

Desire, recollection and thought: On Augustine's *Confessions* I,1

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Our own look inward is, with Augustine's, a look beyond to the Truth which is finally the sole criterion for all truths.

"You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised." The *Confessions* does not begin by addressing us, its readers; rather does Augustine, its author, address God, the author of all creation. Nor does Augustine's apparent disregard for his readers prove to be only passing—we do not have to do here with some spiritual epistle dedicatory as it were—for as the book's title suggests, it is in its entirety spoken to God, spoken in and out of the awareness of God's abiding presence. We have before us something unlike a normal book, namely an extended prayer. What is more, and as the title again implies, the *Confessions* is a prayer which lays bare many of the most intimate details of Augustine's life. Accordingly, this "book" will be to a very great extent a catalogue of sin and error. The most obvious features of the work compel us to wonder whether it is appropriate for us to read it. What "right," what "business" have we to eavesdrop on Augustine's confession?

It must be admitted that our current fascination with biographies and autobiographies, with "true confessions" and "true stories," is not encouraged by the unrelenting piety of the book. Augustine's warning in the Tenth Book that he is not writing for the idly curious (X.3) seems almost superfluous, for the thin patience of mere curiosity will long since have worn

away. Nor can we expect to read this work as we would the work of that great ancient biographer Plutarch, to wit, for purposes of moral and political edification. Augustine does not simply present the record of his deeds either as a model for us to emulate or as a downward path to be avoided; we must never lose sight of the fact that the author tells his story from the closet to the side of the church and not from the pulpit in front of it. Even the theoretical value of the writing would seem negligible, or at best incidental. For insofar as it is a history, and a "personal" history at that, the *Confessions* looks to be the preserve rather more of the accidental and the particular than of the necessary and universal (cf. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451b5). It is far from clear, therefore, why a reader of whatever cast of mind would want to trouble with this or any other such confession. What possible interest could it hold for us?

Evidently Augustine did think his prayer could be our business and would be of interest, for he does make it public: we are meant to be privy to this confession (IX.8). But this only forces us to rephrase our question. Why should he make public what would ordinarily be a most private affair? Why should the community of two which forms the nucleus of this writing open up to include us? And even supposing that we may discern Augustine's purpose for us, there remains a further problem. How could he have hoped to bare his hidden heart to the Lord with full awareness that he was being watched? By the same token, do not those who make the greatest show of abandoning all reserve rightly incur our suspicion? "For in truth I would not say those same words, nor would I say them in the same way, if I knew that I was being heard and seen" (IX.4). In short, a full and public disclosure of self would seem to be a moral, psychological, and spiritual contradiction in terms.

"Great is your power, and to your wisdom there is no limit." If it is not evident why we ought to be reading the *Confessions*, still less is it clear why Augustine should bother to address them to a God whom he holds to know it all. Obviously he is not attempting to let God in on any secrets, or to remind him of something he has forgotten (V.1). Nor will it

¹Cf. VI.3 with Ambrose, *On Cain and Abel* 1.9.35: "a vow or a prayer is commendable to the extent that its substance is hidden." But cf. 1.9.39 with what follows.

do to ascribe Augustine's speech to a fitful concern about God's awesome power [*virtus*], as though the confessor, eager to please, were on his knees before some fearful Eastern potentate. To say nothing of other matters, flattery is possible only where vulnerability and ignorance reign (Aristotle, *Politics* 1314a1 ff.). Even if Augustine had not gone public, then, the writing of his "autobiography" would have remained something of a puzzle.

1.

"And man, who is part of your creation, wishes to praise you." Despite or rather because of the work's confessional mode, the author does not speak only of and for himself. His praise of God, couched in the language of the Psalms, is categorical, and is at no point obscured by his own self-revelations (cf., e.g., V.1). God is praised because he is good; God is not good because Augustine praises him. Further, the author suggests that it is *man's* wish and joy to praise God, despite *man's* consciousness of death, sinfulness, and lowliness. If all this is true, then the *Confessions* is not quite so private a thing as we have made it appear: already in the first paragraph Augustine makes a comprehensive claim about the human good. Perhaps he invites all his readers to repeat *mutatis mutandis* his confession of praise to God. This suggestion, while plausible, must contend with two opposing difficulties. In the first place, is man's wish correctly characterized by Augustine? Many men would deny that it is. To be sure, their simple denial would not prove Augustine wrong, for the issue clearly does not concern what all or even most men want, think, or do: any understanding of human happiness will give rise to controversy. Yet if the book is to remain accessible as something genuinely public then it must work towards agreement. Those readers of the *Confessions* who do not at first hold that man's highest end is praise of God must, in reading, be persuaded that it is, if the book is not to appear to them in the end as idiosyncratic in the extreme. Only if this writing speaks truly about man's end will it rise above personal indiscretion (XII.25). This leads to the second difficulty.

If what it means to confess is to praise God, and if to praise God is man's proper end, then what point is served by Augustine's dwelling on the private details of his life? How can such particulars shore up his universal claim against the doubts

of those who do not accept it? Does not the autobiographical form provide the "physio-psychologist and unriddler of souls" with all the evidence he needs to advance a reductionist interpretation of Augustine's good (cf., e.g., Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, secs. 50, 200)? It seems as though for those who agree with Augustine about man's end, his autobiography is superfluous, and for those who do not, it is, at least potentially, a stumbling block.

"Let him read it who so wishes, let him interpret it as he wishes" (IX.12). The beginning of a resolution to these difficulties is to see that the teaching of the "holy rhetorician" (Nietzsche) exists together with an unwillingness to instruct, and the self-disclosure with a kind of reserve. Neither the reticence nor the reserve, however, has anything to do with esotericism or secret teachings.² It may seem that Augustine makes shamelessly available to every comer his long talk with God. But in fact, only a believer, or one on the way to belief, will understand his words as they are meant to be understood, as they are understood by their author. To anyone else the book will seem at best a lengthy exercise in self-deception, at worst, an extended hallucination: if there is no God then Augustine is only talking to himself. Thus anyone wholly outside the Christian community of faith, hope, and love will not really understand the work, and to that extent something so public as a book can retain a certain privacy after all. Unless this prayer is read as a prayer it will, ultimately, be opaque to interpretation (IX.4; X.3). But in that case why does the author not preface his prayer with the warning "only Christians need apply"? We have been warned, after all, not to cast our pearls before swine. It can only be that Augustine's good, so far from being a sectarian affair, demands to be announced to all. What proves to be decisive, however, is not Augustine's powers of persuasion—that which usually makes, or rather unmakes, all the difference for public discourse (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1355a20 ff.). Rather, it is the reader's free response, coming from

²This is not to say that there are no legitimate Christian uses for esotericism. See, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar's "Introduction," to *Origin, Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings*, trans. by Robert J. Daly, S.J. (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), p. 17. Also Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana* IV.9.23; Thomas Aquinas, *In Ilibrum Boethii de Trinitate* q.2, a.4.

"within," to the book's implicit invitation. Finally only the reader can decide whether the *Confessions* is private and unintelligible, or public and obvious.

II.

"You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." If one may speak of the theme of the *Confessions*, then it is contained in these, surely the most often cited words of the work. The first nine Books are, accordingly, given over to recounting before God and men the journey of Augustine's restless heart to God. The remaining Books attempt to describe more fully that God in whom his heart rests. Augustine's comprehensive account of the human good is displayed in the play between movement and rest. Now, if that account is to have any persuasive force at all it must contend with its most worthy opponent. Aristotle,³ and other thoughtful men like him, had argued that human happiness is to be found wholly in this life and in this world in the practice of moral and intellectual excellence; the life of thought and action manifested in Greek philosophy would seem to leave little room for Augustine's prayer. It is of great moment, then, that the Bishop of Hippo's education was, as we come to see, in the tradition which has its origin in Socrates. The restlessness of the human heart, instantiated in the author's account of his first thirty years, is powerful testimony that man will not be satisfied by the life lived and taught by Aristotle and others. Is Augustine's learned dissatisfaction thus an argument against the sheerly philosophic life? Surely not. A restless heart does not prove Aristotle wrong. Perhaps it is simply part of every man's lot to be ever somewhat restless (cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1178a1).

In an age obsessed with "self-realization" this last point calls for elaboration. To say that God is the fulfillment of

³We do not mean to suggest that the discussion of the fact of human misery, or if you will of the "problem of evil," is anything less than central to the author's purpose. However, evil is a problem to be faced by any account of the good. Therefore the fundamental difficulty for Augustine's presentation of the theological good is that form of mind which does not understand the good in Biblical terms. Incidentally, as Augustine's experience with Manichaeism seems to show, a preoccupation with the problem of evil already seems to presuppose a theological understanding, albeit a deficient one.

our deepest longings is not without certain risks. The first which comes to mind is that degenerate Augustinianism which would found all of theology upon the transcendental character of human desire, resulting in a kind of metaphysics of the human heart. Feuerbach is only the most obvious, because the most thoroughgoing and explicit, exponent.⁴ In his boldness he reminds us that "transcendentalism" is not easily distinguished from wishful thinking. What is more, a god conceived solely as the answer to our desires would not answer those desires. Awareness of our penury will tell us that whatever is constituted by its being desired is not truly desirable at all, but is as empty as we are in our neediness. What is idolatry if not the worship of a human conception of a human need (cf. VI.6)? The decisive issue is not our restlessness but the existence of a term in which it could rest.

How does one come to see that our lives, all our lives, have an end, and that that end is the Christian God? It is the answer to this question which, if realized, would settle the dispute between Augustine and Aristotle. Augustine's answer, such as it is—for in some respects it is not an "answer" at all—is faith. Only in faith can man achieve his end. Only in faith is Augustine's conversation with God possible.

III.

"Grant to me, Lord, to know and understand which is first, to call upon you or to praise you, and also which is first, to know you or to call upon you? But who calls upon you not knowing you? For one not knowing you might call upon another instead." These are the first of an untold number of questions raised in this book. Whatever else Augustine's turn from philosophy involves, it clearly does not entail the questionable life of unquestioning obedience (cf. Luke 1:26-34). The placement of these questions is also telling. Despite the urgency of Augustine's bewilderment, only after praising his God does he give voice to it. The truth of things may be deeply puzzling, but only petulance, pride, or plain ignorance would think to put a question to what it had not first acknowledged: the theologian and the philosopher agree that questions are

⁴In his *The Essence of Christianity*. For a subtler version of the same, see Machiavelli, *The Discourses* I.37 with I.26.

neither first for us nor first in themselves. The fact that the author raises these particular questions at this particular juncture is equally significant, for they govern the rest of the book. They are really asking how the search and discovery of faith are possible.

Why would we ask after God unless we already knew Him as the one for whom we should be asking? On the other hand, how do we know him as the one to be asked after unless we have already made an effort to seek him out? The quandary expressed here is twice answered by Augustine. The first answer is simple, though not simple-minded (cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 100d, 105c) and is advanced as soon as the problem has been posed. The second answer is considerably more nuanced; it is, however, essentially a commentary on the first answer and it takes up the rest of the book. Before we approach either, we would do well to appreciate the force of the difficulty. Only slightly modified, and under the pressure of "epistemological" concerns, it becomes, surprisingly, part of the modern philosophical artillery against belief. Consider the following version, which questions the authority of Scripture. How do we know the Scriptures to be true? In effect, because we have it on God's word. But it is Scripture itself which is alleged to provide the "evidence" of its provenance. The unspoken conclusion: there is no sense in which Scripture can be known to be anything but a fabrication.⁵ The modern answer to this dilemma has been dual: either the inarticulate interiority of fideism or the confident Enlightenment assertion that "our only guide is Reason."⁶ Should we restrict the debate to this level, it would be hard to avoid siding with the rationalists, who know a circle when they see one, and are not afraid to call it vicious. Augustine's opening questions, then, are anything but polite. If thought through, they might seem to put at risk everything he holds dear.

"My faith, Lord, calls upon you, which you have given to me, which you have breathed into me through the humility of your Son, through the ministry of your preacher." Augustine's short and immediate solution to the dilemma is to cut through it. Because the answer he seeks proves to be a person, not a thing, not even a body of doctrines, the answer can, as it were, move toward him both to elicit and to address his questioning. Only because the hidden God chooses to make himself known to us through Christ, Scripture and the Church, is it possible to know and call upon God. Were the Triune God not to have revealed himself, which he might not have, as one to be sought, known, and praised, our search and understanding and praise would be to no avail. "Faith comes through hearing, hearing through the words of Christ" (Romans 10:17). True, "arguments" from authority are of the weakest sort; but it is precisely the purpose of Augustine's paradox to show that in the present case no other sort would suffice. Or to put it another way, we have not here to do with arguments at all, but with a friendship (IV.9), of which trust forms an essential part. The rationalist might not be very satisfied with this, but it is the mark of an ill-educated man to want more certainty than the nature of the thing allows. Even in the sphere of the strictly human, some things must be taken on faith (VI.5).

The reply to Feuerbach is plain. Our desire might have been perpetually frustrated. It is not, and we are not monsters, but only because God chooses to come to us. At most our desire is preparatory. But even this is not adequate. For God's coming is not primarily, much less exclusively, to be seen as the fulfillment of our wildest dreams. He is greater by far than our yearnings, as Augustine never tires of confessing (I.4). Otherwise stated, the Gospel truly tells us something new (III.5; VII.9).

Thus the Saint's response in faith is not satisfaction, contentment, nirvana, or whatever else we might expect "rest" to look like. His response is thanks and adoration, which proves to be an unending activity, restless because desire is no longer at war with itself. Accordingly, Augustine describes faith as a "gift," as something "breathed into" him. Such language is more appropriate to faith than a word like "leap," and even more basic than a phrase like "the mind's assent."⁷ To speak with Kierkegaard of a "leap of faith" is to over-emphasize, and indeed to distort, the act which involves an individual human agent in belief. The focus is on what man

⁵Cf., e.g., John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV.16.14 with IV.18.6 and with IV.19 passim. For a contemporary restatement, see Thomas Sheehan's controversial review essay "Revolution in the Church," *New York Review of Books* (June 14, 1984). Sheehan does not push the point as far as he might. Instead he speaks darkly of the "end of Catholicism." Since the completion of the present essay, he has made his views more plain in *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* (New York: Random House, 1986).

⁶Erich Przywara, "St. Augustine and the Modern World," in *A Monument to Saint Augustine* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1945), pp. 249-286.

does in faith almost in abstraction from the "object" of faith. And even assent is entirely secondary, in this instance although in no other, to that which is assented to. Whereas when we speak of faith as a gift, we acknowledge the importance of the believer's own actions—gifts after all may be accepted or rejected—but we do not lose sight of the certain origin and certain end of that faith.⁷

That said, the circle which God's generosity breaks through is neither annulled by God nor forgotten by Augustine. To the contrary, it is only in terms of that circle that the reminiscences which follow make any sense. The *Confessions* as a whole is the long and mediated answer to the paradox Augustine has posed. In preserving a certain kind of circularity, it repeats with a difference an understanding of knowledge and belief which, although foreign to much of modern epistemology, is nonetheless at work in the Saint's philosophic predecessors.

The petulant Meno, in the Platonic dialogue which takes its name from him, is stunned by Socrates' questioning, and attempts to silence his interlocutor with an eristical argument. "How can you search for something of which you know nothing at all?" begins his three-pronged attack (Plato, *Meno* 80 d). The similarities to Augustine's questions are self-evident. Socrates, so far from taking the *aporia* as an obstacle to discussion, uses it to advance the inquiry. As is well known, he tries to get Meno to see that inquiry and learning are the same as recollection. Cognition is re-cognition. The Aristotelian version of this thesis, leaving aside the many subtleties of and divergences between the two accounts, is that all knowledge proceeds from prior knowledge (*Arist. Post. 71a1 ff.; Meta. 992b26 ff.*). "Hermenautics" is the name for the modern re-discovery of the same principle. The *Confessions* proves to be the perfect literary embodiment of the view that the knowledge of faith, too, is a recollection. The co-implication, and hence the apparent circularity, of seeking, finding, and praising God is laid out for all to see in this work of memory.⁸

"You arouse him that he delight to praise you." The most visible and forceful sort of inchoate knowledge at work in the *Confessions* is the author's desire. The traditional separation of intellect and will may tend to obscure the fact, nonetheless the yearning which drives this story is knowledge in a very real sense. "We would not love [the happy life] if we had not learned of it [Iossemus]" (X.20; cf. X.10,17; also *Summa Theologiae* I q.2 a.1 obj.1 and reply). Thus the abyssal poverty of Augustine's love is not a sheer lack. Through it, God is "possessed" as not yet possessed, or better, he is present as absent. Faith, in short, fits with or corresponds to what Augustine already "knew" in his heart. We must add several qualifications, however. The author's yearning is not characterized as absolutely prior, even it is a gift; the very capacity to receive God's word is "aroused" in him. And, to repeat, love of itself does not prove the existence of its "object," for only as fulfilled will it truly know what it is about. Finally, that fulfillment is never truly realized in this life, not even in the most sublime vision or the most mystical of prayers (IX.11).

Because of love's "prior knowledge" these reminiscences characterize life's progress as a return, as a gathering back towards God's self-giving. And recollection in this sense accounts not only for the overall dynamic of the *Confessions*, but also for Augustine's dwelling on the particulars of his past life. Cardinal Newman speaks of "a general law . . . that God's presence is not discerned at the time when it is upon us, but afterwards, when we look back at what is gone and over."⁹ Newman's thesis is amply born out by the book before us. The work is animated by the belief that God comes to each of us not principally *via* abstractions, which stand outside of time, but as person to person, and in the everyday. Again and again Augustine shows that it was only in retrospect that the significance of the events of his life could and did become clear to him (V.8; VI.9; VII.20). In the most general terms, it is only

⁷See Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation, The Aquinas Lecture*, 1982 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982).

⁸Needless to say, there are crucial differences between the Platonic and the Augustinian accounts of recollection. For instance, Augustine uses his very life and its purpose to demonstrate recollection; Socrates appeals to a

slave-boy's discovery of a relatively straightforward mathematical truth. Socrates "explains" recollection by recounting a myth, thereby indicating that there are necessary obscurities to any account of the possibility of all accounting. Augustine readily acknowledges that there are such obscurities (cf., e.g., X.8), but he also holds that they exist only for us (X.24).

⁹*Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 4 (London and New York: Longman's, Green & Co., 1906), p. 256.

with a prospective eye to our destiny that the retrospective glance is intelligible; and yet that prospect would not have been possible had it not been anticipated by unwitting experience, the twists and turns of an ordinary life (for in truth the events recounted herein are quite ordinary). This explains why the *Confessions*, unlike almost any modern autobiography that comes to mind, never once treats the past nostalgically, a fact which is often mistakenly attributed to Augustine's supposed harshness. Rather, the painful return home is un sentimental because homeward is not strictly speaking pastward. Similarly, the *Confessions* is not a "recherche du temps perdu." The true meaning of all human pasts is ever present to God, and so could never be lost.

As Socrates counsels Meno, so Augustine counsels us to join with him and look "inward." Does the account which makes sense of the vagaries of his life also make sense of our own (cf. XI.3)? No more for the theologian than for the philosopher does such a look mean a turn to mute, and consequently indefensible, feeling. Because in his present he can look to his past and recognize its meaning, the truth of his past is repeatable, it stands outside that past, and therefore is in principle available to be shared, communicated. And so our own look inward is, with Augustine's, a look beyond to the Truth which is, finally, the sole criterion for all truths. Still, books have their own time, especially the books of faith, as Augustine knows better than most (IX.5). So he is happiest and on most solid ground not when he is out to convince, addressing his readers directly, but when he is charitably overheard admitting his debt to God.

IV.

To sum up, Augustine's revelation of his inmost self is an imitation of God's self-revelation to mankind.¹⁰ As faith is necessary to the Saint's acceptance of divine revelation, so faith is necessary for full participation in the *Confessions*. From this it follows that reading the *Confessions* cannot of itself

bring about faith. At best the work can draw its readers towards faith by speaking to their minds and hearts so that the Word of God may gain a hearing (note in this respect the author's constant reliance on Scripture—XII.16; XI.1). The *Confessions* can confront the tendency to reduce faith to some process of reasoning, and the opposing tendency to make of faith something unreasonable and arbitrary, by displaying faith as something beyond but not opposed to reason. And it can "stir up the heart" by testifying to a balm for our sin and shame, our questions and doubts, our misery and lowliness, namely God's mercy, truth, and greatness. In a word, Augustine's *Confessions* is an icon of the Word of God. □

¹⁰ Along with Przywara's article, cited above, the most helpful work for the present study was Thomas Pruffer's "Notes for a Reading of Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X," *Interpretation, a Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 10, pp. 197-200.