

Breadcrumbs in the Forest: A Return Home

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“He knows that if he stays in that familiar forest he can never get to his proper home, but in the forest he was free to roam about and satisfy his natural desires while the Way, by its straitness, promised to impose a very different kind of life.”

Colin Starnes, *Augustine's Conversion*

Augustine's *Confessions* has been hailed for centuries as the quintessential Christian conversion story, but there has been much controversy within academic circles as to the authenticity of Augustine's account. Did his conversion occur under a fig tree? Did he fidget about as he struggled with conversion? Did Lady Continence appear to him? In this essay, I will turn away from these questions and instead focus on Augustine's account of God's interjection. How does God intercede for Augustine in his *Confessions*? More broadly, how does God speak to the human soul? Specifically, I will discuss Books 7 and 8 of the *Confessions* in an attempt to trace Augustine's journey to conversion. I hope the reader will keep in mind the *Confessions*' consistent message of turning away from and returning to the repose where our hearts find the *patria* (home) we desire. Augustine's pilgrimage involves the most basic of human powers. Let us start by enumerating the powers Augustine has in mind.

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From birth, the human condition reveals a principle of agency. Augustine writes of infancy: "Little by little I began to notice where I was, and I would try to make my wishes known to those who might satisfy them; but I was frustrated in this, because my desires were inside me. ... So I tossed about and screamed" (1.6.8).¹ We find in Augustine's remarks three principles one might identify as components of agency. The first is inclination, the infant's desires. The second is knowledge, the infant's understanding of himself, his desires as his, and the external environment as separate and discrete. The third is will, the power to act (as the infant demonstrates) with movement and sound. If these three are indeed the primary powers associated with the human condition, Augustine must reveal how God intervenes for us through all or some of them in order to explain, not only his conversion, but also the conversions he hopes his *Confessions* will inspire. Each of the three principles of agency inspire a unique set of questions. For the principle of inclination we might ask the following questions: Is desire, graced by God's presence, sublimated so one only desires the good after conversion? Or does God sublimate desire before conversion and thus inspire the conversion itself? For the principle of knowledge we might ask these questions: Does God implant thoughts and knowledge into one's mind? Or must one discover God for oneself through some sort of psychic ascent? If one does discover God through one's own mental powers, is one necessarily converted? Finally, when it comes to the principle of will, does God speak to the will to engender one's conversion? Is the will converted by God Himself, and once converted, never to stray again? Or must one remain vigilant even after conversion? In short, in which of these three powers does God interject Himself? If Augustine hopes to kindle future conversions, he must provide answers to these questions.

We must first ground ourselves in what has come before Book 7 if we are to understand Augustine's arguments. Augustine has struggled with materialist notions of the world since the beginning of the *Confessions*, and those efforts will continue in Book 7. In his commentary on Book 7, Phillip Cary summarizes Augustine's problem quite well;

¹ *The Confessions* 1.6.8, hereafter cited in text; all quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from Maria Boulding's translation.

“The fundamental problem is how to see God, when the only things we are used to seeing are of quite a different nature.”² Augustine struggles to understand something that is not extended in space and time. His Manichaeism has so influenced his thinking that he cannot abide the thought of something incorporeal. Augustine’s own words clarify this difficulty:

I was still forced to imagine something corporeal spread out in space, whether infused into the world or even diffused through the infinity outside it. This was still the case even though I recognized that this substance was imperishable, inviolable and immutable (necessarily so, being superior to anything perishable, subject to violation or changeable); because something to which I must deny these spatial dimensions seemed to me to be nothing at all. (7.1.1)

Although Augustine here has moved beyond the Manichees’ dualistic notions of matter, he still has not escaped a mixture of Manichean materialism and Skeptical doubt. Augustine has recognized, anticipating Anselm, that God is “that than which nothing greater can be thought.” He knows that God must be inviolable and immutable. His problem now is reconciling that definition with an extended body, for he knows that material things decay. Cary writes,

according to Augustine’s theory of imagination, you can only imagine the sorts of things you can perceive with the five senses, and the senses can only perceive bodily things such as light. So if we only *imagine* God, we will conceive of him in material images drawn from the senses. ... He [Augustine] could only think of material things because his mind was ‘gross,’ i.e., heavy and weighed down by its attachment to things of this world.³

Augustine himself declares, “I was rearing up against you [God] in my pride, charging head-high against the Lord and crassly presuming on my own strength, even those inferior things gained the upper hand and pressed me down, so that nowhere could I find respite or relief” (7.7.11). This difficulty is not remedied, but it reveals Augustine’s prideful reliance on his own intellectual powers. As Starnes explains, “at bottom

² Cary, “Book Seven: Inner Vision as the Goal of Augustine’s Life,” 107.

³ Ibid.

... [such] errors arose from his pride which blinded him to the truth. So long as he refused to relinquish the arrogant aim of grasping the truth immediately and directly so that he could put it to the service of his private ends, he was bound to conceive of God as a corporeal substance."⁴

In chapter nine of Book 7, immediately following his search for answers to God's corporeality and his acknowledgment of his own pride, Augustine becomes familiar with Platonist writers. This short and dense chapter addresses the promising recognition of God as Word that Augustine says he found in the Platonist writers and the flagrant pride that the Platonists displayed in conceiving of God as word but not humbling themselves before Him. As Carl G. Vaught adverts in his *Encounters with God in Augustine's Confessions VII-IX*, "the contrast between pride and humility is important because it points to the limitations of Neoplatonism as a way of approaching the relation between God and the soul and calls our attention to the attitude required of those who want to participate in it."⁵ The young Augustine is starting to realize that to turn toward God will require a change in his thought.

One cannot overlook the other component of 7.9 if one hopes to follow the path Augustine has revealed to his readers. If we accept Augustine's conclusion that mere thought will not lead to God, we must consider the other component of 7.9, namely the divine part of humans—the soul. Augustine refers to a light that "illuminates every human person" (7.9.13) and describes this light as the light of the human soul. But complications arise in Augustine's metaphor when he writes that "the human soul, even though it bears testimony about this Light, is not itself the Light, but that God, the Word, is the true Light" (7.9.13). In the introduction, we asked specifically if God interjects himself into our thinking. If we are to answer that question, we must carefully dissect Augustine's comments regarding divine illumination.

Etienne Gilson writes the following about divine illumination:

⁴ Starnes, *Augustine's Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Books I-IX*, 181.

⁵ Vaught, *Encounters with God in Augustine's Confessions VII-IX*, 38.

The real difficulty begins when we try to specify what is due to God in the act of knowing and what is due to man. To begin with, it is well to note that divine illumination, far from relieving man of the necessity of having an intellect of his own, rather takes it for granted. Thus there can be no fusion between the human mind and the divine light; on the contrary, a light which illumines is one thing, the thing which that light illumines is another: the eyes are not the sun. On this point therefore, we cannot be mistaken. It is a point on which Augustine gave precise details over and over again in his endeavor to remove all uncertainty as to his real meaning.⁶

Gilson contends that Augustine's theory of divine illumination is not meant to alleviate the need for the intellect but is instead the method by which the intellect comes to know. In other words, the mind knows only by the light of the divine, but knowing is the mind's object, so the light is not the same as the knowing; however, the light is required if one is to know. If one will allow a metaphor to explain a metaphor, the ears can hear, but without vibrations in the air there is no sound. The divine light is the vibration that allows the mind to make actual what is only potential within it (to use Aristotelian language). Gilson would, perhaps, answer the question we posed in this way: God interjects Himself into our cogitations by shining his divine light on the subject with which the mind is grappling. Gilson takes pains to illustrate that Augustine is not reliant on supernatural illumination but is instead advocating that "God does not take the place of our intellect when we think the truth. His illumination is needed only to make our intellects *capable* of thinking the truth, and this by virtue of a natural order of things expressly established by Him" (emphasis mine).⁷

In his *The Light of the Mind: St. Augustine's Theory of Knowledge*, Ronald H. Nash argues that Gilson's argument centers on the human ability to judge correctly and "has nothing to do with the contents of the mind's ideas."⁸ Nash argues instead that Augustine reveals a dichotomy in this light, and he asserts that Augustine bespeaks a light appropriate to created intellects and a separate light that is unchanging and immutable: "Just as the moon derives the light it reflects from the sun, so the rational mind of man derives a created ability to know from its

⁶ Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 79.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Nash, *The Light of the Mind: St. Augustine's Theory of Knowledge*, 99.

origin, God.”⁹ Nash might answer our question in this way: God does not interject Himself into our cogitations because the light that is needed to ascertain new content within the mind is within the mind itself. The mind does not need illumination from another source, like God, because God endowed the mind with its own light.

With these two epistemological theories in mind, let us turn to 7.10, or (as Boulding titles the chapter) “He attempts Platonic ecstasy, but is ‘beaten back.’” Augustine begins this chapter with the following sentence: “Warned by these [Platonic] writings that I must return to myself, I entered under your guidance the innermost places of my being; but only because you had become my helper was I able to do so” (7.10.16). It is not immediately apparent why Augustine turns inward. Starnes’ explication seems most fitting: “On the advice of the books of the Platonists he turned the attention of his mind away from sensible bodies and inward towards his thought itself.”¹⁰ On the other hand, this explanation seems contrary to Augustine’s previous discussion related to his pride. If pride is the fly in the ointment, why would one turn toward oneself to find further enlightenment? The second part of the sentence is the key to understanding Augustine’s intention. He describes God as his “helper,” a description which alleviates this notion of pride and animates a fresh look at one’s interior that fits quite well with Starnes’ exegesis. Let us return to Starnes:

[Augustine’s] attention was finally directed towards his intelligence itself, which had the idea of an infinite, universal, and incorruptible good as the proper object of a certain knowledge. Here at last, as he now saw, in the certainty of his thought itself, was something which was real but which was not a body in space. From this moment everything fell swiftly into place.¹¹

Augustine has finally transcended his need for material substance to explain everything. He now sees that his own mind contains concepts which do not obtain in the external world of substances. Augustine is ready to contemplate the immutable.

⁹ Nash, *The Light of the Mind: St. Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge*, 108.

¹⁰ Starnes, *Augustine’s Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Books I-IX*, 183-184.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

The important point here is that Augustine makes the ascent toward the immutable in his *mind*. God lifts his *mind* up because Augustine knows the way to approach the immutable now due to the writings of the Neoplatonists. He ascends toward God through his powers of cognition. It will become clear why this manner of ascension is of such great import as we move forward in our discussion.

Now that Augustine has apprehended how the ascent is to be made, we must scrutinize his first divine experience if we expect to carefully follow the path he has taken:

I entered, then, and with the vision of my spirit, such as it was, I saw the incommutable light far above my spiritual ken, transcending my mind: not this common light which every carnal eye can see, nor any light of the same order but greater, as though this common light were shining much more powerfully, far more brightly, and so extensively as to fill the universe. ... Nor was it higher than my mind in the sense that oil floats on water or the sky is above the earth; it was exalted because this very light made me, and I was below it because by it I was made. (7.10.16)

Augustine apprehends the divine for the first time. His mind has allowed him to climb the existential ladder toward God. Whether this climb is the result of divine intervention (as Gilson would have it) or his own powers of mind (as Nash would have it), Augustine has apprehended the truth for the first time in his life.

However, Augustine does take pains to describe for us that it is only through God's help that he has acquired this station. Vaught writes of Augustine's divine vision that "Augustine emphasizes its tenuous nature by claiming that God lifts him up so he can see that there is something to see, though he is not yet fit to see it."¹² In this first ascent, Augustine finds that, although he has the desire to see, his eyes are not yet prepared to behold the truth. This vision inspires Augustine to declare that to doubt the existence of truth would be to doubt his own existence. I find Charles Natoli's explication helpful here: "Non-delusive certainty can only come from a Light that, once seen, makes itself

¹² Vaught, *Encounters with God in Augustine's Confessions VII-IX*, 43.

inexorably known for what it is. In its effulgence it cannot be mistaken for anything else, nor anything else for it."¹³

What was lacking in this experience that prevented Augustine's rise to the full view of truth? Augustine himself describes the episode as being "far away from you [God] in a region of unlikeness" (7.10.16). One must conclude from this statement that Augustine, though ascending, is still far from God. His mind has allowed him to traverse a span required for a glimpse of God, but he is still far away from Him. Augustine found himself humbled by this experience. One might argue that his humbling was the result of his reliance on the Neoplatonists' theory of God, namely one that lacks humility before the Word. In the words of Vaught, "In this moment, a hole is blown in the circle of the first stage of his Neoplatonic vision, not only by Augustine's incapacity to contemplate what he glimpses, but also by the voice of God that addresses him from afar."¹⁴ One might conjecture at this point that the mind is not enough to attain God.

Let us turn to Augustine's second ascent in 7.17:

I proceeded further and came to the power of discursive reason, to which the data of our senses are referred for judgment. Yet as found in me even reason acknowledged itself to be subject to change, and stretched upward to the source of its own intelligence, withholding its thoughts from the tyranny of habit and detaching itself from the swarms of noisy phantasms. It strove to discover what the light was that bedewed it when it cried out unhesitatingly that the Unchangeable is better than anything liable to change. (7.17.23)

In this second ascent, Augustine has realized what God is, but he still longs to cleave to Him and inexorably falls short. Starnes describes two ways of understanding this passage. First, he states that Augustine has discovered that the absolute good is unlike himself and that this discovery has left him with certain knowledge that "he is separated from God and the recognition that the world was no adequate resting place for his soul because it was not the absolute good."¹⁵ Second, he speaks of

¹³ Natoli, "Augustine's Choice: The Lord of Light or the Light of the Lord?," 27.

¹⁴ Vaught, *Encounters with God in Augustine's Confessions VII-IX*, 44.

¹⁵ Starnes, *Augustine's Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Books I-IX*, 190.

the “tyranny of habit” which weighs Augustine down and forces his mind back toward the things of this world. If it is true that one can only gain access to God for mere moments with the mind, how is one to find the repose one desires in God? We again find Augustine genuine in his desires to attain God but unable to maintain that relationship for more than a harried flash.

To summarize our conclusions thus far, one would have to say that Augustine has shown us that the mind is not enough to obtain God. Augustine himself has proved that, although it can help one make the ascent to God, the mind always falls short in maintaining the desired kinship. The mind lacks some power that would allow it to shed its burden of material weightiness and ascend to God once and for all. In answer to our questions posed in the introduction concerning the power of cogitation, we can now state that the mind, whether or not God intercedes in its thinking, cannot aspire to God. Although this is true, we also must admit that the soul cannot rise to God unless the mind has moved beyond its material concerns. The mind must shed its pride before it can even catch a side-ways glance of God.

We must turn our attention now from Book 7 to Book 8. Specifically, we should focus our attention on 8.12 and Augustine’s burgeoning conversion, but we first must grapple with the examples Augustine uses to explain the will.

Augustine writes, “there were plenty of actions that I performed where willing was not the same thing as being able; yet I was not doing the one thing [submitting to God] that was incomparably more desirable to me, the thing that I would be able to do as soon as I willed” (8.8.20). Augustine has realized that he must submit his will to God before he can maintain that loving relationship he so longs for and find repose in the Unmoved. His problem now is that he cannot bring himself to do so. But why? Augustine genuinely hopes to find God and remain in God’s splendor, so why can he not submit to the “light yoke” that God has for him?

Augustine posits the reason for his inability to assume the light yoke must disclose a second will. The first aims at the eternal while the second remains mired in habit. He considers this problem “a sickness of the mind” (8.9.21). Starnes writes of this section that “[Augustine] begins the last chapter by stating specifically that as a result of his consideration of the two ends, and because of the irrational resistance he still

experienced to giving himself entirely to the course he both knew to be best and wanted to follow, a great storm broke within him."¹⁶ In his *The Young Augustine*, John O'Meara describes this section in a similar way: "For, not to go only, but to go in thither was nothing else but to will to go, but to will resolutely and thoroughly; not to turn and toss, this way and that, a maimed and half-divided will, struggling, with one part sinking as another rose."¹⁷ This great storm will end in Augustine's conversion—but not before he makes some new discoveries.

I much prefer O'Meara and Mary Clark's concept of a divided will to any notion of two wills. Two wills seems to contrast with everyday experience since it is quite rare to find oneself unable to will an action; the usual problem is not the willing but the deciding. If we accept the divided will theory, we must then ask another question: If there is indeed one will that somehow becomes divided, how are we to ascertain the root of this division and rectify it?

In her *Augustine: Philosopher of Freedom*, Clark writes, "[Augustine] is exposing his experience that the divided will cannot will effectively. It must first be united. To be unified it will have to let go of one of the things to which it is clinging."¹⁸ Augustine himself remarks, "I was at odds with myself, and fragmenting myself. This disintegration was occurring without my consent, but what it indicated was not the presence in me of a mind belonging to some alien nature but the punishment undergone by my own" (8.10.22). Augustine here shows us what he had in mind when he spoke of the sickness inhering in his mind. The sickness is sin, original sin as evidenced by Adam. Gilson speaks of it in this manner: "since the will desires the good, it is by nature destined to accomplish it; since it is still unable to carry out the good it desires, there is something damaged within it."¹⁹ If sin is present within us and it divides our wills between this world and God's eternity, how are we to overcome this stumbling block so we can find the repose we seek in God?

¹⁶ Starnes, *Augustine's Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Books I-IX*, 232.

¹⁷ O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 176.

¹⁸ Clark, *Augustine: Philosopher of Freedom*, 71.

¹⁹ Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, 159.

Augustine tosses about until he beholds a vision of Lady Continenence, who symbolizes order, at 8.11.27. Lady Continenence persuades Augustine that he can become ordered just as so many others have done. He can order his loves so that God is at the zenith and the impulses of the physical world remain in their proper place within the order. Starnes explains the situation this way: “In principle ... the contrast is between continence—i.e., holding oneself on a particular way—and the incontinence or dissipation of whatever sort to which each of us is prone—i.e., the unrestrained and irrational pursuit of an endless multiplicity of finite goods.”²⁰ Even after Lady Continenence lends her advice, Augustine is still not able to let his will rest in God. It is only when he hears “*tolle lege*” and reads Paul’s words that his doubt leaves him and he is finally able to allow God to unify his will. Starnes maintains, “the actual restoration, the healing of his divided soul, if it was to come at all, would have to come from God.”²¹ Augustine must submit his will to God and admit that he is incapable of healing himself on his own. God’s grace is required for the fallen to be restored.

We have already recognized that the mind is not enough for Augustine to come to God. Now we also find that the will itself is divided between this world and God’s eternity due to our nature as fallen creatures, and it is only if one submits one’s will to God that one can find the unity that marks the respite to which all humans are drawn.

We have followed the breadcrumbs that Augustine himself followed. These breadcrumbs are found within our own natural agency. We find these things within ourselves from infancy: a will, a rational mind, and desires. One might term these “God’s breadcrumbs.” He has laid them out to bring us from our sorrowful state of disintegration due to our disordered loves (the forest) back toward Him, back toward *home* (to maintain the metaphor). Augustine’s *Confessions* traces those breadcrumbs for the reader. We followed Augustine as he embarked on a pursuit. He started with the mind, and found that the mind, while quite important to the goal of finding God, cannot alone maintain a connection with the eternal. Augustine then pondered the will, and we followed his exploits. The will allows us to act, but it must be united in love toward an ordered list of concerns; one’s desires must coincide with God’s natural order. Further, we found with Augustine’s aid that the

²⁰ Starnes, *Augustine’s Conversion: A Guide to the Argument of Books I-IX*, 231.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 235.

will cannot act on its own to bring one to God because the will is incomplete, divided and marred by original sin; it must be accompanied by divine grace, and divine grace depends on one submitting to the “light yoke” of God’s will. In summary, we found that the *patria* of Augustine’s *Confessions* is available to us, and he has shown us how to find it, and, better yet, how to dwell in it as a home for the soul, the only home where true respite lies.

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