

Augustine's Hermeneutics: How to Read the *Confessions*

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Whether we like it or not, we must deal with texts. When a text contains specific hermeneutic principles instructing the reader how to interpret it, it seems that these principles should be examined closely and should be given priority, when interpreting that text, over other, perhaps conflicting, hermeneutic principles. In such a case, the question of a hermeneutic circle arises: how can the reader approach the text in order to learn how to interpret it appropriately without first knowing how to interpret what one finds?

The *Confessions* is such a text, and Augustine's answer to this question would be that a faith that is motivated by charity is needed in order to transcend this gap between the author and reader, this severance whose source can be traced back to humanity's original separation from God. The result of this original separation, this Fall, is the splitting apart of the members of a true, Christian community, a group of individuals bound together under God by mutual charity and love.

While this paper does not deal with the hermeneutic circle, *per se*, it does examine Augustine's guidelines for correctly interpreting Scripture and suggests that these same hermeneutic principles can be applied to the *Confessions* itself. This is done not for the sake of mere curiosity, although it is interesting to apply a text's hermeneutics to itself, but because Augustine implies that we should (XII.31; XII.26).¹ Because I apply the *Confessions'* hermeneutics to the *Confessions*, this paper restricts itself to this work alone, referring to Augustine's other writings only rarely.

Since the *Confessions* calls for an openness to a plurality of interpretations, and because this paper applies these hermeneutic principles to the work itself, it is important to see the *Confessions* from various perspectives. In section I, three such approaches to the *Confessions* are presented: the theological, the spiritual, and the historical. From the "theological" perspective, one may ob-

serve Augustine's return from an egoistic involvement with worldly, temporary distractions back to the completeness and wholeness found in his one, eternal Origin. The *Confessions* may also be seen as a "spiritual" exercise through which Augustine is healed and forgiven of his sins by confessing them to God. It is important to note that, since the pear theft can function in the *Confessions* as the paradigmatic sin, one in which the group of young thieves mimics and shadows the Triune community, the spiritual exercise of redemptive confession is inherently more than a solitary exercise. While it is personal, and while God alone redeems and forgives, Augustine's confession to God -- and to the reader -- can be seen as his longing for the ideal community that sin has shattered and destroyed. Finally, one may examine the "historical" reasons why Augustine wrote the *Confessions*, for whom it was intended, and how it was read or heard. Whereas the "theological" and "spiritual" approaches require no more than an analysis of textual evidence, this third approach depends upon the findings of historical research and would proceed according to the appropriate methods of historiography.

Section II begins by looking at Augustine's Scriptural hermeneutics. An acceptable interpretation of Scripture, he says, will recognize the difference between the author's intended meaning and the truth of the message, attempt to access the author's original meaning while at the same time admitting the difficulty (if not impossibility) of doing so, apply the principle of charity (*caritas*) by remaining open to a plurality of possible interpretations, and be consistent with the letter of the text, as well as with the "Inner Light". After explaining these principles, I apply them to the *Confessions* by analyzing the passages wherein Augustine addresses his readers directly or indirectly, whether they are believers, unbelievers, or both.

In section III, I claim that whenever Augustine addresses the reader as a believer, he does so in an attempt to create a true community united under God and founded upon the principle of charity. Indeed, here the findings of the historical, theological, and spiritual approaches converge: Augustine's historically-verifiable actions are his attempts to find true fellowship which, grounded in a theological understanding of an eternal, forgiving, loving God,

would help heal his present spiritual state of “misery” through charitable interaction (X.33).

I

The characterization of the *Confessions* from the “theological” point of view will be brief. Louis Mackey has persuasively interpreted the *Confessions* as a self-conscious attempt to free itself from the constraints of temporal autobiography in order to land itself in the eternal realm of theology where the Word reigns.² The *Confessions*, he says, traverses the “meanwhile” between the narrative of history and the discourse of eternity, always trying to reach the latter, yet failing before it ever gets started. The *Confessions*, like Augustine, has become a problem unto itself (X.33): how is a dialogue with God even possible?

The *Confessions* begins with Augustine praying to God for guidance as he searches for Him. Book I opens with a recitation of Psalm 145:3: “Can any praise be worthy of the Lord’s majesty?” (I.1). It is the nature of the creature to seek and praise his Creator: “Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you” (I.1). Echoing Meno, Augustine raises the problem of how a man can pray to God for help when he does not know God, and how he could know God without praying to Him for guidance. Augustine solves the problem by doing both, i.e., by confessing his faith and seeking knowledge of God through prayer: “I shall look for you, Lord, by praying to you and as I pray I shall believe in you, because we have had preachers to tell us about you. It is my faith that calls to you, Lord...” (I.1).

Augustine then recounts the events of his life, starting with his conception and beginning Book X in present time (skipping the decade after Monica’s death in Book IX), at which point he begins to go “backwards” in time, toward the beginning of time and toward his true Beginning. Augustine explores memory (Book X), then time itself (Book XI), then creation and the Creator himself (Books XII and XIII).³ The *Confessions* is, among other things, the story of Augustine’s journey from his beginnings in childhood sin to the mystical union with God he shares with Monica in Book IX. He both begins and ends the *Confessions* with words about the

Word, his Creator. Furthermore, the Creator is present throughout the entire book. God is the backdrop against which the events of his life are interpreted. God gives meaning to the people and places, the deeds and actions, the triumphs and tribulations of Augustine's life. For Augustine, there is no place or time not inhabited by the presence of God. Of course, God is not "in" any time or place. "What place is there in me to which my God can come, what place that can receive the God who made heaven and earth?" (I.2). Nevertheless, God is present throughout Augustine's life and throughout the entire *Confessions*. He is the Listener to whom the *Confessions* is spoken.

The "spiritual" perspective sees Augustine absolved of his sins as he confesses them to God. It is therefore inextricably connected to the "theological" progression described above. Augustine is not redeemed by himself, nor by the reader (although the charity of others is important), but by God. In recounting his life, Augustine does not tell us exclusively about his successes and triumphs, say, as a popular rhetoric teacher at Thagaste. Rather, Augustine reveals his trials and failures, beginning with his childhood and ending in his present, "miserable" state in Book X. While Augustine confesses many sins, e.g. his sexual habits (II.2), sensual indulgences (X.30), futile curiosity (X.35), and pride (X.35), I will take as exemplary the theft of the pears in Book II.

The pear theft raises the epistemological problem for Augustine of how one can ever know his past. "If the crime of theft which I committed that night as a boy of sixteen were a living thing, I could speak to it and ask what it was that, to my shame, I loved in it" (II.6). The epistemological problem of the past is linked to the ontology of the past. Because the crime is not a "living thing", it cannot be addressed in order to know what motivated it. Augustine solves this apparent problem, however, by showing that the crime is still in his memory. "My God, I lay all this before you, for it is still alive in my memory" (II.9). By remembering what he felt at the time, he can answer: "And now, O Lord my God, now that I ask what pleasure I had in that theft, I find that it had no beauty to attract me" (II.6). Augustine stole the pears for no other reason than to delight in evil itself. He later admits, however, that his peers' enticements were also instrumental in his stealing the fruit;

had they been absent, he probably would not have committed the crime (II.8). Augustine was also attracted by the assertion of the liberty of his will which the act embodied, a false liberty, he would add, which only mimicked God's true liberty (II.6). Ultimately, the crime is meant to represent evil for evil's sake, a thrill that is shared within a false, privative community of fellow sinners: "But as it was not the fruit that gave me pleasure, I must have got it from the crime itself, from the thrill of having partners in sin" (II.8).⁴

Augustine says that he is able to recall his crime without fear because God has already forgiven him (II.7). However, it is also because he recalls the crime that Augustine is forgiven, in the sense that he feels healed by telling the story.⁵ This does not mean that God, for Augustine, can only forgive him after he remembers his sin. Since God forgives sins Augustine never even committed (II.7), surely God forgives sins -- in the "theological" sense -- before Augustine confesses them. The point is that Augustine himself -- in the "spiritual" sense -- comes to feel redeemed by recounting his sin: "talking through" his failures frees Augustine of the burden of past sins. Therefore, while it is a necessary condition that God already forgive Augustine of his sins before he confesses them, it is also necessary that Augustine actually confess his sins (and the *Confessions* is, after all, such a confession) if he is to feel healed by the Physician.

This theme of spiritual forgiveness and healing is repeated throughout the *Confessions*. Augustine recognizes how he profits from confessing his sins to God. "For when I am sinful, if I am displeased with myself, this is a confession that I make to you" (X.2). God is the Physician of the soul who heals its wounds. "You have forgiven my past sins and drawn a veil over them, and in this way you have given me happiness in yourself..." (X.3). This spiritual healing leads to true joy and happiness in God.

The fact that Augustine devotes much of Book II to the pear theft is significant. It is hard to ignore the resemblance of Augustine's "fall" to the Fall of Adam. Both of these sins involved the picking of fruit from a forbidden tree. Moreover, it seems to be more than a mere coincidence that when Augustine converts, he is sitting beneath a fig tree. This personal redemption

would parallel the redemption of humanity by Christ on the cross. However, an examination of such parallels is beyond the scope of this essay.⁶ Rather, I would like to examine the historical question the pear theft raises for us as readers of the *Confessions*.⁷

Because of the theological (or aesthetic) balance the pear theft offers to Augustine's redemption beneath a fig tree, how do we know that the historical Augustine did not simply invent the story for theological or aesthetic purposes? This question arises out of the dual nature of the *Confessions*, which is at the same time both an autobiographical history and a fictional narrative. It is a remembering of how events occurred objectively, but at the same time it is an *interpretive* remembering. Augustine could interpret every event of his life in purely "worldly" terms, or in terms of divine activity in his life. He could explain the pear theft as the result of the human desire to assert one's freedom (II.6) and please one's peers (II.8), or as the activity of God who was preparing him for his conversion under a fig tree.

Both interpretations assume the event actually "occurred" in some way. It is quite possible, however, that Augustine invents the story for its theological and aesthetic significance, which brings us back to the original question.

The answer depends on whether we view the *Confessions* as history or as narrative.⁸ If one were to view the *Confessions* as a historical document telling about a certain pear theft, one might look for confirmation of the event in Augustine's other treatises or the writings and personal anecdotes of his contemporaries.

If, on the other hand, one were to view the *Confessions* as a fictional narrative, it is no longer important whether or not the events recounted took place "objectively".⁹ The author of the fictional narrative is not the same as the author of the autobiographical history. While the latter may be approached through historiographic methods, we shall never know what the former intended by the plot of his story.

This brings us to the third perspective from which to explore what the *Confessions* signifies for Augustine, viz., the "historical". This approach, unlike the "theological" and "spiritual" ones, is not necessarily grounded in the text of the *Confessions* but relies upon historical knowledge of Augustine, bishop of Hippo in the

fourth-century. What were the historical conditions provoking Augustine to write the *Confessions*? Who were its original readers and listeners? How was the *Confessions* read and heard during Augustine's time?¹⁰

The *Confessions* was written around 397, only a few years after Augustine had become bishop of Hippo (Brown, 161).¹¹ Augustine's appointment as coadjutor bishop of Hippo became surrounded by some controversy, for the combination of his Manichee past and his extreme cleverness helped make others distrust him (Chadwick, 66).¹²

Because the Christian Church was becoming stronger in Roman society, Christian "religious autobiographies" turned from telling tales of persecution and martyrdom to confessing personal temptations and yearnings for moral perfection (Brown, 159). The book was intended for the *servi Dei* ("servants of God") and the *spirituales* ("men of the spirit") who wanted to know about Augustine's conversion (Brown, 160). The men who were impressed by the *Confessions* composed a mixed group: Paulinus of Nola, Secundus, a "cultured Manichee", and Pelagius (Brown, 160). Gillian Clark claims that Augustine expected the *Confessions* to be widely circulated (Clark, 40). Because the letter correspondence between Augustine and Paulinus of Nola, a well-known bishop, was partly responsible for the writing of the *Confessions*,¹³ Augustine must have assumed that the story of his Christian rebirth would be passed on to other readers with similar interests and connections (Clark, 42).

Augustine wrote the *Confessions* at a time when he felt isolated from the great spiritual men he knew in Europe (Brown, 161). Whereas he had been baptized by St. Ambrose in Italy, he was now in a comparatively isolated province in Africa. Since he was now a bishop, he felt he had lost contact with the average *servus Dei*. Augustine at this time was oscillating in the midst of inner turmoil. He says, a decade after his conversion: "Terrified in my sins and the dead weight of my misery, I had turned my problems over in my mind and was half determined to seek refuge in the desert" (X.43). The fires of optimism sparked by his conversion having died down, the middle-aged Augustine was ready to flee into the desert and imitate the hermit Anthony.

Because his *Confessions* is an intellectual inquiry, Augustine makes certain assumptions about the intellectual background of his readers (the *spirituales*). He pays them the compliment of being as steeped in Neo-Platonic philosophy as he himself was (Brown, 167). The readers of the *Confessions* would have been struck by Augustine's excited, vulnerable "affectivity" (*affectus*) (Brown, 169), as well as his open, pleading dialogue with God. It is hard to imagine Plotinus having such a conversation with the One (Brown, 167). They would have also noticed the new, literary-religious form of self-expression Augustine creates by weaving the language of the Psalms (and Vergil) into the interpretation of his life's struggles (Brown, 174).

Of the thirteen books of the *Confessions*, Book X would have taken Augustine's readers most by surprise. When it was read aloud in Rome, Pelagius was "deeply annoyed" by its tone (Brown, 177).¹⁴ Whereas most religious autobiographies of the period centered around a "conversion" that was seen as a clean and total break from the past, Augustine devoted much of Book X revealing his present state, rife with turmoil and temptation. It is clear that at the time of writing the *Confessions*, Augustine still suffered many of the same temptations which afflicted him before his conversion.

Fourth-century readers usually acquired a hand-written copy of the *Confessions* by asking someone to write out a copy for them (Clark, 81).¹⁵ They also might have heard the *Confessions* read out loud.¹⁶ Hearing the book read aloud would have changed how one perceives the sequences of words, since the text would no longer be static as on a page but would flow "in time" according to the cadences of a voice. Clark suggests that the *Confessions* was dictated by the eloquent rhetorician (Clark, 80), which would help explain the intense, emotional "affectivity" of the work.¹⁷ The visual cues modern readers enjoy -- such as the italics or quotation marks which mark Augustine's shifts from his own words to the words of the Bible or classical literature -- were not available to readers of the first manuscript copies (Clark, 81). The audience which Augustine expected had to "hear" such changes in his writing. If they were to catch such nuances, they had to be familiar with these texts as well as trained in the art of reading, listening, and interpretation.

II

Now that we have seen what the *Confessions* signifies for Augustine from the “theological”, “spiritual”, and “historical” perspectives, we are prepared to examine the limiting criteria for any acceptable interpretation of the *Confessions*. We will employ two approaches. First, we will apply Augustine’s own Scriptural hermeneutic principles to the *Confessions* itself. Secondly, we will examine the textual passages wherein Augustine addresses the reader. Applying the *Confessions*’ hermeneutic principles to itself demands a close examination of the text: the first approach implies the second.

Let us begin with a brief characterization of Augustine’s Scriptural hermeneutic principles. He writes:

How can it harm me if I understand the writer’s meaning in a different sense from that in which another understands it? All of us who read his words do our best to discover and understand what he had in mind, and since we believe that he wrote the truth, we are not so rash as to suppose that he wrote anything which we know or think to be false. Provided, therefore, that each of us tries as best he can to understand in the Holy Scriptures what the writer meant by them, what harm is there if a reader believes what you, the Light of all truthful minds, show him to be the true meaning? It may not even be the meaning which the writer had in mind, and yet he too saw in them a true meaning, different though it may have been from this (XII.18).¹⁸

From this passage, several points emerge. First, there is a distinction between the truth of a passage and the author’s original, intended meaning. Augustine recognizes that we cannot get back to the author’s intended meaning. Speaking of Moses and Scripture, Augustine distinguishes between the truth of the message itself, of which he is convinced, and the meaning which Moses intended, which Augustine can never know for certain. “And I real-

ize that when a message is delivered to us in words, truthful though the messenger may be, two sorts of disagreements may arise. We may disagree either as to the truth of the message itself or as to the messenger's meaning" (XII.23). The standard which judges the truth of the message is, of course, "the Light of all truthful minds".

Secondly, we can never be sure that we have understood the passage in the precise way the author understood it: "It may not even be the meaning which the writer had in mind..." (XII.18; cf. XII.25). Augustine reiterates this point with even more skepticism: "But the truths which those words contain appear to different inquirers in a different light, and of all the meanings that they can bear which of us can lay his finger upon one and say that it is what Moses had in mind and what he meant us to understand by his words?" (XII.24). Finally, he says, "Even if Moses were to appear to us and say, 'This is what I meant,' we should not see his thoughts but would simply believe his word" (XII.25). It seems that, for Augustine, a return to the author's original meaning is unattainable in principle.

Nevertheless, we should "do our best" to discover what the author had in mind when he wrote (XII.18). The reason for this is the God-given authority of the writer, Moses. "And if he had only one meaning in mind, let us admit that it must transcend all others" (XII.32). In all interpretative attempts, Augustine says that he seeks the author's original meaning, even if it is unattainable in principle. "Let me lay this confession before you in the firm belief that if the explanation I give accords with the meaning which Moses had in mind, I shall have done what is right and best. This is what I must try my utmost to do" (XII.32).

The fourth point, which is closely related to the third, is that we should employ the two precepts of charity (*duo praecepta caritatis*; XII.25), which are: 1) Let us not go beyond what is laid down for us, one man slighting another out of partiality for someone else (I Cor. 4:6); and 2) Let us love the Lord our God with our whole heart and our whole soul and our whole mind, and our neighbor as ourselves (Mt. 22: 37, 39). In other words, love others and love God.¹⁹ This "principle of charity" (*caritas*) attempts to minimize abuse of Scripture for personal interests and desires (*cupiditas*, about which more below). Furthermore, out of "applying the

law...to the end of charity" (XII.25) emerges harmony and joy with other believers. "But I pray that in you, O Lord, I may dwell in harmony and joy with those who feed upon your truth in the fullness of charity" (XII.23). Applying the principle of charity is the first step on the way to building a true community. The hermeneutic principle of charity is the same principle which grounds a fellowship of Christian believers who demonstrate the love of God by caring for one another.

The fifth and final point, which is only implicit in the passage, is that every acceptable interpretation must be "consistent with the truth" (XII.25; cf. XIII.24). An interpretation must not "depart from the truth" but must be "within the truth" (XII.25). On one level, this means that one should not contradict the letter of the Scriptural text. Just as priority is given to the author's intended meaning, so also is authority given to the letter of the text. For example, to claim that in some way God did not create heaven and earth would be an unacceptable interpretation of "In the Beginning God made heaven and earth" (XIII.24). But a legitimate interpretation must also be consistent with the truth in a second, more theological, sense, viz., it must accord with the Inner "Light of all truthful minds", the eternal standard and source of all truths.

An acceptable interpretation of Scripture, then, will recognize the difference between the author's meaning and the truth of his message, "try its best" to access the author's original meaning while at the same time realizing the difficulty of doing so, apply the principle of *caritas* by remaining open to a plurality of possible interpretations, and be consistent with the letter of the text (and the Inner Light).²⁰

Before continuing, certain points require clarification. The first point concerns Augustine's conception of the author's intended meaning (*intentio*). Augustine does not use this term to signify a set of inner mental concepts that would be propositional or quasi-linguistic, a disinterested sort of "mentalese", but in the sense of a *cogitationis intentio* or "mental concentration".²¹ Glidden rightly stresses the visual, as opposed to propositional, character of Augustine's conception of authorial intentionality.²² The author's "intention" refers to the mental picture of reality which the author projected at the time of writing. It is motivated by the author's

particular interests and concerns which are shaped by his individual experiences, personal and collective memory, and historical situation. Secondly, there is a crucial difference between the self-giving care of *caritas* and the personal interest of *cupiditas*. All true love is directed towards God (*caritas*), not towards the world (*cupiditas*). The objects of *cupiditas* have only relative, not absolute, value. They are but means to God, the true End desired for His own sake.²³

We are now prepared to apply these criteria to the *Confessions* itself. We do this not merely to imitate Augustine in using his hermeneutic principles, but because he implies we should do so. "For my part I declare resolutely and with all my heart that if I were called upon to write a book which was to be vested with the highest authority, I should prefer to write it in such a way that a reader could find reechoed in my words whatever truths he was able to apprehend. I would rather write in this way than impose a single true meaning so explicitly that it would exclude all others, even though they contained no falsehood that could give me offense" (XII.31; cf. XII.26). While Augustine is referring to his hypothetical writing of the creation account, his words may fruitfully be applied to the *Confessions* itself. As Mackey writes, "The story of his life would not be worth telling if it could not be presented as an exemplum of salvation history. As such, it is invested with all the momentous authority of its divinely inspired original" (Mackey, 52). However, it must be added that Augustine would have been wary of giving too much authority to his text: "They must ask you for the gift of understanding and not appeal to me as if it were I who 'enlightened every soul born into the world'" (XIII.10; cf. XIII.22).²⁴

If we apply Augustine's Scriptural hermeneutic principles to the *Confessions*, the conditions listed above should be met. We must realize that the truth we find in Augustine's message may be different from his intended meaning. We should "try our utmost" to get back to his original meaning; the historical analysis above may help us in this task. We should apply the principle of charity. Finally, our interpretation must be consistent with the text.

Although every acceptable interpretation must meet the criteria of textual consistency, this in no way limits the plurality of possible interpretations of the *Confessions*. Rather, whatever truths

the reader has arrived at according to his own reasoning are to be echoed in Augustine's text. "...[T]hose who can should find expressed in the few words of your servant whatever true conclusions they had reached by their own reasoning" (XII.26).

Let us turn, then, to the passages which address the reader in order to see how he or she should understand the *Confessions*.²⁵

We first note that the primary "reader" or intended audience of the *Confessions* is God. Book I opens with prayer and praise of God. The recitation, "Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty?" (Ps. 145:3) is repeated at the beginning of Book XI. It is clear that God is present throughout the entire book as the Hearer of Augustine's confessions. When Augustine addresses the reader, he usually does so indirectly and uses the subjunctive form, "Let the reader do X."

And now, O Lord, I make you my confession in this book. Let any man read it who will. Let him understand it as he will. And if he finds that I sinned by weeping for my mother, even if only for a fraction of an hour, let him not mock at me.... Let him not mock at me but weep himself, if his charity is great. Let him weep for my sins to you, the Father of all the brothers of your Christ (IX.12).

It is noteworthy that Augustine allows his book to be read by anyone, believer or unbeliever (about which more below). Furthermore, he permits a plurality of possible "understandings" of his book. The only request Augustine makes is that the reader not mock but sympathize with him by weeping for his sins alongside him. Just as the principle of charity was a necessary condition for a proper interpretation of Scripture, so also is it a necessary condition for a proper interpretation of the *Confessions*.

This point may be illustrated by several other passages throughout the *Confessions*. In Book X, Augustine raises an interpretive problem for anyone who reads his characterization of the temptations he still suffers in his present state. "When they hear me speak about myself, how do they know whether I am telling the truth?" (X.3). The solution to this problem is *caritas*, which "believes all

things" (X.3). "For although I cannot prove to them that my confessions are true, at least I shall be believed by those whose ears are opened to me by charity.... Charity, which makes them [the readers] good, tells them that I do not lie about myself when I confess what I am, and it is this charity in them that believes me" (X.3).²⁶ The principle of charity is what makes it possible for the readers to overcome the gap that exists between them and Augustine (much like the lacuna separating Augustine from Moses). Individuals separated by particular feelings, memories, thoughts, and desires are brought back together by the *caritas* which, by "believing all things," transcends differences in gender, education, and age (as the mystical experience at IX.10 demonstrates).²⁷ *Caritas* allows the readers to accept on faith the truth about Augustine; it is this same charity which "makes them good." Augustine stresses not a "hermeneutics of suspicion" but one of open acceptance, which, nonetheless, is subject to the critical judgment of the Inner Light.

At this point, the question may be raised, "Who is the reader of the *Confessions*?" It has already been addressed from a historical perspective. Here, I will answer it by dividing the *Confessions* into passages wherein Augustine addresses 1) believers; 2) unbelievers; and 3) both unbelievers and believers. Let us turn to these in reverse order.

We have already seen how Augustine says of his book, "Let any man read it who will" (IX.12). What can be said of this anonymous reader? It is clear that he desires happiness. "Surely happiness is what everyone wants, so much so that there can be none who do not want it" (X.20). This is not to say that everyone desires *true* happiness, which is "to rejoice in you and for you and because of you" (X.22). To rejoice in God is the same as to rejoice in the Truth (X.23). If we learn to ignore all the distractions of the world and to rejoice in the Truth by which all else is true, we shall be happy (X.23). Augustine says that all men are united by this one purpose, i.e., temporal happiness on earth, and that all action is aimed at this goal, even if the attempts to attain this goal are endlessly varied (XIII.17). The community which is formed by this common purpose includes both believers and unbelievers, the former finding true happiness in God through *caritas* for one an-

other, and the latter attempting in *cupiditas* to find happiness in some created, temporal good.

Augustine also addresses the general reader (believer or unbeliever) in order to make him realize the vast distance separating him from God. Augustine does this in two ways. First, Augustine begins by acknowledging that God already knows what Augustine confesses. "I need not tell all this to you, my God, but in your presence I tell it to my own kind, to those other men, however few, who may perhaps pick up this book" (II.3). Since God already knows whatever Augustine will say, Augustine reveals his life not to God but to the reader. He continues, "And I tell it so that I and all who read my words may realize the depths from which we are to cry to you" (II.3). The purpose of Augustine's confession here is to bring the reader to imitate him in realizing the infinite depth separating God from the person he or she is. It is a call to the reader to join him in submitting to God. Augustine makes the same point in a second way, this time engaging the reader in a "mental exercise" (XIII.11). He asks the reader to consider his own existence, knowledge, and will in order to realize how great is the difference between man and the Trinity. Again, the point is not so much about humanity in general as it is about the particular reader who is infinitely separated from God.

Let us turn to those readers who may be characterized as "unbelievers". Simply put, Augustine does not care to argue with unbelievers who reject the truths which the Inner Light reveals to Augustine. "As for those who deny these truths, let them snarl and deafen themselves as much as they like. I shall try to persuade them to be silent and to open a way to their hearts for your word" (XII.16). The problem with them is not that they disagree with Augustine but that they "snarl" and are "deaf" to his words. In short, they do not receive his message in a spirit of charity. Augustine says he will try to bring God's truthful Word to their hearts, but this can happen only if they are ready to listen.

The fact that Augustine does not care to argue with close-minded unbelievers does not imply that he does not care about them at all. On the contrary, Augustine sympathizes with them because they are estranged from their Creator and are therefore "unhappy" in the true sense of the word. He prays for them: "Let

them then turn back and look for you. They will find that you have not deserted your creatures as they have deserted their Creator” (V.2). Surely these men and women who tread the “hard path” remind Augustine of himself before he turned away from the distractions of the world and looked within himself to discover the divine Truth that never deserted him but was always there. Augustine offers his story as a model for unbelievers to follow, especially those whose intellectual objections may be obstacles to their possible conversion.

Augustine says much more concerning those who do acknowledge the truths revealed to Augustine by the Inner Truth.²⁸ They agree with Augustine concerning these fundamental points, yet disagree with his interpretation of the first book of Genesis.²⁹ Augustine addresses them in order to explain his interpretation and to resolve the disagreements arising therefrom. In the very act of asserting his individuality by offering his own interpretation, Augustine engages with other believers. Augustine explicitly recognizes his desire for a true community when he says that he seeks knowledge of God’s Word (Genesis) not for his sake alone but so “that it may serve the love I bear to others” (XI.2). The specific details of Augustine’s interpretation of Genesis need not concern us here. What is important to notice is that Augustine is ready to engage in an open discourse with those who are ready to listen charitably.

In Book XIII, Augustine does something quite rare in the *Confessions*: he *directly* addresses the readers who are believers. He uses bold, sweeping language, derived from his interpretation of Scriptural passages, in order to encourage fellow believers in their Christian walk. “Divide the light of those who are perfect, but are not yet as the angels, from the darkness of those who are infants in God’s nursery but are not without hope....Go, then, for you are fires burning with holiness and glory....Spread throughout the world; let all men know the light” (XIII.19). Notice that the unbelievers who are still in the darkness nevertheless have hope: they still have the potential to return to their Origin. In one of the few instances where Augustine uses the second person plural to address the reader, he commands his Christian brethren to set a shining example for all men, believers and unbelievers alike.

More frequently, Augustine addresses believers indirectly in passages which seek to effect some change in them. There are numerous examples of this. If they have avoided the sins that he has committed, he tells them to love and thank God all the more for having prevented them from making his mistakes (II.7). Above all they should not take credit for their good behavior but should give God the glory. Secondly, he asks God to inspire the readers to remember Monica (and Patricius) in prayer, for Monica's dying wish was to be remembered "at the altar of the Lord" (IX.11). Thirdly, he begs God for self-knowledge in order to confess to his fellow brothers in Christ the "wounds" he finds in himself, so that they might pray for him. Fourthly, he points out that it is man's duty to confess his sins to God (V.5). Fifthly, he means his confession of past sins to be an uplifting example for those who are on the brink of despair. "But when others read of those past sins of mine, or hear about them, their hearts are stirred so that they no longer lie listless in despair, crying 'I cannot'" (X.3). The believer, unlike an audience member passively watching the mundane plot of a play unfold, is challenged by the example of Augustine's success; he can no longer say "I cannot" because Augustine has shown that, with God's grace, he can. All the same, Augustine advises the reader not simply to imitate others who are better than him or her, but to seek God's will in his or her own life (XIII.22).

III

We have now seen passages wherein Augustine addresses the believer both directly and indirectly. My interpretation of these passages is the following: when Augustine addresses the reader as a believer, he does so in an attempt to create a true community united under God and founded upon the principle of charity. In order to be a member of this community, the believer must hear or read Augustine's *Confessions* with *caritas*, which means that he or she must thank God when Augustine comes close to his Creator and pray for him when he is separated from Him by his sins (X.4). In other words, he or she must (re)act appropriately. The members of this Christian community will love what is worthy of love

and sorrow at what deserves remorse (X.4). Perhaps most importantly, they will continue to love Augustine even when he sins (X.4). In short, they will care for Augustine according to their *caritas*. Augustine says that by confessing the successes and failures of his life,

I fire my own heart and the hearts of my readers with love of you, so that we all may ask: Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty?... So by confessing our own miserable state and acknowledging your mercy towards us we open our hearts to you, so that you may free us wholly, as you have already begun to do. Then we shall no longer be miserable in ourselves, but will find our true happiness in you (XI.1).

Augustine and his fellow believers are united in their common love of God. The common purpose of praising, seeking, and serving God brings believers together in *caritas*, just as the common goal of temporal happiness unites humanity in *cupiditas* (XIII.17). In addition to praising God, the believer confesses -- with Augustine -- his "miserable state" in order to find wholeness and fulfillment in God. Notice that Augustine has shifted to the first person plural in the quoted passage. Whereas Augustine usually refers to other believers indirectly while still addressing God, here he is already united with his brothers and sisters in Christ and speaks on their behalf: "...we open our hearts to you...." His voice now speaks for the community they form: just as they were in a "miserable state" together, so they are "wholly freed" by the same divine mercy.

Concerning Augustine's desire for a community united under God and grounded in charity, the findings of historical scholarship would confirm what is revealed by the textual evidence of the *Confessions* alone. In his introduction to the *Confessions*, Pine-Coffin points out that the historical Augustine possessed a remarkable gift for making friends (Pine-Coffin, 11). Many of Augustine's sins in the *Confessions* stem from his desire to please peers and win friends. Augustine himself recognizes this temptation as one which afflicts him even at the moment of his confess-

ing (X.36). While Augustine claims that he stole the pears for the sake of evil itself, he admits that he was also motivated by peer pressure. At the same time, he calls the accomplices to his sin “nothing” (II.8), suggesting that evil companionship is not essentially different from evil itself, which is also “nothing” (VII.12). A desire for a true community was the impetus behind his (failed) attempt to live with ten other friends (VI.14). It is even plausible that his sexual indulgences, his swiftly taking a mistress immediately after the first one had departed (VI.15), were not motivated merely by sexual desire but by a yearning for genuine companionship. Throughout his life, Augustine repeatedly identifies himself with a group of some sort. “Augustine will never be alone” (Brown, 61). At various points in his life, however briefly, Augustine is a member of some community: of nurses and playmates, of learned rhetoricians, of Academics and Sceptics, of Manichees, of Platonists, and, ultimately, of Christians.

Simply by reading or listening to Augustine’s text, the reader forms a “primary linguistic community” with Augustine.³⁰ Of course, one might be forced to read an English translation of the Latin manuscript in order to become a part of this smallest of communities, but it would be a community all the same. If the reader agrees to the same fundamental truths as Augustine, that is, if he is a believer, they may form a deeper, “secondary” interpretive community held together by these common truths.³¹ Furthermore, this community of believers would be unified by the one source of truth, God. If the reader is a “believer” in Augustine’s sense of acknowledging the Inner Truth, and if he meets the interpretive criteria described above, he will form a triadic community with Augustine which is united by, or under, the Truth. This triadic community is a human imitation of the Triune God, just as the group of pear theft accomplices is a parody of this triadic community.³² Whereas Augustine’s yearning for true community repeatedly goes unsatisfied by his attempts to form a community based on created, temporal goods (e.g., pleasing peers, sex, idle education, friendship not based on God), this community of believers would be the “truest” possible on earth because it would be grounded in the source of Truth. It is not mere coincidence that Augustine’s mystical union with the Truth is not a silent, isolated

contemplation but is shared in conversation and in communication with his mother (IX.10).

Having said this, it must not be forgotten that, for Augustine, the most perfect of Christian communities will be flawed. The purest triadic community between two believers and God will still only be a reflection of the Trinity. To take the hermeneutic example, even if Moses were to speak to Augustine directly, their communication (and hence their community) could never be perfect. Augustine can never know Moses' intentions but must take his words on faith (XII.25), accepting them insofar as they resonate with the Inner Truth (XI.3). This is what it means to employ the principle of charity. This is how Augustine would have us read the *Confessions*.

A reading of these passages which emphasizes the caring community formed between Augustine and the reader would not reject but embrace the "theological" and "historical" perspectives offered by Mackey and Brown, respectively. Because Augustine would receive therapeutic support and charity from the reader, this reading also encompasses the "spiritual" interpretation offered in Part I. It is God who heals Augustine, ultimately, but He does this through the members of the Christian community. In short, the historical actions revealed by Augustine's *Confessions* are his attempts to find "the true fellowship of charity" (X.36) which, held together by a common theological understanding of one, eternal, loving God, would heal his troubled spiritual state which has become a problem to him (X.33). Augustine thus invites the readers to join him in confessing (V.2), which, after all, is one's duty to God (V.5).

NOTES

¹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, tr. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961).

² Louis Mackey, "From Autobiography to Theology" in *Peregrinations of the Word* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

³ See Emmett T. Flood's, "The Narrative Structure of Augustine's *Confessions*: Time's Quest for Eternity," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 2, issue no. 110 (June 1988).

⁴For the theological import of the pear theft, see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson and tr. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), pp. 15-17.

⁵For the writing of the *Confessions* as therapy, see E.R. Dodds, "Augustine's *Confessions*," *Hibbert Journal* 26 (1927-8) 460.

⁶For a bibliography of several interpretations of the pear theft, see Brian Stock's well-documented *Augustine the Reader* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 312, n. 137.

⁷Cf. Pierre Courcelle, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la Tradition Littéraire* (Paris: 1963), pp. 91-97.

⁸Or theology, as Mackey sees it. The problem is that the *Confessions* is so many things at once, and I do not mean to limit the possible characterizations of the *Confessions* to history and narrative alone. Furthermore, the relation between history and narrative is a complex issue (e.g., Can historical science exist without telling a story with the structure of a narrative? Does the objective occurrence of events itself have a narrative structure, or does the historian impose a narrative upon objective "facts"?) which I cannot address here.

⁹This brings us to the problem of "truth" in fiction, which I will not deal with except negatively, i.e., by saying that if one views the *Confessions* as fiction, questions of historical truth are no longer important.

¹⁰I do not pretend to give comprehensive answers to these questions. For a bibliography of historical research led by Courcelle, and his critics, see Stock, p. 19 and p. 300, n. 271-3.

¹¹Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), ch. 16.

¹²Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹³See Courcelle, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la Tradition Littéraire*, pp. 559-607.

¹⁴Augustine was aware of this reception by Pelagius: "When these words of mine ['Give what you command and command what you will'] were repeated in Pelagius' presence at Rome by a certain brother of mine (an episcopal colleague), he could not bear them and contradicted him so excitedly that they nearly came to a quarrel." *De Dono Perseverantiae* XX 53 (A.D. 428).

¹⁵Gillian Clark, *Augustine: The Confessions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹⁶For a bibliography on silent reading, see Stock, p. 286, n. 53 and p. 288, n. 80.

¹⁷For a bibliography on Augustine's practice of oral composition through secretaries, see Stock, p. 283, n. 2.

¹⁸Cf. *De doctr. Christ.* III.27.38.

¹⁹Cf. *De doctr. Christ.* I.5: "Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build up the double love of God and of neighbor does not understand it at all."

²⁰For the developments in Augustine's hermeneutic principles leading up to *De doctr. Christ.*, see Gordan J. Hamilton, "Augustine's Methods of Biblical Interpretation," *Grace, Politics, and Desire*, ed. Hugo A. Meynell (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1990), pp. 103-119, esp. pp. 103-6. Hamilton focuses on *De doctr. Christ.* instead of the *Confessions* and is indebted to G. Bonner, "Augustine as Biblical Scholar," *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1, eds. P.R. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

²¹Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 84-7.

²²David Glidden, "Augustine's Hermeneutics and the Principle of Charity," *Ancient Philosophy* 17 no. 2 (Spring 1997) 135-57. Glidden compares Augustine's principle of charity with the modern principle found in Quine and Davidson, pp. 152-6.

²³Karl Jaspers, *Plato and Augustine*, tr. Ralph Manheim (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1962), from *The Great Philosophers*, vol. 1, ed. Hannah Arendt.

²⁴What Eileen Sweeney says of *De doct. Christ.* may also be applied to the *Confessions*: "Its constant message is a reminder that just as Christians may not take signs for things, the world for God, we also cannot make (but have an unailing tendency toward making) our own texts into things, our own understandings and theories into fixed and complete truth." *Reading and Wisdom*, "Hugh of St. Victor: The Augustinian Tradition of Sacred and Secular Reading Revised," (Notre Dame University Press, 1995).

²⁵Cf. the *Retractions* II 32 (A.D. 427): "My *Confessions*, in thirteen books, praise the righteous and good God as they speak

either of my evil or good, and *they are meant to excite men's minds and affections toward him*. At least as far as I am concerned, this is what they did for me when they were being written and they still do this when read. *What some people think of them is their own affair*; but I do know that they have given pleasure to many of my brethren and still do so. The first through the tenth books were written about myself; the other three about Holy Scripture, from what is written there, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,' even as far as the reference to the Sabbath rest" (my italics).

Also, cf. *Letter to Darius* (A.D. 429): "Thus, my son, take the books of my *Confessions* and use them as a good man should -- not superficially, but as a Christian in Christian charity. Here see me as I am and do not praise me for more than I am. Here believe nothing else about me than my own testimony. Here observe what I have been in myself and through myself..." (*Epist.* 231, *PL*, 33, c. 1025).

²⁶ Cf. X.33: "This, then, is my present state. Let those of my readers whose hearts are filled with charity, from which good actions spring, weep with me and weep for me. Those who feel no charity in themselves will not be moved by my words. But I beg you, O Lord my God, to look upon me and listen to me. Have pity on me and heal me, for you see that I have become a problem to myself, and this is the ailment from which I suffer."

²⁷ Cf. Goulven Madec, "Le communisme spirituel" in *Homo Spiritualis* (1987) 225-239, esp. 227-38.

²⁸ Such truths include, e.g., that Moses was a devout servant of God, that the Holy Spirit speaks in Moses' books, and that the original formless matter had its being from the Creator (XII.15).

²⁹ Chadwick suggests that this is one possible motive (among several) for the genesis of the *Confessions* (Chadwick, 66).

³⁰ See R.A. Markus, *Signs and Meanings* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), pp. 32-43.

³¹ Cf. Augustine's notions of formal and informal religious groups, reviewed in detail by George P. Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 9-62.

³² See Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 94.