

“Pride goeth before a fall, and a haughty spirit before destruction.” Welcome to the destruction: We have reached the present-day. And behold, Augustine is already here to meet us!

I am a postmodernist – meaning that I have abandoned both the *project* of modernity, to establish a universally accessible “reason” founded on indubitable first principles, and the *heresies* of modernity, which argue that modernity’s failure entitles us all to think and behave in whatever ways we please. (Becoming one has taken me about four years so far.)

Let’s sneak a few peeks at Augustinian opportunites in this new world:

*Depravity and epistemological humility.* Augustine would see modernity as one long exercise in prideful self-delusion, as the ultimate revival of Pelagianism. This was a project confident that “unaided human reason” could understand the universe. Yet moderns could never agree on what constituted “reason,” on what first principles were self-evident, and how thinking should proceed from these principles. (Relativism, which gives up making claims that go further than individual minds or communities, is a grand modern epistemological surrender.)

Postmoderns are readier to accept the Augustinian claim that wills, intellects, and memories are marred by imperfection and naturally limited. This transforms epistemology from a campaign to achieve “universal truth” by “starting from scratch” through “unaided reason,” into a respect for how we *actually* learn – in formative narrative traditions we inherit, and into a regimen for healing and sharpening our traditions’ learning practices. Our readings have been such confessional therapies: *Confessions* at the personal level, *On Christian Doctrine* at the pastoral level, *On the Trinity* at the contemplative level, *City of God* at the civic level.

*Community and authority.* Moderns sought a way of thinking that was independent of social location. It was to be individual (Descartes) and universal (Kant) at the same time, a body of truth that would stand for all time and unite humanity under the sole authority of reason.

Modernity’s failure to construct such a body of knowledge returns authority to human communities (where it lay all the time). While some Christians find this idea threatening to God’s universal authority, postmodern Christians see no problem – given that the *truly* authoritative community is the community *of God*, the people made of the Father’s will, represented in the incarnate Son, indwelt by God’s Spirit, entrusted with God’s law and Gospel, and charged with keeping it and spreading it to the world. All this is, of course, fully compatible with Augustine’s Universal Church. Strengthened by postmodernism, both so-called “Catholics” and so-called “Protestants,” many of whom are really modern individualists in denominational disguises, are coming back around to appreciating the community of faith as God’s mouthpiece in the world and his reign on earth.

*Civics.* As we have seen, modernity’s universal pretenses led in two incompatible directions: Collectivism and individualism. The results were catastrophic. The state, ostensibly the servant of the individual, became its absolute master. Of course this happened in France, Russia, Germany, and Japan; but it also happened, more subtly and less thoroughly, in the U.S.A. (“ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country”). World War II and the Cold War were conflicts between different flavors of statism.

Naturally, Augustine’s political vision was pressed into service. The City of God has its proper sphere of influence (the private lives of individuals); the earthly city has, well, everything else. Reinhold Niebuhr and others read Augustine to say that “the state and good citizenship are God sanctioned, but because of the sinfulness of the *civitas terrena*, they are empowered to use coercive law to maintain forcibly public order and political consensus” (Joanna Scott, “Political Thought,” in Fitzgerald 658-659). (Political consensus won’t be concupiscent too?) “Church,” “tribe,” and “family” are aspects of human community that modernity could only domesticate

(i.e., put to the service of state power and individual “sovereignty”), or oppose. The City of Man, with its all-consuming loves, was on a rampage. (That we have grown to accept our political imprisonment is further evidence of the state’s social and psychological power over us.)

Postmodern appropriations of Augustine need not straightjacket the *City of God* and *Confessions* in individualist collectivism. The community traditions themselves can finally be recognized as the “givens,” as accountable to no “universal,” “neutral,” authoritative philosophy for their legitimacy, because none exists, either at the national or the personal level.

*Selfhood, body, and interiority.* This brings us to personhood, where I think I rocked a few worlds Wednesday. If the modern self is a fiction, then who am “I”? And isn’t Augustine the father of individualism, privileging the individual over the community in the search for traces of God in the created order? It is in *the mind* that the *imago dei* lingers, so it is in looking *inward* that we see God reflected in us. How could Augustine lead anywhere but back to modernism?

Here’s how: Keep in mind Augustine’s usage of “person.” It is the patristic notion of person *as relation*. I am constituted a person by my relationships: My parents, siblings, wife, kids, students, coworkers, neighbors, and above all my God and Church. Relationality, the aspect of personhood that makes it appropriate for the Triune persons (Father, Son, and Spirit are relations), is lost in Cartesian solipsism. To return to a healthy notion of personhood is simply to return to a common notion of personhood, one Augustine happily adopts in *On the Trinity* (e.g., 2.1.2). This is not exotic: It is the way we naturally use the word in our lives together, when modernity is not training us away from it. It’s the way Augustine is speaking in the first seven books of *On the Trinity* – the ones moderns don’t read anymore. (By the way, personhood as relation also saves “Augustinianism” from becoming a unitarian “God and the soul.”)

Augustine is only a problem here when Augustine is misread. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* is a long attack on several cherished modern (and Cartesian) axioms: the epistemological priority of the individual to society, the causal priority of experience to language, and the logical priority of propositional truth-claims over other forms of discourse. It opens with an extended criticism of Augustine’s account of how he learned to speak in *Confessions* (1.8). Yet other Wittgensteinians (Nancey Murphy, Takeshi Kato) maintain that Wittgenstein misunderstands *Confessions*, or takes it out of context. Wittgenstein succeeds in dislodging modern views of language and self; but he could have enlisted Augustine on his side. For Augustine learns to look inside himself *from his community*, and his community teaches him what to find there: the *imago dei*. *Confessions* is not the triumph of a lone self discovering its world through reason, or a Nietzschean hero creating one through will. It is the triumph of divine grace in rescuing and restoring a prodigal son through the work of God’s people. Want to know how to be saved from modernity? Gus has been showing us all semester. It’s called “Church.”

*Conclusion.* We have reached the end of a long course. I am proud of all of you, the quiet ones as well as the hand-raisers, the non-majors as well as the majors, for sticking with it, for taking on works that intimidate doctoral students, for writing *all those summaries*, for looking interested when I mount my soapbox, for trusting *and* arguing against me – for wrestling with God and man, and for prevailing. I hope you take away a blessing you will treasure.

I know I will. For the first time in *my* life, I think I understand what a theological life looks like. I hope the attention we’ve paid to this one legendary figure has both satisfied and grown your hunger to be healed and grow in the life of our mind, to know the history of everything from our spirituality to our civilization, to know who we are as followers of Christ, and in knowing each other, to know the One in whose image we are being conformed. Augustine is one voice in a cloud of witnesses, one of many faithful (and sometimes faithless) servants. May his life and legacy inspire us to track the Spirit’s footprints in the lives of many others!