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November 22, 2013

Dwelling in the Land of the *Confessions*

It's surprising that a lover of wisdom should lavish as much attention on the particulars of his own life as Augustine does in the *Confessions*. While any number of philosophers before him had sought to live by the maxim inscribed in Apollo's temple at Delphi—γνῶθι σεαυτόν, know thyself—none known to me had taken this as a directive to reflect on the contingencies of his own biography, let alone publish his thoughts on such intimate matters as a vexed relationship with his mother, a childish loathing of school, a troubled sexual history, or an enduring tendency to overindulge at the dinner table. In the *Phaedo*, Plato does have Socrates recount how he lost his youthful enthusiasm for the study of nature (96a-100a), but in their exclusive attention to the evolution of his philosophical orientation, these autobiographical remarks hardly compare with the astonishingly inclusive narrative of a sinner's wandering path to God that Augustine gives us in the *Confessions*. Socrates, his account of his "second sailing" notwithstanding, lives out the Delphic command not by brooding over his individual history or unique identity but by enlisting dialogue partners in a collaborative search for the truth of those experiences potentially shared by us all in virtue of our common humanity. To oversimplify a bit, he's interested not so much in *who* he is as in *what* he is, not in this individual man called Socrates but in what it means to be a human being in general.

Even more pronounced is the contrast between Augustine and Plotinus, the thinker who perhaps exercised a greater influence on him than any other pagan writer. The Neoplatonist's disregard for merely individual selfhood is memorably captured in the testimony of his disciple Porphyry, who writes that "Plotinus, the philosopher our contemporary, seemed ashamed of being in the body. So deeply rooted was this feeling that he could never be induced to tell of his ancestry, his parentage, or

his birthplace.”¹ No mere quirk of temperament, this reticence is governed by Plotinus’s overriding ambition to identify completely with the incorporeal intellect in its capacity for timeless contemplation of the divine One. It’s this aspiration that motivates his refusal to share even the bare facts surrounding his origins as an embodied self.

For all that he owes to the self-effacing Platonic sage, however, Augustine himself has no qualms about directing his gaze and ours to the particular circumstances and events of his unique, unrepeatable, and still-unfolding life. Quite to the contrary, he writes in the confident hope, reiterated at several key points in the *Confessions*, that by reflecting on that life, seeking out the narrative threads that bind it into a unity, he and his readers might be drawn ever closer to the eternal, divine truth. But how does a lover of wisdom—one, moreover, as indebted to Neoplatonism as Augustine acknowledges himself to be—arrive at a hope like this one? How is it that he comes to see his embodied, time-bound existence as no mere image to be forgotten as quickly as possible in the ascent to its divine original but as something worthy of the most serious and sustained attention?

Now, one approach to the question immediately comes to mind. As an orthodox Christian believer, the author of the *Confessions* fully accepts the doctrine of the Word made flesh. God himself, on this account, took on all the characteristic features of human finitude: he was born of a particular woman at a particular time and place, spoke a particular language, practiced a particular religion, lived in relationship to particular human others—we could extend forever this list of “accidents” that individuate the incarnate beings that we ourselves are and that Christians believe God in Jesus became. While some of these properties and relationships are undoubtedly less important than others, who are we to scorn the whole lot of them if God himself has deigned to take them on? Who are we to be “ashamed of being in the body” if the Creator of all things, of corporeal substances no less than of the spiritual, saw nothing shameful in becoming incarnate? If the humanity of Jesus Christ, indeed his very flesh and blood, is indispensable to our salvation, shouldn’t we at least have second thoughts about

renouncing our own humanity, or attempting to locate it exclusively in a disembodied intellect that manages to shed the burdens of finitude?

But of course these are very big “ifs”—*too* big, I think, for a community like ours whose conversation appeals to no higher authority than natural reason. While Augustine believes he can find in the writings of the Neoplatonists themselves the doctrine of the Word that was with God and that was God, not even he claims to apprehend the *incarnation* of that Word on any basis other than faith. My ambition tonight is to see how far we can go toward making sense of the intensely personal approach of the *Confessions* without appealing to postulates drawn from sacred doctrine. While I suspect that Augustine’s unprecedented way of applying the Delphic maxim becomes fully intelligible only against the background of his specifically Christian commitments, we might nevertheless *begin* to understand the peculiar strategy he employs in the *Confessions* by considering the deficiencies that come to light there of a philosophy conducted in a wholly impersonal key. However dazzling a glimpse it may afford of the eternal truth, Neoplatonic introspection, we shall see, fails to open out onto what Augustine calls “the way that leads not only to beholding our blessed fatherland but also to dwelling therein” (7.20.26).²

PART I

Before examining their limitations, however, I want to begin by briefly considering why the “books of the Platonists” (7.9.13) were attractive to Augustine in the first place. His study of them comes directly on the heels of his disillusionment with the Manicheism he had been espousing for the better part of a decade. Disheartened by the moral and intellectual bankruptcy he has found even among the elite members of that sect, he has also come to reject their sharply dualistic vision of good and evil as coeternal principles locked in cosmic combat. Such a view, he concludes, is irreconcilable with his dawning certainty that God must be beyond all change, corruption, or violation. Nothing can harm a divinity worthy of the name, and this means that God could have no compelling reason to engage in

battle with eternal forces of darkness. In fact, such forces are no more than the figments of an overheated mythic imagination: for together with being immutable, God is by nature infinite; it makes no sense, therefore, to posit a reality that would constrain in any way his power to implement his perfectly good will.

With his Manichean convictions thus in tatters, Augustine finds himself not so much freed as unmoored, drifting toward a radical skepticism that, for all its philosophical plausibility, can't possibly quiet the clamor of his restless heart. It is in this state that he becomes newly open to the possibility of reconciling with the Catholic Christianity in which his mother attempted to raise him, an orthodox faith which, largely due to Bishop Ambrose's brilliant preaching on the allegorical sense of the Old Testament, he has ceased to disdain as the bastion of simple-minded literalism. He realizes, for example, that our being in God's image need not entail that he be confined to a body like ours, as the Manichees had mocked the Catholics for allegedly believing. At this stage, however, Augustine finds he can do no better than replace such anthropomorphism with a less crude but no less materialist notion of God, now imagined as a subtle body extended throughout infinite space, permeating and exceeding a created world conceived on the analogy of a sponge submerged in a vast sea (7.5.7). To think in this way, he realizes, commits him to the absurd view that an elephant, for example, must contain more of the divine presence than a sparrow, yet he remains frustratingly unable to understand God or anything else in nonmaterial terms. He writes: "Whatever was not extended over, or diffused throughout, or compacted into, or projected up to definite measures of space, or did not or could not receive something of this kind, I thought to be completely non-existent" (7.1.2).

It's this crucial error that the books of the Platonists enable him to overcome, not simply by introducing him to an impressive *theory* of incorporeal being but by showing him a path leading to nothing less than a direct *experience* of the purely spiritual, first within his own soul and ultimately in the divine being itself. Taught to shun the external and direct his gaze inward, he eventually catches sight of what he calls the "unchangeable light" above the mind. After ascending beyond bodies and the power

to perceive them and onto the soul's rational faculty of judgment, he says that in realizing its own mutability, this reasoning power

raised itself up to its own understanding. It removed its thought from the tyranny of habit, and withdrew itself from the throngs of contradictory phantasms. In this way it might find that light by which it was sprinkled, when it cried out, that beyond all doubt the immutable must be preferred to the mutable. Hence it might come to know this immutable being, for unless it could know it in some way, it could no wise have set it with certainty above the mutable. Thus in a flash of its trembling sight it came to that which is. Then indeed I clearly saw your "invisible things, understood by the things which are made." (7.17.23)

Many of you will no doubt recognize the final sentence here as a citation of Paul's Letter to the Romans (1:20). By quoting Scripture, however, Augustine does not mean to imply any essential difference between the experience he is recounting and the one described by Plotinus and his disciples. As in the writings of those philosophers, the inward turn of *Confessions* 7 corresponds to a movement away from absorbed attention to the particularities of the material world and toward the timeless, intellectual contemplation of the "unchangeable light" at the source of all finite things. That eternal light is one and the same for Plotinus as for Paul, for Augustine as for you or me. If our highest good is indeed to gaze upon it, it's understandable that a thinker like Plotinus would regard attending to those things that differentiate us individuals, the temporal accidents of birth and biography, as at best a distraction from our true calling. In the famous treatise known as "On Beauty," Plotinus insists that what we ought to be doing is chipping away like sculptors at everything exterior to the eternal light within us. "Do you see yourself, abiding within yourself, in pure solitude?" he asks.

Does nothing now remain to shatter that interior unity, nor anything external cling to your authentic self? Are you entirely that sole true light which is not contained by space, not confined to any circumscribed form...? Do you see yourself in this state? Then you have become vision itself. Be of good heart. Remaining here you have ascended aloft. You need a guide no longer. Strain and see.³

But what if "straining" isn't enough? What if "remaining here" proves too difficult? For all the serene confidence that marks Plotinus's writings, even he and his disciples sometimes seem to acknowledge the impossibility of simply willing the soul to arrive at and persist in its transcendent

vision. Porphyry, for instance, claims to have had the experience just once, in his sixty-eighth year,⁴ and while Plotinus says that for him “it has happened often,”⁵ he also characterizes it as something that comes “suddenly” (*exaiφhnēs*)⁶ upon a soul that is all too quickly sent back down into the comparative dullness of mere discursive reason.⁷ Now, I suppose it’s possible (though personally I doubt it) that if Augustine had experienced nothing worse than this inevitable slide from *nous* to *dianoia*, from pure contemplating to the difficult labor of thinking things through, and if, moreover, he had found some way to reconcile the suddenness of the introspective vision with Plotinus’s confidence in the sufficiency of effort (“straining”) to bring it about, he just might have remained content with what the books of the Platonists were able to teach him. But as he recounts in such compelling detail in the *Confessions*, his rapturous and reassuring vision of the unchangeable light is followed almost immediately by a plunge back into currents of temptation that prove to be just as irresistible as they had been before. No transformation of his life ensues, no conversion or reorientation of his misbegotten aims and ambitions follows upon the ecstatic experience that liberates his mind. “I was borne up to you by your beauty,” he confesses, “but soon I was borne down from you by my own weight, and with groaning, I plunged into the midst of lower things” (7.17.23). In other words, the tyranny of habit reasserts itself immediately, and he succumbs to old patterns of feeling and acting despite seeing them more clearly than ever as obstacles in the way of his deepest desire. The good he approves unreservedly in his mind he fails to pursue with an undivided heart; unable to do what he wants, he does the very things he hates.

How depressing! Wouldn’t we like to think that even a pale approximation of a vision like the one Augustine reports would have a profound effect on the way we live our lives? Wouldn’t it be easy to love the truth and to do it if we were only certain what the truth was? But this is just the sort of comforting illusion that Augustine indulged in until his ecstatic vision deprived him of what he calls “that former excuse, in which I used to look upon myself as unable to despise the world and to serve you because knowledge of the truth was still uncertain to me” (8.5.11). Now, approaching thirty years

of age, he has attained the certainty he's long been seeking, and yet he discovers that he is just as enthralled to his old, enervating habits as he ever was. Able to *see* the truth, he still cannot draw near enough to bask in its radiance.

If we are at all persuaded of the authenticity of his testimony—influenced, perhaps, by an uncomfortable awareness of our own failures to translate insight into action, to *do* the truth we know—we have reason to wonder whether any mere vision, however dazzling, can set us on the sure path to the good. Understanding alone is perhaps not enough to overturn long-settled habits of self-indulgence, indolence, and despair, no matter how irrefutable the evidence becomes that these are precisely what keeps us from the happiness we seek. To use one of Augustine's favorite images, it's as if we can become *enchained* to ways of life we know to be toxic to our souls. He writes:

For in truth lust is made out of a perverse will, and when lust is served, it becomes habit, and when habit is not resisted, it becomes necessity. By such links, joined one to another, as it were—for this reason I have called it a chain—a harsh bondage held me fast. A new will, which had begun within me, to wish freely to worship you and find joy in you, O God, the sole sure delight, was not yet able to overcome that prior will, grown strong with age. (8.5.10)

Now, we call “habits” those dispositions to feeling and action that come to be in us as a result of repetition. What we do habitually we do not because nature compels us or reason convinces us but simply because we have done likewise in similar situations time and again in the past. Here's a trivial example. I'm in the habit of drinking a cup of coffee first thing every morning. I don't remember making a deliberate choice to start doing this, but if ever I did, it must have been a long time ago: at this point in my life, it's only a slight exaggeration to say that deliberate choice of any kind becomes possible for me only *after* I've had that first cup. I suppose if I were to summon my inner resources I could manage to break a chain now thousands of links long by choosing to have tea tomorrow instead. After all, it's not my *nature* that determines me to drink coffee, as it is, say, the stone's nature that causes it to fall or the fire's that makes it rise, but merely my long-settled habit—a practice become *second* nature, so to speak.

But might there be situations in which this is a distinction without any practical difference, occasions when second-nature constrains no less than first and habit takes on the character of compulsion? For Augustine there were, and we need not have suffered from any of the conventionally recognized “addictions,” I think, to identify with his experience of habit as an iron chain holding him back from goods he has to come to perceive with incontestable clarity.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle observes that, unlike those powers that are in us by nature (e.g., sense perception), the potencies for which precede our exercise of them, the virtues of character are like physical or technical abilities in that they come to be in us only after we have been engaged in the activities associated with them (1103a25f.) We become capable of courage, for example, only by repeatedly doing courageous things, meaning those things the already courageous person does, just as we become harpists by repeatedly practicing the harp under the tutelage of an accomplished player. As we grow more accustomed to being at work in them, these activities become easier for us, more pleasant, we could even say, more “natural” to us.

Unfortunately, though, this is at least as true, and probably more so, of bad actions as it is of good: as Augustine knew all too well, a past defined by repeated indulgence in any kind of excess or deficiency can make a future characterized by strength of will or self-control, let alone full-fledged virtue, appear entirely out of reach. How I conduct myself today seems largely determined by what I did yesterday, even when the memory of this recent past fills me with shame and regret over having acted otherwise than I *knew* I should.

I want to turn now to Augustine’s analysis of time to see what light it might shed on this indebtedness or even enslavement of the present to the past, and also on the shape that a rehabilitated future might ultimately take. My hope is that doing this will bring us a step closer to our goal of understanding the significance of Augustine’s autobiographical turn in the *Confessions*.

PART II

Though it would take all night (at least) to do justice to his fascinating and intricate meditation, the basic paradox of time Augustine identifies in Book 11 can be expressed in a few words. It seems, he observes, that the present is the only time that actually exists, since whatever the future is, it is not yet, and the past is no longer. Upon scrutiny, however, the present itself turns out to look like nothing more than an extension-less boundary between those two nonentities, the past and the future. “It flies with such speed from the future into the past,” Augustine says, “that it cannot be extended by even a trifling amount” (11.15.20). Hemmed in as it is on both sides by nonbeing, the reality of the duration-less present itself falls under serious suspicion. Here is Augustine again:

[I]f the present were always present, and would not pass into the past, it would no longer be time, but eternity. Therefore, if the present, so as to be time, must be so constituted that it passes into the past, how can we say that it is, since the cause of its being is the fact that it will cease to be? [11.14.17, emphasis added]

Thus it appears that neither the future, nor the past, nor even, now, the present has a sure hold on being: future and past are not, and the present is only in so far as it ceases to be. But Augustine is unwilling to conclude from this that time is mere illusion. Should we decide that it exists only in a secondary or derivative sense—a kind of moving image of eternity, as the *Timaeus* has it—it nevertheless remains too fundamental to our lived experience, and our ways of talking about that experience, simply to deny its reality altogether. The task is to try to *understand* what time is, if not in itself then at least as it is *for us*. What we can say for sure, Augustine thinks, is that the past and future depend for their being on the present; they “do not exist except as present things” (11.18.23), he says. It seems no less true, however, that the present itself cannot *be* apart from the past and the future, for what else could provide the present the “space” it needs to extend beyond the length-less and breadth-less instant that exists, if it exists at all, only by rushing headlong into non-being?

Characteristically, Augustine looks within himself for a way beyond the impasse. It's there, in the soul or the mind, that future and past things acquire a kind of presence (and therefore *being*), as correlates of the mind's acts of expectation and memory, respectively. It's also there that present things achieve stability by being held in attention, an act of the mind that articulates itself beyond the point-like instant by looking back to a beginning and forward to an anticipated end. Whereas on initial reflection time had seemed to vanish into the nothingness of a not-yet-existent future, a no-longer-existent past, and a perpetually self-destructing present, its claim to at least relative being can now be redeemed so long as we're willing to pay the price of acknowledging its dependence on the mind's own activity. The three times, Augustine says, "are in the soul...the present of things past is in memory; the present of things present is in intuition; the present of things future is in expectation" (11.20.26). Taken as a whole, time can thus be described as a "distention of the mind" (*distentio animi*) (11.26.33), a stretching or swelling of present consciousness backward into a remembered past and forward into an anticipated future.

While it's certainly possible to distinguish memory, expectation, and intuition or attention as three separate acts of the mind, Augustine's analysis makes clear that to do this would be to engage in a kind of abstraction. For in our lived experience of things, memory, expectation, and attention form a single, continuous whole. The mind, he says, "looks forward, it considers, it remembers, so the reality to which it looks forward passes through what it considers into what it remembers" (11.28.37). To illustrate this dynamic, he reflects on the experience of reciting a psalm he knows by heart. Once he's formed the intention to recite and is about to carry it out, the psalm, or rather, his recitation of it, is one of the "things future," which is to say, it exists for the mind in the mode of expectation. The ray of consciousness is pointed forward, so to speak, casting its light over the whole psalm as something to be brought out into the open as an audible presence. As the recitation proceeds, the stock of expectation decreases in proportion to memory's increase, until, having reached his proposed end, the speaker falls silent and the psalm in its entirety exists by way of its resonance in the recollecting minds of its hearers.

What happens between the beginning and the end of this process, namely, the ongoing transferal of expectation's funds into the account of memory, corresponds to present time in its more expansive, non-instantaneous conception. The act of the mind responsible for this making present Augustine variously calls "intuition" (*contuitus*), "attention" (*attentio*), and "intention" (*intentio*). Present consciousness, we come to understand, doesn't just passively register a now that arises only to perish (or, more accurately, arises only *by* perishing); on the contrary, the attending or, better, the *intending* mind plays an active part in the unfolding of temporal events, as both Augustine's heavy reliance on words with *tendo*—stretch out—at their root, as well as his pregnant choice of the recitation example powerfully suggest. About that recitation, Augustine writes:

The life of this action of mine is distended into memory by reason of the part I have spoken and into forethought (*expectatio*) by reason of the part I am about to speak. But attention (*attentio*) is actually present and that which was to be is *borne along* by it so as to become past. (11.28.37, emphasis added).

It's worth hearing that again: what was to be is "borne along" by attention into the past. The Latin verb here is *traicitur*, a passive form of *traicio*, which could also be rendered as "transports" or "conveys." It combines the preposition *trans*—"across" or "along"—with the root verb *iacio*, meaning "throw," so we might think of attention as the act of throwing an expected future into a recalled past. The sense of this would be to emphasize how time for Augustine is not merely something that we suffer but is also, perhaps even primarily, something that we ourselves *do*. It's hard to know how to say this: the mind constitutes, enacts, unfolds, or perhaps *lives* time, in the transitive sense of an expression like "living one's life." But whatever verb we finally settle on, the crucial thing to grasp is that the soul itself makes an indispensable contribution to the experience or even the very being of time in shouldering an expected future and bearing it along into a recalled past.

If the full significance of this activity does not come fully to light in Augustine's psalm example, what he says toward the end of Book 11 leaves no doubt about the ultimately moral horizon of his

analysis. After describing the temporal process by which the action of reciting the psalm reaches completion, he asserts that “[t]he same thing holds for a man’s entire life, the parts of which are all the man’s actions” (11.28.38). (In fact, the scope can be widened even further to take in all of history, the “whole age of the sons of men,” though I’ll keep our focus for now on the life of the individual.) Just as I look ahead in expectation to the psalm I am about to recite, so too do I project a practical or moral future for myself, setting about in the present on the task of converting into a happy memory what is now only an aspiration to act in accordance with my conception of the good. In this way, “that which was to be is borne along” into the past.

Of course, there are many ways for our moral intentions to misfire. However completely he comes to rely on God’s grace, Augustine remains sensitive to the constant vigilance, the intense daily effort required of him if he is to fulfill his divinely reordered aims. Readers of Book 10 of the *Confessions* know that his baptism did not render him immune to the temptation of taking it easy, of allowing himself to be swept up by the rushing current of the merely instantaneous now instead of rising to the challenge of actively *living* time, that is, of anticipating a virtuous future and then undertaking the arduous task of carrying it through the present and into the past. “I am a burden to myself” (10.28.39), he writes, vividly evoking his sense of this labor, the obligation imposed on us imperfect, temporal creatures not to while away the time but to strive, with God’s help, to close the gap between what we are now and what we are called to be.

The difficulty of that task, as our discussion of habit has prepared us to see, seems to be directly proportional to the distance separating what we will to become from what we have already been. In other words, the more radically the future we project for ourselves departs from the past we recall, the harder it is to bear that future successfully into the present. In the hopes of deepening our understanding of this phenomenon, let’s return once more to Augustine’s recitation example. Forming the intention to say the whole psalm from beginning to end involves calling it up to the forefront of his mind from out of what in Book 10 he had called “the great cave of memory” (10.8.13). Only because

he has already learned it by heart at some point in the *past* can he now look forward to reciting it in the present. And this suggests, if the example is as paradigmatic of all temporal experience as I believe Augustine means it to be, that anticipation is itself grounded in recollection, in other words, that the projected future “borne along” by a present intention is first assembled by the soul from materials drawn from its past. Augustine makes the point more explicitly in Book 10. Within the memory, he says,

I encounter myself and recall myself, and what, and when, and where I did some deed, and how I was affected when I did it. There are all those things which I remember either as experienced by me or as taken on trust from others. From that same abundant stock, also, I combine one and another of the likenesses of things, whether things actually known by experience or those believed in from those I have experienced, with things past, and *from them I meditate upon future actions, events, and hopes*, and all these again as though they were actually present. “I will do this or that,” I say to myself within that vast recess of my mind, filled with images, so many and so great, *and this deed or that then follows*. (10.8.14, emphasis added).

What this passage allows us to see, I think, is that temporal life, or the activity of *living* time, is marked by a kind of circularity. In proposing a course of action to myself, I cannot but rely upon the “abundant stock” of past experiences, either my own or those attested by others and found credible to the extent that they are consistent with my own. In other words, before the anticipated future can be borne along into the remembered past, the past must first be launched forward into the future as the indispensable material out of which the soul shapes its expectation. Now, this is not to say that in acting in the world we only ever repeat ourselves, or that the wheel of lived time rotates around a fixed point. Augustine mentions here that as he deliberates he “combine[s]...the likenesses of things” drawn up from memory, thereby suggesting that the soul enjoys at least some degree of creative freedom in its activity of conceiving for itself a future as something other than an exact replica of its past. But it’s still no use pretending that a path of total novelty is ever open to us; the future is inescapably indebted to the past, expectation inevitably takes its stand on the ground of memory.

It’s not hard to grasp that this poses a grave threat to the possibility of the deep and abiding transformation the young Augustine came to recognize as his only hope for happiness. For if my

memory teems with images of a life fundamentally inimical to the good; if the virtuous examples of others seem too remote from my experience to be plausible or even attractive models for me; and if the claims of the philosophers to offer an escape from time and all its woes have proved too good to be true, then my desire for the happy life, no matter how firmly rooted in a clear vision of its reality and goodness, seems fated to go unfulfilled. In their essentially timeless character, transcendent moments of insight, like those Augustine attains by way of Neoplatonic introspection, are essentially cut off from memory and expectation, mere interruptions of the circuit of lived temporality. As such, they remain no more than isolated points of light, like individual stars in a vast night sky—beautiful, to be sure, but virtually powerless to illuminate the ground beneath our feet as we stumble along in search of the way that leads not only to beholding but to dwelling in the land of our desire (7.20.26; 7.21.27).

Augustine opens a window onto the potentially ruinous dependence of expectation on memory in recounting a conversation he had with himself a few years before his final decision to seek baptism. Approaching the age of thirty, he looks back with chagrin at all the time that has passed since his teenage reading of Cicero's *Hortensius* first set him on fire with the love of wisdom. The bitter anxieties and disappointments of those dozen years have left him more convinced than ever of the futility of a life given over to worldly ambition. His disillusionment with the rationalist pretensions of the Manichees and his deepening admiration for the philosophically sophisticated preaching of Ambrose have inclined him, as he puts it, to "fix my feet on that step where my parents placed me as a child" (6.11.18). He's going to do it, he really means it this time, he's going to put away what he calls his "vain and empty concerns" by committing himself fully once and for all to the Catholic Church. Just *not yet*. "[T]ime passed," he says,

and still I delayed to be converted to the Lord...I loved the happy life, but I feared to find it in your abode, and I fled from it, even as I sought it. I thought that I would be too wretched, if I were kept from a woman's arms. I did not believe that the cure for this disease lay in your mercy, for I had had no experience with that cure. I believed

that continence lay within a man's own powers, and such powers I was not conscious of within myself. (6.11.20)

Notice what's holding him back. Though he has long suspected that the cares imposed by married life are for him incompatible with the spiritual freedom he desperately desires, he also knows himself well enough to realize that he lacks the strength to live without the comforts afforded by sexual intimacy. In the terms of his metaphor, he suffers from a "disease" whose symptoms he knows how to treat but whose cure, he has learned, lies completely outside his own power to effect. Whether or not we think it makes sense to diagnose as an illness his inability to commit to celibacy, with a little imagination most of us will be able to relate to Augustine's predicament here. He knows exactly what it would take for him to be happy, but bitter experience has convinced him that he's just not up to the task. Nothing he finds in the spacious caverns of his memory allows him to envision for himself a life of genuine health, and without the means to palliate the symptoms of his disease, he fears that taking up residence in "God's abode" would serve only to increase his misery. Thus he shrinks back from the decisive step, without, however, being able to resign himself to a future as fatalistically determined by the past as his own seems certain to be.

Perhaps there is little we can reasonably say about the causes of Augustine's ultimate escape from this desperate situation, at least if we want to keep open the possibility that it was indeed God's grace that finally set him free. I think we can conclude, though, that whatever it was that finally lifted the terrible burden from his soul in that Milan garden, the experience he describes as "a peaceful light streaming into my heart" (8.12.29) would have been every bit as isolated and ineffectual as his Plotinian visions of the eternal truth turned out to be had it not become possible for him to discern the underlying continuity of his past life of unhappy wandering with the baptized future he was finally empowered to project for himself. For as his analysis of time has shown us, to the extent that the present remains divorced from the past that precedes it, it cannot but have the character of the instant that *is* only by *ceasing to be*, the point-like now that suddenly—*exaiφhnēs*—emerges out of nothingness

only to vanish again just as suddenly. From such an instant, however charged with divine presence it might be, nothing of lasting, practical significance is likely to follow—nothing more consequential, at any rate, than the sort of wistful memory and infinite, impotent yearning that threatened to consume Augustine in the wake of his disappointing experiments in Neoplatonic ascent.

In concluding, then, I want to suggest that Augustine's passionately personal reflection on the events leading up to his final conversion is intended to recall and thereby reinforce the vital links between the future opened up to him on that momentous day in Milan and even the darkest periods of his youthful estrangement from himself and from his God. Though his conversion undoubtedly marks a new beginning, even a kind of rebirth, it succeeds in doing what impersonal introspection had failed to do because Augustine is enabled to see it as the culmination of a process that had begun in him long before. The call he finally answers in deciding to seek baptism is the very same call that had never ceased resounding in his heart, even when he was desperately trying to drown it out in the frantic pursuit of sensual pleasure, emotional and intellectual titillation, and worldly success. In looking back on his past, he comes to see that in the anxiety, disappointment, and doubt that marred his life of secular striving, God himself had been calling him home.

You were always present to aid me, merciful in your anger, and charging with the greatest bitterness and disgust all my unlawful pleasures, so that I might seek after pleasure that was free from disgust, to the end that, when I could find it, it would be in none but you, Lord, in none but you. For you fashion sorrow into a lesson to us. You smite so that you may heal. You slay us, so that we may not die apart from you. (2.2.4)

Augustine meditates on his past in the *Confessions* to learn again this lesson of sorrow, which is also, paradoxically, a lesson of great hope. From out of the caves of his memory he no longer draws up the despair-inducing confirmation of his own weakness that had paralyzed him as a young man, but the liberating assurance that God had always been with him, even in the depths of his sin. Recollections of events in which that divine presence now seems unmistakable nourish his expectations of future

assistance, giving him the strength to stand firm against present temptation in the confidence that his conversion will turn out to have been the decisive event of his life, and not a mere prelude to another aborted attempt or humiliating failure to change his ways.

But as his unsparing assessment of his present condition vividly demonstrates, he knows that nothing is guaranteed. To be sure, conversion to the truth for him comes as a gift, but that gift—perhaps like all gifts—is profoundly difficult for a creature with a long history of proud self-assertion to receive. Ever present is the temptation to refuse or return it in the fatal conviction, born of pride and despair, that there is no genuine good beyond what we can obtain for ourselves. The books of the Platonists did nothing to disabuse Augustine of this error. “Strain and see,” they told him, at once puffing him up by preaching the sufficiency of effort, and casting him down by showing him no more than the way to *behold* the blessed country when his heart’s desire was to *dwell* therein. The way beyond beholding is a way of humility, and Augustine’s searingly honest examination of his life is his attempt to walk it.

Thank you.

¹ Porphyry, “On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of His Work,” in Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. cii.

² All Augustine quotations are from *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960).

³ *Enneads* 1.6.9, in *The Essential Plotinus*, trans. Elmer O'Brien (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1964), pp. 43-44.

⁴ “On the Life of Plotinus,” p. cxxii.

⁵ *Enneads* 4.8.1.

⁶ *Enneads* 6.7.34.

⁷ *Enneads* 4.8.6.