

# Personal Tutors' Day

April 2009



## St Augustine & Journaling

Augustine ... 'distils a new feeling' from the memory of uncomprehended emotion. The light of God can make a story a continuous reality, out of the chaos of unhappiness, 'homeless' wandering, hurt and sin. And so nothing can be left out of account – not even the first inkling of experience, the origin of consciousness itself

[Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*]

## ***The Confessions: Augustinian Themes in Journaling***

### a) *Feeling & Thinking: Personal & Theological Reactions*

*Now boys, I know that at a time like this there's gonna be some personal emotions that you'll be thinkin'.*

[B52 pilot in *Dr Strangelove*]

The way we 'feel' about things, our emotions, shape the landscape of our mental and social lives. But why and how? Is it because they are 'animal' energies within us that have no connection with our thoughts, imaginings and appraisals, and certainly nothing to do with our reason. Or are the emotions suffused with intelligence and discernment, bound up with thought, and, in themselves, ways in which we value and judge the world? A lot is at stake in the way we view the emotions – for this decision will dictate, for example, the way we learn to live morally; a way we teach children to learn and grow; and potentially the way in which we 'do' theology. In each case, are our feelings things we must learn to 'still' and police in order to allow the intellect to grasp something more important – the key ideas or principles of morality, education or theology? Do we need to get beyond the messy material of grief and love, anger and fear, jealousy and fellowship if we are to get anywhere at all? In approaching the emotions in a novel and revolutionary way Augustine distilled not only, as Peter Brown suggests, 'a new feeling', but further, as Rowan Williams adds, a new kind of way of narrating *biographically* 'who I am' (or: 'painstaking attention to the contingent strangeness of remembered experience').

To the modern eye *Confessions* can appear an odd mixture of literary genres: nine books of autobiographical recollection stuck onto three books of dense and theoretical reflection. What is the connection; what accounts for this abrupt change of style?

We may be drawn to one style rather than the other – feel gripped by the twists and turns of Augustine's tumultuous life, or intrigued by his dialectical musings – but the real key to Augustine's story and explanation of the magnitude of its importance to the Western Spiritual tradition lies in following through his melding of experiential and conceptual language; the subtle interplay of 'reason' and emotion' that make up a human life. To the extent that we find this difficult may say as much about us and our culture as it does about the difficulty of Augustine's text.

For Augustine the discovery of who 'I am' depended in good measure of his discovery of what a 'self' is. True self-knowledge and conceptual articulation of this self who knows the same intimately fertilise. Thus, the mature Bishop knows that in his youth he misunderstood himself because, in part, of the false ideas he had of what a self was – whether these ideas were 'materialist', or Manichean; but also because the one he sought had been mired in sin. In short, for Augustine, both these kinds of ignorance kept him from God and kept him from himself, exterior to who he 'really' was, as his life was dispersed – morally, emotionally and existentially - within the flux of a changeable world.

In short: Augustine neither knew theoretically that the self is to be discovered through an inward journey, nor existentially of the personal depth that exists within himself in which God is to be found.

The *Confessions* is both the story of a search for God and a story of Augustine's search for God. For Augustine these two journeys were but the same: the search for God was the search for his true self. And the place where both were to be found - both Augustine and God – was in his 'inwardness'. Thus, famously: 'But you were more inward than my own inwardness' (3.6.11)

However, the picture is further complicated because if the *Confessions* records Augustine's search for self and God then this very narrative was also central to this search it describes. And while Augustine's original motivation for writing so novel a book may have been intended to convince other Christians of the genuineness of his conversion, so also was it ingredient in his conviction that his life did indeed possess a recoverable narrative in which could be seen the working of grace through this self. Augustine could show to others but also to himself – in the light of Truth – the pattern of a search for God was at first not understood, then only dimly grasped - but in concepts that betrayed its true nature - and then finally revealed as the search it truly was. Augustine thus discovers a journey to self-knowledge which he thus constructs through this very telling. Crucially then: unless there is a self to be discovered and unfolded, there is no story to be told; unless there is some thread of meaning in terms of selfhood there is no coherence to the story. Thus: no self, no autobiography.

But on the other hand, Augustine implies that until his conversion he was not in a sense a self at all. His conversion was the discovery of the love by which he was loved which was the discovery he had all the time been searching for. In discovery of this self as lovable so autobiography became possible. So we might just as well say: 'no autobiography, no self'. For writing the *Confessions* is an act of appropriating his self hood.

These two poles are intimately connected is a hermeneutical and spiralling search recorded in the *Confessions*.

b) *Reflective Practice: Annotating as Re-membering*

However, there is another level of complexity to be contended with in reading Augustine's *Confessions*. For not only is the search for self and God bound together, but this binding is deeply problematic to Augustine – a problematic that, while repeatedly intruding into Augustine's story, finally finds construal in a conceptual/philosophical reflection. Or could we say: Reflective Practice!

The issue is marked from the first chapter when, among a barrage of questions, Augustine asks if a person is to pray for help, then must he 'know you before he can call you to his aid' for if he does not know you how can he pray to you – and therefore pray at all? (1.1.1). Chicken and egg! Or, more technically, this is an example of the type of aporia that comes up again and again in Augustine and finds its most virulent occasion in Bk 10. For Augustine asks: how can a person be said to be searching for something, if she does not know what it is searching for; and how, by contrast, is it that if we do not know what it is we are searching for can we be said to be searching for it at all?

In Bk 10 this question takes centre stage and it is not hard to see why. Augustine has, in the first nine books of *Confessions*, presented his own life as a searching for God; and, at the same time, a searching for self. In so far as his life can be represented as a progression from not-knowing to knowing (himself and God) he recognises that this search cannot properly be depicted as the progression from unqualified ignorance to wholly new knowledge; for how can a person be said to be searching at all if he has no idea of what he is searching for. To be able to say at the end of a search 'Aha, there I have found it!' is, in some way, to be already in possession of the where-with-all to recognise it. Thus, if the discovery is a kind of re-cognition how is this possible if there is not also some pre-cognition to be retrieved?

Augustine's early Christian writings had certainly toyed with Neoplatonic ideas of *anamnesis* – the idea that all knowledge is a form of remembering of that which we knew pre-natally but then forgot through the cataclysm of birth. This is Platonic and we find the argument in the *Phaedo*; an argument for the pre-natal existence of the soul. However, Augustine soon gave this idea up as he could not square it with the Biblical claim that that in creation we can encounter eternal truth. Nonetheless, this did not alter his conviction concerning the centrality of memory in knowledge acquisition – the fact that all knowing is based on re-cognition. And no where is this revisionary Platonism more than evident in the *Confessions*: discovery of God is literally re-discovery of God – a return to a truth already known, to a knowledge somehow present in the searching itself.

And this is hardly a conceptual conviction alone. Much rather, for Augustine it is emphatically only because God has been seeking him that he, Augustine, seeks God. If his seeking is for God it is only because it is already from God. This is the foundational truth that underlines all Augustine's aporiae concerning seeking and finding. God is not to be sought outside the self, for God is already there within -

eternally more intimate than I to myself. It is I who am outside – God is interior to me and thus drawing me back to who I am.

So Augustine's seeking originates from a power already active within himself. Thus, this conceptual puzzle yields to the existential quest for the discovery of how even at the beginning of his search he was aware of this inner power which is both the object and source of his searching. If God was in his searching must he not have, in some way obscure way, known this?

Augustine's answer to this question is complex and not least because he is faced with the struggle to show how even the uncontrolled hedonism of his youth is in some way a manifestation of his seeking for God. He is convinced that he was all the time searching for God; that this can be said because all the while God was in his seeking; and that this can be demonstrated by his eventual discovery of God as a return as a home – but existentially this amounts to a tall order.

So in Bk 10 Augustine seeks to offer an account of how it is that God was in his seeking although he himself drifted far from himself and from God. How can this be? Augustine's answer is that a solution lies only in an adequate understanding of memory.

Why would this be so? Well at least at first blush it is clear why this would be so. At a cognitive level, to seek something one does not yet possess is like trying to remember something one has forgotten. For Augustine his discovery of the Christian God was at least like an act of memory – 'Aha yes, now I see what it is all the time that I had been seeking!'. This is the experience not of post-factum rationalisation but genuine recognition of a truth once obscured now revealed. To appropriate this truth is to appropriate one's past for what it truly was and therefore set one's past in true, ordered and coherent relationship with reality. It is therefore to appropriate continuity and selfhood. It is the power to describe what my past has been in terms of what I am – the power of autobiography. And the mechanism for this retrieval is memory.

But if the claim is truly that this is not just arbitrary rationalisation after the event, then this can only be because there is some sort of evidence that, in some sense, I did know that what I was looking for was God. So this sharpens the issue – for what evidence can Augustine bring forward to justify the claim that, for example, in the debauchery of his experience in Carthage he had been seeking God? In Bk 10 Augustine tries to meet this problem head on.

In 10.18 Augustine refers to Jesus' parable of the lost coin (Lk 15) and suggests the woman seeking her lost coin would never find it unless she remembered it. The situation is pretty clear-cut: a person seeking a lost coin can only find it as this coin lost if they can give a sufficiently good description beforehand of what it is they have lost. As Augustine says: 'If a thing vanishes from sight but not from memory...its image is retained within us and we look for it until it comes to light

again (10.18.27). However, because the example is so unproblematic it has little to offer us in understanding what I am seeking when seeking God.

So in Bk 10:19 Augustine considers the case of someone who is trying to find the right word for a thought or can't quite remember another person's name. This is more promising. When for example in the act of writing I try and find the right word for a thought this is not analogous to the lost coin for it is precisely the articulation of the thought as yet not quite fully thought that is sought. I do not yet 'know' the thought that has occurred to me, as I know the lost coin. I know rather of it and I am seeking to bring it into view. So in a sense until I find the right word I'm not entirely sure what I am seeking for, although I know enough about it to rule out of court any number of 'pretenders' to this articulation. Perhaps it is better to say I have a sense of the shape or the fittingness of what we seek – the shape that the answer must fill what I say 'Aha, that's right, that fits!'

Finally, in 10.20 Augustine asks 'How then do I look for you O Lord? He begins by suggesting that the search for God has the general shape of a search for happiness – to search for God is to search for blessed happiness. Everyone desires happiness 'so much so that there can be none who do not want it'. But if we seek it, it is only because, in some measure, we already possess it. Augustine is convinced that this universal seeking for happiness is only possible if happiness is to be found somewhere in everyone's memory. We are therefore back to the same question: how do we know the happiness we seek? Or as Augustine has it where in the memory is this knowledge of happiness to be found?

In 10:23 there is a long and fallacious argument that amounts to the following. Everyone seeks happiness; no one would really be satisfied with a happiness known to be false; the only true happiness consists in God; therefore the search for happiness is the same as the search for God.

Philosophically fallacious as this is Augustine knows that he, and many others, have sought happiness in things that cannot truly yield it. And Augustine knows, as Aristotle before him, that the desire for happiness is absolutely irreducible; you can never cease to desire it. Yet Augustine also knows there is scarcely any limit to the perversity and depravity of human desire. Hence the desire for happiness can be present in utterly self-destructive desires. It is still the desire for happiness however misconceived so long as some aspect of it consists in a desire for what true happiness consists in. And nothing human beings desire can wholly lack this capacity.

In every human desire there is an echo however faint of God – desired not necessarily as God but as human happiness and even happiness sought in false pursuit. And this may be said even if the only evidence for the desire for true happiness is, as it were, negative, consisting in a trail of restless frustration which such false satisfactions leave behind. Thus, for Augustine an awareness of

God as the true object of desire is always present if only in the form of dissatisfaction.

Dissatisfied longing is the key to Augustine's 'remembering God' and so to the shape of his life and form of the *Confessions*. Thus famously 'our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you' (1.1.1)

All his life Augustine sought God but this was not a straightforward search analogous to a coin once clearly known, now lost. Rather, it was a search with many false starts and blind alleys. Sometimes the search was more or less unconscious but the search became ever more acute as the gap between Augustine's emotional frustration and intellectual coherence widened. As the vague shape of what he sought slowly formed, so the dissatisfaction and unhappiness became greater. For what he begins to recognise is that his seeking of God is. This is an 'emotional' discovery that the God he sought had always been in his seeking.

But where? In Augustine's 'interiority'. Augustine had been unable to recognise God because it was he that was outside himself. His seeking thus had to be inwards towards himself – into his memory as that most intimate part of himself which was the depth in which it would be possible to recognize the God who he could not possibly wholly forget.

And in what sense does Augustine remember? Augustine remembers God in the form of a restless dissatisfaction which sharpens as he draws nearer his goal. This dissatisfaction is a remembering because it is a longing for what he lacks and recognition of his failure to reach it. Remembering is a knowing and not-knowing – knowing as a form of not knowing.

And what was it that left Augustine so dissatisfied with all that he had sought besides God? Whence his unhappiness? The answer to the question is this: the character of all created things as mutable. Augustine could not contemplate the changeableness of creation without a shudder of dismay and apprehension. And if this is to be styled neo-platonic then it is in this characteristically platonic emotion of distress at the instability of things. And yet it was not only the influence of Platonism that Augustine learned to feel this distress. It was the emotional key to his life before he encountered the books of the Platonists. Rather it was in Platonism that he found an intellectual key to help him formulate the emotional tide of rising dissatisfaction in all his seeking. Platonism made such an impact on him because he encountered it at the point where he could find no way forward emotionally because he remained intellectually trapped in his materialist prison. Platonism explained to him the dissatisfaction he experienced emotionally. Platonism gave him a language for understanding his sense that creation teeters on the brink of nothingness – that what is could just as well not be. Moreover it taught him that what we are as knowers of these things are also mutable beings. There is nothing of us as mutable beings to distinguish us from

the mutable things we know. We are perishable among the perishable and were it not from something within us – the light of immutable truth – we would indeed not even know the perishable from the imperishable.

And this, for Augustine, is what it is to live in exteriority – it is to be so immersed in the mutable that we cannot even see it as mutable. His reading of the platonic books rescued Augustine from this. In short, this pre-explicit hold on the immutable is not so minimal that the memory cannot produce within the mind recognition experienced as a moment of awe and glory of the immutable.

Augustine's journey was therefore inwards - interiority is the memory – that which is most within me. However, in careful deployment of the spatiality of this language Augustine prefers to say I am in God for it is truer to say God is the other side of memory and so, in the deployment of another metaphor, above it. Religious language is at its paradoxical limits here. In being most myself so I am elsewhere in God. God is everywhere and to say God is encountered in the memory is not to say God is contained in the memory but that in the action and process of remembering (in Augustinian fashion) so I experience a personalized truth present to me as a capacity to judge the changeable. The language of interiority is self-subverting as it folds out onto an exteriority beyond any anterior/ exterior antinomy.

Memory is thus the point of juncture between the 'within' and the 'above' – it is the key to his autobiography and his philosophical quest. He both 'works this out' and encounters it in a flash of wonder and beauty – and the two intertwine

### c) *Spiritualities*

Augustine's story combines then on the broadest canvas the combination of two modalities of spirituality. There is the spirituality of self-discovery. The spirituality of a journey which retraces it's steps back towards a self lost sight of but still in some manner active in the returning steps. The journey is one back to a primitive relationship, never wholly lost, lingering on the tip of one's tongue, an uncanny sense of once having been here and recovering the union of the soul with God. Memory is a storehouse to be sifted through.

Then there is a spirituality of a dynamic, dramatic self-making. Not a finding in the past but a dramatic and new encounter of what appears from the future. In this sense Augustine's conversion was not the illumination of a misrecognised passion, but the arrival of a new passion – the making of a soul. Augustine was given as it were a new remembering form the future. This was not reactivation of a dormant power but the graceful arrival of a new power.

These two spiritualities possess different moods – in one the language of passivity of having a sense of being guided to where one has always been recognised again as though for a first time. Sin and failure are ruptures in consciousness and their overcoming involves patient re-integration. In the other

the language is that of activity, of self-making – altogether more existential. Here there is rupture, break, no and domestic metaphors of return.

No doubt, in some manner, these two spiritualities map onto the differing existential and conceptual strands of the *Confessions*. Thus the autobiography of crisis, discontinuity and making of personal identity is the language of self-making. But this is all set within a theological-cum-conceptual reconstructive hermeneutic - the spirituality of self-discovery and post-factum recognition.

Such is the complexity and fecundity of Augustine's preoccupation with seeking and his seeking of the meaning of seeking itself which the western spiritual tradition has inherited.

As Rowan Williams concludes

Augustine's greatest legacy to Christian spirituality is the affirmation that the life of grace can include not only moral struggle and spiritual darkness, but also an awareness of the radically *conditioned* character of human behaviour – marked as we are in ways unknown to us by childhood experience, historical and social structures, and many more facts of which Augustine himself could not have been consciously aware, but to which our age is especially sensitive' (89)

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## **Bibliography**

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