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AUGUSTINE'S ACCOUNT OF HIS PERSONAL CONVERSION TO GOD IN THE *CONFESSIONS* (PART I)[1]

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Abstract. St. Augustine's *Confessions* may be history's most famous autobiographical account of one man's personal conversion to God.[2] In this essay, I shall read St. Augustine's Confessions as a highly personal account of a conversion to God – a personal conversion which included his whole person in its intellectual, moral, and affective dimensions. Once grace leads him to accept the truth of the Catholic faith intellectually, it further leads him to allow God to inspire and guide him in choosing to live the truth of the faith and, in doing so, to experience a joy or delight that gives him the emotional strength to live that truth. As I shall argue, Augustine's *Confessions* can be read as an autobiographical account of one man's personal conversion to

[1] GenAI Disclosure Statement. No GenAI tool was used in any aspect of this paper.

[2] For a thorough study and analysis of the text of the *Confessions*, cf. James J. O'Donnell, *Confessions: Introduction: Text and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). For a well-regarded biography of St. Augustine, cf. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). For a contemporary collection of scholarly articles on Augustine's *Confessions*, cf. *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, edited by Tarmo Toom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

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God in his decision to receive baptism and henceforth to live a life of an ordered love for God.[3]

The article will be divided into two installments, the first installment presented here and the following installment in our next edition of *Landas*. This first installment will present what an intellectual, moral, and emotional conversion meant for Augustine by canvassing the complete span of his writings as an introduction to his personal conversion in the *Confessions* as intellectual, moral, and emotional. This installment will then cover a portion of Augustine's intellectual conversion to the Catholic faith to the point where, in studying natural philosophy, he realizes the falsity of the Manichean religion and turns to the skepticism of academic philosophy. The paper will then take up his intellectual search for the truth, his intellectual conversion to the truth of the Catholic faith, and his moral and emotional conversion in living that truth.

Keywords: conversion, intellectual conversion, moral conversion, emotional conversion

Introduction: Personal Conversion as Intellectual, Moral, and Emotional

In the *Confessions*, St. Augustine takes his readers on the journey of his soul by means of conversation between himself and God – a conversation in which Augustine shares with us his readers the state of his mind and heart from the earliest years of his childhood – as far as he could remember - through his adolescence and adult years

[3] As Augustine describes this ordered love of God at *On Christian Doctrine* I, 27: "… so that he neither loves what he ought not to love, nor fails to love what he ought to love, nor loves that more which ought to be loved more…and that every man is to be loved as a man for God's sake; but God is to be loved for his own sake. And if God is to be loved more than any man, each man ought to love God more than himself. Likewise, we ought to love another man better than our own body, because all things are to be loved in reference to God and another man can have fellowship with us in enjoyment of God, whereas our body cannot; for the body only lives through the soul, and it is by the soul that we enjoy God." Also, cf. Augustine, *Of True Religion*, 24.

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as these finally lead to his final conversion to God in his decision to be baptized.

As Augustine describes his conversion to God, he wrote these confessions years after the actual event. In fact, it was almost ten years after his religious conversion and after he had become a bishop of the Catholic Church in northern Africa that he was able to set out his conversion experience in his spiritual autobiography. This means that at the time of his writing his *Confessions*, Augustine had come to a faith perspective he did not have at the time of living these events ten years before. His *Confessions*, then, are his *recollection in faith* of God's ways in his life.

The title itself of his *Confessions* was significant for Augustine on several levels.[4] First and above all, "confession" meant for him an act of thankful praise to God for how God had led (and was continuing to lead) him in his life. But second, "confession" meant for Augustine an honest acknowledgment of his sins before God as well as how God had forgiven – and continues to forgive him. Finally, "confession" meant for Augustine the act of witness – the act of confessing as *sharing* with others – friends and foes – what God had done and was continuing to do for him in his life. In writing these confessions, Augustine believed that by confessing his own story of God's ways with him, his readers could come to appreciate their own lives as a story of God's ways with them so that they could join him in confessing their own personal experience of the mercy of God.

Augustine begins his *Confessions* with a prayer that concisely conveys his faith understanding of how God had been (and continues to be) present with him and active in his life:

> You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised: great is your power and your wisdom is immeasurable. Man, a little piece of your creation, desires to praise you, a human being 'bearing his mortality with him' (2 Cor. 4:10), carrying with him the witness of his sin and the witness

[4] Cf. Carolyn Hammond, "Title, Time, and Circumstances of Composition: The Genesis of the *Confessions*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, edited by Tarmo Toom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 17-24.

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> that you 'resist the proud' (1 Pet. 5:5). Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.[5]

In this opening prayer, Augustine presents his readers with the theme of his *Confessions* – how God gradually revealed Himself to him throughout his life, leading him back to Himself through the very deepest desire of his restless heart. His *Confessions* begin with a prayer and continue as a prayer in the form of a conversation with God the Father, whom Augustine addresses as "Lord" but especially directly as *Thou* (*you*). The *Confessions* is written as a conversation with God in which Augustine acknowledges and thanks God for what he considers the most significant moments in his life, moments in which he recognizes God's mysterious providence guiding him back to God Himself. In an attempt to appreciate Augustine's experience of God's providence, we follow him in his *Confessions* as he describes to God how God spoke to him - most fundamentally in his desire for truth and then in his desire to love and be loved. Reflecting on these desires, he believes that God is inviting him to realize that "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

What Augustine means by the heart, of course, is the universally recognized human symbol of what is most profound in us – what is at the very center of each one of us. It is the seat of the intellect as well as the emotions and affects, the psychic energy we have to do (or refrain from doing) what we desire. For Augustine, the *restless* heart includes our intellectual desire to know the truth about God but also our appetitive yearning for intimacy with God as our Father and eternal *Thou* (You). The restless heart is our deepest longing to know the truth of who God is and the desire to love and be loved by the God of Love. Augustine's *Confessions* are his personal account conducted in a conversation with God, confessing how God helped him realize through important events of his life how God led him to

[5] Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1, in Henry Chadwick [trans.], *Saint Augustine Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford Word Classics, 1998). Hereafter, *Conf.*

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realize that it was God Himself who converted Augustine intellectually and affectively to come to rest in Him.

The following will be divided into two parts: the first, a description of his personal conversion to God as intellectual, moral, and emotional, as the background. The second part will examine Augustine's account of his personal conversion to God in his *Confessions*, including an intellectual, moral, and emotional conversion in his life.

Intellectual Conversion in the *Confessions*

As Augustine relates in his *Confessions*, his interest in the philosophical life was awakened when, as a university student, he read the *Hortensius*, a dialogue of Cicero which has since been lost. While Augustine's view of philosophy, wisdom, and happiness evolved throughout his life, his early exposure to philosophy prompted his search to understand in what happiness consists of and how to obtain it.[6]

For Augustine, happiness is both the motive and its end, for human beings have no reason to philosophize except with a view to happiness.[7] The search for happiness involves the mind (*mens*) in the activity of reason (*ratio*) in acquiring knowledge as an understanding (*intellectus*) and contemplation of truth.[8] The human mind in reasoning makes use of two kinds of knowledge: knowledge for the sake of knowledge

[6] Augustine, *Letter* 147, 2, 7.

[7] Augustine, *City of God* XIX, 1, 3.

[8] But knowledge as a contemplation of truth can be of things sensibly perceived or of things imperceptible to the senses but accepted on the reliable testimony of others. In the latter case, knowledge is a belief (*fides*) accompanied by assent to another's testimony, while a knowledge based on what is sensibly perceived differs from the latter only in its source. Knowledge as belief, or faith, can be deemed reasonable provided one has sufficient reason for believing the testimony of those others in its regard. Augustine understood reason as a progressive understanding (*intellectus*) of truth which was naturally prior both to belief and to the understanding of that belief. Cf. Augustine, *Sermon* 43, 2, 3.

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or knowledge for the sake of happiness. Corresponding to these two kinds of knowledge, the human mind makes use of a superior and an inferior reason.[9] On the one hand, we have the knowledge of the intellect or superior reason oriented to the divine Ideas, a knowledge in the order of contemplation and based upon an act of submission of intellectual humility to God, a knowledge which ensures happiness: this is wisdom. On the other hand, we know inferior reason, a knowledge of things human oriented to sensible things, a knowledge in the order of action; this is science.[10] It is the knowledge of things divine which is the concern of wisdom as well as the guide to happiness as our final end; while human knowledge is subservient to wisdom.[11] The realization of the truth of this wisdom will require of Augustine an *intellectual* conversion from unbelief to belief in the Catholic faith – a conversion which will require an intellectual humility in accepting the gift of faith. In the *Confessions*, Augustine gives an autobiographical account of a gradual intellectual conversion to this wisdom after his intellectual journey through various forms of unbelief.

As we shall see, Augustine's intellectual conversion to the truth of the Catholic faith involved his answering three fundamental questions as preliminary to his intellectual acceptance of the Catholic faith. The first of these questions had to do with the nature of God, the second with the nature of evil, and finally Augustine had to make sense of and accept the overall *coherence* of the Catholic faith. Answering these questions will require of him an intellectual conversion in humility as the graced submission to God in accepting the truth of the faith. But even after having undergone this intellectual conversion to the truth of the faith, Augustine will face the deeper question of how he can actually *live* the truth of the faith he accepted intellectually. This deeper challenge will require of him a graced *moral* and *affective* conversion which will also require humility: a graced moral conversion in overcoming a pride of the will in trying to save himself by his own

[9] Augustine, *On the Trinity* XII, 3.3, 12, 19, 4.4.

[10] Augustine, *On the Trinity* XIV, 1, 3.

[11] Augustine, *On the Trinity* XIV, 1,3.

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efforts and a graced affective conversion in humbly accepting being loved by God in his deepest vulnerability.

Moral Conversion in the Confessions

By use of his superior reason under the influence of grace, Augustine was able to realize the truth of the Catholic faith in overcoming by grace his pride of intellect in his journey through various kinds of unbelief - Manichean, Scientific, Academic, and Neo-Platonic. But once he was able to accept the truth of the Catholic faith, he now had to freely accept baptism and *live* that truth. Living the truth of the faith he intellectually accepted will require a *moral* conversion of the *will* in humbly acknowledging his need for God and allowing God to act in him.

Augustine comes to understand that the human mind is directed to its own end when it submits to wisdom. In doing so, he becomes capable of directing all his actions in accordance with wisdom, conferring upon those actions their moral character. As human beings do not make truth but rather discover it, and as sense objects exist independent of the senses which perceive them,[12] so in the intelligible order the truth seen by different minds at the same time is distinct from those minds.[13] God is the inner master of the intelligible and the source of agreement between minds.[14] In knowing the truth we come to realize that we have but one master, namely the inner truth which presides over our souls, Christ, the unchangeable power and eternal wisdom of God.[15] Every rational soul seeks His counsel, but His truth is revealed to souls according as their will is good or evil. Our inner light or inspiration in recognizing the truth comes from God.[16]

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[12] Augustine, *On Freedom of the Will* II, 7, 13-19.

[13] Augustine, *On Freedom of the Will* II, 12, 33.

[14] Augustine, *The Teacher* 1, 2; 11, 38; 12, 40.

[15] Augustine, *The Teacher* 11, 38; 12, 40.

[16] Augustine, *On Divine Questions,* 83, 54.

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This divine illumination is intimately present to the soul in a way that resists adequate representation,[17] for there is nothing in creation as near to God as the soul.[18] This divine illumination is of intelligible rather than sensible realities, which requires the necessary character of judgement.[19] Divine illumination provides the soul with regulative principles, which Augustine calls rules.[20] These rules are the practical principles of the moral life. Fundamental to these rules is the eternal Law of God by which all creation is directed by God. Our human conscience is illumined by this divine Law, so we understand the first principles of morality in the order of action. This we call natural law.[21]

Divine illumination not only prescribes rules of action for us by making our conscience submit to natural law; it also gives us the means of putting these rules into practice. Every man becomes virtuous only by conforming his soul to the immutable rules and lights of the Virtues dwelling within the Truth and Wisdom common to all. The four cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice have the divine Wisdom as their source.[22] As God is the very life of the soul, it is by bestowing these virtues on the soul, virtues including wisdom, piety, and charity.[23]

But human beings need to freely accept God and His divine illumination. The power on which that free response depends is the will (*voluntas*). The will as the principle of all our actions is the principle of the moral life. Indeed, not only do all the resolutions and decisions made in the practical order depend on the will, but every operation

[17] According to the judgment of Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine*, 2nd Edition (Toronto: Vintage Books, 1967), 80.

[18] Augustine, *The Measure of the Soul* 34, 77.

[19] Cf. Augustine, *On the Trinity* IX, 6, 9, 10, 11; cf. *On the True Religion* 30, 54-56.

[20] Augustine, *On Free Will* II, 10, 29; *On the Trinity* XIV, 15, 21.

[21] Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms* 57, cf. 118, 25. 145, 5; *On Order* II, 8, 25.

[22] Augustine, *On Free Will* II, 19, 52.

[23] Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* XIX, 5, 12.

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of our cognitive powers in the theoretical order as well is under its immediate control.

Augustine thinks of the human being and his will in somewhat the same way. In every soul, as in every body, there is a weight drawing it, as it were, constantly, moving it always to find its natural place of rest; and that weight we call love. "My weight," as Augustine puts it, "is my love."[24] Love is the principle of the will and a crucial and overarching notion in Augustine's understanding of the moral life. Love is closely related to virtue and often used synonymously with will or intention (*intentio*).[25] Love is a force in our souls that attracts us to the true beauty we find nowhere else but in and above ourselves; it impels us to ascend from the sensible to the intelligible world to the contemplation of God.[26] From this follow important consequences for understanding Augustine on voluntary action.

First of all, if love is the inner force which moves the will, and the will denotes the human being himself, the human being is essentially moved by his love.[27] Love is the source of action. The impetus is what is desired, but what can be loved can be morally good or evil. The moral problem, then, is not *whether* one should love but what one should love. Love, but be careful what you love![28] *Virtue* is an inner disposition or motivational habit that enables us to perform every action we perform out of *right* love. Virtue then means to will what we *should* will, i.e., to love what we *should* love. The moral quality (moral *goodness* or evil) of our love will determine the moral quality of the will and ultimately the

[24] Augustine, *Conf* XIII, 9, 10.

[25] Augustine, *On the Trinity* XV, 38, cf. *City of God* XI 7, *Conf* XIII, 12.

[26] Augustine, *Conf* X, 8-38, sp. 38.

[27] Augustine, *On the Trinity* XI, 7, 12.

[28] Augustine, *Sermon* 96 1,1; *On the Good of Widowhood* 21, 26.

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moral quality of the act which results.[29] Virtue, then, is ordered love[30] and the criterion of true virtue is its orientation to God.[31]

Since the moral quality of the love determines the moral quality of the will and the will determines the moral quality of the act, the moral quality of the emotions is determined by the moral quality of the love from which they arise.[32]

And as virtue is the only path to happiness, the goal of the moral life, if love is the principle of the will or the will itself, the highest virtue will also be the *highest love*.[33] As for the virtues subordinated to this highest virtue, these may be reduced to this highest virtue, thus highest love. Temperance is love bestowed on the thing loved, fortitude is love which endures anything for the thing it loves, justice is love serving the object loved, and prudence is love wisely discriminating between what helps and what hinders the other virtues, discriminating between what binds the human being to God and what separates him from God.[34] Thus, we reach the heart of morality, charity as the love of God, the highest good.[35]

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[29] Augustine, *On the Trinity* XI, 6, 10.

[30] Augustine, *The City of God* XV, 22.

[31] Even if Augustine occasionally refers to the four cardinal virtues as if they could be added to the Pauline or theological virtues of faith, hope, and love to make a sum of seven, they are best taken as a subdivision of love: Augustine, *Letter 171A* 2, the only one of the Pauline virtues that persist: *Soliloquy* 1, 4. Cf. Christian Tornau, "Augustine of Hippo," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine/#Virt.

[32] Augustine, *The City of God* XIV, 7, 2.

[33] Augustine, *On the Way of Life of the Catholic Church* I, 15, 25.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Cf. Augustine, *Sermon* 349, 1-3.

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Charity is the love whereby we love what we ought to love.[36] Charity moves toward God, as a personal reality. While we can love some things for their own sake, we love persons for themselves. The Lord's great commandment is to love God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Loving another with one's whole soul means loving another as oneself on a basis of perfect equality. The one I love is my equal, and I am the equal of the one I love. This is why I love him as myself, as God enjoins. That same justice which in love between human beings demands equality between ourselves and the object of our love, demands that God the Supreme good be the object of an unqualified love, a love without measure.[37] For Augustine, a perfectly realized love of God is a completely actualized moral life expressed in his recommendation to "love and do what you will."[38] As the love of God ought to be the source of acts which give that love expression, all morality may be understood to flow from the love of God.

God is love, and the moral life is love. To live by love, we must move towards God in love even now as a pledge of future happiness in the possession of God, but we already possess God within us through grace, the gift He has made of Himself.[39] Only grace enables us to possess God in love even now in this life as we move toward our full loving possession of God in heaven.[40]

As the moral life is to be ordered to wisdom in the contemplation of God, the moral life requires God's grace and the humble acceptance of that grace in ordering the will and the emotions to the love of God. Augustine experiences that grace as he reads the words of St. Paul under the tree in Milan when he hears God speak to him in his need.

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[36] Augustine, *Letter* 167, 4, 15.

[37] In the words of Augustine's friend Severus, summarizing Augustine's own words: *Letter* 109, 2.

[38] Augustine, *Tractates on the First Letter of John* 7, 4, 8.

[39] Augustine, *Sermon* 158, 9 and 143, 4.

[40] Augustine, *Sermon* 23, 8.

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Emotional Conversion in the *Confessions*

In Augustine's theory of action, will (*voluntas*) describes the motivation of a rational being as an impulse (*horme*) toward action. This impulse involves a perception of an object as good and good for oneself. The love that is provoked by this perception is not a feeling but an awareness of the higher reason (*mens*) in relation to some perceived good as answering a need.[41] The perception of such an object includes the cognizing of mental sentences expressing how attaining that object will contribute to one's happiness. This takes place in the discursive part of the mind (*animus*).[42] Psychic delight is experienced at the possession of the object, but the mind now considers whether the object, via the action, will indeed contribute to happiness, and it either assents or dissents by issuing an imperative that commands doing or not doing the action.[43] This theory of motivation underpins Augustine's account of emotion.

For Augustine, all the soul's sensible movements can be reduced to four fundamental emotions: desire (*cupiditas*), joy (*laetitia*), fear (*metus*) and sorrow (*tristia*). Emotions are caused by judgments, passions by assent to false propositions, and affections by assent to true propositions.[44] Every movement of the soul is directed either towards a good to be acquired or attained or away from an evil to be avoided

[41] For Augustine, feelings are psychic pains or pleasures experienced in an "inner sense" though caused by cognitive apprehension while *eros* is mental awareness of itself, cf. *On the Trinity* X, 8, 10-11.

[42] Augustine, *On the Trinity* XI, 8, 12. *Cogitatio* is the discursive use of images and at XII 12 17 where *scientia actionis* is discursive thought (*ratiocinari*) about things in the sensory word. The lower part of the mind has as its focus knowledge of sensible realities by which we may do right actions, XIV, 7, 10 cf. Sarah Catherine Byers, *Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 52-3.

[43] Byers, *Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine*, 52-53.

[44] Byers, *Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine*, 57.

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or removed;[45] but the soul's free movement to acquire or to retain a thing is the will itself.[46]

In his *City of God*, Augustine distinguished two forms of life whose principles are decisions of the will either to live *secundum se ipsum*, that is, in accord with what one determines to be good and right for oneself, or to live *secundum spiritum* according to God's will in embracing His love, truth, and order in imitation of Christ.[47] In these two kinds of lives, emotions such as love, joy, grief, and fear arise in agreement or in disagreement with the good things we desire in the kind of life we will.[48] We feel desire or joy when we obtain what we love, but fear or grief when subjected to things we do not love.[49] As love is the principle of the will, when we possess something we love, we feel joy, whereas we feel fear in facing the prospect of what we do not love. Emotions will be experienced as either positive or negative depending on their arising from what we either love or hate, and their morality will depend on the moral character of what we love or hate.[50] As the moral quality of the love determines the moral quality of the will, so the passions or emotions arising from a will which are in line with God's will are morally good, whereas passions or emotions arising from a life not in accord with God's will are morally evil.[51] Emotions experienced in a rationally ordered way of life, a life in conformity with God's will, will be moral and rational, whereas emotions we feel in living not in accord with God will be immoral and irrational.[52]

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[45] Augustine, *City of God* XIV, 6.

[46] Augustine, *On the Two Souls* X, 14.

[47] Augustine, *On the City of God* XIV, 1, 3, 4.

[48] Augustine, *On the City of God* XIV, 6.

[49] Augustine, *On the City of God* XIV, 6.

[50] Augustine, *On the City of God* XIV, 7.

[51] Augustine, *On the City of God* XIV, 6, 7.

[52] Augustine, *On the City of God* VII, 23; VIII, 17.

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Habit (*Consuetudo*) and the Emotions

After having intellectually accepted the truth of the Catholic faith, Augustine faced the personal challenge of living that faith. His challenge, as he describes it in Book VIII of the *Confessions*, was not that of being more *certain* of the truth of the faith but in being more *steadfast* in dedicating himself in service to it.[53] The difficulty he felt in being more steadfast was his being tightly bound by his compulsion to act for sexual satisfaction and his desire to be free of that compulsion. Augustine will describe his inner struggle as a struggle between two wills, the one to live celibately, the other to maintain his longstanding carnal relations. This latter he describes as an older will which had the strength of an old habit.[54] The conflict he experiences between these two wills was that between his will to what he knew was right and a carnal will weighed down by habit (*consuetudo*). He describes his psychological experience of this inner conflict in the theological terms of St. Paul in Paul's letter to the Galatians 5.17 as the flesh lusting against the spirit and the spirit lusting against the flesh, and in Romans 7:22-25 as a conflict between the inner man and the law of his members.

Augustine recognizes that he is responsible for this conflict of wills within him, as the carnal will has arisen from many repeated actions in conflict with God's will. This carnal will he experiences as an aberrant part of himself and a punishment he has brought upon himself.[55]

Augustine's recognition of habit goes back at least as far as his reading of Aristotle's *Categories* when a student in Carthage.[56] In Aristotle he learned that habit was a quality of substance (not a substance itself), a stable disposition like various kinds of knowledge and of the moral virtues like justice and temperance that are gradually

[53] Augustine, *Conf* VIII, 1.

[54] Augustine, *Conf* VIII, 10.

[55] Augustine, *Conf* VIII, 12, 22.

[56] Cf. Augustine, *Conf* IV, 28, 29.

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acquired by repeated acts but not easily changed.[57] But he was aware of the notion of habit was a common place in the ancient world as a second nature (*consuetudo secunda natura*), that is, a relatively permanent tendency created by repeated activity and which in turn produces effects in a predictable sort of way.[58]

Habit arises from repetition of a pleasurable activity as this pleasure is lodged in memory.[59] When recalled, the pleasure is intensified, and the desire to repeat the act is strengthened.[60] In unregenerate man, the weight of carnal habit is stronger than the weight of love of God.[61] Only God can rectify such a habit by a grace which provides the person with the pleasure of a love for Himself.[62] With the emotional strength provided by this grace, the evil habit can be undone and an inner unity found in wholeheartedly willing what God wills.[63]

If he is to recover this unity of a wholehearted will in accordance with God's will, evil habit must be transformed through an emotional conversion. This emotional conversion will come about in Augustine's experience of being spoken to by God as he reads the words of St. Paul in his *kairos* moment under the tree in Milan. In that experience

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[57] Augustine, *Categories* 8b, 26.

[58] Cf. John J. Prendeville, "The Development of the Idea of Habit in the Thought of Saint Augustine," *Traditio* 28 (1972): 29, 77. Augustine will insist until the end of his life that habits are freely contracted and can grow into second nature: Augustine, *On the City of God* XII 3.

[59] Augustine, *Against Fortunatus* 22 Augustine explains that before we acquire a habit, we have the free choice to do a certain action or not. When, however, we have done something freely and the pernicious sweetness and pleasure of the action has gripped our soul, then it becomes so involved in its habit that it cannot overcome what it made for itself by sinning in the first place.

[60] Augustine, *Conf* VI, 25; X 41.

[61] Augustine, *Conf* VII, 17.

[62] Cf. Augustine, *Conf* XIII, 10.

[63] Cf. Augustine, *Conf* VIII, *passim.*

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of being loved by God, he receives the will and the emotional strength to love God with God's own love for him.

Augustine approached moral and emotional conversion, especially in his dealing with divine inspiration.[64] As human motivation is initiated by motivating impressions which are received, our minds must be touched by an external power which instills in us a delight. In Book VIII of the *Confessions*, Augustine laments that it was his own habitual actions which had forged the chains that now bind him, to make him unable to assent to the impressions of continence, and yet he believes that he retains the power of choice (*liberium arbitrium*), which is the power to give or refuse assent to the sentential content of the impression. And yet he will misuse this power of choice to serve his addiction. What is needed is a divinely motivated impression which, by its delight, will supply the emotional strength to choose what is morally right to do because it is morally good (*kalon/honestum*) as Christ is the source of such goodness.[65] In his *Replies to Simplicianus*, Augustine asks himself, "Who has it in his power that his mind be touched by the kind of impression by which will may be moved…And who can welcome in his mind something which does not give him delight? Who has it in his power to ensure either that something that can delight him will turn up, or that he will be delighted when it turns up?" He answers, "If those things delight us which serve our advancement towards God… that is inspired and bestowed by the grace of God."[66] In his letter on Psalm 67 he writes, "You have prepared in your own sweetness for the needy, O God… so that a good work may be done…from love[67] We need these motivating impressions from God so that, in listening to Him God Himself grants us the will to act according to His will.[68]

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[64] Byers, *Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine*, 172-214.

[65] Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ; Replies to Simplicianus,* 2.24. 28-25.29, citing John 3.8.

[66] Augustine, *Replies to Simplicianus,* 1.2.21.

[67] Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms,* 67.13.

[68] Augustine, *Replies to Simplicianus,* 1.2.21.

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How? In his letter on Psalm 50, Augustine writes, "As I listen, he [the psalmist] says, 'you will give me delight and gladness…when we listen interiorly to him making some suggestion and teaching us we are subject to our teacher."[69] In his commentary on Psalm 114 Augustine writes "Gracious is the Lord…gracious in the first place because he has inclined his ear to me; and I know not that the ear of God has approached my lips, until I was aroused (*excitarer*)…that I might call upon the Lord's name: for who has called upon him, save him whom he first called?[70] And in Letter 57 we read:

> By God's calling they understand to whom they must groan and call upon him in whom they rightly believe, saying 'Have mercy'… when someone stretches out to him, therefore and groans in that way there will happen what follows: where sin abounded, grace was even more abundant …as a result there comes about the fulfilment of the law.[71]

In his later writings, as in his *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians*, Augustine writes, "a human being prepares the heart, but does so only with the help of God who touches the heart in such a way that the human being prepares the heart. But in the answer of the tongue, that is, in that which the divine tongue answers to the prepared heart, the human being does nothing but all comes from God…" As we shall see in Bk VIII of the Confessions, after having cried out to God for mercy and help, "How long, O Lord? Augustine hears the voice "pick up and read" and, in picking up his Bible under the tree in the garden in Milan, reads the passage which his eyes immediately light upon – at that moment he is inspired to listen to God speak to him in the words of the passage he reads and is converted morally and emotionally.[72]

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[69] Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms* 50.13.

[70] Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms* 114.5.

[71] Cf. Roland Teske [trans.], *Letters 156-210*, vol. II/3, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century (New York: New City Press, 2004), *letter* 157, 2.16 and 157, 2.22.

[72] Augustine, *Conf* VIII, 28-29. For an examination of Augustine's developing understanding of God's grace and the human response in conversion, again. cf. Byers, *Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine*, 172-214.

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In the following, we will follow Augustine himself as he relates his journey to God in the *Confessions* by noting and commenting on key moments of intellectual, moral, and emotional conversion in that journey.

Augustine's Intellectual Conversion to the Truth of the Catholic Faith

Augustine's Early Years

Augustine's *Confessions* begins with his account of his early life with his family – his mother, father, and younger brother in Thagaste, a village in northern Africa. While he grew up in a home in which his mother Monica lived as a devout Catholic, Augustine's father, though a baptized convert at his death, was during Augustine's early life an unbeliever who did not share his wife's concern for Augustine's religious upbringing. Augustine, influenced by his mother's instruction and example, received and practiced the Catholic faith very early in his life, although he did not receive baptism.[73] Despite their differences with respect to the faith, both of Augustine's parents shared a deep concern for their son's future career in the world and, to that end, insisted that the boy Augustine receive the best possible academic formation. While at first resistant to academics, the young Augustine gradually grew to enjoy learning and came to realize that the joy he derived in his experience of learning new things stemmed from a passion for the truth. Despite his early exposure to the faith through his mother, Augustine confesses that his slowly developing passion for the truth in his youth did not move him to seek the truth of God the Creator.[74]

[73] Augustine's baptism was delayed on the assumption that, baptism, being a washing away of all sin, deferring baptism would be better for the baptized, cf. *Conf* XI.17.

[74] Augustine, *Conf* I, 31.

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University Life in Carthage

After his father dies, Augustine begins a new chapter in his life as he leaves his mother and his native village and takes up residence in the big city of Carthage to pursue his university studies. He describes that almost immediately upon entering the big city, he got involved in a number of problematic relationships. He describes his motivation in these relationships:

> To me it was sweet to love and be loved, the more so if I could enjoy the body of the beloved… my love was returned, and in secret I attained the joy that enchains. I was glad to be in bondage.[75]

The physical and emotional pleasure he experienced in loving and being loved is described ambiguously as a "joy that enchains." In the midst of this emotional ambiguity, Augustine begins his studies at the university with the career ambition to become a successful orator. With this goal in mind, he decides to devote himself to the study of rhetoric, and he enjoys a considerable amount of success in his studies:

> My studies, which were deemed acceptable, had the objective of leading me to distinction as an advocate in the law courts, where one's reputation is high in proportion to one's success in deceiving people…. I was already top of the class in the rhetor's school, and was pleased with myself for my success and was inflated with conceit…[76]

During his studies, Augustine happens to come upon a book which will open new vistas for him and will mark the first stage of his intellectual conversion to the truth. The book he comes upon was a short treatise of Cicero's entitled *Hortensius* – an exhortation to a life of philosophy as a love for wisdom.77 While Augustine's initial

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[75] Augustine, *Conf,* III,1.

[76] Augustine, *Conf,* III,6.

[77] The *Hortensius*, composed by Cicero in 45 BC toward the end of his life was actually Cicero's adaptation of a short work of Aristotle's entitled the *Protrepticus* which was written as an exhortation to a life of philosophy as a life in pursuit of wisdom which alone offers human beings true happiness, cf. Chadwick [trans.], *Saint Augustine Confessions*, p. 39, footnote 17.

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interest in studying the work was motivated by his career interests, the *content* of the book (rather than its literary style) captivates him, as its exhortation to a life of philosophy offers him a conception of a way of living that was new to him.

> The book changed my feelings… it gave me different values and priorities. Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart… I was impressed not by the book's refining effect on my style and literary expression but by the content…love of wisdom is the meaning of the Greek word *philosophia*. This book kindled my love for it… the one thing that delighted me in Cicero's exhortation was the advice 'not to study one particular sect but to love and seek and pursue and hold fast and strongly embrace wisdom itself, wherever found.[78]

Augustine's first steps in what proved to be his intellectual conversion to the Catholic faith were taken in his intellectual conversion from a career-wise secular point of view to an enthusiastic interest in a life of philosophy as a love of wisdom. Yet right at the start of this newfound enthusiasm for philosophy, as this was presented to him by Cicero, Augustine notices something curious.

> One thing alone put a break on my intense enthusiasm – that the name of Christ was not contained in the book. This name … my infant heart had piously drunk in with my mother's milk, and at a deep level I retained in my memory. Any book which lacked this name, however well written or polished or true, could not entirely grip me.[79]

His disappointment in finding no mention of the name of Christ in Cicero's book rather surprises Augustine for at this point of his life he had all but forgotten his childhood faith. Intrigued by this disappointment in not finding the name of Christ in the description of a life of wisdom as this is presented to him by Cicero, Augustine decides to acquire a Bible and begins reading it.

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[78] Augustine, *Conf* III, 7.

[79] Augustine, *Conf* III, 8.

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> I therefore decided to give attention to the holy scriptures and to find out what they were like. And this is what met me… a text lowly to the beginner but, on further reading, of mountainous difficulty. I was not in any state to be able to enter into that, or to bow my head to climb its steps … [but] it seemed to me unworthy in comparison with the dignity of Cicero.[80]

Intellectually, he is unimpressed by much of the content of what he finds in the Bible, and its literary crudeness is off-putting for someone like him – an intellectually proud young man successful in his academic studies and an aspiring student of rhetoric educated in the elegant Latin style of the classics.[81] His twofold disappointment in content and style leads Augustine to conclude that the Bible – and along with the Bible, his childhood faith – cannot provide him with the intellectual wisdom he was now seeking. In retrospect, Augustine reckons that his initial negative reaction to the Bible and the faith it expressed was borne of an intellectual pride in not being able to "bow my head to climb its [the Bible's] steps."

As a young man at this point, Augustine is seeking to make sense of his life intellectually, morally, and emotionally in the midst of university life, its academic and social demands, and the ambiguity he was experiencing in his affective desire to love and be loved. In the midst of these life challenges, Augustine comes to hear of a movement and way of life which claimed to provide the kind of meaning he was seeking. The movement and way of life he comes in contact with is Manichaeism – an intellectual and religious movement which was sweeping through the educated classes of the Roman Empire and in particular in North Africa among the educated elite. Like many of his fellow students (and professors) at the university, Augustine is attracted to a movement which appeared to offer the kind of intellectual, moral,

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[80] Augustine, *Conf* III,9.

[81] Before St. Jerome's revision of the Latin Bible, Augustine and African Catholics in North Africa only had access to the Old Latin Bible composed by second-century missionaries in Italy and Africa was colloquial and in places obscure to the point of being barbaric, cf. Chadwick, *Saint Augustine Confessions*, xiv.

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and emotional guidance he needed. He soon becomes a follower of this Manichean movement and its proposed way of life.

Manichaeism was a philosophy and a religious way of life based on what was claimed to be a true understanding of God and of reality.[82] Founded by Mani, an enigmatic Persian figure who claimed to be *the* prophet of God who reveals to mankind the truth. According to Mani, originally all was Goodness and Light, which he understood in materialistic terms as a kind of primordial material, or stuff. Due to some primordial fall (never explained in detail), this one Light fragmented into countless individuals who took on bodies but retained within themselves a piece of light from the one original Light. Thanks to this primordial fall, the one Light divided into two opposing principles of good and evil, light and darkness, spirit and flesh. God was identified as the original Light and the ultimate principle of good; Satan, the principle of evil. A cosmic struggle between God (Goodness and Light) and Satan (Evil and darkness) ensued. This cosmic struggle is experienced by each human being as a conflict within the spirit and the flesh. Salvation consists in each individual joining in this cosmic struggle between good and evil by identifying himself with his inner light and engaging in battle against the darkness within oneself in resisting the body and its desires. By identifying with their inner light and denying the fleshly desires of the body, individuals, when they die, would be freed from the body and return to God by having their individual inner light absorbed in the one original Light. But this process required from each Manichee the practice of a rigorously ascetic life which, for the inner circle of believers or "the elect," meant a life free from personal possessions and of adhering to strict dietary laws as well as abstinence from all sexual activity. Those who felt themselves incapable of the rigors of such a life could opt instead for a second-best kind of life in which they could marry and carry on in the secular world - not as "elect" but as associates or "helpers" of the elect. These "helpers" had the special task of supporting the Elect financially and by this service

[82] Cf. Chadwick, *Saint Augustine Confessions*, xiv-xv and Christopher Kirwan, "Manicheism," *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Craig, doi: 10.4324/9780415249126-K046-1.

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hoped to themselves become elect at death and in their next life begin their journey as elect back to reabsorption into the Light.

In the condition Augustine found himself, the Manichean creed seemed to make sense to him as offering a very clear vision of reality and a rigorous ascetic program to overcome the vagaries of human desire. In particular, the dualistic world view of the Manichees with its radical separation between good and evil, light and darkness, spirit and flesh must have made emotional if not intellectually sense to a young man who was personally struggling with his own inner conflict between a desire to live a life of wisdom by forgoing worldly ambition and sex and a life of worldly success and the opportunity to love and be loved as occasion might offer. Thinking that this movement offered him the kind of intellectually coherent worldview he needed as well as an ascetic program to deal with his inner conflicts, Augustine decides to become a Manichee. He receives a thorough indoctrination within the Manichean community of adherents at the university. In his enthusiasm to live a life of wisdom without compromise, Augustine initially wants to join himself to the Manichean "elect" in their rigorous life of celibacy and abstention. But his inner conflicts with uncontrolled sexual desire and personal ambition lead him to the conclusion that he cannot live as one of the "elect" and so, reluctantly, very reluctantly he settles instead for a life as a Manichee "helper," a kind of "second best" option in which he could still live a life in pursuit of wisdom as a Manichee without having to practice strict celibacy nor would he have to renounce his personal ambitions. This second-best option, however, never satisfies Augustine, as his deeper desire was to give himself completely to a life dedicated to wisdom and to live in conformity with that wisdom. Yet despite this deep disappointment in his failure to live the Manichean way of life as he wanted, Augustine will continue in this sect for the next ten years of his life.

Augustine's intellectual journey began with his conversion from a secular concern, as a university student, with worldly success and popularity to a concern for a life dedicated to the pursuit of philosophy and the wisdom it promised. His pursuit of wisdom led him to embrace Manicheeism as a way of life, for Manicheeism seemed to offer him the

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wisdom he was seeking as well as a program to live out that wisdom. Yet he is also personally disappointed in not being able to live out the demands of Manicheeism. But he is also becoming dissatisfied with the wisdom the Manichees seemed to be offering him. Despite his personal disappointment and dissatisfaction with Manicheeism, Augustine continued living as a member of this movement for almost the next ten years of his life. In writing his *Confessions*, Augustine looks back and identifies three basic teachings of the Manichees that he initially accepted as consonant with his life as he understood it at the time but which he will discover are false and will prove troublesome to free himself from. The first of these doctrines was that of the fundamental dualism between the spiritual realm of light and the unspiritual realm of darkness. While this dualism seemed to make sense initially as describing his own inner conflict between the spirit and the flesh, he realizes that the radical nature of this dualism will be the basis for radical rejection of fundamental Christian beliefs in God as Creator of all, of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ for the salvation of human beings, and that human beings were created in the image of God. As a Manichee, the Christian belief in God as the Creator of heaven and earth meant that the Christian God had to be directly responsible for the existence of the material universe. As the material is the root of evil for the Manichee, the Christian God as the Creator of the material universe must Himself be evil. Secondly, the Christian belief in the Incarnation of God in Jesus could only mean for a Manichee that not only did God create evil but actually united Himself to evil in taking on human flesh in Jesus Christ. Finally, the Christian belief that flesh-and-blood human beings were created in the image of God could only mean for a Manichee that God in Himself must be flesh and blood, that God Himself was evil. These Manichean criticisms of such basic Christian beliefs shocked Augustine even at the beginning of life as a Manichee, but he did not have the capacity to criticize the Manichean world view and so could find no way of resisting these three Manichean criticisms of Christian belief.

While he stayed on in Carthage after finishing his university studies, Augustine continued to live as a Manichee, though he never gave up his interest in philosophy in general. It will be his continued interest

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in philosophy and what he learns in his study of philosophy that will eventually enable him to challenge his Manichean beliefs.[83] He writes:

> Since I had done much reading in the philosophers and retained this in my memory, I compared some of their teachings with the lengthy fables of the Manichees.… The philosophers' teaching seemed more probable than that of the Manichees… I used to recall many true observations made by [the philosophers] about the world. I particularly noted the rational, mathematical order of things, the order of seasons, the visible evidence of the stars. I compared these with sayings of Mani who wrote much on these matters very copiously and foolishly. I did not notice any rational account of solstices and equinoxes or eclipses of luminaries resembling what I learnt in the books of secular wisdom. Yet I was ordered to believe Mani. But he was not in agreement with the rational explanations which I had verified by calculation and had observed with my own eyes. His account was very different.[84]

As Augustine continued his study of philosophy, especially that of natural philosophy, which impressed him and when he compared the findings of natural philosophy with many Manichean beliefs about nature, he began to entertain doubts about the veracity of the Manichean system as a whole. At this point he hears that Faustus, one of the Manichee luminaries noted for his wisdom, is to visit Carthage in order to give some lectures; Augustine is eager to attend and listen to see if his growing doubts about the Manichean system could be resolved. Augustine tells us:

> For a long time I had eagerly awaited Faustus. When he came, I was delighted by the force and feeling he brought to his discourse and by the fitting language which flowed with facility to clothe his ideas… but I was disappointed that in the public assembly of his audience I was not allowed to put a question, and to share with him

[83] For an analysis of the influence of philosophy on Augustine and his use of philosophy in the *Confessions*, cf. Giovanni Catapano "Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, edited by Tarmo Toom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 191-207.

[84] Augustine, *Conf.* V, 3, 4, 6.

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> the perplexing questions disturbing me, by informal conference and by the give and take of argument. When this became possible, I, together with my close friends, began to engage his attention… when I put forward some problems which troubled me, I quickly discovered him to be ignorant of the liberal arts other than grammar and literature; and his knowledge was of a very conventional kind … after he had clearly showed his lack of training in liberal arts which I had supposed him to be highly qualified, I began to lose all hope that he would be able to analyze and resolve the difficulties that disturbed me…in consequence the enthusiasm I had for the writing of Mani was diminished, and I felt even greater despair of learning from their other teachers after having consulted on many points which disturbed me the man who was particularly distinguished among them.[85]

As he was becoming disillusioned with the Manichean system, Augustine was growing in his appreciation of natural philosophy and its rational methodology in approaching the world, and it was this philosophy that led him to abandon the Manichean system: "I decided I must leave the Manichees, thinking that I should not remain a member of a sect to which I was now preferring certain philosophers."[86]

While his study of natural philosophy was impressing Augustine as a research program in coming to know the world and its study aids him in appreciating the falseness of Manicheeism, Augustine is disappointed with this philosophy as a *wisdom* for it seems to him to lack any apparent interest in the ultimate religious concerns for God and for a relationship with God.

> About the creation they [the natural philosophers] say many fine things that are true; but the truth, the artificer of creation, they do not seek in a devout spirit, and so they fail to find him. Or if they do find him, although knowing God, they do not honor him as God or give thanks.[87]

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[85] Augustine, *Conf* V, 11, 12, 13.

[86] Augustine, *Conf* V, 25.

[87] Augustine, *Conf* V, 4, 5.

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Initially failing to find in natural philosophy the wisdom he was seeking, Augustine turns to another kind of philosophy popularly known at the time as "Academic skepticism."[88]

To be continued in Part II, to appear in the March 2027 issue of Landas.

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[88] Cf. Augustine, *Conf* V, 25.

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