

Augustine's *Confessions* and Contemporary Concerns

Edited by

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Contents

Abbreviations	vii
Introduction	
<i>David Vincent Meconi, SJ</i>	1
Book 1: A Typical Child of the Fifties	
<i>John W. Martens</i>	11
Book 2: The Acidic Allure of Self-Loathing	
<i>David Vincent Meconi, SJ</i>	32
Book 3: Augustine's Pedagogy of Presence, Truth, and Love	
<i>Jeffrey S. Lehman</i>	53
Book 4: Fugitive Beauty	
<i>Erika Kidd</i>	73
Book 5: Narrating Radical Inclusivity and Dysmorphic Identities	
<i>Christopher J. Thompson</i>	91
Book 6: Augustine's Anxiety and Ours	
<i>Andrew Hofer, OP</i>	106
Book 7: The Liminality of Vision	
<i>Gerald P. Boersma</i>	125
Book 8: Conversion and the Transformational Journey from the Dissociative to the True Self	
<i>Paul Ruff</i>	143
Book 9: Christian Transcendentalism	
<i>John Peter Kenney</i>	164
Book 10: Memory, Individualism, and the Collected Self	
<i>Hilary Finley</i>	183

Book 11: Sacramental Time or the Never-Ending News Feed? <i>Veronica Roberts Ogle</i>	203
Book 12: Augustinian Contemplation and Centering Prayer <i>Margaret Blume Freddoso</i>	225
Book 13: The Heart Finds Rest through the Church <i>Joseph Grone</i>	249
Contributors	271
Index of Names and Subjects	275
Index of Scripture References	287

Introduction

Augustine never wrote as a person limited by the constraints of late antiquity. In telling his life's story, he muted the particulars so as to stress the perennials and perennial he became. His homilies still feed the Christian soul, his teachings on the nature of God and human heart still illumine the searching, and his *Confessions* above all continue to show us what each of our life story is becoming. It is the truths contained in this omnibiography, this story of every human soul before God, which these pages set out to unfold. For it was Augustine's intention to tell a story that could be read at any time by any one and still bear fruit that is eternal.

That is why, in the summer of 2019, scholars from around the United States gathered at Saint Paul Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, to discuss how each book of the *Confessions* could be read today. Every generation brings a new story with which to read Augustine's story and the narrative of the twenty-first century is yet again that of a generation unrestful and unsure. We are a people who fear but remain unawed, who question but do not seek, who wander but make no pilgrimage. As such, the cultural emptiness of the twenty-first century offers a space where Augustine's voice can be heard anew. That is the goal with which each author below was tasked: What does this particular book of Augustine's *Confessions* say to us today?

The occasion for Augustine's sitting down to compose the *Confessions* still remains a debated point. Some think it was his roundabout way of explaining the story of the North African Church to Bishop Paulinus of Nola—particularly the story of his and Paulinus's common friend Alypius. Was he trying to show

the schismatic Donatists that their accusations that he was still a secret Manichee were unfounded? Was he appealing to a larger audience to show that his conversion to Catholicism was in fact authentic? Remember, when he left the shores of North Africa, he went to work for the pagan emperor, had a live-in concubine, and still belonged to a New Age-type cult. His story had to be told.

In thirteen pre-planned books, then, Augustine set out to narrate the beginnings of the “restless heart” to the Church—where the collective body of praise proves to be the eternal remedy—and all the blessings and burdens of the intervening years. Whereas books 1 through 9 read more autobiographically, they are held together by the more philosophical books—book 10, which treats the memory able to unify these years of varied experiences; book 11, which treats the time which memory traverses; and then books 12 and 13, which bring us back to the original beginning, the Book of Genesis. As such, each of our authors takes up one of these books to see how it might speak to us today.

We begin with John W. Martens’s look at book 1, where Augustine alludes to Matthew 19:14, writing, “It was only the small stature of a child that you mentioned with approval as a symbol of humility, O Lord our king, when you declared of such is the kingdom of heaven” (1.19.30).

Martens’s essay shows why Augustine seemed to miss Jesus’ theological point about children and to reduce them to little sinners not model disciples. To understand Augustine’s view of children and childhood, the author compares ancient Roman views of childhood with current views of child development. Augustine gives us insight into the ways of the Roman world through his recollections of his own childhood but also through his adult observation and knowledge of children.

Augustine’s insights align with what we know of Roman antiquity and its understanding of childhood, with one important proviso. Although what he has to say about children and how he understands them reflects the dominant view of children and childhood in antiquity, there was a counternarrative, represented by Jesus’ own teaching, which was also found in some pagan thought of the time. The counternarrative about children in pagan antiquity is that of pure children, who functioned as conduits to the divine and even guides for rituals and liturgy. This seems to be the model that Jesus points to in his own teaching.

In many ways, our culture today has overreacted to Augustinian views of childhood and education and portrays childhood as filled with innocence and goodness. Augustine might be able to offer us balance in how we raise and educate children. That is, while Augustine turns against a positive view of the spirituality of childhood as taught by Jesus, he also warns against the temptation

seen in much modern culture that children ought to be arbiters and judges of their own lives.

On the other hand, without challenging Augustine's views of original sin, it should be noted that his willingness to attribute sinful motives, scheming and conniving, to infant behavior originates in his culture's lack of knowledge about human development. Ancient doctors and moralists looked at development in physical terms and not in terms of emotional, mental, or moral development. Even if they understood that the age of reason was reached at the age of seven, for instance, they did not examine how children were shaped by environment, trauma, or culture, nor did they understand neurocognitive brain development.

Augustine's assessment of infants as sinful schemers overstates the reality. Adults shape children, for good or ill, and one of the most significant ways in which the impact of human sinfulness can be tempered or accentuated is how we discipline and educate our children. Children are born with a propensity to sin, but it was not "only the small stature of a child that you mentioned with approval as a symbol of humility, O Lord our king" (1.19.30), it was the goodness inherent in children, which the adults who bring them into the world, raise and educate them, must cherish as Jesus himself did.

In book 2, Augustine explores the eerie depths of the mystery of iniquity. Saint Louis University's Fr. David Meconi, SJ, sets out to show how an acid joy is somehow contagious and thus habitual to the sinner. Augustine so famously steals those pears one summer night, confessing that they were not at all enticing or alluring. In fact, he had better fruit at home. He was neither hungry nor thinking how some pilfered produce might be to his advantage. He stole the pears simply because he was divided in soul and had fallen in love with his own ruin.

This is the modern malaise we see in so many harmful habits, from the self-harm of cutting and eating disorders to suicide itself. When such is freely taken on out of an unwillingness to be known and to be loved, the divided soul refuses the solace of community and is forced to turn in only on itself. Here, Augustine knew, the broken psyche refuses healing and grows comfortable with the uncomfortable, finding its own destruction somehow pleasing.

The remedy is the Cross. Before that crucified love, the stony heart can finally melt and thus receive the healing for which all stand in need. Augustine learned early on that unless one feels accepted and known and loved for who he or she is, that individual will have no choice but to find solace in his or her own sin. It is an abuse of the self that no one really wants, but often it is all one allows him or herself to have. It is the documentation behind every act of domestic violence: first remove the victim from her support system, friend group, and

routine, and then, in that isolation, the hurt can ensue and the bruises can be hidden from the eyes which really care. The pear-tree scene taught Augustine this twisted allure and provided him with an experience with which he came later on to know the power of the Cross.

With book 3, the University of Dallas's Jeffrey S. Lehman turns our attention to Augustine's youthful embrace of the pagan classics. By examining Augustine's reading of Cicero together with its immediate and broader context in book 3, Lehman argues that the *Hortensius* episode reveals the beginnings of a third "way of life" proposed by Augustine, one grounded in an intimate, personal encounter with the triune God who is Truth and Love. Lehman begins by considering the first two books of the *Confessions*, noting how certain passages prepare us for the nascent pedagogy we see developing in book 3. He then examines the *Hortensius* episode within the context of book 3, revealing the close connection between this episode and what precedes and follows it in that book. Finally, he considers the third way as a fruitful contribution to effective pedagogy today.

Book 4 is famously about friendship and grief. Erika Kidd from the University of St. Thomas takes an unusual approach, opening her essay not with Augustine's tender portrait of grief, but with his whole-hearted preoccupation with beauty. Augustine claims in book 4 to be a great lover of beauty. He writes a youthful book in which he explains what makes beautiful things beautiful, and he struggles to understand his attachment to beauty, even as he finds this attachment coming up short. Kidd proposes that Augustine's attachment to beauty frames and illuminates Augustine's book 4 account of his own grief. Augustine is not neutral about that grief; he confesses it, implying it is somehow problematic.

Kidd argues Augustine finds fault with himself not for choosing the wrong object of love, nor for loving creatures too much. Instead, Augustine confesses his failure to love created beauties well. Drawing on Augustine's rich analogy between syllables and creatures, Kidd suggests the meaningfulness of creation emerges out of a joint recognition (Augustine's and God's) of the beauty of what was lost. She concludes that the beauty of creatures is, for Augustine, not a trap nor a distraction, but a revelation, one that invites Augustine into deeper intimacy with God and with the beautiful creatures they both love.

Writing on book 5, Christopher J. Thompson, the Academic Dean of St. Paul Seminary, invites readers to reflect on the broader context of psychological integrity, both in its descriptive and prescriptive modes. Thompson suggests an Augustinian model of identity that adequately "describes" the per-during dissonance of ordinary human experience. Thompson then identifies

the “prescriptive” or normative defense of that same identity, narrated from the vantage of the Church’s theology of Christ and creation.

James J. O’Donnell says that Augustine’s anxieties appear evident on every page of the *Confessions*. With distinctions about the kinds of anxiety known today, Fr. Andrew Hofer, OP, Professor of Theology at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., offers “Augustine’s Anxiety and Ours.” Hofer looks at Augustine’s anxiety in book 6, and uses that book as a mirror to reflect to us what we need in our own culture so ridden with anxiety. In the chapter’s first part, we see that Augustine features his mother Monica and his spiritual father Ambrose as models of faith for his anxious heart. After comparing his life as orator at the imperial court with a drunken beggar on the streets, he reviews his friendships and lusts in the presence of God, who alone can give rest. In the chapter’s second part, we then make explicit something of our own state seen in book 6’s mirror: models of faith needed to steady us in turbulent times, comparisons of worldly success and failure in searching for happiness, as well as our friendships and lusts. In the chapter’s end, we allow Augustine the bishop to preach to us about the joy of the Lord’s presence, a certainty that can overcome our anxiety.

Sight has a particularly pronounced place in book 7. Ave Maria University’s Gerald P. Boersma uses book 7 to ask what the gift of sight delivers to Augustine, while also looking into how mortal sight fails. Boersma argues that the liminality of Augustine’s state of conversion is expressed in the language of unconsummated vision. He demonstrates that the overwhelming question of book 7, namely, how to understand the nature of the divine substance, is described as a deficient quest to see. With the aid of divine illumination through the mystical vision(s) at Milan, Augustine does receive intellectual clarity about the divine substance. As such, the ecstasy of book 7 highlights the restored sense of spiritual sight. Nevertheless, the vision of Milan is short-lived; Augustine is left dissatisfied, a feeling that underscores the book’s liminal character and the inability of sight to deliver, at least in this life, a vision of God. These experiences of book 7 offer substantive cognitive payoff.

Augustine becomes intellectually certain (*certus*) of the faith he received from Monica and Ambrose, and his quest to understand the nature of the divine substance and the origins of evil finds a degree of resolution. At this point, we still await the momentous moral conversation of book 8 and Augustine’s entry into the sacramental life of the Catholic Church in book 9, such that the apogee of his autobiography occurs at Ostia with his mother, Monica. As such, the narrative of the *Confessions* presents the vision of Milan as penultimate rather than ultimate. Book 7 has a liminal place in Augustine’s conversion; in book 7,

Augustine sees, but in a manner that is incomplete and unsustained. The perspective of faith governs his outlook, but it is a faith that, by his own admission, is as yet unformed. His vision needs to be healed and strengthened, and that is the journey of book 7.

Saint Paul Seminary's Paul Ruff puts Augustine's account of his moral conversion in book 8 into dialogue with the contemporary psychology of transformation, particularly as presented in the phenomenological theory of Diane Fosha. Ruff reviews Fosha's map of the key relational, affective, and cognitive processes that are the drivers and markers of transformation back to our True Self. He overlays this map onto the detailed, dramatic, phenomenon reported in Augustine's account of his conversion process in book 8, showing striking parallels. He compares these dramatic "natural" and "supernatural" processes, noting what they have in common and what might distinguish them from each other. Ruff concludes with a discussion of the importance of Christians being open to and accompanied through the disruptive, tremulous experience of transformative conversion led by the heart. He also highlights the need for the converted to find their place in the body of Christ. Augustine's accounting of integrative, embodied conversion grounded in the community of the body of Christ speaks powerfully to our post-modern, dissociative, atomized, world.

Saint Michael's College's John Peter Kenney, having spent his life studying Augustine's mystical theology, takes book 9 to consider Augustine's autobiographical account of contemplative transcendence in light of contemporary naturalism. Drawing on the work of Charles Taylor, Kenney considers salient characteristics of scientific naturalism, including its commitment to an anti-transcendental account of reality, its representation of the human self as sharply individuated and "buffered," and its commitment to the "objective perspective" of the natural sciences, what Taylor calls the "view from nowhere." The resultant nihilism of this account is then underscored.

That prolegomenon sets the ancient transcendentalism of Augustine into relief. Augustine's *Confessions* attributes his discovery of the very idea of transcendent reality to his reading of ancient Platonism, especially Plotinus. There he discovered a philosophical account of an infinite One, at once transcendent of the material world and ontologically immanent within all finite reality. The human soul must thus be regarded as suffused with the inherent presence of the One. Nor could the soul be a spectator of the infinite. The soul could achieve a kind of knowledge of the One through inner contemplation, recovering and intensifying the interior presence of the divine.

Now the reader is better prepared to understand book 9's "vision at Ostia," where two descriptions of Christian contemplation by Augustine and Monica

are simultaneously offered. Each of these texts is reviewed with particular attention to the “participatory” knowledge that these two very different souls achieve. This immediate, interior participation in the reality of divine Word is the foundation of Augustine’s commitment to transcendence, understood in Christian terms. The chapter concludes with some final observations on the differences between the nihilism of secular materialism and Augustine’s Christian transcendentalism.

When treating Augustine’s amazing book 10 on self-identity and the power of recall, Saint Louis University’s Hilary Finley considers the role of technology in reshaping human memory, which Augustine depicts throughout the book as the vehicle for Divine communication. In light of the prevalence of technology in modern society, Finley examines the potential diminishing of human openness to Divine communication in two fundamental areas, as technology mimics Divine authority and seems to command human activity: first, in terms of how humans come to know God through meditation on personal experience and knowledge, as Augustine explains, which reflection occurs less frequently as a result of the ubiquitous availability of social media, keeping human activity in a short-term holding pattern; and second, how an abundance of particular technological images are now absorbed by the human brain and become the fodder of human memory, upon which humans then meditate to know God—but the images are fleeting colors on pixels, removed from the natural world, which for centuries has represented more directly the Divine presence in the world.

In “Sacramental Time or the Never-Ending News Feed?,” Veronica Roberts Ogle of Assumption University explores Augustine’s meditation on time, drawing out its relevance for our age of distraction. Arguing that Augustine endeavors to divest us of our tendency to think about time in terms of a timeline—a spatial metaphor that conceals the true relationship between time and eternity—Roberts Ogle shows how he does this in order to help us rethink the nature of eternity and to rediscover its pull. In brief, Augustine argues, spatial time flattens our horizon so that passing things more easily occupy us and take our attention away from our eschatological goal. By dissolving down to a vanishing point the time that is, Augustine draws the reader’s attention to the simultaneous reality and ephemerality of the temporal present, and so makes it possible for that reader to conceive of eternity as the true reality of the present: that which the temporal “now” fails to fully be. In glimpsing the true nature of eternity, Augustine hopes, we give ourselves knowledge that we can constantly recollect, using it to enliven our desire for eternity, and so to persevere on the journey home.

Thus, Augustine's meditation is both philosophically rigorous and pastorally tailored to our fallen state. Deeply aware of our tendency to fall into *distentio*, the state of being pulled apart by fractured desire, he shows us how our attempts to flee this fragmentation by drowning ourselves in distraction is futile. Augustine, in forcing us to sit still, recalls our attention to ourselves and helps us clearly see our true restlessness—and where it points. Roberts Ogle considers the power of this message for contemporary culture and concludes by exploring the use and abuse of social media in its light. By observing that Augustine helps us see that we have, as a society, plunged headlong into time alienated from eternity, the author ends her essay on a note of hope. If Augustine can show us how we have strayed, he can also show us a way home—through the recovery of sacramental time.

Margaret Blume Freddoso, who comes to the conference from the University of Notre Dame, in her essay covering book 12 develops the metaphysical understanding of contemplation that Augustine sets forth in that penultimate book of the *Confessions*. Contemplation is not some state of absorption into the divine, but rather a soul's anticipatory participation in the realm of the blessed, who freely and perpetually gaze upon eternal Wisdom. Next, Blume Freddoso shows that for Augustine, contemplation cannot be achieved by intellectual or psychological techniques. Throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine reveals that the way to contemplation is daily incorporation into Christ's Body through the sacraments and meditation upon Scripture in communion with the Church, which bears fruit in works of charity. It is the way of a penitent pilgrim who continually confesses his sin, his misery, and his longing to return home, as well as his faith, love, and trust in the Savior who will bring him there.

In the final part of her essay, Blume Freddoso compares Augustinian contemplation to the popular contemporary practice of Centering Prayer. Although Centering Prayer's proponents present it as traditional Christian contemplation transposed into a modern key, she shows that the practice itself is quite different from the practices that constitute the way to Augustinian contemplation. Indeed, in practice, Centering Prayer most closely resembles Transcendental Meditation, which has its roots in a metaphysics directly contrary to the metaphysics of contemplation that Augustine articulates in book 12.

In his analysis of book 13, Joseph Grone, a doctoral candidate at Saint Louis University, considers Augustine's prolonged exegesis of the Hexaemeron as a corrective and remedy to the stark individuality that pervades the modern West. At a time when individuals are increasingly turning away from churches and other religious communities, book 13 offers a vision of human fulfillment which comes only through a communion prepared by God from the

very beginning. For Augustine, the creation of the heavens and the earth is also a foreshadowing and preparation for their future re-creation—God not only wills the being of his creatures but also their well-being. Thus, seen in the light of Christ, each creative act in the Genesis 1 account recalls God’s redemptive actions through the Church on earth.

Grone begins with Augustine’s account of God’s creation, restoration, and illumination of rational beings. The goodness which God bestowed in creation was not forfeited as humanity fell into darkness; rather, Augustine suggests, by baptism, God has drawn fallen persons out of darkness to share in his eternal light. Those who have been baptized have been created as spiritual and material members of his Church—the heavens and the earth—who are continually drawn deeper into their union with God. With this introduction, Grone traces the details of Augustine’s exegesis, demonstrating his reading of creation as God’s work of redeeming fallen humanity through the mystery of Christ’s Church. Scripture, sacraments, miracles, the apostles, the preachers of the Word, the saints, the spiritual and material persons on earth, and more find expression in Augustine’s reading of Genesis, as each element participates in God’s saving activity in time. From here, Grone recounts Augustine’s additional commentaries on the commandments and provisions of God’s grace, the fruits of virtue, and the exceeding goodness of created things. Finally, Grone describes Augustine’s treatment of the seventh day, in which the human is finally able to share in God’s eternal rest. This is the rest which the restless heart from the beginning of the *Confessions* is finally able to receive, and it is, Grone emphasizes, only in the dynamics of divine grace in the Church that this rest is able to be found.

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