

## Augustine on Desires, Feelings, and Spiritual Formation

From Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967, 2000)

The life of feeling was what really counted in personal growth. This conviction led Augustine in Book IX of the *Confessions* to pierce far beneath the surface of his life at Cassiacum. What was important to him now were the emotions of the convert, conjured up with classic authenticity. These were the ‘inner goads’ that had ‘tamed’ Augustine; for they had lasted for him, while the hopes contained in the intellectual programmes of the time had been eroded, and the *Dialogues*, now ‘smelling of the class-room’, had come to rest on his bookshelf – high and dry, full of the names of dead friends.

Seeing that Augustine wrote his *Confessions* ‘remembering my wicked ways, thinking them over again in bitterness’, it is amazing how little of this bitterness he has allowed to colour his past feelings. They are not made pale by regret: it is plainly the autobiography of a man who, even as a schoolboy, had known what it was to be moved only by ‘delight’, to be bored by duty, who had enjoyed fully what he had enjoyed: “‘One and one is two, two and two is four,’” this was a hateful jingle to me, and the greatest treat of all, that sweet illusion – the wooden Horse full of armed men, Troy burning and the very ghost of Creusa.’ After all, where better than in the pages of the *Confessions* can one read of the eternal dilemma of a young man, ‘witty and polished’? ‘I had not yet been in love and I was in love the loving...I set about finding an occasion to fall in love, so much in love was I with the idea of loving.’

Augustine analyses his past feelings with ferocious honesty. They were too important to him to be falsified by sentimental stereotypes. It is not that he had abandoned strong feeling: he merely believed it possible to transform feelings, to direct them more profitably. This enjoyed crying at the theatre: now, it was only by trying to understand why he had behaved in this paradoxical way as a student in deriving pleasure from sharing the simulated grief of two actors, that he could define in a convincing way, how he would now behave as a Christian bishop when faced by genuine suffering: ‘Should we then cut off all feeling for suffering? Certainly not! Therefore, at times, let us still find sorrow welcome.’

He was fascinated by the precise quality of human feelings. We meet him observing the behavior of babies at the breast; and as he touches in passing on the attitudes of contemporaries to a long engagement, we can catch in the language of this bishop of Hippo, some distant echo of courtly love: ‘It is the custom that a couple, once engaged, should not be married straight away; lest the man, as a husband, should hold cheap the woman for whom he had not sighed throughout the long delays of courtship.’

Above all, Augustine will twice handle, with unique insight, the most complex of all emotions – grief and mourning. Friends, in romantic fiction, were prepared to die together: ‘But a mysterious feeling quite contrary to this obsessed me: my very loss of interest in living took the form of an oppressive fear of dying. I believe that, the more strongly I loved him, the more I hated and feared, as a relentless enemy, death, that had snatched him away. I thought death capable of suddenly devouring all men, because he had taken this loved one. That is how I felt, as I remember it...For I felt his soul and mine to be one soul in two bodies and so looked on life with horror, because I did not wish to live as only half myself: and so it may well be that I feared death, lest, in dying, I should bring about the total extinction of the man I loved so much.’

In the *Confessions*, however, the evocation of Augustine’s feelings forms part of the wider study of the evolution of his will. Every step Augustine takes in his career, for instance, is firmly embedded in an exhaustive analysis of his motives. When describing how he wrote his first book, he will strike despair into modern scholars by refusing to tell us what it was he said in it, and will, instead, dwell at length on the complex motives involved in his having dedicated it to an unknown professor: ‘Who can map out the various forces at play in one soul, the different kinds of love... Man is a great depth, O Lord; You number his hairs...but the hairs of his head are easier by far to count than his feelings, the movements of his heart.’

Nothing shows Augustine’s preoccupation with the will more clearly than the way in which he recounts his adolescence. His African readers tended to think that a boy was innocent until he reached puberty: ‘as if’, Augustine once said, ‘the only sins you could commit were those in which you use your genitals.’ These, indeed, are the sins that seem to have interested the average reader of the *Confessions* ever since. Augustine, however, treats them as not very important: in his eyes they paled into insignificance before a single act of vandalism. The pointless robbing of a pear-tree is what really interests this great connoisseur of the human will: he will analyse this one incident with fascinated repulsion; ‘For what could I not have done, seeing that I could enjoy even a gratuitous act of crime?’

For, in the *Confessions* we are faced with the full force of Augustine’s new awareness of the limitations of human freedom. The ‘gratuitous act’ of a young hooligan is a sad paradigm for free will. Men were free only ‘to throw themselves headlong.’ By such destructive acts of will, they had even crippled their own capacity to act creatively. For when a man came to wish to choose the good, he found himself unable to follow his conscious

choice wholeheartedly: for his previous actions had forged a 'chain of habit' in which he was held fast, 'not in another's shackles, but in the iron links of my own will'. The strength of this 'chain' obsesses Augustine throughout the *Confessions*. Five years of sad experience in battling with the hardened wills of his congregation have flowed into this book: even in the miniature biographies of Alypius and Monica, the sins that God has 'cured' are 'besetting sins' – extreme cases of compulsive habits.

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Augustine wrote the *Confessions* in the spirit of a doctor committed only recently, and so all the more zealously to a new form of treatment. In the first nine books, therefore, he will illustrate what happens when this treatment is not applied, how he had come to discover it, and, skipping a decade, he will demonstrate, in Book Ten, its continued application in the present.

It is this theme of *Confession* that would make Augustine's treatment of himself different from any autobiography available, at the time, to its readers. For the insistence on treatment by 'confession' has followed Augustine into his present life. The amazing Book Ten of the *Confessions* is not the affirmation of a cured man: it is the self-portrait of a convalescent.

This one book of the *Confessions* would have taken Augustine's readers by surprise: when it was read in Rome, for instance, Pelagius was 'deeply annoyed' by its tone. For that the conventional Christian wanted, was the story of a successful conversion. Conversion had been the main theme of religious autobiography in the ancient world. Such a conversion was often thought of as being as dramatic and as simple as the 'sobering up' of an alcoholic. Like all too many such converts, the writer will insist on rubbing into us that he is now a different person, that he has never looked back. Seen in such a light, the very act of conversion has cut the convert's life in two; he has been able to shake off his past. Conversion to philosophy or to some religious creed was thought of as being the attainment of some final security, like sailing from a stormy sea into the still waters of a port: S. Cyprian treats his conversion to Christianity in just these terms; so did Augustine when at Cassiacum. The idea is so deeply ingrained, that it comes quite naturally from the pen of a classic 'convert' of modern times, Cardinal Newman. In the late fourth century, also, the dramatic rite of baptism, coming as it often did in middle age, would only have further emphasized the break with one's past identity, that was so marked a feature of the conventional idea of conversion.

The tastes of Augustine's age demanded a dramatic story of conversion, that might have led him to end the *Confessions* at Book Nine. Augustine, instead, added four more, long, books. For, for Augustine, conversion was no longer enough. No such dramatic experience should delude his readers into believing that they could so easily cast off their past identity. The 'harbour' of the convert was still troubled by storms; Lazarus, the vivid image of a man once dead under the 'mass of habit', had been awoken by the voice of Christ: but he would still have to 'come forth', to 'lay bare his inmost self in confession', if he was to be loosed. 'When you hear a man confessing, you know that he is not yet free.'

It was a commonplace among Augustine's circle of *servi Dei* to talk of oneself as 'dust and ashes'. But Book Ten of the *Confessions* will give a totally new dimension to such fashionable expressions of human weakness. For Augustine will examine himself far less in terms of specific sins and temptations, that in terms of the nature of a man's inner world: he is beset by temptations, above all because he can hardly grasp what he is; 'there is in man an area which not even the *spirit of man* knows of.'

Augustine had inherited from Plotinus a sense of the sheer size and dynamism of the inner world. Both men believed that knowledge of God could be found in the form of some 'memory' in this inner world. But, for Plotinus, the inner world was a reassuring continuum. The 'real self' of a man lay in its depths; and this real self was divine, it had never lost touch with the world of Ideas. The conscious mind had merely separated itself from its own latent divinity, by concentrating too narrowly. For Augustine, by contrast, the sheer size of the inner world, was a source of anxiety quite as much as of strength. Where Plotinus is full of quiet confidence, Augustine felt precarious. 'There is, indeed, *some light in men*: but let them walk fast, walk fast, *lest the shadows come*.' The conscious mind was ringed with shadows. Augustine felt he moved in a 'limitless forest, full of unexpected dangers.' His characteristic shift of interest to the abiding 'illnesses' of the soul, his scrupulous sense of life as 'one long trial' had placed beside the mystical depths of Plotinus a murmurous region: 'This memory of mine is a great force, a vertiginous memory, my God, a hidden depth of infinite complexity: and this is my soul, and this is what I am. What, then, am I, my God? What is my true nature? A living thing, taking innumerable forms, quite limitless...' 'As for the allurements of sweet smells' for instance, 'I am not much troubled... At least, so I seem to myself: perhaps I am deceived. For there is in me a lamentable darkness in which my latest possibilities are hidden from myself, so that my mind, questioning itself upon its own powers, feels that it cannot rightly trust its own report.'

It was a traditional theme to expose one's soul to the commands of God, knowing that He 'searched the hearts of men'. But it was most unusual to insist, as Augustine does, that no man could ever sufficiently search his

own heart, that the 'spreading, limitless room' was so complex, so mysterious, that no one could ever know his whole personality; and so, that no one could be certain that all of him would rally to standards, which the conscious mind alone had accepted. Augustine's sense of the dangers of identifying himself exclusively with his conscious good intentions, underlies the refrain that so shocked Pelagius: 'command what You wish, but give what You command.' For 'I cannot easily gather myself together so as to be more clean from this particular infection: I greatly fear my hidden parts, which Your eyes know, but not mine... Behold, I see myself in You, my truth... but whether I may be like this, I just do not know... I beseech You, God, to show my full self to myself.'

Nothing could be more vivid than an inner self-portrait sketched by a man, who had not allowed himself to be lulled into certainty about what he was really like: 'which side will win I do not know... I just do not know.' He still has sexual dreams: they worry him because of the emotion of consent and of subsequent guilt that occurs even in his sleep. Greed, however, is a far more acute and revealing source of disquiet for him. He had watched with fascinated sympathy the insatiable voracity of little babies. He still felt himself on a slippery slope: he speaks with the harshness and fear of someone for whom the boundaries between a measured appetite and a shadow of sheer greed were still not safely fixed. With the delight of music, by contrast, he is fortified by his own, positive experiences. The beautiful chanting of a Psalm might cause his mind to wander: but he was prepared (as he would never be prepared at table), to risk enjoying himself: 'I feel that all the various emotions of the heart have rhythms proper to them in verse and song, whereby, by some mysterious affinity, they are made more alive.'

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After the distant storm of the garden in Milan, after this anxious peering into dark potentialities, the remaining three books of the Confessions are a fitting ending to the self-revelation of such a man: like soft light creeping back over a rain-soaked landscape, the hard refrain of 'Command' – 'Command what You wish' – gives way to 'Give' – 'Give what I love: for I do love it.' For Augustine, progress in wisdom, measured now by the yardstick of his understanding of the Holy Scriptures, could only depend on progress in self-awareness: these 'first shafts of light of my illumination' as he meditates on the opening lines of the Book of Genesis, illustrate directly the effects of the therapy he has just undergone. It is this therapy of self-examination which has, perhaps, brought Augustine closest to some of the best traditions of our own age. Like a planet in opposition, he has come as near to us, in Book Ten of the Confessions, as the vast gulf that separates a modern man from the culture and religion of the Later Empire can allow: *Ecce enim dilexisti veritatem, quoniam qui facit eam venit ad lucem.* 'For behold, You have taken delight in truth: and he that does truth comes to the light. I desire to do truth in my heart, before Thee, by confession: with my pen, before many witnesses...'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967, 2000), p.164 – 174