

## Confessions

*St. Augustine*

September 30 - October 15, 2016

The confessions of St. Augustine were delivered during his middle age. To a modern reader much of it is rather tedious as he is addressing God in a personal way. He obviously was a very intelligent man, and he came to Christianity, or at least Catholicism at a rather mature age (around 32), although of course the existence of God must have been something he was brought up with, his mother Monnica being a very devout Catholic convert. A natural suspicion is that he is allegorical and not literal when he addresses God, allegory along with parables and metaphors being the standard fare of the Bible, as well as subsequent religious writing. You write to persuade others trying to make your case as translucent as possible. Yet it is hard to believe that he is consistently writing tongue in cheek, one should remember that it was not until fairly recently, I am thinking of the 18th century, that the material basis of humans were fully acknowledged, and with that the possibility that the soul as well as anything else might have a material basis. While many now have been taught to scoff at the idea of a God, more specifically a personal yet omnipresent and omnipotent being with all the inescapable contradictions intrinsic to the concept, most people have still a hard time to square their own consciousness with a material basis. In short, at least psychologically most people believe in a personal soul, even if they would be loath to admit it, and in this context a personal idea of a God, as the source of the soul, is rather natural.

Christianity is very influenced by Platonism, more specifically neo-platonism, with its emphasis on an underlying reality distinct from the apparent one readily accessible to us through our senses. Platonism is about Truth, and Truth you have to serve and honor above anything else. In such abstract terms much of the concept of God starts to make sense. But Platonism, especially neo-platonism, posits the idea of an immortal soul. In other words of an inner essence that can partake of the deeper reality, be it through reasoning abetted by other deeper qualities of the human psyche, such as a sense of beauty, transcending mere physical beauty, and love and goodness, qualities even modern men most likely see as transcendent. And with this ability, the soul surely must share of the immortality of the higher reality, a conviction which must bestow a lot of comfort. Had Socrates, after all, been able to confront his death with such equanimity and courage, had he not been convinced of the immortality of his soul? Views which many people, although not consciously seeing themselves as believers, may nevertheless be sympathetic to; because what we form with our lips is one thing, what we believe in our hearts is quite another thing, not so easily clothed in words, but revealed by action and hope. Thus although we may find the constant extolling of the virtues of God longwinded and rather naive, they may make sense as one soul addressing the soul of all souls.

The account begins by a biographical sketch, which no doubt has served as an inspiration. It is a classic case of a 'Bildungsroman' in which we are to follow the trajectory

of a man in development, from an ignorant youth addicted to gratuitous mischief<sup>1</sup>, as a successful teacher of rhetorics and a follower of the Manichean heresy, traveling across from his home in North Africa to Rome and later to transfer to Milan, where he eventually sees the light and converts to the faith of his mother. This had a tremendous effect on him, his teaching and writing of which he must have been very proud became less lavish. He gave up his weakness for the female flesh<sup>2</sup> and entered a period of strict penitence, during which time his mother died while still in Italy. The account of his early years would be interesting as a glimpse of Roman life in the late 4th century, but does not live up to those particular expectations, as I believe that most classical accounts do not, as the conventions of writing did not include paying heed to the more mundane aspects of life. True we are told that one of his disciples had an addiction to watch gladiators at play but had managed to overcome it only to once again succumb. The interest is focused on the nature of addiction as it overrules sense and resolutions, not the gory spectacle of a gladiators fighting among themselves, because the nature of such bloody and vulgar activities were assumed to be known by all readers. Likewise in discussing an anecdote having to do with his mother as a young girl on the verge of becoming addicted to wine, it is the moral of the story that engages him, not the particular setting, although we are given a glimpse of the young girl being commanded down to the cellar to bring up wine, and in the process taking a deeper and deeper sip by each renewed mission. So people drank wine and they kept it in caskets in the cellars to be brought up a little at the time for each meal. What made her finally come to her senses was the scolding of her servant. St. Augustine observes that our enemies can often correct our faults by their disparagement, just as flattery of friends can corrupt us. This reminds me of Popper who remarks that if you want a text of yours criticized do not give it to a friend, who is apt to be indulgent, but to an antagonist who delights in going for the jugular.

His confessions are thus put down on paper to serve both as a document of his gradual conversion and also as an exemplary tale meant for the benefit of his fellow men. Surely, as in the words of R.G.Collingwood, every artist expects to be eavesdropped on. Why explain to God alone if he knows it all already? As the author comments on it by himself. Why then does it matter to me whether men should hear what I confess? Men are inquisitive and always prone to pry into the privacy of others, but how do they know that they are not served lies, as no one is able to read the thoughts of others, only your own spirit within you may know them. Or more specifically *For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of the man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God*<sup>3</sup>. Then he claims that while he cannot prove that his confessions are true, as no can lay their ears at his heart, at least he can hope that those sympathetic to

---

<sup>1</sup> Explained by the author as a case of winning social approval and hence acceptance, which certainly has the ring of truth to it.

<sup>2</sup> He had sired a son when he was still only sixteen, living with his mistress, whom he later had to give up in order to make a more advantageous match. As the bride to be was still too young for sexual congress he had to acquire another mistress in the interim, conduct which at the time was not considered exceptional in any way, although the fashion of celibacy had started and one of his disciples was already a convert to it, and urged his teacher to follow suit, which he eventually did.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:11

him will believe him, in other words by charity alone their ears may be opened to receive. And so when they learn that he who would had been steeped in sin received Gods mercy and was saved, they too can take heart.

St. Augustine was obviously a very intelligent and level-headed man with many a talent and an unquestionable literary flair (the translation from the original Latin probably does him little justice), and one assumes, a lot of personal charisma. At one time in his youth he was caught up in astrology, but he rejected it. Could astrology be true? He argued. But if so two individuals born at the same moment, or at least so close to each other in time, that any separation cannot be perceived, would have identical fates, which clearly is not the case. The issue of a slave woman emerging simultaneously with that of her mistress will surely have a very different fate. Class and circumstances inevitably trump celestial positions. He lived at a time when there was precious little scientific knowledge, hence the predominance of Aristotle who filled a vacuum, abhorred or not. He remarks that it is the evaporation of moisture which makes the air dense enough to support birds in flight. An interesting remark in light of that day. As a psychological observer he is often astute. Among other things he observes that when he wants to move a limb, the limb reacts and obeys instantaneously, but when he wants to will something like his own desired conversion, his mind does not follow suit as readily. He concludes that in the latter case, the will must be divided, even if we are not consciously aware of it, because otherwise act would obey will, as limb obeys impulse. One may readily think of parallels in ones own mind. Why did I not write that book although I wished and willed it, why did I not simply overcome my inertia? In retrospect it seems too easy to have taken this first step, with which every journey commences? Could it be that the will was inhibited by another will, that it was not united in one mind, but split?

The real interest of the Confessions occur at the end when he in true scholastic spirit pits reason against faith and emerges with a fruitful fusion. This must have been the dilemma when intelligent and rational men encountered religious dogma. How to reconcile them both? A problem that does not allow an easy resolution. There is much emphasis on the temptations of the flesh when it comes to sin, but what is seldom openly acknowledged is that there is an even more insidious sin than succumbing to the weakness of ones flesh, and that is pride, the pride of intelligence. Augustine does confess to it at the end, but not as a pride of being able to stand up to God, but as a merely human pride in basking in the admiration of fellow men. But to get the issue of sins out of the way. St. Augustine is not indifferent to sensual pleasure. Sound more so than taste and thus he found himself particularly attracted to music, especially hymns when sung. He observed that when sacred words were sung they had a deeper impact on him when they were not. That they stirred in him a more intense religious fervor and a more ardent flame of piety, and thus he becomes ambivalent as to his attitude towards art. He is inclined to approve of the custom of singing in church as an aid for weaker spirits to find inspiration for devotion, but the problem with the gratification of the senses is that they are not just content with a supplementary role but desire to take precedence. Thus when the singing itself becomes more moving than the truth which it conveys, a grievous sin is committed. Of all the senses that of sight is the most sensuous I would say, and St. Augustine concurs, and this is the sense that is most insidious in leading us astray. The skill of hands make many beautiful objects such

as clothes, shoes, pottery and other useful things, but they are made on such a lavish scale that is not required for the modest needs they are ultimately designed to satisfy. And this goes for many other things for which gratuitous beauty takes precedence, he proceeds. Thus he echoes Plato's injunction against art as art as a distraction from the real thing (God in the case of St. Augustine) as it comes to the fore in his 'The Republic'. But even greater than the danger of merely satisfying bodily pleasures is that of tending to the pleasures of the mind, namely that of inquisitiveness. This futile curiosity is usually known as learning and science and derives from our thirst of knowledge that is usually conveyed through the eye *For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world*<sup>4</sup>. He notes that we never say 'Hear how it glows', 'Smell how bright it is', 'Taste how it shines' or 'Feel how it glitters'. But not only do we say 'See how it shines' we can also say 'See how loud it is', 'See how it tastes' and 'See how hard it is'. Thus seeing is the metaphor for describing the sense, so to speak, used for understanding. Thus we can employ the word even when knowledge is acquired by another physical sense. And in fact, I would note, in many languages, 'seeing' is used for understanding, as in 'Do you see how the different things come together'. Seeing is in fact the most extensive sense, able to handle the most information in units of time, as we would express it now. Sound may appeal to our emotions, but sight is paramount when it comes to reason. St. Augustine also points out that it is easy to distinguish between the motives of pleasure and curiosity. Pleasure looks for beauty, fragrant perfumes and harmonious sounds, but when curiosity is concerned, the reverse is of interest. Curiosity is simply the urge to explore the whole spectrum of being, and as such it has many very unpalatable consequences of which various freak shows are just one of many. Even religion is not immune. In fact to test God by demanding sign and wonders from him not in order to obtain salvation but merely for the love of experience, is an abomination. As already noted to St. Augustine another sin is to desire praise. It is one thing if such praise stirs me because it benefits my neighbor rather than my own vanity, he admits. Whether this is the case, he admits he does not know. If not why should unjust blame affect me more when laid at my door rather than with unequal injustice laid at another's? Why should insults sting more when presented to me than to others? He wonders. And to reproach yourself for pride is just another instance of pride. Thus when a man prides himself for his contempt of vainglory, he makes himself guilty of an even emptier pride, because he cannot really hold it in contempt as long as he prides himself on doing so. One can see here at play St. Augustine's pride in reasoning and exhibiting logical contradictions.

Pride or not, it is Truth that is paramount, and as a true platonist he extolls truth, in fact one can argue that he defies it, and thus his God is simply truth, an interpretation which would render much which otherwise appears embarrassing perfectly sensible. Surely Truth should triumph, and those that lie and disregard it, will eventually come to grief, not because of any personal vengefulness. Also the emphasis on Truth means that intellect, in true scholastic spirit takes pride of place, and what better way to serve God, i.e. Truth! As the platonists did he makes a distinction between mere opinion ( $\delta\omicron\chi\alpha$ ) and truth, although the former can be elated to the latter. He speaks scornfully about being in love with your opinion, not because it is true, but because it is yours. If not you would have equal respect

---

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 2:16

for the opinion of others, just as I do, he explains, not because the opinions are theirs but because they are within the truth. Thus, as with Popper, the truth of an opinion has nothing to do with who holds it, because opinions are not private property. Opinions which are true are the common property of all lovers of truth, he concludes.

He also digresses on Truth and its expressions. It can be expressed in many different ways, as well as a mind can understand an idea which is expressed in a single way. As an example he takes the phrase *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth*<sup>5</sup>.. It is presented in the Bible in just one way, and the tongue can only shape the sounds accordingly, but it can be differently interpreted. And here he suggest that the phrase to multiply should not necessarily be interpreted that man should fill the earth with offsprings, let alone all organisms, but interpretations should multiply. To the initial words of the Bible we will have occasion to return later. As to their interpretation he remarks that some simple souls imagine God as a kind of man or a vast bodily substance endowed with power, who by some new and sudden decision created heaven and earth. They are merely materialists The simplicity of the language of the Scripture sustains them in their weakness. He admits though that the notion of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit may be hard to fathom, even for souls that are not simple. As how to understand Trinity? he gives as a mental exercise the following analogy: Existence, knowledge and will. As we can all say that I am, I know and I will. He elaborates further by saying I am a being that knows and will, I know that I am and that I will, and I will both to be and to know. The three things although distinct are intimately interwoven. This must be plain to anyone with the wits to understand it, he claims and he urges one and each to probe their own minds and report.

He really comes into his stride when he discusses memory. St. Augustine is in fact very intrigued by his memory, and he likens it to a great field or a spacious palace, a storehouse for countless images of all kinds which are conveyed to him by his senses. He furthermore observes that when he avails himself of his memory he asks it to produce what he wishes to remember. Note how he can personalize his memory as something outside of himself, and in this case we readily accept it, because we share his experience. Some things memory delivers on the spot, others only after some delay, as if it had been hidden in some deep recess, then there are other memories that thrust themselves to his attention, as if they were crying 'perhaps we are what you want to remember?'. Those impostors on his attention he needs to brush aside as something he does not want. Ideally memories present themselves promptly and in the right order as required, as when reciting something by heart. He also claims that in memory everything is stored separately according to its category, which depends on what sensory organ once admitted them. Light, color and shape are admitted through the eyes, sounds of all kinds through the ears etc. What is stored in memory is not the thing sensed but an image of it, and how those images are formed is a mystery. He marvels at how he can distinguish different smells without those being present in his nostrils. But not only that is retained, episodes as well, so he can confront himself what he did as well as his state of mind of his past life. He can even remember that he did remember, although he may no longer remember what he remembered. A great wealth of images are available for him to contemplate and recombine to form plans and anticipations

---

<sup>5</sup> Gen 1.1.

of the future. The power of his memory is prodigious, he describes it as a vast sanctuary whose depths he is not able to plumb, but yet merely a part of himself, yet large enough not to be contained in his mind, which is too narrow to contain itself in its entirety. And he wonders what part of it, it does not contain. And there is even more, the facts he has learnt going beyond his own immediate experience, that knowledge of his, be it of grammar or the way to debate, they are kept apart, because now it is no longer a case of images but of the real things. The facts themselves are retained inside him without having ever been admitted by any of the different gateways the senses provide, and the conclusion must be that they have always been there deep down in his mind, for ever hidden had he not by instruction been alerted to their existence. This is of course a very platonic idea, that knowledge is within us and forgotten and learning is a way of remembering by being prompted. As such hidden knowledge basic principles must be counted. As an example he takes the principles of numbers used in counting. Counting is not an image of something, it is there on its own from the start, and here it is hard to dispute with him, innate intuitions about some very basic facts seem inescapable. Feelings can be remembered too, but not in the same way they were originally experienced. He can recall past fears without being afraid, and past desires without desiring them anew. In fact when remembering a past sorrow the feeling it engenders may be that of happiness, happiness that the sorrow is over, just as the recollection of happiness will bring sadness because the happiness is at end. He finds it rather remarkable that the mind can remember its states, it would be less remarkable if such memories were confined to bodily pains. Memory is mind he claims, and takes as confirmation various linguistic usages, such as 'it slipped out of my mind'. Momentarily he entertains the idea that memory is the stomach of the mind and once its food has passed into it, it has also lost its taste. He eventually rejects the simile but not without acknowledging that there are similarities nonetheless.

Forgetfulness fascinates him. To forget something means that the memory has lost it, and if memory presents something else we will reject it because we will recognize that it is not what we are looking for. How could we do this comparison unless we retained something in memory (where else?) with which we can compare it with. And if we are lucky and memory presents us with the real thing, we recognize it right away. How could we do it, if we did not all the time have a memory of the memory without being aware of it? As an example he takes the common problem of associating a face with a name, memory provides many different ones, until it clicks<sup>6</sup>.

We all desire happiness, but how can we desire it if we do not know what it is?<sup>7</sup> When a Greek hears it named in Latin he does not understand it and gets no pleasure from it, but we do, as would the Greek have done had it heard it in Greek. It is not the mere sound of the name that gives pleasure, but what it signifies. If we know it, it must be present in our memory. But how? It is not a material object, as say a city, and cannot

---

<sup>6</sup> Against this one can argue as follows. Assume that you are looking for a number and you know it is a factor of another known one. You get many candidates and you test them one by one, until one divides. Then you know that you are done, not because you had a template with which to compare, but because you knew it had to satisfy a certain property. Similar things can be going on when we rummage through a memory heap looking not so much after an individual as something that fits a description.

<sup>7</sup> The same kind of objection can be raised again.

leave an image. Nor is it abstract as numbers, because once we remember numbers we do not strive anew to acquire that knowledge. But even if we have knowledge of happiness we strive to acquire it. Is it like joy, which we can recall even in sadness? Joy has never been presented through the senses, it cannot be seen, heard or tasted. It is something that is experienced by the mind at its occasion. The memory of joy is not always something recalled with longing, sometimes rather with disgust, as one may take joy in shameful things. He concludes that happiness induces in us an anticipation of joy, and that true joy, and hence true happiness, is to be found in the rejoicing in God. He concludes that although all men may desire happiness, not all look for true happiness.

Now the climax of the book is a discussion of the first words of Genesis, to which we have already alluded, Those more than any other are momentous words striking at the very ontology of everything, in particular the omnipotency and omniscience of God. We have already remarked that those words cannot be taken on face value, as simpletons tend to do. How should they be taken? What are the Earth and the Heavens? The very fact of their existence implies their creation, because they are subject to change and variation, and the very meaning of those words is that something is there which were not there before. And they cannot have made themselves as that would have implied that they have had to exist before their existence begun. Why did God suddenly decide to create the Earth and the Heavens, why not before nor after? But this would imply that the will of God had changed, and God does not change. To God there is no time, that means no past nor any future just a present; thus in particular no ordering of events, One may compare it with mathematics. There is no time in mathematics, mathematical truths are eternal and co-existing, it is not that some truths precede others, such distinctions are meaningless. But when the human mind tries to apprehend mathematics it has to do so in time. Some things have by necessity to follow others, you have to choose a path along which to explore the mathematical landscape but the path is not part of the landscape itself, the landscape can as well be explored by other paths. But when you achieve some more basic understanding the path disappears and you see everything at once and you realize how you can get from A to B and back again along different paths. It is all present to you in one go<sup>8</sup>. The same thing with a deductive proof, it follows by necessity step by step. But the sequence of steps are not part of the truth only of the proof, and the truth can be reached by many different proofs. A proof is not the reason that something is true, it is just a path to convey the truth to the human mind. Once a truth is truly assimilated the structured proof may be discarded as so much a ladder and what remains is an awareness of different connections not their spurious temporal order. In the same way, St. Augustine indicates that the creation of the world should be understood. In fact as a foretaste of Laplace infinite intelligence, in eternity, there is no past nor any future because both are determined by the present. Thus we have a solipsism of time.

Now we come to what may be the most intriguing part of the book. What is time? St. Augustine utters his oft quoted words to the effect that he knows what time is well enough until someone asks him. Then when he tries to explain he becomes baffled. All

---

<sup>8</sup> One may compare with a painting it all exists at one time, no part of a painting precedes another one, as is the case with music or a narrative. Yet when you look at a painting your eye has to zig-zag across to take it in. You can only apprehend a painting in time, but the way you do it is irrelevant.

he can claim is that if nothing passed there would be no past, if nothing was going to be there would be no future, and if nothing were no present. How can we ever speak of a long or a short time? How can anything that does not exist be either long or short? How to measure time? Any extent of time is either in the past or the future or divided between them, never in the present as it has no duration. But what is in the future does not yet exist, and what is in the past no longer exists. So what we are measuring, comes out from what does not yet exist passing through what has no duration and moving into what no longer exists. But yet we measure it! My mind is burning to solve this intricate puzzle he confesses and beseeches to be instructed. He refers to the learned opinion that time is nothing but the movement of the celestial bodies. He is not convinced. If the heavenly bodies ceased to move, but the potters wheel would continue to do so, would there still not be time with which to measure its rotation? And he goes on and shows that he clearly understands what a day is, one of the units of time we use, but that this does not go to the core of the problem. What if the sun made its circuit in an hour instead, it would have to circle twenty-four times before making up a day. This of course begs the question of what is meant by an hour, any definition of which available at the time would have been connected to the movement of the sun across the sky. Units of time are given by periodic phenomena, whose periods are assumed constant. Period. This of course does not solve the metaphysical problem of what time really is, but the practical one of measuring it. But so far he does not go, at his time there were no periodic phenomena except the celestial ones, and I am not so sure that he was familiar with the pendulum, which if they existed would proceed at vastly different paces depending on length. But nevertheless he would no doubt have gotten the point of a modern explanation had it been given him.

He also notes that there is a sense in which both past and future exist, but not as future and past but as in the present. More specifically the past exists only as the traces, i.e. the images it has left in the memory. Beholding the past is hence an act in the present, namely contemplating those images. This ties in beautifully with Collingwood's interpretation of history as the reconstruction of the past in the present, never mind that he for technical reasons doubts the power of memory to be faithful enough to give justice to the past, it is the principle that counts. Similarly St. Augustine wonders whether the future can be predicted in a similar way, whether the future leaves traces in form of images we can contemplate? He confesses to God that he does not know, but remarks that we generally think of what we are going to do before we do it. That we make plans and in this way command the future. When plans are put in action, the future has been made into the present. But we cannot strictly speak about foreseeing because you cannot see what does not exist. But when we foresee we see if anything the causes, and the causes exist in the present. Thus St. Augustine concludes that there are three times, the present of the past, the present of the present and the present of the future, and they all exist in the mind. The present of the past is memory, the present of the present is direct perception and the present of the future is expectation. He admits that the words he uses may be inaccurate, as words usually are but nevertheless we are usually able to convey the meaning. Once again time is coming out of what does not yet exist, passing through what has no duration, and moving into what no longer exists. This is the human predicament living in time, I would comment and be tempted to make a slight digression.



We live in time and have expectations of the future which are changed into experience. Thus when we are young expectation predominates and provides much of what is our happiness, I would say. We may regret our dearth of experience and envy those who are set deeper in time thus having a more intimate relation to what once was but no longer is, When we get old our memories become laden and give a rich storehouse from which to draw, but on the other hand our expectations dwindle to almost nothing. In a life well lived the memories make up for the dearth of expectation, while in a life wasted, the memories make up a scant consolation and are no longer liable to be enriched. This is a feeling of overwhelming bitterness. Yet one can argue, that no matter how beautiful the memories they never live up to expectation and somehow you would like to stop this degradation. An eternal life would mean an incessant supply which would be discharged into a memory which would overflow all boundaries and present a horror with its reckless abundance. Eternity is different from eternal life, there is no change, no accumulation, just a present. But how can a human be imprisoned in a perpetual unchanging present? It would ostensibly be a life of cessation (no more expectation) but not of obliteration, yet how could the past be contemplated and savored when such activities require time? And even if possible, an eternal rummaging through your memories would eventually become tedious and a constant reminder of what you have missed in life. (As they say you never regret as much as what you did as what you did not, never mind that the distinction between doing and not-doing is hard if not impossible to make.) Now what in your human mind could be feasible for eternity? Throughout our life we have a strong feeling of continuity of existence. We may change of course, but we still feel that there is a constant identity against which we measure our change. We often feel that our lives could have turned out differently, which they could of course, thus making a clear distinction between ourselves and our lives. Our lives are gifts we have received and which we are free to form, thus in a sense we believe we exist before our lives begin. This core of our personality that is unaffected by experience is what we usually refers to as a soul. As it existed before we started to live, it stands to reason that it will still exist when our lives are over, in other words our souls do not exist in time, only our lives do in a brief flash, but dwell in eternity. This would be an interpretation of a purer platonistic heaven then the one which is usually presented in Christianity polluted by the ideas of Paradise, incidentally a Persian loan meaning walled enclosure, of a place of eternal pleasure and idleness, and as any metaphor taken literally reduced to silliness.

October 16-17, 2016 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*