

· As Brown reminds us, *Confessions* is not an exercise in journaling. It is a retrospective by a bishop in his 40's. Themes immediately explode that will be with us all semester: The intimate relationship between God and humanity that drives the lives of both. Transcendence, omnipresence, and specific presence. Eternity and time. The priority of God's grace. Language and signification. Total depravity, inherited sin, and infant guilt. Evil as disordered, deprived good, and sin as wrongly directed love. The vanity of pagan myths and the coherence of the Word. The perversity of classical civilization and the edification of Christian life. All this, only in the first book! The density of this material, right from the beginning, is simply amazing.

This says several things. First, for Augustine, even something as simple as prayer involves and depends on all these aspects of the Christian faith. The deepest questions of life run through the simplest things. Get them wrong, and the Christian life derails.

Second, Augustine *lives his theology*. Everything he thinks, he believes thoroughly, and it informs his every thought and action with an intensity we today would call fanatical. You would be scared to have this guy as a roommate. The issues and controversies in which he is involved are all-consuming. There is no distance whatsoever between his “professional” theological life and his personal life. I hope we will feel the pressure this exerts on us throughout the semester.

· Rarely noted in standard accounts of Augustine's life is that he is a “believer” as a child (1.ix.14, 1.xi.17), but not so strong as to warrant baptism except in an emergency. Augustine's “conversion(s?)” later are turns away from, or turns toward, earlier faith. That changes the story considerably.

· Book 2 centers on *concupiscentia*, the wrongly directed love that constitutes sin. Concupiscence (or “cupidity”) is love, the best thing, but used in the worst way (2.ii.2-3). It is love of the creation *rather than* the creator (2.iii.6), an abuse that leads to an ultimate irony of a world forsaking the best for the mediocre (2.vi.13-14; and here too, Ben Patterson's and Stan Gaede's endless invocations of C.S. Lewis' *The Four Loves* in chapel show that Reformed Christianity is profoundly Augustinian in this way, too, not merely in its doctrine of predestination). Concupiscence is regard for erudition rather than moral continence (2.ii.4). It is, in the end, love even for sin itself (2.iv.9). It turns the world's order into chaos, its holy friendships into societies of demons (2.viii.16-2.ix.17). Through it even the beauty of God's creation is made ugly (2.vi.12). In the end, sin is simply senseless (2.ix.17).

Brown warns us not to overestimate the debauchery of Augustine's adolescence (39). But to Augustine it is quality, not quantity, that matters. His famous story of the theft of the pears (2.iv.9) makes the point. The very triviality of taking a load of unappealing pears simply for its own wrongfulness is the ultimate sign of sin's enormous power.

· Against this power, there is only one greater: God himself. Augustine is helpless to do good; “I also attribute to your grace whatever evil acts I have not done. ... No one who considers his frailty would dare to attribute to his own strength his chastity and innocence, so that he has less cause to love you” (2.vii.15). This is the kind of thing that will drive Pelagius crazy when he reads it. Augustine is what today we call a “monergist” – one who believes that God's action *alone* is what produces righteousness. That “alone” should remind you of the Reformation, which protected its monergism with a host of them: *sola Scriptura, sola gratia, solus Christus, soli Deo gloria*. Against Augustinian monergism, the Christian East believed in “synergism” – the need for humanity to cooperate with God's grace in order for salvation to happen. Arminians are

synergists. Imagine how a synergist – Jonathan Wilson? – would pray 2.vii.15, and you have a hint of what’s at stake in the Calvinist-Arminian debate.

By the way, Augustine the monergist still believes Monica’s stubborn faith and prayers and tears led God to *grant* his return to the faith (3.xi.19ff). Here is a clear picture of Augustine’s vision of monergistic divine action mediated through human action.

· You know all those sermons about nothing being satisfying because you have a vacancy in your soul that only God can fill? They were right out of the Augustinian playbook, weren’t they (3.i.1)? Here Augustine’s most horrifying illustration is of the theater, where we pay to live vicariously, even to experience others’ misery at a safe distance (3.ii.2-4). Ouch. What do you think of *Titanic* now, ladies? Or WWF, gentlemen?

You can see why Puritans got a bad name: This analysis strips bare the evil that we find innocuous in infants, normal in adolescents, and defensible in adult society – indeed, the evil that structures our entire public and private lives. Going to a movie with this guy would be like a NCTO with Jeremiah. This is also where Puritanism’s big sister, “Catholic guilt,” comes from. But what do you think now? Is Augustine just a spoil-sport who wants to ruin everyone’s fun (as a Catholic-educated aunt once claimed), or are we being too quick to absolve ourselves?

I mean this to be a hard question to answer.

If we’re too easy on ourselves, it may be because we, like the young Augustine, bear “the noetic effects of sin.” Not so long ago, Reinhold Niebuhr, thinking he was being Augustinian, claimed that original sin was the only empirically verifiable Christian doctrine. Clever, and widely quoted, but wrong. My teachers taught me that sin is a theological achievement. It takes a lot of re-orienting to see sin for what is, for it has so disoriented us (3.vii.12).

· Look closely at a consequence of defining sin in terms of love: It interiorizes sin so thoroughly that intention becomes all-important (for only a subject *loves*, and love is a function of the will). There are many acts we cannot judge because we don’t know the hearts of the actors; they may be sinful or they may not (3.ix.17). This idea remains enormously influential today. If the Reformation’s conservative children fix on guilt, its liberal ones fix on subjectivity. To this day America’s criminal justice system is deeply interested in determining guilt by gauging intentions – far more interested than the Torah! This came to its depressing logical conclusion with Joseph Fletcher’s *Situation Ethics*, in which abortion, free sex, killing, and adultery could be defended as ethical if they were motivated by “love.”

· Note the prominence of rhetorical and textual practices in Augustine’s education (Brown chapter 3, *Conf* 3). The text of *Confessions* bears their legacy. It is a complex and ambivalent one: Beautifully written demolitions of erudition for the sake of personal glory or legal gain (3.iii.6ff). A place for Cicero in Augustine’s return to God (3.iv.8) while he still finds the Bible impenetrable and inferior (3.v.9). This is what you might call the bright side of concupiscence: Nothing is entirely evil, for evil is merely (!) a relative lack of goodness. So Augustine does not simply reject classical philosophy, pagan antiquity’s intellectual, social, political legacy, or the practice of rhetoric. Nor does he simply embrace them. We will be exploring Augustine’s critical reactions, rejections, appropriations, and transformations of these traditions on behalf of the Gospel. By the way, this theme became profoundly influential in the twentieth century through H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*, which spawned a thousand rationalizations about “transforming” this or that aspect of culture, including war, greed, and even television.

So beware: Augustine’s thoughts head in many different directions. We have to be very careful not to follow them off a cliff.