisely the point? What if it serves a pedagogical function? Let us follow the text closely, then, as Augustine embarks instead on an investigation of the universal desire for happiness – for the *beata vita* – as a clue, a trace, of what we have forgotten. For instead of stopping to produce a theory of the knowledge of God through the *imago dei* within, Augustine establishes a much more restless principle: "If we remember having forgotten something, we have not forgotten it entirely. But if we have forgotten altogether, we shall not be in a position to search for it." (X.19.28) In other words, if God has been entirely forgotten, all is lost; we will not even be searching in the dark, as it were. But we are still searching, so all is not lost. For every human being searches for happiness.

X.20.29–23.34

In the next phase of the argument, Augustine claims that if everyone desires to be happy, even though they have different understandings of what will lead to such happiness, this may be because everyone remembers having been happy once upon a time, and the desire for it is the trace left. Augustine envisages a kind of absolute happiness here, one where we have everything we need and desire nothing further; this would be the absolute standard of happiness, according to which all present degrees of happiness are measured and found wanting. But when were we happy in this way, such that we now have a memory-trace of it? This is indeed the sixty-four-dollar question! When and where were we happy in this way? Augustine does not provide a clear answer.

What happens next is instead that Augustine once again embarks on a set of hermeneutical reflections, prompted by the fact that the way to the happy life, which is really about what to enjoy, is so variously interpreted by different people. The way to the happy life is, we might say, hermeneutically underdetermined. Jean-Luc Marion helpfully distinguishes the element of absolute certainty from the element of abiding uncertainty central to Augustine's thesis at this point: "The

contradiction between desire (certain) and its object (uncertain) constitutes the very heart of the argument."¹⁹ True, the universal desire for happiness is incontestable, but this in itself provides no theoretical ground upon which to build the edifice of theological knowledge, since the object of desire is itself a point of contention. Once again, we must say that the whole question hangs upon how we orient our love, a question that involves spiritual practice over and above theoretical knowledge.

The upshot of this section on the *beata vita* is the same as the section on the lost coin: In order for us to search for and desire the happy life, it must somehow be in our memory, even if only as a trace; it seems to be something like a structure of the immemorial that must be there but that cannot be fetched out at will.²⁰ Augustine no more than gestures towards this mysterious hidden thing, that nonetheless attracts us one and all. If anything, it is a radicalization of the enigmatic: I know with certainty that I desire it, but know not why or how to attain it. Thus the very fact of my certainty becomes strange: "Unless we had some sure knowledge of it, our wills would not be so firmly set on gaining it. But how can this be?" (X.21.31) Leaving this deeper question hanging, Augustine transitions into a discussion of truth by way of the notion of enjoyment, which obviously everyone has some experience of. Hence, by associating the certainty of the desire for happiness with the everyday experience of enjoyment, the argument rather abruptly moves to the next phase.

In his own mind, of course, Augustine is clear that only in the enjoyment of the Lord, and therefore in truth, is happiness to be found. A connection is established between happiness and truth. Says Augustine: "The happy life is joy in the truth; and that means joy in you, who are the Truth [*beata quippe vita est gaudium de veritate. hoc est enim gaudium de te, qui veritas es*]." (X.23.33) So happiness cannot be divorced from a right perception of reality, in particular the perception of the only true source of ultimate happiness. But why is it so hard to perceive? The answer given is twofold: *First*, because we are so distracted and anxiously distended in this life of constant change. (This answer will be taken up later in the book, where Augustine speaks of

¹⁹ Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 86.

²⁰ "In other words, the *beata vita* precedes us as an immemorial"; *ibid.*, 93.

the problem of *curiositas*, that human greediness for experience and novelty that causes us to lose focus on what's really important.) *Second*, a right perception of reality is difficult because pride causes people to prefer their own falsehoods to a truth that would accuse them and reveal their sin. In short, everyone has an inkling of truth and of God in their desire for the happy life, but this is suppressed in various ways, and, hence, does not lead people to true happiness in God. In the end, Augustine is painfully aware that no simple intellectual move will bring a human being desiring happiness to a cognizance of where it is to be found – “truth hides from the soul [*ipsum autem veritas lateat*]”. (X.23.34) Nonetheless, as all desire happiness, all desire truth, which requires truth to be – however feeble, misguided or suppressed – present in their *memoria*. In short, there is a trace of the divine in the human mind, but in this text it is cashed out not in terms of knowledge, of the structure of the mind itself, or of anything readily graspable at all; it is rather understood as an innate *desire* for happiness and truth.

Recapitulation

Let's pause here and take stock: Augustine has led us to see that beyond memory it is impossible to be mindful of God, since he would then be forgotten. And within memory, while there is a trace – in the desire for happiness and truth – it is in no way self-interpreting. Rather, the human condition is such that we follow our desire for happiness on all kinds of crooked ways, which Augustine has been confessing throughout the first nine books. Having come this far in the argument, where only the final push remains for Augustine, we have to admit that things are less than clear. Has it been demonstrated that Augustine has come to know himself, who he truly is? Has he found God by turning inward and ascending through the layers of memory? Is there anything so far that could be likened to a sure foundation for the knowledge of God and self? While the general answer to these questions must be 'No!', such an answer must be carefully qualified, as we are dealing with a highly complex text, one that we are approaching not only with an eye to what it *says* but also to what it *does*. It is in the final section of the memory-investigation as such that we will be able to tie this together.

X.24.35–29–40

With the final transition the argument takes a sharp turn. Leaving his reflections on the happy life to one side, Augustine is ready to conclude: He exclaims that it is after all in his memory that he has found God, not primarily outside it. But surprisingly enough, Augustine does not claim to have found God by a combination of interiority and meditative ascent. At least not in any straightforward sense. The key text in question is the following:

From that time when I learned about you I have never forgotten you, because wherever I have found truth I have found my God who is absolute Truth, and once I had learned that I did not forget it. That is why you have dwelt in my memory ever since I learned to know you, and it is there that I find you when I remember and delight in you.

[nam ex quo didici te non sum oblitus tui. ubi enim inveni veritatem, ibi inveni deum meum, ipsam veritatem, quam ex quo didici non sum oblitus. Itaque ex quo te didici, manes in memoria mea, et illic te invenio cum reminiscor tui et delector in te.] (X.24.35)

From the first time he learned about God this knowledge has been activated in his mind, and it is there that he continues to find God when he remembers and delights in him. God, who is the transcendent creator, has deigned to dwell in Augustine's memory. However, the recognition that every truth is related to the Truth is something that Augustine first understood when he found God, or rather when God found him. In other words, Augustine's understanding of the object of the human desire for happiness and truth was given together with his Christian faith, and it is in light of this – "once I learned *that*" – that he is able to remember God truly. In light of the foregoing discussion of hermeneutics, perhaps we could say that faith is the condition of possibility for rightly interpreting the structure of human desire towards God. To be sure, the desire for happiness and truth is there, but it hides its true meaning until illuminated by faith.

Augustine continues to discuss what has now become the crucial question: "Where did I find you", he asks, "in order to make your

acquaintance at the outset"? That is to say, what is the origin of this knowledge of God he now claims to have? The prominent Augustine scholar Roland Teske describes Augustine's answer as a "tantalizing ambiguity" precisely because he does not really say where he first found God.²¹

We might draw attention here to the echoes of Plato's dialogue *Meno*, which have of course been heard throughout Augustine's exploration of memory. For Plato, it is on account of prenatal acquaintance with the realm of ideas that knowledge can be recollected and thus activated in the mind through a dialectical process. The question, What is the origin of this memory? can thus be given a clear answer in the theory of the transmigration of souls.

This option, however, is not open to orthodox Christianity. Augustine answers differently: "Where then could I have found you in order to learn of you, if not *in yourself*, far above me [*nisi in te supra me*]?" (X.26.37) What is the meaning of this "in yourself"? Frustratingly, Augustine, once again, does not say! At the very least it points away from Augustine himself towards God, once again countering the notion that God is just waiting to be discovered in the mind as Augustine turns within. Perhaps the "in you" simply refers back to the time when Augustine first learned that God is Truth, whether at his conversion or earlier. Or perhaps it refers to the general context of creation, especially since Augustine, in the following section, describes created things as, "those things which would have no being were they not in you [*quae si in te non essent, non essent*]". (X.27.38) We have here another allusion to the doctrine of creation and the concomitant notion of an existential participation in God, by which all things subsist. This twist of the Platonic scheme would make it possible to hold that there is something like an existential 'memory' of being held in the mind of God, perhaps activated through the confession, along with all created things, that "He made us!" Importantly, however, neither of these suggestions are elaborated in the text. What is clearly stated, on the other hand, is the action of God in the process of conversion: "You called, shouted, broke through my

²¹ Roland Teske, "Augustine's Philosophy of Memory", in: Eleanore Stump & Norman Kretzmann (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, 154.

deafness; you flared, blazed, banished my blindness; you lavished your fragrance, I gasped, and now I pant for you." (X.27.38)

Finally, Augustine returns to the theme of the scattered life, under which condition he still lives, and which necessitates his ongoing confession and, therefore, conversion. It appears that the turn within has *not* assuaged Augustine's sense of dispersion; rather, it has allowed it to shine forth and to be displayed in all its enigmatic depth: "I am a burden to myself [*oneri mihi sum*]." (X.28.39) Yet all is not bleak, for Augustine is on his way – on his way to God, where, through continence itself given by God, as he puts it, "the scattered elements of the self are collected and brought back into the unity from which we have slid away into dispersion". (X.29.40) In this way, Augustine ends his meditation by foreshadowing that ultimate act of memory – which is God's, not his – through which what was once collected, then fell into dispersion, will once again be perfectly *re-collected* in God.

The Pedagogy of Ignorance and the Constitution of the Self

Let me conclude by offering some further remarks on how to read this text, which is nothing if not enigmatic. First of all, it seems to me quite impossible to square a closer reading of this text with an over-epistemologized understanding of it. I don't see in it an epistemological investigation, much less does it constitute a proof; neither does it establish a permanent foundation for knowledge of self and knowledge of God. To say this is not to deny that there are epistemological elements in the text, however, even though they are more alluded to than explicated. This is particularly true with regard to Augustine's discussion of truth, which when entertained in the mind is always a participation in Truth itself, such that finding truth is always finding God. "Wherever I have found truth I have found my God." (X.24.35) This is known as Augustine's doctrine of illumination, which he elaborates elsewhere, especially in the earlier works, and which is clearly in the background here.²² Significantly, however, Augustine makes it clear that even though such 'illumination' may have been operative, he was not mindful of it until he learned about it – through

²² The best recent account of this is Schumacher, *Divine Illumination*.

faith. Illumination is not understood as God zapping the subject from above, as it were. Rather, as Lydia Schumacher has persuasively argued, illumination signifies for Augustine the exercise of the human intellect's natural – though weakened – ability to know truth, not an extrinsic impartation from God to provide supernatural knowledge.²³ *That* cognition of truth is a participation in the God who is Truth is itself a hermeneutic. "Once I had learned *that* I did not forget it." That is to say, once that was clear to me, my experience of truth could be rightly interpreted as being mindful of God. The kind of epistemology that would follow from this, however, is very different from one that would privilege self-knowledge as the interior path to God, in and of itself, since the Augustinian epistemology is premised on faith. The difference between modern epistemology and Augustine is stark. In Janet Soskice' pithy formulation: "Descartes meditating on certainty becomes certain of himself, an imperfect being, and god, a perfect one. Augustine, becoming a problem to himself, finds he does not know himself and cannot know God."²⁴ Thus, while the doctrine of illumination is alluded to, I cannot see that it is central to the argument being made in Book X, or to the pedagogy it performs.²⁵

But it is possible to discern a different pedagogy at work in this exploration of memory. Maybe the first step to recognizing it is to notice the obvious fact that the *questio magna* which Augustine has become to himself is not at all primarily a question of theoretical anthropology or of a philosophy of consciousness, for the context throughout is one of moral struggle, or better, of struggle to overcome the scattering or dispersion of himself (which in the time-investigation of Book XI will be articulated in terms of a *distentio animi*). What is at stake, therefore, is what we could call an existential situation, and its remedy is not a better theory of selfhood, to be sure, but a more

²³ *Ibid.*, 62–65.

²⁴ Soskice, "Augustine on Knowing", 70.

²⁵ When I first presented this argument, at the *Collegium Patristicum Lundense*, Lewis Ayres insisted that, while the moral context is indeed primary, the element of illumination must not be forgotten. My thanks to Prof. Ayres for pressing me to enquire more deeply into the Augustinian theory of illumination for this version of the argument.

intimate relation with God, who is the true giver of the self to itself.²⁶ And, again, this is merely to insist that, for Augustine, there is no clear boundary between what we would call systematic theology on the one hand, and spirituality on the other (or dogmatics on the one hand, and prayer on the other). Rather, a better understanding of oneself and of God is inseparable from the practices of Christian piety, such as the confession of sin, the confession of praise ... and the confession of ignorance, which keeps one open to the mystery that names God and creation alike, and in particular that part of creation which is the one who confesses.

Related to this point, it seems to me that when Augustine concludes that he has not found God in the world external to his senses, but rather by turning within, to mind and memory, the main point is still existential or spiritual, rather than narrowly epistemological. "In love with loving, I was casting about for something to love", as he had earlier put it. (III.1.1) This casting about has its own dangers and is related to Augustine's sense of dispersion, something that is amply confirmed by looking at the second half of Book X, in which he confesses his present temptations, and in particular the section on *curiositas*, curiosity. Returning to the intimate place of the inner man, therefore, may be seen as a *spiritual practice* that attempts to counter this natural dispersion precisely through a re-collection of the scattered self, and hence to move closer to the true object of desire. Like other spiritual practices, the purpose is to open a space within human life for God to act; to invite, as it were, the operation of God. Hence also the important upshot of the section we have looked at – that it finally does not lie within human power to recollect the self (overtaken as it is by the abyss of memory and forgetfulness); this power belongs to God alone, who, as Augustine later puts it, "did not forget me when I forgot you". (XIII.1.1)

But there is a part for Augustine to play here, and that is to conspire to his own re-making through the act of confession. Maria Boulding puts it this way: "The word of confession is ... a creative process. The human speaker is at one with God who is creating him; he becomes co-

²⁶ As Augustine puts it: "I did not even exist to receive your gift of being; yet lo! Now I do exist, thanks to your goodness." (XIII.1.1)

creator of himself, *constituting himself in being by confession.*"²⁷ In this light, the act of confession takes on paramount importance, which is indicated by Augustine when he prays: "Let me not waver from my course before you have gathered all that I am, my whole disintegrated and deformed self." (XII.16.23)

If in this way confession is even constitutive of a dynamic constitution of the interior human being before God, and if its various modes – confession of sin, confession of praise and confession of knowledge and ignorance – are deeply intertwined, then perhaps the exploration of memory is to be seen as a particularly intense moment in the confession of ignorance. At any rate, it becomes important for us to try to understand the function of these various modes of confession in Augustine's writing.

The French philosopher and intellectual historian Jean-Luc Marion argues in his recent *tome* on Augustine's *Confessions* that, for Augustine, the *magna questio*, which ushers in the confession of ignorance, is most closely related to the notion of the image of God in human beings, which Marion thinks primarily consists in not being susceptible to a comprehensive definition, that is to say in the fact that human beings remain, like God, incomprehensible mysteries. He writes: "Man remains unimaginable, since formed in the image of He who admits none, incomprehensible because formed in the likeness of He who admits no comprehension."²⁸ And here, he says, Augustine inscribes himself in an on-going tradition of Christian theology, represented also by Gregory of Nyssa, who says, "since the nature of our mind, which is according to the icon of the Creator, escapes knowledge, it keeps exactly its likeness with its lord by keeping the imprint of the incomprehensibility [set] by the unknown in it".²⁹ The point here seems to be that the image of God in human beings is recognized precisely in not defining the essential content of that image. Indeed, that the 'answer' to the *magna mihi questio* of Augustine coincides with the 'question' itself; that is to say that to the extent that one opens oneself to not being able to grasp oneself fully, to not being able to resolve the aporias, to indwell, as it were, the *questio magna* as

²⁷ Maria Boulding, "Introduction" in *The Confessions*, 25 (my emphasis).

²⁸ Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 259.

²⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, quoted in *ibid.*, 259.

an ever open question, to that extent one is able to be grasped by God. As Soskice puts it: "Augustine, by losing him "self" finds, in a sense, that he does not need to fathom himself since it is enough that he is known by God."³⁰ Or, to put the pedagogy at work here in other terms: to the extent that the aporias and enigmas of human existence are lived and recognized as such, and also *confessed* as such, to that extent a human being is open to the influence of God, and to be pulled in the direction of eschatological consummation, which is of course in the direction of the ultimately happy life.

What is at stake for Augustine is the itinerary of the human soul from a false self-awareness to a true self-awareness, from a mind undisturbed by the experience of hovering over the abyss of forgetfulness, to a mind driven by such experiences out of itself to seek shelter in God. As Augustine says: "Nowhere amid all the things which I survey under your guidance", and he is now speaking of the exploration in Book X that we have just walked through, "nowhere ... do I find a safe haven for my soul except in you; only there are the scattered elements of my being collected, so that no part of me may escape from you". (X.40.65) Such, I submit, are the contours of the pedagogy of ignorance at work in Augustine's exploration of memory.

³⁰ Soskice, "Augustine on Knowing", 74.