

# The *Confessions* as Autobiography

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## 1 Introduction

At several points after deciding to join the catholic church in the summer of 386, Augustine framed current arguments – especially against the Manicheans – by referring to his own past. While these references can be appreciated as Augustine’s “first confessions” (so O’Donnell 1992: 1.li–lvi), they bear only a superficial resemblance to Augustine’s astonishing masterpiece of ca. 397. A brilliant and profoundly original work of creative theology, the *Confessions* combines biblical interpretation, late Platonism, and anti-Manichean polemic with haunting autobiographical narrative. Augustine’s account of his past, which begins in Book 1 and shapes his narrative through to the close of Book 9, is the stylistic hallmark of the *Confessions*. It is what makes this work so unusual in its own period, so perduringly valuable to Augustine’s later biographers, and so seemingly accessible to his modern readers.

On the strength of this narrative, the *Confessions* has been hailed as the first introspective autobiography in western letters. In one sense, this description is apt. Composed as a prayerful address to God, the *Confessions* surveys Augustine’s life during the 33-year period from his birth and early education (Books 1 and 2), through his years with the Manicheans, up until his liberating encounter with Neoplatonic thought in Milan (Books 3–7) and his resolve to enter Ambrose’s church as a sexual celibate (Book 8), ending at the point when, shortly after baptism, his mother Monica dies (Book 9). Once this narrative section concludes, however, some 40 percent of the *Confessions*’ eighty thousand words remain. After Book 9, Augustine’s focus shifts abruptly from his past (ca. 387, when the “autobiographical” section ends in Italy) to his present (ca. 397, when the bishop of Hippo, resuming the question with which he had opened this work in 1.1.1, ponders how fallen humanity can know God). Book 10 contemplates memory; Book 11, the nature of time; Book 12, spiritual and material creation; Book 13, revelation, the church, and final redemption. These incandescent final books retrospectively alter any simple reading of the

earlier, narrative ones. When Augustine wrote his masterpiece, he clearly had more than an examination of his personal past in mind.

## 2 The Interpretive Conundrum

The temptation to read the *Confessions* first of all as a work primarily about Augustine, and especially as the story of his conversion in 386 in Milan, must be attributed in part to the style of its composition. Augustine propels the narrative of his first seven books by presenting a series of conversion stories of mounting intensity. After a resoundingly positive encounter with Cicero's *Hortensius*, he resolves to give himself over to the quest for wisdom (3.4.7–8); thence, after an intensely unhappy encounter with the Bible, to Manichaeism (3.5.9–6.10). Serious flirtations with astrology and deeper involvement with the Manicheans occupy the next decade of his life (Book 4). Later on, disheartened and unmoored in Italy, he toys with embracing the non-committal caution of the New Academy (5.10.19). Once in Milan, the Platonizing allegories of Ambrose's sermons reveal to him the covert Christian content of the Old Testament, and so he decides to become a catechumen (5.14.24; 6.5.7). Shortly thereafter, the works of Plotinus and Porphyry introduce him to the conjoined Neoplatonic ideas of non-material reality and of introspection as the royal road to God (7.9.13). These teachings liberate him from his lingering attachment to Manichean materialism, and enable him, through disciplined introspection, to experience a mystical ascent: "By the Platonic books I was admonished to return into myself. With You as my guide I entered into my innermost citadel" (7.10.16). These *libri platoniorum* lead Augustine to a more profound understanding of Paul's letters as well (7.21.27). By the end of Book 7, his intellectual conversion is complete. But, still, Augustine lingers as a catechumen, unwilling and unable to bring himself to full initiation into the church.

Read in this way, as a story about Augustine's conversion(s), the earlier books of the *Confessions* reach an elaborately written crescendo in Book 8. The problem with proceeding to baptism, Augustine says there, was his sexual need:

I was still strongly bound by the ties of woman. The Apostle did not forbid me to marry, though he exhorted me to something better and very much wished that all men were unattached, as he himself was [1 Cor. 7: 1–7]. But I was weaker, and chose the softer option, and this single thing prevented me from deciding more firmly on others, so that I was weary and wasted with nagging anxieties.

(*Conf.* 8.1.2; trans. Chadwick 1991, with minor alterations)

In concentrated succession, powerful conversion stories, some linked to examples of heroic chastity, now bear down upon him. First, Simplicianus relates how Marius Victorinus came to baptism (8.2.3–6), causing Augustine to "burn to follow" Victorinus' example (8.5.10). Next, Ponticianus speaks about Antony's call to the Egyptian desert (8.6.14), and about a community of male celibates directed by Ambrose just outside Milan (8.6.15). Finally, Ponticianus relates his personal knowledge of two affianced couples in Trier who resolved to quit the world in order to devote themselves to lifetime celibacy. All of these stories, Augustine says, put him in mind of the *Hortensius*, and of how long and how far he had wandered in his quest for wisdom (8.7.17).

A riveting presentation of violent inner conflict now dominates Book 8 through to its conclusion. Panting, weeping, throwing himself prostrate, Augustine agonizes over his own indecision, his divided will, the paralyzing paradox of wanting and not wanting the same thing at the same time. *Da mihi castitatem et continentiam domine sed noli modo*: “Grant me chastity and continence, O Lord, but not yet” (8.7.17). The climax to this scene abruptly arrives when the irresolute and exhausted Augustine hears a child’s voice chanting *tolle, lege*: “Pick up and read.” Snatching his volume of Paul’s letters, Augustine takes as divine counsel the first verse that his eye falls upon, Romans 13: 13–14: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh and its appetites.” The words of the apostle work an instantaneous transformation: “At once [. . .] a light of relief from all anxiety flooded my heart, and all the shadows of doubt disappeared” (8.12.29). His way clear, his resolve firm, Augustine commits himself to the celibate life and to the catholic church.

When compared to the seeming emotional extravagance and the tight structure of Book 8, Book 9 seems both surprisingly restrained and oddly organized. Augustine receives baptism back in Milan, (on April 387; 9.6.14), and then, waylaid in Ostia, he shares with Monica a mystical ascent (or at least a conversation about such an ascent, 9.10.23–6). A sort of “Life” of Monica precedes this episode (9.7.17–22); an account of her death follows it (9.8.26–12.33). Augustine closes by asking God to inspire future readers of the *Confessions* to pray for his parents, Patricius and Monica (named here for the first and only time, 9.13.36). Without transition, Book 10 abruptly takes the reader from these events in 387 to the bishop’s current philosophical and epistemological concerns a decade later. (Augustine, unlike many modern readers, considered Book 10 to be also about himself: *de me, Retr.* 2.6.1.) The exploration of memory in Book 10 leads, in Book 11, to a lyric meditation on time and eternity. Books 12 and 13 contemplate God’s many different kinds of creation, taking as their starting point the very first verse of Genesis (*Conf.* 12.1.1–2.3) and concluding with an evocation of the eschatological Last Day (13.36.51). The *Confessions* thus ends as something very different from the life story with which it had seemed to begin. No matter how one justifies approaching this work – primarily as Augustine’s autobiography, or as the story of his conversion – that approach certainly comes at the cost of the coherence of the whole.

A primarily autobiographical approach not only complicates our view of the *Confessions*’ compositional integrity; it introduces complications about the integrity of its historical witness as well. At Cassiciacum, on retreat in the months following his decision to join the church in 386, Augustine had written four treatises (*Contra Academicos*, *De beata vita*, *De ordine*, and *Soliloquia*) whose tone and content stand in marked contrast to his later account of this same event in 397. Even writings done back in Africa, such as *De libero arbitrio* (*On Free Will*), scarcely oblige the perspective on spiritual progress displayed in *Confessions*; and the mantic verses from Romans receive scant attention, even in his comments on that particular letter written between 394 and 397 (Fredriksen 1986 and 1988; cf. Harrison 2006; Asiedu 2000). Scholars in the late nineteenth century noted these disparities (Boissier 1888; Harnack 1904; see Boyer’s review of the *status quaestionis*, 1920). Alfarcic (1918) even suggested duplicity on Augustine’s part: the conversion of 386, he conjectured, was to pagan Neoplatonism, not to catholic Christianity.

Alfarcic’s challenge to Augustine’s truth-telling was eirenicly mollified by mid-twentieth-century scholars, who established that Milan during Augustine’s time there was at the height of a renaissance of Platonic studies: no need to conjecture an either/or relationship between philosophy and faith when, for men like Ambrose or Augustine,

Christianity was continuous with, and the ultimate expression of, the introspective metaphysics developed by Plotinus and by Porphyry (esp. Courcelle 1968, 1969). Paraphrases of and homages to Plotinus' *Enneads* in fact run through the whole of the *Confessions*, and the Neoplatonic emphasis on knowing the self as the way to know God provides the broad theme of the whole. Arguably, then, the *Confessions* may be read not as Augustine's life story per se but rather as an idiosyncratic and personalized meditation on the wandering of the soul and its ultimate return to the One (Chadwick 1991: xxiii–xxv, and notes passim).

In the 1960s, when interest in psychoanalysis began to affect historiography, the personal content of the *Confessions* once again dominated scholarly attention. The influence of this tradition of interpretation is best seen, and seen at its best, in Peter Brown's classic biography *Augustine of Hippo*. There Brown characterized Augustine's writing of the *Confessions* as "an act of therapy" (Brown 1967: 165). The work, Brown said, represented a "climax" of antiquity's autobiographical genre (no examples of which, however, are offered: p. 159). When writing the *Confessions*, claimed Brown, Augustine had "felt compelled to reveal himself" (p. 160) through an "anxious turning to [his] past" (p. 164), thereby achieving a "therapy of self-examination" (p. 181). Brown's psychoanalytic orientation focused attention on Augustine's conscious and (putative) unconscious thoughts and feelings, especially as these related to his relationship with his mother (who gets a chapter of her own, ch. 2; see all 27 references given her in Brown's index). And it raised the issue of the emotional authenticity of Augustine's depiction of his past, as well as of the psychotherapeutic benefits of that depiction (p. 170).

Brown's historical acumen combined with his sensitivity to psychological nuance to create a biography of tremendous beauty and depth. But this sensitivity is purchased at a price. In his chapter on the conversion of 387 – nicely entitled "Philosophy" (Chapter 10) – Brown simply quotes Augustine's own later description of the event from *Confessions* 8 (cf. O'Donnell 2005a: 73). And, unsurprisingly, his chapter specifically devoted to the *Confessions* fails to take into account the final third of Augustine's work; indeed Brown merely mentions, in the closing paragraph of his 24-page chapter, the existence of Augustine's last three books (1967: 180f.). The effect is a subtle re-editing of the *Confessions*, whereby the "impersonal" Books 11 through to 13 virtually drop from view.

The most recent major biography of Augustine, by O'Donnell (2005a), has turned this autobiographical approach to the *Confessions* on its head. O'Donnell, author of an exhaustive three-volume commentary on the *Confessions* (1992), argues in his new study that the *Confessions* conforms not to modern standards of psychological candor, but to ancient standards of rhetorical presentation. The *Confessions*, he avers, is a work of brilliant artifice and power, a virtuoso act of self-invention and self-justification. The attention that O'Donnell draws to the book's many oddities – many in the supposedly accessible first nine books – supports his case that Augustine shaped this presentation of his past for a purpose, and that this purpose was neither historically nor emotionally driven.

For example, in the *Confessions'* early books, Augustine minimizes his childhood familiarity with catholic Christianity, thereby creating the impression that he truly encounters authentic Christianity for the first time from a source of unimpeachable authority, namely Ambrose (O'Donnell 2005a: 53). He also subtly misdescribes his youthful attachment to Manicheism, treating the decade of his allegiance to and intense involvement with the sect as a prolonged adolescent phase, vaguely tainted with sexual profligacy. Such behavior, had it occurred, would surely have prompted a rebuke from the Manichean community; and it would fly in the face of the fact, unobtrusively embedded in

Augustine's review of his earlier years, that the entire period of time spent with the Manicheans, from ages 18 until past 30, coincided with his period of monogamous parenthood (*Conf.* 3.3.5–6.10; O'Donnell 2005a: 53). Finally, lost in Augustine's abrupt transition from Book 9 (set in 387) to Book 10 (set in his present, 397) are the major turning points in his life during that decade: his interrupted retirement at Thagaste; his conscription into the clergy at Hippo; his ordination there as bishop. Autobiography as such, O'Donnell concludes, was not likely Augustine's concern (2005a: 63–86; see also Lancel 2002a: 208–20).

The *Confessions*, O'Donnell finally insists, is an artful presentation that weaves together themes and phrases from Psalms, Paul, Genesis, and Plotinus into a complex, fundamentally trinitarian theological argument about the ways in which Adam's fall obscured God's image in man and the ways in which God's gift of grace restores it (2005a: 65–86). The Father *is*, the son *knows*, the spirit *loves*. Being, knowing, and loving similarly constitute the core of human reality. But human knowing, misdirected, becomes *curiositas*; human loving goes wrong as *concupiscentia carnalis* ("desire of the flesh"); and human being deteriorates into worldly ambition, a false and ultimately depleting engagement with others and with self. The eight so-called "autobiographical" books illuminate this trinitarian model of God and of God's human image, argues O'Donnell, by narrating a story of Augustine's own fallenness, his various sins keyed out in the tropes of fractured three-ness. Book 9, on Augustine's baptism, represents his death to his old life in the world and the start of his new life in the church. Book 10 explores, now in the present, the ways in which *memoria* functions as the seat of the self and as the self-transcending immaterial space within the soul where man meets God. Books 11–13 then lay out a trinitarian exegesis of the opening lines of Genesis that concludes, at the very end, with the vision of eschatological rest awaiting the redeemed believer in "the Sabbath that has no end" (13.37.52–38.53). Thus the journey begun by Book 1's famous opening line – "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" – reaches its completion in the vision of the End, which closes Book 13: "We may rest in you for the Sabbath of eternal life, and also you will rest in us." "That door opening onto eternity," concludes O'Donnell, "is the real goal of the overarching narrative of the *Confessions*, the narrative of the life of the bishop who remembers and narrates his past. Many readers don't make it that far with him" (2005a: 86).

O'Donnell's reading is intricately theological and densely intellectual, in that regard well matching Augustine's own text. His interpretation has the effect of eroding the impression of comfortable familiarity with the *Confessions'* first nine books that the "autobiographical" approach to them so easily conjures. As the strangeness of the first nine books emerges, the more integrated all thirteen books appear. Reading in this way turns the old interpretive question on its head. If we see theology, not autobiography, as Augustine's purpose in the *Confessions*, we no longer ask what the last four books are doing in this work. We wonder, rather: Why did Augustine write the first nine books as he did? Why, indeed, did he write them at all?

### 3 The Theological Matrix

Augustine himself saw the *Confessions* as falling into two uneven halves, the first ten books about himself, the last three about the Bible (*Retr.* 2.6.1). The very structure of his book complicates any single attempt to define it. A brief glance at the works that precede the

*Confessions*, however, can help to orient us in Augustine's larger theological project in the late 390s, and so can help us to identify the interplay of problems, themes, and texts that shape his complex classic.

- (A) Upon his return to Africa (388), Augustine had taken up the interpretation of Genesis against the Manicheans (*De Genesi adversus Manichaeos*). That work was almost unrelievedly allegorical, much more like the commentary on the same text written by Philo of Alexandria over three centuries earlier than like Augustine's own writing on Genesis five years later. At the beginning of Book 2 of his treatise, however, Augustine hints at his own impatience, or perhaps dissatisfaction, with solely figurative or allegorical approaches to Scripture. Juxtaposing definitions of "historical" and "prophetic" interpretation, he unexpectedly expresses a desire to read the Bible in a third way, *secundum litteram*, which he explains as *non aliter intelligere quam littera sonat*, "understanding nothing other than what the words say" (*Gen. adv. Man.* 2.2.3). Looking back decades later, in his *Retractationes* (*Reconsiderations*), and describing his failed effort at a literal interpretation of Genesis that he had attempted shortly thereafter, in 393 (*De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*), Augustine defined *ad litteram* interpretation as the effort to understand Scripture *secundum historicam proprietatem*. *Proprietas* indicates an essential or distinctive quality. To interpret a passage of Scripture *ad litteram*, then, would mean something like interpreting it "according to its historical character" (*Retr.* 1.18). Augustine will unpack this thought a few years later, when he attempts to compose a handbook on biblical interpretation, *De doctrina christiana* (*On Christian Teaching*, ca. 397), before starting the *Confessions* (Fredriksen 2010: 190–6; 241–6).
- (B) The work on Paul that he embarks on in the mid-390s – spurred again by his contest with the Manicheans – amplifies what Augustine meant by this idea of *interpretatio ad litteram*. In the course of working on his commentary on Galatians, Augustine had challenged Jerome on the way in which the latter had understood Galatians 2: 11–14, Paul's falling-out with Peter in Antioch (*Ep.* 28). Jerome, like the vast majority of catholic commentators, was committed to the idea that Peter surely knew that Jesus had overthrown the Law, and thus that Peter and Paul had actually stood on the same side of this issue in Antioch: apostolic leadership was undivided, on this as on other issues. Thus, following (*inter alios*) Origen, Jerome had concluded that Peter in Antioch had only pretended to disagree with Paul, for the edification of the community. Consequently, Jerome continued, both Paul's rebuke of Peter and his later report about that rebuke in Galatians had also been feigned. Augustine objected: the text of Scripture, he insisted, whatever the myriad spiritual truths it might convey, could never present and preserve deliberate falsehoods. Its description of a past event needed to be truthful. Galatians 2, he concluded, really did report an actual disagreement between the two apostles on the question of the necessity of gentile Christians' observing Jewish law. Augustine's concern for scriptural authority underlies his insistence, here, on its moral integrity:

If we allow even only one time even a single well-intentioned lie into that supreme authority, there will be nothing left of those books because, whenever anyone finds something difficult to practice or hard to believe therein, he will follow this most dangerous precedent and explain it as the idea of an author who lied. (*Ep.* 28.3.3; on this controversy, Plumer 2003: 33–53)

Augustine's commitment to the general principle of Scripture's veracity coincided with a related development in the way in which he had begun to read the Pauline epistles in particular. Paul's letters began to provide him with the occasion not only for thinking theologically (on the ways that grace, for example, enables faith), but also for thinking *secundum historicam proprietatem*, according to the "historical character" of the Pauline text. As a result, not just Paul's message but also Paul's life becomes a focus for Augustine's theological reflection. In the commentaries of the mid-390s, Augustine began to think about Paul's biography no less than about Paul's theology. He began to construct a Paul *ad litteram* that served as a touchstone for his theology (Fredriksen 2010: 290–302).

This dual approach to Paul's letters, biographical (thus "historical") and theological, in turn helps to account for the revolution in Augustine's thought on grace and free will that occurred in the course of his intense exegetical activity between 394 and 396. From his brief works on Romans and Galatians through to the *Ad Simplicianum* (*To Simplicianus*), Augustine had continuously seen Paul as a premier historical example of how God moves a person from *sub lege*, "under the Law," to *sub gratia*, "under grace." In Augustine's reading, Paul's biography modeled Christian conversion, while Paul's theology articulated its principles. But the more Augustine thought "historically" with the New Testament traditions about Paul's pre-conversion self, the less his "historical Paul" could be accommodated to Augustine's own earlier models of conversion, wherein the sinner, before the reception of grace, called out to God for help (e.g. *Exp. prop. Rom.* 44). According both to Paul's own testimony, however, and to the witness of Scripture (that is, Acts), Paul had been a blasphemer (1 Tim. 1: 13), a slave to pleasures and desire, full of malice and envy (Titus 3: 3; *Ep. Rom. inch.* 21.5–7). He had approved Stephen's murder and had resisted the Holy Spirit (*Exp. prop. Rom.* 15.6; cf. Acts 8: 1); he had violently persecuted the church (Gal. 1: 13; 1 Cor. 15: 9; Acts 8: 3, cf. 9: 1–4). At no point had Paul called upon Christ for help, nor does Scripture give the reader any reason to think that Paul would have done so (*Exp. prop. Rom.* 61–2).

Saul's redemption was inexplicable; yet God had called him anyway. From his work on Genesis and Exodus via Romans 9, and from the example of the "historical Paul" as he constructs him, Augustine came to conclude that no sinner is saved because of his own merit – including the merit of asking, while still a sinner, for God's help – because, after Adam, humans have no merit, and no self-generated ability to gain any: all are born equally and justly incapacitated by sin, thus equally and justly condemned. Humanity as such constitutes "a mass of the sinful and the impious, far removed from God's grace" (*una [...] massa peccatorum et impiorum [...] remota gratia dei. Simpl.* 1.2.19). God's reasons for choosing one sinner for salvation while relinquishing another to perdition are "most hidden" (*occultissimi*), known to himself alone. His reasons must be just, but humans cannot see how. Augustine brought this radical theology of grace, together with his understanding of scriptural straightforwardness, the *ad litteram* understanding of biblical narrative, at the dramatic conclusion of the *Ad Simplicianum*. There Saul the persecutor, "thrown prostrate by one word from on high," is wrenched, undeserving, out of his old life into his new one by the inscrutable decision of God (*Simpl.* 1.2.22).

- (C) In this same period immediately prior to the *Confessions*, when Augustine worked on these ideas about the correspondence between scriptural texts, historical events, and theological interpretation, he also worked, at a more fundamental level, on the

correspondence between language and meaning. Inspired in part by Tyconius' handbook of biblical exegesis, the *Liber regularum*, Augustine embarked on a different but related undertaking, his *De doctrina christiana*. Begun shortly after the *Ad Simplicianum* (but not completed until the final years of his life, sometime around 426), *De doctrina christiana* presents a theory of language and of reference when analyzing and thus interpreting "signs," especially as these signs occur in Scripture.

Signs, Augustine explains, are indicators referring to things other than themselves. Some signs are natural, endowed with no intentionality ("Where there's smoke" – a natural sign, lacking intention – "there's fire."). But the signs that matter for the rhetorician are *signa data*, "given signs," of which the primary example is human language. Intention informs human speech; understanding language requires interpretation. And linguistic signs themselves fall into two categories: signs that refer to specific things (*signa propria*, "proper," "literal," or "self-referential" signs) and signs that refer to something else (*signa translata*, "transferred," "referring-away," or metaphorical signs: *Doc. chr.* 2.10.15).

The Bible is a special instance of *signa data* because it has a unique double authorship: the timeless, eternal God who is its source, and the historically and linguistically contingent human writers who are its medium (*Doc. chr.* 2.2.3). The variable quality of translations and manuscripts adds yet more layers of difficulty for the interpreter. And infinitely compounding all these problems is the Bible's literary style itself. Its seeming simplicity conceals rich profundities; its multitude of images, figures, and (especially) numbers code infinite mysteries. Nothing is superfluous; everything requires effort; multiple layers of meaning always obtain.

The semiotics that Augustine explores in *De doctrina christiana* is all bound up with his vision of history and with his views on the theological significance of humanity's existence in time. Its necessary dependence on language, and the sheer difficulty of finding meaning in and through ambiguous signs – whether those signs be events, numbers, or words – Augustine took to be both a symptom and a consequence of the great sin that marked the beginning of history. Interpretation and its attendant difficulties, no less than sin, mortality, and spiritual death, witnessed to the price paid by the entire species for the Fall (*Gen. adv. Man.* 2.3.4–5.6). When God cast Adam from Eden, he exiled him into the dislocated consciousness caused by his living in time (Stock 1996: 15–16).

## 4 Time, Retrospect, and Truth

Understanding Scripture requires interpreting it *ad litteram*. Paul's personal history illumines his theology of grace. The quest for truth and for the knowledge of God is fraught with difficulties, which define fallen humanity's condition in time. These three lines of theological reflection converge in Augustine's *Confessions*. They set its central inquiry: How can fallen humanity know God? This question opens Augustine's Book I (1.1.1). When he moves from the retrospect of Books 1–9 into his present, he repeats it in prayer: "Let me know You, You who know me; let me know You even as I am known. O You, power of my soul, enter into it and fit it for yourself" (10.1.1). And by the end of Book 13 the answers to Augustine's petition have accumulated. God has provided humanity with many means of knowing him: physical creation (13.33.48); Scripture; the

church and its head, the divine Son; and the human mind itself, which in the beginning God made according to his own image and likeness (13.34.49). God is man's maker, and the person is so constituted that she naturally longs to know God. "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (1.1.1). Why, then, is knowing God so difficult?

God is outside of time; fallen humans are divided up in time. Book 11 explains and explores the consequences of this difference between God and the human being, what we might call its cognitive aspect. Human consciousness is distended, and the nature of time itself underscores and feeds its disunity. Time functions psychologically; that is, it exists and is experienced within the soul. We speak of time as past, present, and future; but only the middle term, "present," has any existence, and thus any reality. The present alone is; the present alone is what the soul experiences. But what is the duration of the present?

Not even one day is entirely present. All the hours of the day add up to twenty-four. The first of them has the others in the future, the last has them in the past. [...] A single hour is itself constituted of fugitive moments. [...] If we can think of some bit of time which cannot be divided into even the smallest instantaneous moment, that alone is what we call "present." And this time flies by so quickly from the future into the past that it is an interval of no duration. Any duration is divisible into past and future. The present occupies no space. (11.15.20)

Reflection reveals that the present itself is an ungraspable, elusive *punctum*. All of an individual's consciousness, her entire ability to know and to understand is described within and is circumscribed by this infinitesimal moment. The present exists like a razor-thin slice of reality, suspended between two infinitely receding types of non-being: the past (which has no existence, since it no longer is) and the future (which has no existence, since it is yet to be). Individual consciousness is awash in this sea of non-being.

My life is a distension in several directions [...] but you, Lord, are my consolation. You are my eternal father, but I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand. The storms of incoherent events rend my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul, until that day when, purified and molten by the fire of your love, I flow together to merge into you. (11.30.40)

Humanity's existence in time thus affects the nature both of experience and of language. Time constantly rushes by, too swift and too atomized to process. A person's experience – by definition, solely in the present – constantly runs between the fingers of the soul like sand. Meaning can thus be distilled only retrospectively, through the integrative functioning of *memoria*, "memory." It is only through recollection that a person can understand what he has experienced, and can ascribe meaning to it.

In this sense the human experience of time is recapitulated in the human experience of language. Language is also tangled up in time and, like experience, language must wait upon the linear passage from being (present) to non-being (past) before it can be retrospectively understood. Consonants and vowels alternate to create phonemes, words follow words, nouns verbs until, reaching the end of the sentence, we remember the whole, and so understand what these units of sound convey. (Like all ancient people, Augustine thinks of words and texts orally, in terms of their being spoken and heard: 11.6.8–11.13).

It is memory that affords the soul its traction on the present. Memory is the soul's point of contact with time, since memory, in order to function, functions only in the present. Meaning comes only through the work of memory; it is never immediately present to humans but is necessarily mediated through the images, signs, words that memory recalls and reflects upon. Just as time is not the same as the units we measure it by, so meaning is not the same as those words that we use in our effort to convey meaning, or as those words from which memory attempts to wring meaning. Meaning, for humans, is always a retrospective achievement.

The tenuousness of significance obtains even with Scripture. God's Word, the Son, exists co-eternally with him, spoken "in the simultaneity of eternity." But in the gospel "the Word speaks through the flesh" (11.7.9): once written, God's word is incarnate in contingent human language. The written, historical word can sustain a diversity of truths whose validity cannot be limited by the historically contingent intentions of their original authors; the fullness of its meanings cannot be known at once (12.23.32–30.41; of course, Scripture can also be misunderstood and misinterpreted, see 6.4.5–5.8). Yet despite this condition of contingency, Scripture nonetheless mediates the knowledge of God, thereby bridging time and eternity. Scripture thus stands between man and God as "a solid firmament of authority [. . .] like a skin stretched above us." It exists because of humanity's ancient fall and because of God's providential response to that fall. "You know, Lord, how you clothed men with skins when by sin they became mortal [Gen. 3: 21]; so too have you stretched out the firmament of your book like a skin, that is, your words [. . .] which you have placed over us by the ministry of mortal men" (13.15.16). And whatever other truths Scripture communicates, it commences with and most straightforwardly asserts that the eternal changeless God, without any compromise to or variation in his perfection, made the invisible and the visible universe with his Word (11.31.41; 12.2.2). This is of course an *ad litteram* assertion (Fredriksen 2010: 190–209).

But, since Scripture necessarily describes God through language, it also measures the difference and distance between God and humanity. God, in eternity, knows all things simultaneously, as do the angels who dwell in the "heaven of heavens," that "intellectual, nonmaterial heaven where the intelligence's knowing [. . .] is not partial, not in an enigma, not through a glass, but complete total openness, face to face [. . .] concurrent, without any temporal successiveness" (12.13.16). Humans, trapped in time, can no longer know God (or anything else) in this way; nor will they again know God in this way until their eschatological transformation (13.15.18; cf. 9.10.25, an especially lyrical passage). Thus, in the only place in the *Confessions* where God "speaks" to Augustine, Augustine imagines God saying to him:

O man, what my scripture says, I say. Yet scripture speaks in time-conditioned language [*temporaliter dicit*], and time does not touch my Word, existing with me in an equal eternity. So I see those things which through my Spirit you see, just as I also say those things which through my Spirit you say. Accordingly, while your vision of them is temporally determined, my seeing is not temporal. You speak of these things in temporal terms, but I do not speak in the successiveness of time [*non ego temporaliter dico*]. (13.29.44)

Augustine's great exploration of memory in Book 10 of the *Confessions* is the anthropological companion piece to the epistemology of time that he sets out in Book 11 and to the meditation on Scripture, creation, and final redemption that follows in Books 12 and 13. Memory's premier role, as we have just seen, is cognitive: it is the site of necessary

intellectual processes, the means by which man meaningfully locates himself within time. But memory is also the site within the soul marked by the habits of the heart, what Augustine elsewhere calls his soul's "weight": *amor meus pondus meus* (13.9.10). This idea mingles with Augustine's vivid appropriation of late Platonism and with his no less vivid recourse, while writing his *Confessions*, to the language of the Psalms, where the seat of knowledge is so often the "heart." For all these reasons, "knowing" for Augustine is never solely a function of thinking. Knowing immediately implies loving. People seek truth because they love truth, and their love directs their path. Love is the motor of the will.

In consequence of the Fall, however, the individual's will is divided and ineffectual, his loves misdirected. Augustine understands Romans 7 as the scriptural manifesto of this condition. Explaining these verses as descriptive of humanity's punishment and of their condition after Adam's sin, he applies them to describe his own life before conversion at *Confessions* 8 (cf. *Simpl.* 1.1.10–12). Power, praise, sexual satisfaction, wealth: Augustine/Everyman pursues these because he loves them, but they can never bring him true happiness. Unaided by grace, fallen human love is compulsive, uncontrollable, disordered, depleting. Only the love of God – which can be given only by God – heals and sustains. So essential is love to human motivation that God uses it as the psychological mechanism of salvation: he redeems by reorienting human love, enabling his elect to love him. Only through God's grace can the person come to love what is good, rather than simply what he wants. Or, as Augustine had said, when commenting on Romans, to describe Paul's conversion: "If those things which delight us serve to turn us to God, this is due not to us, but to him" (*Simpl.* 1.2.21).

Augustine's construction of a Paul *ad litteram* in the mid-390s – especially around the issue of Paul's conversion – had profoundly affected, and been affected by, Augustine's understanding of love and will, grace and merit. His construction of an Augustine *ad litteram* in the *Confessions* applied his new theological insight to the material of his past, distilling a narrative account of God's workings in his own life, workings that, he now claimed, he understood in retrospect. The figure of Paul, evoked at the very beginning of Augustine's book, both models and mediates the redemption of the *Confessions'* Augustine: "My faith, Lord, calls upon you. It is your gift to me. You breathed it into me by the humanity of your Son, and by the ministry of your preacher" (1.1.1; O'Donnell 1992: 2.17). And Augustine's post-396 construction of Paul's conversion accounts in turn for an oddity in his own story: the failed conversion of Book 7. Intellectually convinced of Christianity's truth by the end of Book 7, Augustine could not be converted until God had healed his heart and joined it to his will. In Book 8, citing Romans frequently in the course of recounting his own conversion back in 386, Augustine provides a narrative demonstration of his current theological convictions in 397. The event that he describes indeed occurred in 386, in Milan; but he could not possibly have described it as he does in Book 8 without the theological development of the intervening ten years.

Augustine is forthright about the retrospective nature of this description of his past: such retrospect coheres with the epistemology he sets out so clearly in Books 10 and 11. His constant refrain in his earlier, "autobiographical" books is that he did not understand, while living it, his own experience. "I did not know what You were doing with me" (3.4.8, on reading *Hortensius*). "Very secretly, you were putting a check on me" (4.14.23, on his oratorical ambitions). "Where was I, when I was seeking You? You were there before me, but I had departed from myself. I could not even find myself, much less you" (5.2.2, on his quest for wisdom in Carthage). "Gradually, though I did not realize it, I was drawing closer" (5.13.23, on listening to Ambrose). The double time-frame of these books, the

past and the present, demonstrates the necessity of retrospect to achieve meaning. And it also gives his story its great poignancy: we watch as the younger Augustine lives his life utterly innocent of the future, while listening to the older Augustine confiding his new insights about his old life to his silent and all-knowing God. The meaning of all these past events – going to school, stealing pears, reading Cicero, joining the Manicheans, quitting Africa for Italy, listening to Ambrose – was available to him, Augustine claims, only afterwards, from the vantage point of his conversion, once his memory had done its work.

Retrospection is necessary for Augustine's reader, too. Not until reaching the complex final books of the *Confessions* can the reader understand the strategy of Augustine's autobiographical narrative in Books 1–9. (Again, the clarity of such retrospection underscores the epistemology explored in Books 10 and 11.) His work on Paul and on Genesis had led Augustine to a conclusion that forever distinguishes him from his great philosophical mentor, Plotinus. Augustine's god, for all his Neoplatonic features, is finally the god of the Bible, the god who encounters humanity in time and who uses history for his purposes of salvation. This larger idea frames the life story that Augustine, in praising this god, relates, just as it focuses the particular prayer on which the work concludes. The god who made humanity in his own image, so that his creature longs to know him; the god who enters history through his spirit, through his son, through his church, and through his book; the god who will end history with the salvation of his saints, is the object of the search that Augustine both narrates and intellectually re-enacts in his *Confessions*. If we, as modern readers, insist on seeing a single chief subject in Augustine's resolutely theological masterpiece, that subject is not Augustine himself, but Augustine's god.

## 5 Further Reading

O'Donnell 1992, a three-volume edition with commentary, is a treasure trove for all aspects of the *Confessions*, be they literary, historical, compositional, or theological. For the intellectual back story, see Courcelle 1968 on late Platonism and O'Connell 1968 on the ways that the anthropology of *Confessions* presupposes a fall of the soul. Knauer 1955 analyzes Augustine's rich use of the Psalms; Bochet 2004 traces Augustine's development as a reader and interpreter of the Bible; BeDuhn 2000 gives an excellent sense of the social organization and ritual behavior that Augustine the Manichean would have experienced and participated in, while his more recent study (2010) traces the ways in which Manicheism served Augustine both as a prompt and as a foil for his various constructions of doctrine and of self. Pincherle 1974, Fredriksen 1988 and 2010 and Markus 1989a explore the ways in which Augustine's rereading of Paul in the mid-390s led to the theology of conversion on display in *Confessions*. Harmless 2010 provides an anthology of more or less autobiographical sections from other writings by Augustine, which also serves as a general introduction to major themes in his thought. Finally, for two quite different readings of the *Confessions* for reconstructing Augustine's biography, see Brown 1967 and O'Donnell 2005a.