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“If your delight is in souls, love them in God”: Augustine of Hippo, religious identity, and the relational self

No late Roman thinker is more widely disliked than Augustine of Hippo, who has come to serve, for modern readers, as a kind of whipping-boy. He is a figure who can be made to illustrate everything we moderns find suspect about the Western tradition. Who constructed the legacy that would be known to the medieval Church as the doctrine of Original Sin? Augustine. Who gave widespread currency to the idea of predestination – an idea which is often misunderstood as an explicit license for religious bigotry and self-congratulation? Augustine. Who gave intellectual substance to the idea that the fight against heresy could justifiably involve the use of physical violence, thus laying the foundation for the excesses of the medieval inquisition? Augustine. How can we admire such a man? How can we understand why so many readers, over the last fifteen centuries, have remembered him so affectionately?¹

The answer, this essay will argue, lies in Augustine’s idea of the predicament of human self-hood. If he is a monumental figure, his is also monumentally misunderstood. This is, in part, because the idea of the self that was current in Augustine’s day is difficult to imagine from the perspective of post-enlightenment Europe. Our idea of the self draws its myth of origins from late Roman writers like Augustine and Marcus Aurelius, but at the same time incorporates elements of a profound individualism that these writers would have found baffling.

Modern ideas of the self take the discrete individual as a starting point, pointing to roots of a distinctively Western idea of the individual in the ancient philosophical tradition,² and most modern accounts of the history of the self cite Augustine’s extended autobiographical reflection in the *Confessions* as a landmark. This said, many vault from Augustine to Descartes in a trajectory of disembodied philosophical development, and nearly all fail to account for the very different visions of society against which ancient and modern writers considered the philosophic problem of self-hood. There are some valuable exceptions, however. Following his two-volume *Geschichte der Autobiografie in der Antike*, Georg Misch embarked a century ago on three further volumes charting the development of self-depiction in the centuries immediately following Augustine’s death in 430.³ The important developments of the medieval period for the history of the individual have also had their due.⁴ But if the historical emergence of what we might recognize as ‘the individual’ has attracted substantial interest, what came before the now-familiar vision of the self as individual requires equal attention.

On this account, we must restore a figure like Augustine to the unfamiliar mental landscape of late Antiquity, a world in which an idea of the self as a free-standing social atom is noticeably absent. What interested early Christian writers was not what we would call the individual; rather, they were far more interested in the relational self – the self embedded in a network of social reciprocities. Scholars of ancient Christianity have

¹ On the history of reactions to Augustine’s thought, see Mark Vessey, *The demise of the Christian writer and the remaking of ‘Late Antiquity’*: From H.-I. Marrou’s *Saint Augustine* (1938) to Peter Brown’s *Holy Man* (1983), in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6, 3 (1998) 377–411; id., *Opus imperfectum: Augustine and his readers, 426–435 A.D.*, in: *Vigiliae Christianae* 52 (1998) 264–285; James J. O’Donnell, *The authority of Augustine*, in: *Augustinian Studies* 22 (1991) 7–35, at 16; id., *Hearing Confessions: A century of scholarship*, in: *Augustine, Confessions* (ed. James J. O’Donnell, Oxford 1992) xv–xxxii; id., *The next life of Augustine*, in: *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture*, ed. William E. Klingshirn/Mark Vessey (Ann Arbor 1999) 215–231.

² For a recent and useful overview, see Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Oxford 2006).

³ Georg Misch, *Geschichte der Autobiografie in der Antike* (Leipzig/Berlin 1907).

⁴ Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1120* (Toronto/London 1987), with Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley/London 1982).

tended, for the last quarter-century, to draw on the concept of the dyadic self – a term made popular by Bruce Malina and Philip Esler – as a short-hand for reminding one another of the early Christian fascination with collective identity.⁵ It is this relational sense of self that is the starting-point for understanding Augustine on the self in the *saeculum*.

Restoring Augustine to an unfamiliar context is particularly important because we tend to think we know him better than we do. Even if he was unmistakably a man of his time, Augustine has had such a strong effect on the thinking of men and women coming after him, that we often hear them instead of him when we read his words. This is always a danger where a writer's influence reaches beyond the ivory tower, and beyond the small clutch of historians who are in a position to measure his words against the context within which he wrote. More than anything, it is difficult to recognize that while his words have an 'old', traditional sound for modern readers, they had a new, vibrant sound when he wrote them. It is difficult to hear that fourth-century sound. This is particularly important because many of his ideas were re-worked by later writers, John Calvin among them, and it takes a careful ear to hear Augustine against the deafening white noise of his later imitators. Augustine's voice may perhaps find more sympathetic hearers in the harsher conditions of the new millennium than it did in the more indulgent years of the late twentieth century.⁶

Augustine is known, theologically, as the man who gave western Christianity its idea of Original Sin, and this is the point on which he is most frequently – and profoundly – misunderstood. His thinking on this point deserves to be explained and defined, and even perhaps defended. For Augustine, the story of Adam and Eve – or of the Fall of Man – was fundamentally a story about knowledge. When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, this was not for Augustine a Freudian allegory about sex. Rather, it was an intellectual tragedy, in which humankind lost its union with the mind and will of God, and embarked on the painful, existential trajectory of consciousness as we know it. Augustine's starting point was not an abstract notion of divine vengeance or punishment, but rather the concrete fact of what he experienced himself and saw in the experience of others: his deduction was that there is a fault line which not only divides our wills from innocent union with the will of God, but even often divides us from our own best selves. That humanity was suffering from a divine punishment was Augustine's logical inference from what he saw around him.⁷

The dislocation of the will is fundamentally a problem of the integration of the individual in history, for Augustine's idea of the Fall of Man hangs in turn on his notion of the *saeculum*, the time-bound dispensation within which we live, an idea explained with great clarity just over thirty years ago by the historian Robert Markus.⁸ The dislocation of the will could be seen, Augustine argued, in the fact that human persons have no real ability to control the effect of their actions, given the unpredictable course of human events. Even the most honest intention, enacted with integrity, can have devastating consequences if its context is known only partially. And because the chain of contingency is so complex and so far-reaching, a person can never have certainty that his or her efforts have been entirely to the good. Augustine argued that within the *saeculum* not only can we never fully know others, but we can not even know ourselves. This is particularly true in that we can never know the real social meaning of our actions. Events are aligned in time in a linear sequence, yet cause and effect can not be accounted for straightforwardly, because of the multiplicity of threads of inter-connection which converge on a given event in historical sequence, with another multiplicity of threads of effect spins off after the fact, and feeds into myriad further patterns in ways that can not be predicted. What all this boils down to is that however deeply felt our intent to do good, as human beings we can never know what final outcome our actions will have, in part because the consequences reach infinitely into the future.

⁵ See, for example, Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta 1981) 51–70, id./Jerome H. Neyrey, *First-century personality: Dyadic, not individual*, in: *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody-MA 1991) 67–96; Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in their Social Worlds: Social-scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (London 1994).

⁶ This said, efforts to understand and even 'rehabilitate' Augustine were never lacking across the twentieth century, from Hannah Arendt's 1918 doctoral dissertation, *Love and Saint Augustine* (ed. and trans. J. Vecchiarelli Scott/Judith Stark, Chicago 1996), to Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame-Indiana 1995).

⁷ Kate Cooper/Conrad Leyser, *The gender of grace: Impotence, servitude and manliness in the fifth-century west*, in: *Gender & History* 12, 3 (2000) 536–551, building on Peter Brown, *Sexuality and society in the fifth century A.D.: Augustine and Julian of Eclanum*, in: *Tria Corda. Scritti in onore di Arnaldo Momigliano*, ed. Emilio Gabba (Como 1983) 49–70.

⁸ Robert A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Saint Augustine* (Cambridge 1970/21988).

Viewed positively, this could be a way of talking about the infinite potential in each human act. But Augustine lived through a period of bloody social unrest in North Africa, and he was concerned about the fact that as a bishop he had to accept responsibility for the well-being of his city, without any certainty about whether he could fulfill, or even in retrospect any certainty about whether he had fulfilled, this responsibility successfully.⁹ For Augustine, moral anxiety was an unavoidable companion to uncertainty.

Augustine’s writings as they have come down to us are almost entirely the product of his three decades as a bishop in a troubled provincial port, beginning in 395.¹⁰ During a visit to Hippo Regius (modern Annaba), a port city in the Roman province of Numidia, now eastern Algeria, in 391, Augustine found himself unexpectedly ordained priest by the aging Greek bishop Valerius, and Valerius designated Augustine as his successor in 395, some time before his own death. Once one of the royal cities of the Numidian kings, Hippo in the 390s was a Donatist city, and repeatedly the scene of religious violence. The Catholic minority were for the most part aligned with Roman authority and international networks of trade and influence. These differences came to a head in 398, when the north African Chieftain Gildo led a revolt against Roman rule. The failure of the revolt brought opportunities to the Catholics, who had been seen to show greater loyalty to Rome, but it by no means settled the religious tensions of the North African cities.¹¹ In 431, within months of Augustine’s death, Hippo would become the capital city of the Vandal Kingdom of Africa (until 439 when the Vandals won Carthage), and the Arian Vandals would bring along with them yet another version of Christianity along with yet another layer of violent upheaval.

Augustine’s experience as a bishop gave shape to his idea of the scope of human agency. He has sometimes been seen by moderns as having been obsessed psychologically with the issue of control, but this is an almost perfectly inverted understanding of his message. It would be far more accurate to say that Augustine was disturbed by, and deeply interested in, the undisputed fact that control, and even self-control, is beyond human reach. In some ways, his mid twentieth-century readers have not been bettered as guides to what was really important to Augustine’s thinking. In his Gifford Lectures of 1939, for example, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr re-christened Augustine’s doctrine of Original Sin with the evocative phrase ‘the human condition’.¹²

One twentieth-century reader of Augustine on whose insight we may usefully draw is another son of what is now Algeria, Albert Camus, writing in the years leading up to the twentieth-century Algerian Revolution (1956–1962). It is beyond the scope of this essay to trace Augustine’s far-reaching influence on Camus intertextually;¹³ instead, we will limit ourselves here to using Camus as a lens through which to perceive more clearly Augustine’s idea of the human condition. Augustine would have recognized Camus’s idea of the ‘homme absurde’, the man who acts in the face of circumstances whose logical consequence could reasonably be immobilizing despair. It might be impious to suggest that we should compare the world of Augustine’s Confessions to that of Camus’ *L’Étranger*, but there might be some interest in looking at how one narrator, Augustine, seeks an otherworldly narrative and spiritual resolution to the alienation of his youth, while his counterpart Meursault turns persistently away from meaning, resolution, or closure. Perhaps more telling would be to set *The City of God* beside *La Peste*. In his tale of the plague’s arrival in the Algerian coastal town of Oran (some four hundred miles west of Augustine’s own town on the same coast), Camus examines corruption and decency in the face of powerlessness, concluding that the moral imperative to act is no less urgent where one can not be certain of the outcome.

⁹ See Claude Lepelley, The perception of late Roman Africa, from decolonization to the re-appraisal of Late Antiquity, in: *The Past Before Us: The Challenge of New Historiographie of Late Antiquity*, ed. Richard Lim/Carole Straw (Bibliothèque de l’Antiquité Tardive 6, Turnhout/Paris 2005) 25–32. On religious coercion, see Peter Brown, St. Augustine’s attitude to religious coercion, in: *Journal of Roman Studies* 54 (1964) 107–116; id., Religious dissent in the later Roman empire: The case of North Africa, in: *History* 46 (1961) 83–101; Robert A. Markus, Christianity and dissent in Roman North Africa, in: *Schism, Heresy, and Religious Protest*, ed. Derek Baker (Studies in Church History 9, Cambridge 1972) 21–36; Gillian Clark, Rod, line and net: Augustine on the limits of diversity, in: *Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Kate Cooper/Jeremy Gregory (Studies in Church History 43, Woodbridge 2007) 80–99; and ead., Desires of the hangman: Augustine on legitimised violence, in: *Violence in Late Antiquity*, ed. Hale A. Drake (Aldershot 2006) 137–146.

¹⁰ Chapter 15: The Lost Future, of Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London 2000) offers a vivid way into Augustine’s development between his conversion in 386 and his taking up episcopal office in 397.

¹¹ On the situation in north Africa, see James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Sinner or Saint? A New Biography* (London 2005) 209–243.

¹² *The Nature and Destiny of Man: a Christian Interpretation*, 2 vols. (London 1943).

¹³ See Paul Archambault, *Augustin et Camus*, in: *Recherches augustiniennes* 6 (1969) 194–221.

La Peste offers a useful counter-point to Augustine's tale of two cities, the City of God and the Earthly City. We should remember here that for Augustine the distinction between the City of God and the Earthly City was by no means to be defined as being between the Church, as it exists here on earth, and a notional 'non-Church'. Rather, both were eschatological communities: his Earthly City was to be populated by those who, at the end of time, were discovered to have turned away from God, while his City of God was the eschatological Church, an institution in the dimension of eternity whose membership can not be predicted from what we know here on earth – and certainly not from membership in any earthly institution. Augustine's most devastating insight was that while we human beings dwell as pilgrims in the medium of time, none of us can know our status in the Two Cities, just as we can never know the final meaning of our actions here on earth.

For Augustine, to try to know where one stood in respect of the Two Cities was to miss the point. It showed not merely a lack of humility in the face of God, but also a disturbing keenness to cause distress to others by preening oneself on presumed achievements. What worried Augustine most was the social fact, already well-established in his day, that a Christian, or a group of Christians, may become so involved in the pursuit of one virtue or another that the end result is not virtue at all but glaring self-involvement. As the impulse to charity and compassion wanes, the cravings of self-importance wax, and the wages of Pride come to out-weigh whatever narrow merit has been attained. This is why he argued so passionately that human beings should put all our trust in God's grace, rather than in the self, accepting, in our ignorance and weakness, the love which God expresses in his act of knowing.

Augustine was born not too long after the death of Constantine (the dates are 354 and 337 respectively). In the second decade of the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine chose Christianity to benefit from special legislation. He treated its adherents preferentially and built monumental basilicas on imperial property – within his lifetime Christianity had been transformed from the religion of an ecstatic fringe to the religion of heads of state. But the Christianity to which Augustine converted still held an ambiguous place as only one of a variety of spiritual and philosophical identities available to a young man on the rise, and there was some tension between the philosophical Christianity of the young Augustine and the liturgy of the emerging state Church. In the third century, the spread of Christianity in the Roman world was part of a general fascination with curious Eastern religions in a sophisticated and cosmopolitan international culture. Dodds and others have argued that the third century saw a flowering of religious and philosophical diversity, and a lively concern in all quarters with the inner human being and the transcendent nature of the soul.¹⁴ The religious options spread like wildfire. Arnaldo Momigliano likened that spread to the spread of Eastern religions in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Outsider status had led to early Christian ways of thinking about the self which sought to make it possible for a human being to withdraw from participation in one community, and take up membership in another, without querying the more fundamental validity of the relational model of self-hood. Particularly important here was an identity strategy already well established in the writings of Paul, who suggested that social affiliations based on *ethnos* – 'membership in a people' – could be replaced by a new relational matrix, that of the *ekklesia*.¹⁵ A similar tension hovered over the problem of the biological family.¹⁶ Frequently, members of a family would be divided among a number of religions or philosophies. Augustine himself was born to a Catholic mother and a father who would be convinced to receive baptism through the witness of his wife: this was a fairly normal mid-fourth-century family.¹⁷ Later Christian writers would try to resolve the tension between the earthly family and the family of faith, but the strategy of substituting *ekklesia* for *ethnos* would prove invaluable to early medieval rulers.¹⁸

¹⁴ Eric R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge 1965).

¹⁵ See, for example, Philip F. Esler, Paul's contestation of Israel's (ethnic) memory of Abraham in Galatians 3, in: *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36 (2006) 23–34.

¹⁶ Carolyn Osiek, The family in early christianity: 'Family values' revisited, in: *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 (1996) 1–24.

¹⁷ For a relational model of conversion, see Kate Cooper, *Ventriloquism and the miraculous: Conversion, preaching, and the martyr exemplum in Late Antiquity*, in: *Signs, Wonders, and Miracles*, ed. Kate Cooper/Jeremy Gregory (Studies in Church History 41, Woodbridge 2005) 22–45.

¹⁸ See, for example, Mayke de Jong, *Ecclesia: early medieval appropriations and adaptations*, forthcoming in another volume of this series.

If the ancient self was relational, it was also rhetorical. The self, as we can discover it, was created in texts, a narrative construction born of retrospection. If historians must always be aware of the problem of representation in our sources, this mode of study is nowhere more rewarding than in the study of early Christian strategies of narrative self-examination and self-justification, a tradition that can be traced back, via the narratives of martyrs and visionaries such as Ignatius and Perpetua, to the first-century writings of the apostle Paul. The retrospective approach to the self has received particularly insightful treatment where Augustine is concerned, a point to which we will return.¹⁹ In any social history of the discursive appeal to ‘inwardness’ through the early Middle Ages, the contribution of Augustine will be seen to be central.

If Augustine’s contribution was not to have invented the modern individual through the narrative of his conversion in the *Confessions*, what was it? Early Christian literature is not interested in the intellectual or psychological development of its protagonists – it is not interested in their childhoods, their pasts – rather, it is interested in the moment of commitment and the moment of death. The technical meaning of the word *conversio*, ‘conversion’, in Augustine’s day was not a change in belief; implied, rather, was a change in life, *conversio morum*. One converted to a philosophical school, which meant a different set of habits, acquaintances, and actions. Within Christianity, one ‘came to belief’ when one entered the faith, whereas a ‘conversion’ meant a conversion to monasticism. Augustine’s tale of his own conversion describes a process over time, a process which has a long, arduous follow-up after the crucial turning point. But it is a story that changed repeatedly in Augustine’s understanding – and in his telling – during the first decade or so after it happened.²⁰

Augustine’s moment of religious commitment took place at the end of a decade of upwardly mobile job-related travel – his twenties – in which he lived in the cosmopolitan centres of Rome, Carthage, and Milan. The *Confessions* were written ten years later, not only after his conversion at the age of thirty-one and return to Africa, but also after his succession as Bishop of Hippo.²¹ From what he knows to be the perspective of having found a city, and a role, in which he will spend the rest of his life, he describes the earlier period of searching as a period of encounters with ideas, and, equally importantly, of encounters with people. As he re-casts those encounters, he sees them as progressions toward the hidden truth contained in the Christian scriptures.

The story of Augustine’s life is a progression, as he tells it, from one stage of knowledge to another, and always in search of a further truth. There is a sense of urgency about this search as he tells it. As a young man, he lives out fully the religious diversity of his day: instead of experiencing a single conversion, Augustine experiences a number of conversions. His first conversion, as an eighteen-year-old student of rhetoric at Carthage, is the classical ‘conversion to philosophy’. This takes place on his first reading of Cicero’s *Hortensius*, a manual on rhetorical style. He tells us that instead of imparting to him a higher rhetorical skill, it inflamed him with a longing for wisdom (III, 4). Soon after, still at Carthage, he becomes interested in the wisdom of the Manichees, a Persian doctrine of the origin of good and evil, and begins to associate with its adherents. It is nearly ten years later that he finally meets the great Manichaean teacher Faustus of Milevis, and is so disillusioned with Faustus’ philosophical abilities that he abandons Manichaeism. He moves to Rome and sets up shop as a professor of rhetoric, and takes a provisional interest in the philosophical teachings of skepticism. The next year he moves to Milan, which has replaced Rome at this period as the imperial city of Italy, to accept a professorship in rhetoric. At Milan, the next three years were characterized by an increasing interest in Neo-Platonism and in Christianity. His eventual conversion to Christianity is intimately linked to his conversion to Neo-Platonism.

The most important aspect of Augustine’s life in Milan, as he tells of it, is his contact with Ambrose, the city’s Catholic bishop. In Ambrose, for the first time, he finds a teacher who is able to explain the meaning of the Christian scriptures in a language appropriate to a late fourth-century intellectual. Augustine had been attracted to Christian teaching for years, but he was disturbed by a feeling that either the Bible doesn’t make a great deal of sense, or else it requires a kind of interpretation beyond what the naked eye can give, in order to reveal its meaning. For Augustine, Ambrose was the man with the hermeneutical key. Here, finally, was an

¹⁹ Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, *Caro salutis cardo*: Shaping the person in early Christian thought, in: *History of Religions* 30 (1990) 25–50, reprinted in id., *Barbarian Philosophy: The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity* (Tübingen 1999).

²⁰ Paula Fredriksen, Paul and Augustine: Conversion narratives, orthodox traditions, and the retrospective self, in: *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986) 3–34.

²¹ On the circumstances of the writing of the *Confessions*, see the introduction to O’Donnell’s edition of the *Confessions* (Oxford 1992) (i) xli–li.

authoritative teacher, a man whom he could trust to guide his mind as well as his heart. Augustine remembered his discovery of Ambrose as a moment of the purest relief. He had been nagged by a discrepancy between his heart and his intellect for years and years, between the Catholicism of his childhood and the philosophical questions of his formal education. Well before the conversion in the garden, Augustine had found in Ambrose's teaching, he tells us, a way to integrate the longings of his heart with the capacities of his mind.

In a sense, the writing of the *Confessions* is most concerned with this question of authoritative teaching. As Augustine tells the story of his own conversion, he follows the course of the battle between ignorance and revelation in one human soul, and thus he explores the significance of the life he has chosen by his conversion to Christianity. His understanding of the nature of human flesh and of human relationships, the nature of reason, the nature of evil and the nature of God, seem calculated to explain the life-and-death importance of exegesis, preaching, and the exercise of ecclesial authority, which have come to be Augustine's own vocation as a bishop.

Augustine describes his conversion as an intellectual process, as a gradual revelation of the meaning of the Christian scriptures. As a Neo-Platonic philosopher, he could cast his confessions in the form of a prayer to an unknown God, a God existing entirely beyond the human sphere in such a way that only a sustained and committed inquiry after enlightenment could hope to find that God's image reflected in the very soul of the seeker. What Augustine brings to this intellectual quest is an acutely personal story of himself as a seeker. He is not only telling the abstract story of the movement of a soul towards the knowledge of God, and the movement of a heart towards its goal of divine love. He wants just as much to tell the story of the idiosyncratic body and personality attached to the same heart and soul.

For Augustine, the story of the human being in his body, in his idiosyncratic personality and place and time, is charged with extraordinary significance. The daily self, the self of habit, is the medium through which the soul has to pull as it makes its way toward God, and it is the development of that self on which the hope of the whole spiritual process rides. What is perhaps most frightening of all for Augustine is the sense in which that soul is at hazard, at the mercy of the path which the body and personality find through life. But if the body is vulnerable to harm and to temptation, it is by no means in itself a force for evil. The body and personality are lost in the maze of the world; if they do not reach the right sign-posts the soul may never find the direction it needs in its turning inward, toward God.

An aspect here that has rightly received attention is Augustine's emphasis on his experience as a son.²² It is the classic case of the provincial boy, who by dint of education and the calling in of favours from his father's friends, is able to find a toe-hold in the ladder of appointment to public office, leading to the chair of Rhetoric in Milan in the years when the emperor's residence was there.²³ As Augustine tells the story, his childhood and youth are characterized by frustration, and hopelessness at not finding guidance in the paths of righteousness. Think, for example, of his disappointment at his parents' failure to baptise him during a childhood illness (I, 11), at their failure to insist that he marry during his student years (II, 2), at finding the Manichaean Faustus to be a pupil rather than a teacher (V, 6); or again of his relief at finding in Ambrose's preaching an explanation of the hidden meaning of the scriptures (VI, 4) whose seeming lack of eloquence had so disappointed him as a young man (III, 5).

There is a sense here of something tragically, irrevocably lost to the young Augustine, a smoother and more wholesome life which might have been possible had he found the path to safety earlier on. As much as he praises his mother throughout the *Confessions*, his experience of her is as someone whose good intentions did not carry enough authority to save him from himself. He resents this more than he admits. Augustine interprets his chequered past not as a courageous exploration of a variety of spiritual modes, but rather as the violent, bereft thrashing of a soul trying to find purchase.

One of the most painful aspects of this thrashing, as he looks back on these events from his monastery in middle age, is his relationship with women. Augustine does torment himself about sins of the flesh, and it may

²² Brent D. Shaw, *The family in Late Antiquity: The experience of Augustine*, in: *Past & Present* 115 (1987) 3–51; Catherine Conybeare, *The Irrational Augustine* (Oxford 2005); see also Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia 2004) 76–86.

²³ Robert A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1988), with Kate Cooper, *The Fall of the Roman Household* (Cambridge 2007), on 'Fathers and Sons', *ibid.* 23–30.

be difficult for us to recognise that these chidings are not empty morality. They are the regrets of a passionate man who not only could not control his body, but even worse, could not control his heart. A single woman stands behind much of Augustine’s anguish in the Confessions. This was the woman who lived with him from his first years in Carthage through his professorship in Milan. We know very little about her. We know from the Confessions that they were not legally married, which implies a substantial disparity in social status between the two. She could have been a slave bought for the purpose of concubinage. It was typical for a young man of high ambitions in the late Roman world to hold off marrying until he had made a name for himself, in the hope of being able to attract the interest of a father-in-law with property and social standing in the meantime. This in fact was the case of Augustine; his conversion took place during the waiting period of his engagement to a wealthy young woman two years under the marriage age, which means she must have been around ten. Concubinage before marriage was considered a legitimate form of sexual activity for an unmarried man of ambition in that it was respectable and monogamous; however, the formal repudiation of the concubine at the time of engagement was an event whose emotional consequences Augustine had not reckoned on. When he tells us about the departure for Africa of his companion of thirteen years, the mother of his son, he tells us that “this was a blow which crushed my heart to bleeding, because I loved her dearly.”²⁴ As he describes her heart-wrenchingly stoic behavior in the event, we are given to understand that she was a baptised Catholic herself, and we are made to dwell on the contrast between the warm domestic influence of modest Catholic virtue and the tragic consequences of worldly ambition.

When Augustine talks about God, he is talking about something distinct from, but at the same time illuminating the losses and cravings of his individual experience. Augustine asserts that the nature of human flesh is different from the nature of God, but the difference should not be understood as a good-evil polarity. He has turned away from the Manichean suspicion that what is created is evil. The nature of God is not a different kind of substance than that which is created. Rather, Augustine sees God as the “Light that never changes” that is seen upon entering “into the depths of the soul”. The Light is Eternity, and “it was above me because it was itself the Light that made me, and I was below it because I was made by it.”²⁵ We are to reach that light through Christ, the one who “departed from our sight, so that we should turn to our hearts and find him there.”²⁶ We can never truly know our own soul until we come in contact with that light. For Augustine, things change as you go deeper into them.

This is evident in his view of human relationships. He explains human friendship as “a delightful bond”, unless “if we are too much tempted by them we abandon those higher and better things, your truth, your law, and you yourself, O Lord our God.”²⁷ To love without seeing the love as part of our connection to God is to betray the eternal, deeper meaning of love for a superficial, transient experience. Only those who love in God “will never lose those who are dear to them, for they love them in one who is never lost.”²⁸ Augustine’s way of handling to the persistent reality of human loss is to try to re-invent human relationships outside the dimension of time. To the degree that we can understand human love as part of something timeless, we can cope with its impermanence.

If he seems to harp on the importance of putting friendships into perspective, it is important to remember that Augustine was not a cool, disciplined, solitary man. Rather, he was passionate and passionately social. Everything he did, he seemed to do in a group. He even seems to take the group context for granted – witness his surprise at Ambrose, who reads to himself rather than aloud (VI, 3). Augustine blames himself for having loved his closest friend “as though he would never die” (IV, 6). Here we must bear in mind that by the time Augustine completes the Confessions (sometime between 397 and 401), he has lost not only this friend of his youth (376) but also his mother (d. 387), his son (d. 390), and his friend Nebridius (d. 390), as well as having been separated from his son’s mother (385 or 386). Augustine’s response to projection theories of religion

²⁴ Augustine, Confessions VI, 15, ed. O’Donnell (i) 71: *interea mea peccata multiplicabantur, et avulsa a latere meo tamquam impedimento coniugii cum qua cubare solitus eram, cor, ubi adhaerebat, concisum et vulneratum mihi erat et trahebat sanguinem.*

²⁵ Augustine, Confessions VII, 10, ed. O’Donnell (i) 82: *sed superior, quia ipsa fecit me, et ego inferior, quia factus ab ea.*

²⁶ Augustine, Confessions IV, 12, ed. O’Donnell (i) 40: *et discessit ab oculis, ut redeamus ad cor et inueniamus eum.*

²⁷ Augustine, Confessions II, 5, ed. O’Donnell (i) 19: *propter universa haec atque huius modi peccatum admittitur, dum immoderata in ista inclinatione, cum extrema bona sint, meliora et summa deseruntur, tu, domine deus noster, et ueritas tua et lex tua.*

²⁸ Augustine, Confessions IV, 9, ed. O’Donnell (i) 38: *solus enim nullum carum amittit, cui omnes in illo cari sunt qui non amittitur.*

would be to turn it on its head. He would argue that in fact, we project onto human beings that love which in fact originates in God.

In thinking about conversion, too, Augustine has his eye on the clock. Conversion is not merely the conversion of the mind or of the heart, but transformation of the everyday yearnings and actions which make up our identity over time. Habit and a lack of clear teaching are the two most dangerous obstacles to what he calls conversion: the initiation of a new way of life. Augustine clearly sees his role as a bishop as useful precisely in that he can chart these obstacles for others. He is trying to make clear what is life and how to reach it, hoping to short-cut the aimless wanderings of others, lost on paths that led nowhere in his own wanderings. For Augustine, conversion is, to begin with, a process of learning which is the right goal, and then a life-long process of bearing that goal in mind against the force of disorienting, disordering habit.

When Augustine talks passionately about authority, we are again likely to misunderstand the reason behind his emphasis. Authority is a crucial issue for Augustine not because it is wrong to ask questions, but “because we were too weak to discover the truth by reasoning alone and therefore needed the authority of the sacred writings.”²⁹ Augustine is painfully aware of human weakness. He has lost so much; he has so much to regret; he wishes he had known better. Authority is a fragile protection against error more painful to the one who errs than to anyone else (I, 6). The one who errs is lost, hopeless; authority can be a beacon of *salus*, safety – often misunderstood when translated as ‘salvation’.

This splintering of the will caused by habit is, for Augustine, the reason he cannot tell a tale of conversion as a single moment of illumination, a peak experience followed by perfect resolution. Disorder and a sense of being ‘lost’ characterize evil for Augustine just as they do error. Evil is not an entity separate from good and opposed to it (VII, 12); it seems rather to be a case of good at variance with itself, somehow gone out of alignment (VII, 13). The same is true of the will: there are not two principles at work in a human being, one good and one evil, but rather there is a single whole will which can be splintered by the force of habit or by conflict of interest (VIII, 9 and 10).

The reason Augustine is forced to depart from the story with the happy ending, and dig deeply into the grit of human experience, is his keen sense of the strength of habit. Habit, he argues, is overwhelmingly important to human beings, because it is an inverted reflection of the human need to participate in the eternal. As he discusses his conversion, before and after, he shows us how the desire for here-and-now stability has subverted his acceptance of the stability of timelessness. On the brink of his conversion, he tells us, “habit was too strong for me when it asked, ‘Do you think you can live without these things?’”³⁰ “Why do you still choose to travel by this hard and arduous path?” he asks his readers. But the arduous path is, paradoxically, the path of the easy and the familiar. Ultimately, it is not easy at all. “There is no rest to be found where you seek it. In the land of death, you try to find a happy life: it is not there. How can life be happy where there is no life at all?”³¹

The early Middle Ages were an age of ‘conversion’, when individuals and whole peoples changed religious affiliation in so many different contexts that no single paradigm of religious identity can account for them all. What we have suggested here is that Augustine contributed a set of texts and textual strategies that contributed to a wider Christian discursive shift, making it possible for a human being to withdraw from participation in one community and take up membership in another – all without querying the validity of what we have called the relational model of selfhood. If we are to take an historically accurate measure of Augustine’s thinking on the individual, we must focus on what he said about human relationships and human community. For Augustine, the human need for an identity that is fundamentally relational, and the human condition of boundedness in history, are two sides of the same coin. Perhaps for this reason his legacy to the early Middle Ages would be never cease to be influential, but at the same time it would never cease, as often as not, to be misunderstood.

²⁹ Augustine, Confessions VI, 5, ed. O’Donnell (i) 62: *cum essemus infirmi ad inveniendam liquida rationem veritatem et ob hoc nobis opus esset auctoritate sanctorum litterarum.*

³⁰ Augustine, Confessions VIII, 11, ed. O’Donnell (i) 100: *tardabant tamen cunctantem me abripere atque excutere ab eis et transilire quo uocabar; cum diceret mihi consuetudo uiolenta: “putasne sine istis poteris?”.*

³¹ Augustine, Confessions VI, 5, ed. O’Donnell (i) 40: *non est requies, ubi quaeritis eam. quaerite quod quaeritis, sed ibi non est ubi quaeritis. beatam uitam quaeritis in regione mortis: non est illic. quomodo enim beata vita, ubi nec vita?*