

Augustine's Confessions II: *Confessiones* VI-VII (Ambrose of Milan; The Therapeutic Power of Philosophy)

Book VI

Augustine's mother, Monnica,

- journeys by boat to join Augustine (note parallel between Monnica and Paul in Acts 27:22-23,25)
- rejoins him at Milan,
- rejoices to hear that he is no longer a Manichaean and
- gives up her North African devotional offerings at the tombs of the martyrs, submitting to Ambrose's authority.
 - For the pagan background of the food and drink offerings in honor of the deceased, cf. the Parentalia (Feb. 18-21), where children honored their deceased parents at the gravesite.

Ambrose a man to be admired and emulated, though not conveniently approached due to his extensive pastoral responsibilities, so that his free time was largely taken up with reading and praying from the Scriptures (VI.3.3; 137-138; a model for Augustine's later conduct of life as a bishop).

Augustine's

- slow turn to spiritual reflection upon God's nature (seeking for God outside himself [VI.1.1]) and
- his discovery that Christianity is in fact compatible with this spiritual conception of God's nature which he had found in the "Platonic books," i.e. Plotinus and Porphyry (which will lead Augustine to find that God had already been present and acting within him.
 - Cf. I.18.28 ("Small wonder that I was swept off helplessly after profitless things and borne away from you, my God" [*a te, deus meus, ibam foras*]) and *De vera religione* XXIX.72 ("Do not go abroad. Return within yourself. In the inward man dwells truth" [*noli foras ire, in teipsum redi; in interiore homine habitat ueritas*]).
 - Compare also Plotinus *Enn.* VI.9.7: "The soul must let go of all outward things and turn altogether to what is within (πάντων τῶν ἔξω ἀφέμενην δεῖ ἐπιστραφῆναι πρὸς τὸ εἶσω πάντη).
- VI.4; 138: "your spiritual children... did not in fact understand the truth of your creating human beings in your image in so crude a way that they believed you to be determined by the form of a human body. Although I had not even a faint or shadowy notion of what a spiritual substance could be like, I was filled with joy...O God... you are not framed of greater and lesser limbs; you are everywhere, whole and entire in every place, but confined to non. In no sense is our bodily form to be attributed to you, yet you have made us in your own image..."
- VI.4.5;139: "I rejoiced to find that your...Church...did not entertain infantile nonsense or include in her sound teaching any belief that would seem to confine you, the creator of all things, in any place however vast and spacious, in any place that would hem you in on every side after the manner of human bodies."

- note the appreciation of Ambrose's allegorical interpretation of the OT in VI.4.6; 140 which helps to answer Manichaean criticism of the materialism of the Old Testament and the carnality of the patriarchs (cf. Adda/Adimantus and Faustus).

Moves from *skepticism* of the Academy ("to determine what I could hold on to as *certain*") (VI.4.5; 139) to an acceptance of *the authority of the Church* (VI.5.7)

See VI.4.6; 140: "In my heart I was hanging back from any assent, dreading a headlong fall, and nearly died by hanging instead."

- "I longed to become as certain of those things I could not see as I was that seven and three make ten. I was not so demented as to think that even this simple truth was beyond comprehension; but I wanted to have the same grasp of other things, both material entities not immediately present to my senses and spiritual realities of which I did not know how to think in any but a materialistic way."
- For an introduction to the problem of skepticism in epistemology, see the bizarre story in John L. Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, pp. 1-3; for a brief summary of Sceptical teaching, see Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, I, p. 13 A2-4; p. 15, H1-3; p. 468 C1-3; 470D3-4; cf. 471; p. 473A1-5 on suspending judgment (withholding assent to the impression, thereby avoiding hasty or precipitous assent to impressions which are uncertain or unclear) as the way to avoid being deceived and achieve inner freedom from disturbance (*ataraxia*). Cf. p. 442 M.
- Moved to pray "O God, shed light on my darkness" (*Deus meus, illumina tenebras meas*) (Ps. 17:29 [18:28]).

VI.5.7;140: Though fearful of embracing false things, he comes to prefer the Catholic doctrine, even though "some of its propositions were not demonstrated rationally, either because there might be no one present to whom they could be demonstrated or because they were not demonstrable at all; but I came to see that in commanding that certain things must be believed without demonstration the Church was a good deal more moderate and very much less deceitful" than the crude myths of the Manichaeans. He began to reflect upon how many things he "believed and held to be true, though I had never seen them nor been present when they happened." At some point, one cannot rely upon indisputable *sense-experience* (first-hand knowledge), but only upon *the testimony of credible witnesses* (second-hand knowledge).

- *The credibility of the witness lies in their confession of the generally recognized truth that God exists and governs and cares for the world and human life finds its goal in God.*
- VI.8: Being weak, we are "unable to find the truth by pure reason" so "that we needed the authority of the sacred scriptures"
- *The scriptures' truthfulness and authority is attested in part by the growth and advance of the Church:* "you would not have endowed them with such authority among all nations unless you had willed human beings to believe in you and seek you through them."
 - In God's providence, the Scriptures would not have been allowed to attain such authority unless they truly led to God.

- For Augustine's discussion of the idea that only seeing is believing (and in what sense this is or is not true), see Augustine's treatise *De fide rerum invisibilitium* (*De fide rerum quae non videntur*) (*On Faith in Things That Are Not Seen*).
 - "The authority of the sacred writings seemed to me all the more deserving of reverence and divine faith in that scripture was easily accessible to every reader, while yet guarding a mysterious dignity in its deeper sense." (This depth of meaning discernible only through spiritual reading/exegesis)
 - Moral purification is necessary to see truth. Cf. VI.4.6: "a more purified gaze of the mind" (*purgatior acies mentis*), i.e. the intellectual vision by which the soul arrives at an immediate, single-minded intuitive knowledge of the truth. The purification of the mind and the purified mind's immediate access to truth (having been illuminated by God, whose light is the source of its knowledge and love, and possessing faith) are part of the soul's ascent to God as the supreme good that it seeks. See further F. Van Fleteren, "Acies mentis" in *The Encyclopedia of Augustine*, p. 6; Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, 1998, p. 99 with n. 40.
 - Cf. Plotinus *Enn.* I.6.9: "If the eye that adventures the vision be dimmed by vice, impure, or weak, and unable in its cowardly blenching to see the uttermost brightness, then it sees nothing" (ἐὰν δὲ ἴη [ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς] ἐπὶ τὴν θεάν λημῶν κακίας καὶ οὐ κεκαθαυμένος...οὐδὲν βλέπει)
 - This does not mean that people who lack this purified, intuitive vision cannot *sense* (i.e. know even apart from conscious rational reflection) that there is a God, that he acts and even that he should be worshipped.
 - *Compare Cicero *De natura deorum* II.13, where Balbus, arguing for the Stoic position, says, "First they prove that the gods exist; next they explain their nature; then they show that the world is governed by them; and lastly that they care for the fortunes of mankind" (*Primum docent (nostri) esse deos, deinde quales sint, tum mundum ab eis administrari, postremo consulere eos rebus humanis*)
- Augustine: Without God's illumination and purification of the soul, this knowledge is nonetheless both limited and ineffective in bringing about action and moral/spiritual advance.

VI.6.9:142-243: secular ambitions of honor, wealth and marriage come to appear increasingly hollow and burdensome → the story of the drunken beggar

- the half-truths and untruths ("lies") used to curry favor in the profession of rhetoric and the anxiety, apprehensiveness and unhappiness these produced vs. the glory of God and the joy of faithful hope

VI.7.11: Augustine's friends share his disaffection (Alypius' character discussed; his obsession with and repudiation of immoral shows; his conversion to Manichaeism from a love of continence; note how Alypius, feeling overly sure of himself and his own powers, is moved to do what he wills not to do, not knowing what he is doing, opening his mind to disorder but the *memory* of this contributes to his future healing)

Note that Alypius and Nebridius share and Augustine's concern with discovering the right way to live and "fiercely burning zeal for truth and wisdom." (Compare VIII.8.19)
VI.11.18;151: note how the friends support one another in reserving time to study the faith, seek salvation and forsake worldly ambitions to pursue truth (compare their desire for an ideal community of friends seeking truth in VI.14.24; 155)

VI.22: Note the introduction of two of the three major forms of iniquity (moral weakness) which occur in the *Confessions*.

- Augustine suffers from concupiscence (sexual desire), which he depicts here as an addiction to the sweetness of pleasure that enslaves and drives one to act in ways contrary to reason (see further VI.16.26; 156-157).
- Alypius suffers from an inordinate and unsound curiosity (a distraction of the soul from noble and spiritually profitable things that can cause the soul to act willfully, impulsively and imprudently, often because one is inappropriately engrossed in the affairs of others and the sinful pastimes which they enjoy).

Monnica's dreams (Dreams and visions were a common means of guidance among North African Christians, being especially prominent in accounts of martyrdom.).

VI.13.23;154: Augustine being 30, he had attained sufficient success/renewal that an offer of marriage could be arranged with a girl from a prominent and affluent family (being two years under the marriageable age =10 years old [!])

VI.14.24: their plans for a Platonic/Pythagorean ideal community fall apart, in part due to the women's likely refusal of a community where all things (including themselves?) would be in common (cf. Plato *Republic* 449c-450c)

VI.15.25: Augustine's grief at his separation from his common-law partner (in preparation for his planned marriage) and his inability to grasp the truly good ("...I had sunk so low, and was so blind, as to be incapable of even conceiving the light of a goodness, a beauty which deserved to be embraced for its own sake, which the bodily eye sees not, though it is seen by the spirit within").

Bk. VII--An Intellectual Conversion to a Spiritual Vision of God (in Preparation for the Moral Conversion of His Will to God in Bk. VIII)

VII.1.1-2/158-159: What is perishable and can change for the worse is inferior to what is imperishable and retains its goodness/virtue forever.

Trying to imagine (by *aphairesis*=abstraction of qualities from a substrate) what God is like imagining refined matter spread out in space; when bodily attributes are removed from this picture, it becomes impossible to imagine anything (any forms) with the physical senses, showing why a different kind of perception--i.e. a spiritual vision which transcends the material realm--is needed. Compare VII.7.11; 168; VII.14.20; 175.

VII.2.3/160-161: Nebridius' Two-Horned Dilemma Posed in Response to Manichaean Teaching: If God can be harmed he is not God; if God cannot be harmed, why would the Darkness have bothered to attack him and why would he have even cared?

VII.3.4;161-162:"the cause of evil is the free decision of our will, in consequence of which we act wrongly and suffer your righteous judgment.

- We are not a mixture of two natures with two different inherent tendencies (*enthumeseis*).
- I have a will that is mine and is the origin and cause of sin (my sin), not something involuntary I suffered from forces outside of me (compare VIII.11/193).
- But if God is by nature wholly good and the source of all goodness and every created thing that exists, where did the evil in my will come from?

VII.6.8/164-165 Astrology Repudiated:

- Correct predictions come by luck at work in a sufficient number of cases necessary to produce a few correct guesses.
- People born at the same time under the same stars can have very different destinies (Esau and Jacob as a biblical example)

VII.7.11

Neoplatonism will eventually help Augustine understand more clearly how to respond to the problem of evil posed by the Manichaeans: "You had released me from those fetters [of Manichaeism], and I was trying to find out where evil comes from, and there was no way out [*quaerebam unde malum, et no erat exitus*]...[I] was in a fever to discover where evil comes from."

VII.9.13/169-170: Reading early Neoplatonic writings in Latin translation

Note his assimilation of these ideas to the prologue to John's Gospel!

- Both assert that there is a transcendent principle that gives existence and order to the world and illumination to the minds of rational creatures. The Platonic books, however, know nothing of the Incarnation and the humility displayed by God in effecting our salvation.
- Note Augustine's theory of the taking of the Egyptians gold, interpreted allegorically of appropriating whatever truth one found within the pagan culture (see p. 172 n. 62) and his appeal to Paul's quotation from the pagan poet Aratus in Acts 17:28.
- Asserts in VII.20.26/181: "I believe that you willed me to stumble upon them before I gave my mind to your scriptures, so that the memory of how I had been affected by them might be impressed upon me when later I had been brought to a new gentleness through the study of your books."
Platonic books are thus valuable [see VIII.2.3/186], even though there is a distinction "between those who see the goal but not the way to it and the Way to our beatific homeland, a homeland to be not merely descried but lived in."; compare VII.21.27 [end]. Note the providential order in which the Platonic books and Bible are read; the reverse order, Augustine contends, could have been harmful.

VII.10.16/172-173: Augustine can turn inward but only with divine help, beholds the transcendent light (the representation of God's essence/nature in its procession toward the world) and then his sight of it fails due to his immaturity.

VII.11.17-12.18/174: The Ladder (Hierarchy) of Nature (*Scala naturae*): Diminishing Existence and the Problem of Evil

- If God is the source of existence and goodness and other things have existence and goodness only by participation in him, then their degree of existence and goodness is derivative in character and less than God's own. Though they fall away from and have less than God's own existence, they have not yet fallen into non-existence. Their destiny lies in returning to the One who is the source of their being and goodness.

VII.13.19/175: "evil has no being at all, and this is true not of yourself only but of everything you have created, since apart from you there is nothing that could burst in and disrupt the order you have imposed on it."

- Beyond the idea of evil as privative (a deprivation/lack of goodness), the notion of an original, normative order (see VIII.8/190[bottom]) also allows Augustine to show that even things that seem unfitting can be good in themselves and work together for the good of the whole.
- One therefore has a third option (disruption of original order--see VII.16.22 for examples and the will twisted away from God) rather than just the choice of either blaming God (blasphemy) or positing another independent causal principle that has created evil (Manichaeism--a materialist figment of the human imagination=idolatry in VII.14.20/175).

Intellectual conversion requires divine action "so that I could absent me from myself awhile...then I awoke in you and saw you to be infinite, but in a different sense; and that vision in no way derived from the flesh."

VII.17.23: A New Ascent

- Augustine loves God for who he is, rather than loving some material image arising from human imagination that is set up in God's place (cf. VII.14.20; 175). His soul however, is dragged down again to the place (terrestrial existence in this body subject to corruption and mortality) which is proper to its ignorance and carnal disposition. [compare the lethargy/lassitude/forgetfulness in VIII.12])
- The treatment of levels of mental activity in rational creatures as they return to the One in interesting:
 - sense-impressions, an inner sense which coordinates them and relates them to the subject (=Stoic doctrine of *oikeiosis* "appropriation"??),
 - then the faculty proper to rational beings in the terrestrial realm (i.e. discursive reasoning, which is mutable and canvasses alternatives and deliberates concerning them) and
 - then, with the exclusion of sense-based appearances (*phantasmata*) the intellect returns to the transcendent source of its own intelligence (represented here by the divine light which is glimpsed and, retained in

memory, creates a yearning and leads one back to Christ the Word and mediator of God; cf. VII.17.23; 177)

VII.18.24: Ascent and Progress Impossible Apart From Christ's Work as Mediator
Sinners must be brought to recognize their weakness, be healed of pride by Christ's humility, and renewed in love (charity). (The Platonic books and the desire for ascent insufficient in and of themselves.)

VII.21.27 Discovery of Paul as Setting the Stage for Augustine's Moral Conversion in Bk. 8.

Paul's Epistles not to be understood as opposing the Law, but confessing the divine transcendence found also in the Platonic books but with an understanding of God's gift of grace in Jesus Christ

Bk. VIII: The Moral Conversion of Augustine's Will to God

VIII.4: Victorinus' conversion requires not just an intellectual conversion to Christian truth but a moral conversion that involves public involvement in the Christian community [as Aug. does in VIII.6.13/194]. (VIII.4.9: "an authoritative example pointing toward salvation"; the same is true of Antony and the characters described in VIII.15)

VIII.5.10: Augustine unable to follow this example--when the will turns away from God, desires become disordered and a habit is formed which eventually compels the soul compare VIII.12].

- God creates a new will in Augustine, a will that is turned toward the worship of God, creating a division/warfare within the soul
- Conversion involves a healing of disordered desires and the immoderate attraction to pleasure that readily overwhelms reason [cf. VIII.17 on the restriction placed on what he asks, his reluctance and his inability in VIII.18,20-21; on not being able to do what one desires/one's will for the good, see esp. 20-21; in 21 the mind finds that it cannot command itself to will something undividedly and with a view to action due to the burden of evil habit, so that two wills exist, though this is not the same as the Manichaean view of the two *enthumeseis* [considerations/deliberations]]
- The two wills discussed (fragmentation and distintegration) in VIII.9.21-VIII.24 and the resolution in divine grace/conversion.