

METAXY AND THE UNREST OF EXISTENCE IN SAINT AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS

David Azerrad
Carleton University

Abstract- The structure and meaning of St. Augustine's *Confessions* have long puzzled interpreters. By reading the *Confessions* in light of Eric Voegelin's thought, the question of unity and meaning no longer poses itself. The 13 books form a coherent symbolization of one man's struggle with the In-Between (*metaxy*) structure of Being, his noetic insight into this structure and the subsequent attempt to express his newfound understanding of reality. Thus understood, the *Confessions* become a powerful account of a soul's turning around (*periag_g_*). This approach not only illuminates the nature of Augustine's participation in reality, but also brings Voegelin's symbolization to life, while revealing its full significance and more importantly, its subtleties and limitations.

The structure of Saint Augustine's *Confessions* is bound to strike most first-time readers as odd. What begins as an inquiry into whether man should praise God or pray to him, soon becomes an autobiographical account interspersed with countless citations from Scriptures and, before ending with an exegesis of the first verses of Genesis, diverts into an examination of memory and time. Are the *Confessions* the story of a man's conversion, a philosophical treatise, an exercise in hermeneutics or a blend of the three? If the unity of the work cannot be established, its meaning becomes even more problematic. Why did Augustine choose to include the last four non-autobiographical books? Some, such as Marrou, simply resolved the problem by concluding, rather chauvinistically, that "Augustin compose mal parce que les anciens, de façon générale, n'attachaient pas à la composition l'attention que nous, Français d'aujourd'hui, y portons généralement."¹ Seen in this light, the *Confessions* are an awkward patchwork of various unrelated parts.² Most recent interpreters however have assumed that there is indeed a thematic unity which binds the 13 books and have sought to uncover its meaning.³ Their solutions are as varied as they are at times original and insightful.⁴

¹ "Augustine composes poorly because the ancients generally did not pay to composition the attention that we, Frenchmen of today, generally do." Henri-Irénée Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, (Paris: Boccard, [1938] 1958), 75.

² Among the many scholars who share this view, the most prominent are Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* (Paris: Boccard, 1950) and John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine: An Introduction to the Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Longman, 1980).

³ For example, McMahon sees the "formal, unifying, principle of the *Confessions* as the 'return to the origin'" (xviii). Robert McMahon, *Augustine's Prayerful Ascent: An Essay on the Literary Form of the Confessions* (Athens: the University of Georgia Press: 1989).

⁴ For a brief treatment of the subject see Robert J. Connell, *St. Augustine's Confessions: the Odyssey of Soul* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 4-12.



By analyzing the *Confessions* in light of the cosmology, anthropology and theology articulated by Eric Voegelin in some of his essays⁵, the question of unity and meaning no longer poses itself. The 13 books form a coherent symbolization of one man's struggle within the In-Between (*metaxy*) structure of Being, his noetic insight into this structure and the subsequent attempt to express his newfound understanding of reality. Thus understood, the *Confessions* become a powerful account of a soul's turning around (*periag.g.*). They offer a vivid testimony of what lies at the core of Voegelin's thought: life as the tension between the pull of the sacred cord of reason and the counterpull of the lesser cords of the passions. The central ideas in Voegelin's thought are interwoven throughout the entire text, from the particularities of Augustine's life to his exegetical efforts. Read in this light, the meaning and structure of Augustine's ascent to conversion will disclose themselves more fully than other overly literary and unphilosophical studies of the *Confessions*.⁶

This approach not only illuminates the nature of Augustine's participation in reality, but also brings Voegelin's thought to life. Indeed, in his essays, Voegelin clearly exposes the symbols he uses to understand reality but, given his style of writing, he does not recreate the experiential ascent which gave birth to them. Voegelin's symbolization of the structure of reality as the realm of in-betweenness or *metaxy* is precisely that: a symbol. It does not offer a comprehensive account of life. It only attempts to capture in words the structure of existence. Supreme irony, the symbols thus run the risk of being understood as signs despite Voegelin's repeated exhortations that "not the insights are to be remembered, but the resistance against the 'climate of opinion.'"⁷ Through the approach followed in this essay, Voegelin's symbolization comes to life, reveals its full significance and more importantly, its subtleties and limitations. That is not to say that the *Confessions* are just a simple illustration of Voegelin's 'theory'.⁸ On the contrary, the *Confessions* often take us beyond Voegelin and at times even highlight the limits of the symbols he uses to express his understanding of reality. Voegelin's thought should therefore only be used as a stepping stone to interpret Augustine's *Confessions*; it should never restrict their meaning.

While recent scholarship has begun to examine the relationship between Voegelin and Augustine, no one has used Voegelin's symbolization of existence to draw out Augustine's understanding of reality in the *Confessions*. Mitchell, in

5 See "Equivalence of Experience and Symbolization in History," "The Gospel and Culture," "Reason: The Classic Experience" and "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme" in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. XII, Published Essays 1966-1985, edited by Ellis Sankoz (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

6 For example, see Marrou, *Ibid*; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967) and James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

7 Voegelin, *Reason*, 289.

8 I enclose the word theory in quotes as it brings to mind the dreadful social sciences method where models (theories) are developed, applied to case studies, and then proved or disproved. Voegelin does not have a theory, at least not in the modern deformed sense of the word (a set of principles that explains the relationship between facts). His writings are however infused with the *ria* (the act of contemplation). As such, drawing upon Polanyi, theory is here understood as the articulation of an insight into reality. Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, [1958] 1974).

tracing the genealogy of the symbol of *metaxy*, examines Augustine's view of the Fall and concludes that it "reveals further metaxic differentiation while at the same time creating extraordinary tension within the *metaxy*."⁹ Mitchell, however, does not extend his insight to the *Confessions*, restricting his analysis to the *City of God*. Heyking's understanding of *Augustine and Politics as Longing in the World* betrays a strong Voegelinian bend. His interpretation of Augustinian politics and the political city draws from Voegelin's thesis in the *Ecumenic Age* that Augustine "conceived the 'intermingling' of the *civitas Dei* with the *civitas terrene* as the In-Between reality of history."¹⁰ Yet Heyking's book is a study of Augustine's political thought. As such, it concentrates on the *City of God* and only makes passing reference to the *Confessions*.

Since any interpretation of the *Confessions* runs the risk of "transforming a single idea—however valid, however present in the work—into a fundamental principle of its whole structure,"¹¹ as Agostino Trapé concluded after surveying more than twenty solutions to the problem of the work's unity, this particular reading does not claim to exhaust the depth of the text. Given the restricted scope of the essay, many of the particularities of Augustine's thought and of his *Confessions* are not addressed. Similarly, some of Voegelin's symbolism, although present throughout the *Confessions*, is not discussed since this essay is not a comparison of both authors, but rather a Voegelinian reading of Augustine.¹² Thus, bearing in mind O'Donnell's warning—"All of us who read Augustine fail him in many ways"¹³—let us turn to the *Confessions*.

Symbols

*Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty?*¹⁴ *How magnificent his strength! How inscrutable his wisdom!*¹⁵ So begin the *Confessions*. Augustine, who studied and taught rhetoric for many years, knew the importance of carefully choosing his words, especially those at the beginning of a text. Why then does he open his *Confessions* with a reference to Scripture? The citations are no mere rhetorical device as biblical references abound throughout the entire work. Whether recalling his childhood follies or investigating the prodigious powers of memory, Augustine effortlessly weaves quotes from the Bible with his narrative. Nay Sayers may detect a pretentious show of erudition. Yet the profound humility which Augustine displays throughout the work and his recurrent reminder that you thwart the proud¹⁶ should dispel their doubts. Even if such accusations were justified, the question concerning Scripture

⁹ Mark Mitchell, "Regaining the balance: An Augustinian response to Eric Voegelin," *Humanitas* 15:1 (2002), 18.

¹⁰ Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 172, quoted in John von Heyking, *Augustine and Politics as Longing in the World* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 11.

¹¹ Agostino Trapé, "Introduzione," *Le Confessioni*, vol. 1 of the Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana, 4th edition (Rome: Città Nuova, 1982), xxii, quoted in (and translated by) McMahon, *Augustine's Prayerful Ascent*, xii.

¹² For example, Voegelin's understanding of the meaning of past and present events as one which is internal to the process of truth is present throughout the *Confessions*.

¹³ O'Donnell, "Introduction," *Augustine: Confessions*, vol. 1 of III, xix.

¹⁴ *Psalms* 144:3. To facilitate reading, all citations from Scriptures are italicized.

¹⁵ *Psalms* 146:5.

¹⁶ 1 Peter v. 5.

would remain unanswered. Augustine was also versed in Platonism and the art of rhetoric yet he never cites Plotinus, Plato or Cicero.¹⁷ Why then the Bible and *only* the Bible?

To understand Augustine's constant references to Scripture, we must first understand the nature of these holy texts. At the core of the Bible is the revelation of the Unknown God, either through the prophets and his law, the Torah, in the Ancient Testament or through his son Jesus Christ in the New Testament.¹⁸ As such, Scriptures are the attempt to capture in words the human encounter with the Divine beyond being. They are the imperfect results of men's search for their common humanity and its order.¹⁹ Scriptures are imperfect for like all symbols they can never capture the Reality to which they point. As Voegelin writes, "The truth of the symbol is not informative; it is evocative."²⁰ For the biblical texts to be understood, they cannot be abstracted from the experiential context in which they arose. Without the experience of God, without the spiritual realm, the words of the Bible no longer make sense. They lose their evocative power. As such, they will only be *truly* understood by someone who has experienced the Divine presence in reality.

Thus, the young Augustine, enflamed "with a bewildering passion for the passion of eternal truth"²¹ after reading Cicero's *Hortentius*, immediately turns to the Holy Scriptures but their message is lost on him. As he has yet to experience the reality of which the biblical texts speak, Augustine has "too much conceit to accept their simplicity and not enough insight to penetrate their depths."²² Gleaming with pride, he still has to undergo the spiritual disciplining that will allow him to embrace God and understand the Scriptures. It would take another fourteen years for the words of Scripture to come to life.²³ Augustine's conversion in the garden in Milan, as he recounts it, culminates in and is confirmed by a reading of the sacred texts. Taking the children's refrain as a personal exhortation, Augustine picks up his Bible and opens it at a random passage. After reading only two verses, he says, "I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."²⁴ At that precise instant, Augustine finally finds the strength and the will to submit to God and in doing so, he allows the Scriptures to reveal their comforting message. A similar event takes place a few months later at Ostia when Augustine shares a vision with his mother Monica. The very sentence in which Augustine describes his insight into "the eternal Wisdom which abides over all things"²⁵ ends with an interpretation of a passage from the Gospel according to Matthew.

¹⁷ In the *City of God*, a much less personal work, Augustine cites these and other pagan authors profusely. ¹⁸ See Voegelin, *Gospel*, esp. 198.

¹⁹ Voegelin, *Equivalence*, 115.

²⁰ Voegelin, *Gospel*, 344.

²¹ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 4. Translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin Books, 1961). All subsequent quotations from the *Confessions* refer to this translation.

²² *Conf.* III, 5.

²³ All chronological references to Augustine's life are drawn from the tables in and Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (16, 74, 184, 282 and 378).

²⁴ *Conf.* VIII, 12.

²⁵ *Conf.* IX, 10.

In both of these revealing episodes, Augustine demonstrates how, in sharing part of the experience which gave rise to the biblical symbols, he is able to understand the reality to which they point. "It was my eyes that read these words but my soul that knew their meaning,"²⁶ he confesses. The gradual unfolding of the meaning of Scripture throughout the *Confessions* will thus culminate in a detailed exegesis of the opening chapter of the Bible. In the last three books of the *Confessions*, Augustine allows the sacred words of Scriptures to shine forth and reveal their hitherto obscure meaning.

We are now better placed to understand why Augustine chooses to open his *Confessions* with biblical quotes. The words of Scripture express, with a great degree of differentiation, the religious dimension of reality and the experience of the divine that Augustine himself discovered during the thirty or so years that the *Confessions* cover. In the biblical symbolization of man's participation in reality, Augustine also recognized his progression, his turning around (peritag_g.).

Having discerned the divine presence in human reality, Augustine begins his *Confessions* by addressing God. In doing so, he could have selected a number of different passages from Scripture yet he settles upon the verse from Psalms quoted above: *Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty?* Augustine's choice of words points to a fundamental paradox inherent in any human attempt to speak of the transcendent other using words grounded in the immanent realm of reality. As Voegelin writes, "the noetic thinker has to symbolize the experience of something that he experiences as lying beyond the symbolization of being things."²⁷ Well aware of the paradoxical nature of his enterprise, Augustine devotes the first five sections of his *Confessions* to its exposition. "Can any man say enough when he speaks of you?" he asks. "For even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you."²⁸ Augustine can only turn to God for help: "Help me to find words to explain."²⁹ In doing so, Augustine acknowledges the structure of reality and man's place in it. He knows that man cannot transcend his condition, reside in the divine realm and capture God's transcendence in words.³⁰ When speaking of God, Augustine, like all men, can only rely on symbols that extend beyond themselves and direct our attention to the other. Augustine is conscious that the structure of reality is that of a *metaxy*, or In-Betweenness.

Metaxy

The Platonic concept of In-Betweenness or *metaxy*, discussed, though always incidentally to the main argument, in the *Symposium*, the *Philebus* and other dialogues, was taken up by Eric Voegelin for whom it came to symbolize the very structure of human existence. Starting from Plato's *metaxy*, Voegelin

²⁶ *Conf.* IX, 4.

²⁷ Voegelin, *Wisdom*, 361.

²⁸ *Conf.* I, 4.

²⁹ *Conf.* I, 5.

³⁰ As Crosson rightly points out, the *Confessions* thus address "the problem of understanding how such an utterly transcendent being can possibly appear within the whole." Frederick J. Crosson, "Structure and Meaning in St. Augustine's *Confessions*," *The Augustinian Tradition*, edited by Gareth B. Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 32.

develops the symbol of In-Betweenness to encompass the whole of reality. Life has the structure of a permanent and irresolvable tension between "life and death, immortality and mortality, perfection and imperfection, time and timelessness; between order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence."³¹ Whichever dyad is used to symbolize the two poles of existence—and this list is far from exhaustive—the structure to which it points remains the same: In-Betweenness. The human realm of participation (*metax-psis*) in reality is thus delimited.

Far from being static entities detached from the *metaxy*, the poles, through the pulls they exert on man, are the dominating forces in the human realm. To illustrate this, Voegelin symbolizes the extremes as the Divine and Cosmic grounds. The Divine Ground, also called the One, the Divine Nous, the Unknown God, or simply the Beyond (*epekeina*) is the formative force in all things and, more importantly, the source of the sacred pull of Reason which draws man to the divine heights of the *metaxy*. The Cosmic Ground or the Unlimited (*Apeiron*) essentially refers to being in time and, as such, is the seat of the counterpull of the passions—chief among which is the *libido dominandi*, the lust to dominate. For once reality is drained of its truth, existence is reduced to being in time, man takes on the role of God and through the *libido dominandi* seeks to create and impose meaning.

Inherent to the experience of life as a state of permanent unrest is a questioning of the divine source of the tension. Hence, Aristotle's assertion in the opening line of his *Metaphysics*: "All men by nature desire to know" (*pantes anthr_poi tou eidenai oregontai phusei*).³² This desire to know the divine ground of man's existence is first aroused by the ground itself. The divine element present in the *metaxy* seeks to arouse man so that he may repudiate a life of being in time and devote himself to the pursuit, but never the attainment, of wisdom. Through the pull of reason, the Divine ground seeks to give a direction to man's movement in the *metaxy*. Reason, is thus "both the force and the criterion of order."³³

By following the pull of reason, man engages in the practice of immortalizing through the experience of the divine presence in reality. However, he can also choose to succumb to the cosmic passions. In doing so, he chooses death. For what is creation but a cycle of birth, growth, decay and death? In the *metaxic* structure of existence, man's soul (*psyche*) becomes the landing site for the cosmic and divine forces, "the battleground between the forces of life and death."³⁴ It is thus incumbent upon man to follow "the pull of the golden cord as far as the counterpull of the steely cords [of the passions] will allow."³⁵

³¹ Voegelin, *Equivalence*, 119.

³² Or, as Voegelin translates to better reflect the structure of reality, "all men by nature reach out for knowledge." Voegelin, "Anxiety and Reason," *What is history? and other late unpublished writings*, edited by Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 103.

³³ Voegelin, *Reason*, 265.

³⁴ Voegelin, *Reason*, 281.

³⁵ Voegelin, *Wisdom*, 338.

The Depths of the Metaxy

The word *metaxy* never appears in the *Confessions*. Not only did Augustine have access to no more than a few Greek texts translated into Latin, his childhood aversion for Greek never allowed him to gain more than rudimentary knowledge of the language.³⁶ Yet like happiness which "is neither Greek nor Latin," but transcends language and is "known to all,"³⁷ the reality to which the symbol of *metaxy* points pervades the *Confessions*. The narrative structure which Augustine imposes upon his life continually reflects the tension between "the God who IS"³⁸ and "the temporal pleasures of the visible world,"³⁹ between the love of the Creator and the love of the creation, between the "bewildering passion for the wisdom of eternal truth"⁴⁰ and the "thoughtless, impetuous enthusiasm for futile pastimes."⁴¹

However, Augustine's life reveals subtleties which are absent from Voegelin's symbolization of the *metaxy* of being. In the first two books of the *Confessions*, we meet a young Augustine who looks for "pleasure, beauty and truth not in (God)" but rather in himself and in God's other creations.⁴² Augustine, by his own account, appears so steeped in sin, so devoted to a life of being in time that he becomes oblivious to the sacred pull of the divine. The *apeironic* counterpull eclipses the noetic drawing. The unrest in Augustine's life no longer results from the interplay of the pulls, but rather from the competing desires.

At first, when recalling his days of sin, Augustine, now Bishop of Hippo, fails to see the divine pull. "I strayed still farther from you and you did not restrain me. I was tossed and spilled, floundering in the broiling sea of my fornication and you said no word."⁴³ The sacred pull was of course present all the time and, in the next section, Augustine realizes that through Monica's exhortations, God sought to draw his attention to the depravity of his ways. "Surely the words which rang in my ears, spoken by your faithful servant my mother, could have come from none but you? Yet none of them sank in my heart to make me do as you said."⁴⁴ While the divine pull inviting man to partake in immortality always exists, regardless of whether man chooses to follow it or not, it will not be felt by those dedicated to the pursuit of earthly pleasures.

Augustine only becomes aware of the pull at the age of 19 after reading Cicero's *Hortentius*. Augustine thus introduces a distinction, absent from Voegelin's writings, between the presence of the pull and man's awareness of it. Voegelin only describes the *metaxic* structure of reality and the countless deformations it undergoes. His essays, couched in the articulate language of a philosopher, fail to convey the seductive power of the passions. Based on his

36 *Conf. I*, 13-14. See also Marrou who, in his thorough discussion of the question "Augustin savait-il le grec?", argues that "je ne conteste pas qu'il ait su le grec, je crois seulement qu'il ne devait pas en savoir beaucoup" (33) and concludes "La culture intellectuelle d'Augustin est tout entière de langue latine" (37). Cf. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 36.

37 *Conf. X*, 20.

38 *Conf. VII*, 17.

39 *Conf. IX*, 4.

40 *Conf. III*, 4.

41 *Conf. VI*, 7.

42 *Conf. I*, 20.

43 *Conf. II*, 2.

44 *Conf. II*, 3.



writings, it is indeed hard to see why anyone would not follow the sacred pull of reason with its promise of immortality. Voegelin pays scant attention to those who choose to completely indulge in the counterpull of passions. His acerbic criticism is mostly directed at those who deny the *metaxic* structure of reality. That is not to imply that Voegelin is unaware of the counterpull's appeal; only that he does not describe it with enough force and not frequently enough.⁴⁵ While the praise Voegelin bestows upon Plato equally applies to him—he is "acutely aware of the spirituality of evil and of the fascination emanating from a tyrannical order"⁴⁶—his appreciation for the tyrannical demands of the passions is absent from many of his writings. Voegelin does not forcefully account for the vast majority of men whose lives are an unremitting succession of desires and the attempts to satisfy them.⁴⁷

Herein lay Augustine's strength. He draws our attention to the relentless, and at times overwhelming counterpull of the passions. The first two books of the *Confessions* are first and foremost a vivid description of the intoxicating powers of sin which can completely obscure reason. Existence, for Augustine, begins, not in the center of the *metaxic*, but in the depths of the *Apeiron*.⁴⁸ Babies are not innocent. They are selfish, vengeful and throw tantrums when their wishes are not carried out.⁴⁹ As they enter boyhood and adolescence, they fall even deeper into sin. For sin itself, rather than the objects of the misguided desires, becomes a source of pleasure. "I loved my own perdition and my own faults,"⁵⁰ confesses Augustine. When stealing the pears, he "relished and enjoyed"⁵¹ not the fruits, which he threw away, but his own sin. After arriving in Carthage, the young Augustine admits, "I had not yet fallen in love, but I was in love with the idea of it."⁵² In retrospect, Augustine realizes that his early life could not "be called true life."⁵³ But at the time, he reveled in it, dismissing his mother's words as "womanish advice."⁵⁴ Augustine thus spent the first 19 years of his life oblivious to the pull of reason. How then did he suddenly become aware of it?

Periag_g

In Plato's allegory of the cave, one of the prisoners "is compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck around and walk and look toward the light."⁵⁵

⁴⁵ There are some notable exceptions. In his book on *Plato*, Voegelin exposes the *er_s tyrannos* which "purges the soul of its last remnants of shame and temperance, and subordinates all actions to the satisfaction of its insatiable craving." Voegelin, *Plato* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 127.
⁴⁶ Voegelin, *Plato*, 127.

⁴⁷ In *Wisdom*, Voegelin briefly discusses the 'darkness' in reality drawing upon Hesiod's list of human miseries. Yet here too, the burden of existence is dealt with a single paragraph and rapidly explained as "the lot of man," 318.

⁴⁸ This idea if of course echoed in the Christian doctrine of original sin. Indeed, Augustine quotes a passage from *Psalms* (91:2), "I was born in sin and guilt was with me already when my mother conceived me."

⁴⁹ *Conf.* II, 6.

⁵⁰ *Conf.* II, 4.

⁵¹ *Conf.* II, 6.

⁵² *Conf.* III, 1.

⁵³ *Conf.* III, 2.

⁵⁴ *Conf.* II, 3.

⁵⁵ *Plato, Republic*, translated by Benjamin Jowett in *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. I (New York: Random House, [1892] 1937), 515d.

Man does not initiate *periaeg-g*-. The action of turning around, as Voegelin writes, "is less an action of seeking than a fate inflicted."⁵⁶ In the myth of the Puppet Player, recounted by the Athenian Strangers in the Laws, man takes on a more active role as it is now incumbent upon him "to assist this most noble pull."⁵⁷ The myth, being a compact form of symbolization, does not explore the reasons that lead man to assist this pull in the first place.

For Eric Voegelin, the answer, while pervasive throughout all his writings, was stated clearly when he said: "the motivations of my work are simple; they arise from the political situation."⁵⁸ By this, Voegelin meant that his philosophy was a response to the climate of ideology and dogmatism in which he lived. Thus understood, philosophy arises as an effort of resistance against the various deformations to which the truth is subjected.⁵⁹ For Voegelin, the age in which he lived—modernity itself—constituted an affront on Reality and the *metaxic* structure of being. He saw a common thread of untruth running through the works of Comte, Hegel, Marx, Freud and countless other modern thinkers. Voegelin devoted considerable energies attacking the intellectual foundations upon which their systems rested and exposing their gnostic underpinnings. In Voegelin's life, we can thus discern a circular movement where the corruption of reason leads man to seek reason which he will then use to denounce its various deformations.⁶⁰

In the *Confessions*, the first experience of the pull of reason initiates Augustine's *periaeg-g* but it soon derails, leaving him in the hands of the gnostic Manichees.⁶¹ As we have seen, the "passion for the wisdom of eternal truth"⁶² is first awakened in a young Augustine, consumed by desire, after reading Cicero's *Horrentius*. Of it, he writes, "it altered my outlook on life. It changed my prayers to you, O Lord, and provided me with new hopes and aspirations...I began to climb out of the depths to which I had sunk, in order to return to you."⁶³ These words express more than just the strong reaction of a passionate young man. The reading of the *Horrentius* marked the first turning point in Augustine's life. Many years later, Augustine would still identify it as the event which had inspired him to turn to philosophy.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ *Voegelin, Gospel*, 184.

⁵⁷ *Plato, Laws*, 645a, translated by Thomas Pangle (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁵⁸ Quoted in the introduction by Ellis Sandoz of *In Search of Order* by Eric Voegelin (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 3.

⁵⁹ While absent from the two platonic myths referred to above, this idea is present in Plato's work. As Voegelin writes, the Hellenic philosophers "were engaged in an act of resistance against the personal and social disorder of their age" (*Reason*, 265).

⁶⁰ In his essay on *Reason*, Voegelin presents a different account of the turn to reason. By following the pull of the Divine Nous, man chooses life by engaging in the action of "immortalizing." "Life is not a given; the God of the Laws can only offer it through the revelation of his presence; life to be gained requires the cooperation of man" (281). Man chooses the life of reason, not in reaction to a climate of perverted reason, but rather as an active decision to partake in immortality.

⁶¹ Augustine, of course, does not describe his conversion as a *periaeg-g*-. He uses the Latin *conversio*. Both words convey the idea of a turning around, a revolution or a rotation. Yet *Periaeg-g* evokes the myth of the cave and has strong platonic connotations, whereas *conversio* is less charged philosophically.

⁶² *Conf.* III, 5.

⁶³ *Conf.* III, 4.

⁶⁴ *Conf.* VII, 7.

While Augustine does not say why this book, which has since been lost, provoked such a strong reaction in him, the narrative structure of the *Confessions* seems to reveal the reason. In the sections leading up to the discovery of the *Hortentius* in Book III, we meet an Augustine's whose "soul fell sick."⁶⁵ After describing the thrills and tumults of sin which engulfed his adolescence, Augustine begins to feel the emptiness and sorrow which inevitably accompany the mindless pursuit of physical pleasure. He realizes that "material things, which have no soul, could not be true objects for my love."⁶⁶ In these "unhappy days," he develops a passion for the theatre, because the tragic plays reflect his "own unhappy plight" and make his "sorrow and tears" enjoyable.⁶⁷ Whereas he once sought the approval of his peers by any means and relished "the thrill of having partners in sin,"⁶⁸ Augustine now has a horror for the violent outbursts of the Wreckers and behaves "far more quietly"⁶⁹ than them. The *apeironic* lust for being in time, which had at first been a source of unlimited pleasures, reveals its darker side through the distress it causes Augustine. Having exhausted himself in depravity, Augustine is now ready to feel the gentle pull of reason. As he becomes conscious of the sorrow which accompanies the counterpull, man initiates his *peritag_g_* by allowing himself to be receptive to the divine calling through reason.

After being inspired by the *Hortentius*, Augustine turns to the Bible for Cicero's work had made no mention of Christ.⁷⁰ Monica's influence had at least succeeded in imparting the name of Christ to her son. Augustine, however, is still not spiritually fit to receive the Scriptures' message. Searching for Christ, yet unable to find him in the Holy Scriptures, he thus falls prey to the Manichees.

The Perversion of Reason

Augustine's fall into Manichaeism reveals an important lacuna in Eric Voegelin's symbolization of man's movement within reality. Voegelin ignores the possibility of regression. His account of *philo-sophia*, also evident in the allegory of the Cave, implies that once the *peritag_g_* is initiated, man can only go up. Voegelin forgets that seeing the light is different from reaching its source. He does not take into consideration the likely perversion of reason by the passions which may set up false rational ideals to maintain their hegemony over the soul. Voegelin, of course, is aware that the counterpull of the passions is always present. Indeed, man can only follow "the pull of the golden cord as far as the counterpull of the steely cords will allow."⁷¹ But his depiction of

63 *Conf.* III, 4.

64 *Conf.* VII, 7.

65 *Conf.* III, 1.

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Conf.* III, 2.

68 *Conf.* II, 8.

69 *Conf.* III, 3.

70 In this section, Augustine gives the first hint as to the marked distinction between philosophy, which finds its finest expression in Plato, and Christianity. The contrast between the two, as understood by Augustine and Voegelin will be discussed shortly.

71 Voegelin, *Wisdom*, 338.

peritrag_g is linear. Once set on the quest for wisdom, man neither falters nor looks back.⁷²

If this were true, why then would Augustine, who now longs "to have wings to carry me back to you, away from all earthly things,"⁷³ fall prey to the twisted beliefs of the Manichees, those "men with glib tongues who ranted and raved and had the snares of the devil in their mouths"?⁷⁴ Contrasted as such, Augustine's embracing of their heretic beliefs appears paradoxical. But the question posed is misleading as it ignores Augustine's "disordered state mind."⁷⁵ Even after reading the *Hortentius*, he is still "in love with a beauty of a lower order,"⁷⁶ his soul, still "a burden, bruised and bleeding"⁷⁷ while his "restless passions"⁷⁸ continue to consume him.

In what is perhaps one of the most revealing passages in all the *Confessions*, Augustine admits that knowledge of what one ought to do is not sufficient: "a heavy load of misery weighed me down. I knew, Lord, that I ought to offer it up to you, for you would heal it. But this I would not do, nor could I."⁷⁹ Augustine is *unwilling* to abandon his old ways and his mind is still not spiritually fit to grasp God. Augustine remains proud and refuses to even entertain the idea that he might have to change his ways to find God. He much prefers to adapt his image of God so that it does not clash with his way of life.⁸⁰ In an attempt to get the best of both worlds, Augustine subscribes to the Manichean teaching. He can continue to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh while maintaining the illusion that in the Manichees' *phantasmata* splendida he can find God and assure his salvation. Through "specious reasoning," he finds solace in the teachings of Manichaeism.⁸¹

Reason, which Voegelin rightly understood as the "force and the criterion for order," can nonetheless be perverted.⁸² In the very section which follows Augustine's entry into the Manichean sect, he discusses the nature of sin. Those who sin "corrupt and pervert their own nature, which you made and for which you shaped the rules, either by making wrong use of things which you allow, or by becoming inflamed with passion to make unnatural use of things which you do not allow."⁸³ Even the sacred nous is not immune from the corrosive passions. Once "the rational mind is corrupt, mistaken ideas and false beliefs will poison life."⁸⁴ Too proud to acknowledge his weaknesses, Augustine uses

⁷² Once again, this is not meant to imply that Voegelin was unaware of regression, only that does not discuss it in the essays under consideration. On a larger historical scale, Voegelin acknowledges a regression as is evident from his writings. Indeed, he devotes the majority of his work to tracing the deformation of the highly-differentiated Classical symbols and to exposing the Gnostic underpinnings of modern thinkers. Voegelin thus points the way but does not extend his account of regression to the level of the individual.

⁷³ *Conf.* III, 4.

⁷⁴ *Conf.* III, 6.

⁷⁵ *Conf.* IV, 3.

⁷⁶ *Conf.* IV, 13.

⁷⁷ *Conf.* IV, 7.

⁷⁸ *Conf.* IV, 2.

⁷⁹ *Conf.* IV, 7.

⁸⁰ See *Conf.* IV, 15.

⁸¹ *Conf.* IV, 7.

⁸² Voegelin, *Reason*, 267

⁸³ *Conf.* IV, 8.

⁸⁴ *Conf.* IV, 15.

reason to justify them and cannot resist the appeal of the Manichees' dualist doctrine which places the blame for evil on evil itself. "It flattered my pride to think that I incurred no guilt," he confesses. "I preferred to excuse myself and blame this unknown thing [Evil] which was in me but was not part of me."⁸⁵

Before concluding Book IV, Augustine interrupts his lament about his Manichean days to recall his reading of Aristotle's *Ten Categories*. Augustine had understood the book without any help, despite its reputed difficulty. He thus distinguishes intelligence, with which complex arguments can be understood, from reason, with which one ascends to God.⁸⁶ The obscuring of reason by pride does not prevent Augustine from using his intellect for studies which bring him no profit as they only separate him further from God.

At this point, the divine pull of reason transforms into a force of repulsion. Augustine describes being pushed back by God. "I was struggling to reach you, but you thrust me back."⁸⁷ God only reveals himself to "men who are humble at heart"⁸⁸ but Augustine is still swelled with pride.⁸⁹ God thus thrusts back Augustine, letting his desires carry him "on a journey that was to put an end to those same desires" and crush his rearing pride. While Voegelin only speaks of God manifesting himself in healthy souls by inviting them to follow reason, Augustine reveals another aspect of the divine presence in reality: God thrusts back sick souls so that they may collapse under the weight of their own pride. He derides the ambitions of those eager for fame and wealth;⁹⁰ he forces sinners to confront their depravity.⁹¹ God paves the way for the spiritual recovery of those whose minds are not fit to grasp him. As Augustine was later to realize, "you set my abject errors before my eyes so that I might see them and detest them."⁹²

Ensnared in a web of delusions, Augustine would spend the next nine years of his life as a Manichee. Despite the shroud of pride which covered his reason, Augustine is too intelligent to blindly accept all the Manichean fictions. By the age of 29, he begins "to distinguish between mere eloquence and the real truth."⁹³ To all the questions which Augustine raises, the Manichees, hard pressed for answers, can only assure him that the bishop Faustus holds the answer. Yet Faustus, like the other Manichees in Carthage, turns out to be quite unformed. Much like the passions which eventually revealed their darker side and brought Augustine to the love of wisdom, the inconsistencies of Manichaeism come to light and mark the beginning of his second *peripleg*.

Freed from the Manichees' hold, Augustine will now begin to experience the unrest of the *metaxy*. Over the next four years, he flounders in "the same quagmire,"⁹⁴ his heart "buffeted hither and thither by winds blowing from

⁸⁵ *Conf. V*, 10.

⁸⁶ Cf. Voegelin, *Reason*, 270: "Parmenides had given the name nous to man's faculty of ascending to the vision of Being, and the name logos to the faculty of analyzing the content of the vision."

⁸⁷ *Conf. IV*, 15.

⁸⁸ *Conf. V*, 3.

⁸⁹ *Conf. V*, 8.

⁹⁰ *Conf. VI*, 6.

⁹¹ In Book VIII, 7, Augustine writes, "O Lord, you were turning me around to look at myself."

⁹² *Conf. V*, 6.

⁹³ *Conf. V*, 3.

⁹⁴ *Conf. VI*, 11.

opposite quarters."⁹⁵ Augustine is torn between consecrating himself to "the search for God and the life of true happiness" and the desire "to enjoy what the world has to offer."⁹⁶ He longs for God but is afraid to find him. He knows that the disease of the flesh drags him down, but he fears letting go of it. The fear of following the sacred pull, an idea entirely absent from Voegelin's essays, will haunt Augustine until his conversion. Even after his vision in Milan, Augustine is convinced that he should abandon his lustful ways but is afraid to do so.⁹⁷ All the soul's "old arguments were exhausted and had been shown to be false," yet it "remained silent and afraid."⁹⁸

Beyond Platonism to Christianity

The period leading up to Augustine's conversion will disclose the fundamental difference between Christianity and Platonic philosophy which is obscured in Voegelin's intricate writing. Voegelin's extensive search for order in history, the result of which makes up the five-volume *Order and History*, led him to the insight that the human experience of participating in reality and the symbolism it engenders cut across time and space. He discerned that "what is permanent in the history of mankind is not the symbols but man himself in search of his humanity and its order."⁹⁹ Excluding the countless varieties of gnosticism that refuse to experience the openness of the *metaxy*, Voegelin understood history as a process of partial truths succeeding one another. While the experiences which give rise to these truths are equivalent, the symbolisms used to express the result of man's search for order are not. Thus, the "differences between prophecy, classical philosophy, and the gospel must be sought in the degrees of differentiation of existential truth."¹⁰⁰ The symbolism which emerged from Hellenic Greece went beyond the compact symbols developed by the Egyptians and the Hebrews, but it would be further differentiated in the Christian Gospels. The difference between Christianity and platonic philosophy is to be found in the symbols used to mediate man's knowledge of the Unknown God (the Divine Ground of the *metaxy*). For Plato, *er_s* acts as mediator. In Christianity, the image of the Eternal is now embodied in Christ. For Voegelin, Christianity and Platonic philosophy thus speak of the same God and the same *metaxic* reality but rely on different symbols to express these truths. Unfortunately, Voegelin does not draw out the implications of this difference in differentiation. He does not extend his insight into the equivalence of Christianity and Platonism to the experiential level.

Augustine's project in the *Confessions* is much more modest than Voegelin's *Order and History*. While Augustine's search for order does not expand beyond his own life, he does arrive at some similar conclusions. By the end of his *Confessions*, Augustine realizes that "a truth which the mind understands [which is experienced] in one way only can be materially expressed

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Conf.* VIII, 5.

⁹⁸ *Conf.* VIII, 7.

⁹⁹ Voegelin, *Equivalence*, 115.

¹⁰⁰ Voegelin, *Gospel*, 188.



[symbolized] by different means."¹⁰¹ The divine truths, which remain mysteries to man, "are fixed and defined and are not enlarged by further evolution. Such are the lights of wisdom and knowledge [Truth]. But the workings of these same truths in the material order [their symbolization] are numerous and varied."¹⁰² Divine Truth is beyond words, but its different manifestations in human reality (truths) can be symbolized.¹⁰³ Augustine does not discuss the equivalence of experience but his understanding that the one Truth is captured in different truths implies it.

In recounting his progression from Platonism to Christianity, Augustine brings Voegelin's language to life and reveals the limits of philosophy. Voegelin's hitherto abstract degrees of differentiation of truth will prove to hide a crucial difference between Christianity and classical philosophy. The further differentiation of Jesus the mediator translates into a fundamental difference at the experiential level. To understand this difference, it is perhaps best to examine how Augustine arrived at his insight.

After leaving the Manichees, Augustine wallows in skepticism, afraid to abandon his sinful ways. He is unable to free himself completely from the Manichees' pernicious hold, as his reason is still not spiritually fit to overcome their false understanding of God and evil. Reason, still subjugated to pride and the passions, acts as an impediment to grasping God. The intimate connection between reason and God will come to light later when Augustine finally resolves the problem of evil by accepting responsibility for his actions.¹⁰⁴ After freeing the power of reason, Augustine is fit to reach God. Through fortuitous causes, he discovers the Platonists' books. In them, he finds part of the Scriptures' message "not, of course, word for word, though the sense was the same and it was supported by all kinds of different arguments."¹⁰⁵ Through Platonism, Augustine arrives at true knowledge of God which culminates in a vision of the transcendent divine realm. As he writes, "my mind attained to the sight of the God who IS."¹⁰⁶

Even with his direct experience of God, Augustine remains "too weak to enjoy you."¹⁰⁷ He immediately falls back into his old ways, only retaining the memory of his vision (*opsis*). Augustine has now seen the goal but he does not know how to reach it. He needs a mediator, but the Platonists do not offer any. Augustine turns to Scriptures and embraces Jesus Christ as the "True Mediator."¹⁰⁸ For Jesus shows men the way by his words and, more importantly, through his deeds.¹⁰⁹ The difference between Platonism and Christianity is now clear. While they both point to the same God, only Christianity offers a way of reaching him. As Augustine admirably writes, "it is one thing to decry the land of peace from a wooded hilltop and, unable to find the way to it, struggle on

¹⁰¹ *Conf. XII*, 24.

¹⁰² *Conf. XIII*, 20.

¹⁰³ *Ci. Conf. XI*, 3: "Truth, which is neither Hebrew nor Greek nor Latin nor any foreign speech, would speak to me."

¹⁰⁴ *Conf. VII*, 12-16.

¹⁰⁵ *Conf. VII*, 9.

¹⁰⁶ *Conf. VII*, 16.

¹⁰⁷ *Conf. VII*, 20.

¹⁰⁸ *Conf. X*, 43.

¹⁰⁹ *Conf. X*, 4.

through trackless wastes where traitors and runaways, captained by their prince, who is *lion and serpent* in one, lie in wait to attack. It is another thing to follow the high road to that land of peace, the way that is defended by the care of the heavenly Commander.¹¹⁰

Conversion and Beyond

Augustine has now seen God and accepted Christ as the True Mediator to reach him. The "voice of Truth" has spoken to him.¹¹¹ He cannot "ask for a more certain proof of you."¹¹² Augustine's reason and faith have taken him as far as they can. He knows both the end and the way to reach it. As he writes in the first section of Book VIII, "The words of your Scriptures were planted firmly in my heart and on all sides you were there like a rampart to defend me."¹¹³ While these truths are "wonderful,"¹¹⁴ Augustine remains unhappy. He no longer hopes for honour and wealth but is still "held firm in the bonds of woman's love,"¹¹⁵ knowing very well that his lust stands in the way to God. Augustine confronts the same dilemma which he faced after reading the *Hortentius*: he knows that he should abandon his old ways but he is unwilling to do so.¹¹⁶ Here too, he confesses, "I had already found the pearl of great value and I ought to have sold all that I had and bought it. *But I still held back.*"¹¹⁷ This "I" of course is the chain of habit forged over so many years of indulging in lust. In the Augustinian *metaxy*, the steely cords of the passions stand their own against the golden cord of reason.

In the period leading up to Augustine's conversion, the unrest of the *metaxy* reaches a climax. Augustine's soul feels the true tension of being as the sacred pull is now strong enough to resist the counterpull of the passions. Armed with "a clear perception of the truth,"¹¹⁸ Augustine opens himself to the unrest of being (*tasis*). He attempts to convey this hitherto inexperienced tension in the symbol of the divided will being pulled in two opposite directions. "My inner self was a house divided against itself," laments Augustine.¹¹⁹ Augustine's wills replace Voegelin's pulls but the existential unrest is no less acute.

At the height of the tension, Augustine turns to himself in despair. "I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it,"¹²⁰ he writes, using words which almost mirror Voegelin's symbol of the "depth of the soul from which a new truth of reality can be hauled up to conscious experience."¹²¹ Augustine's conversion is the result of a 12-year struggle which culminates in

110 *Conf. VII*, 21.

111 *Conf. VIII*, 1.

112 *Conf. VIII*, 1.

113 *Ibid.*

114 *Conf. VII*, 21.

115 *Conf. VIII*, 1.

116 Augustine thus highlights the fundamental shortcoming of Socrates' early ethical cognitivism ("to know the good is sufficient cause to do the good), as evident in the Gorgias, and thus aligns himself with Socrates' later holistic account of the soul as captured in the image of the chariot in the *Phaedrus*.

117 *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

118 *Conf. VIII*, 5.

119 *Conf. VIII*, 8. Cf. *Conf. VIII*, 10: "one soul which is torn between conflicting wills."

120 *Conf. VIII*, 12.

121 Voegelin, *Equivalence*, 124.



his experience of reality and the resulting insight into its structure. The sections leading up to Augustine's revelation beneath the fig tree make it clear that he converts by acknowledging the *metaxic* structure of being and the impossibility of overcoming it. He understands and accepts the inherent conflict between reason and the passions which were formed without regard to reason. By recognizing his place in reality, Augustine acquires what Voegelin calls a "differentiated and therefore superior insight into the same reality" shared by all.¹²² He participates in the process of reality becoming luminous to itself. In the conversion, we witness "the unfolding of noetic consciousness in the psyche."¹²³ By converting, Augustine does not overcome the counterpull of the passions but casts them upon God. He becomes conscious that the divine presence in the *metaxy* will help him bear their relentless downwards pull.

The conversion itself—the actual realization of the *metaxic* structure of being—only takes up two pages. Augustine's struggle makes up the previous eight books. The structure of the *Confessions* echoes what is perhaps Voegelin's central thesis around which the rest of his thought gravitates: what is constant in the history of mankind is the unrest of the *metaxy* itself, not the truths which emerge from it. The *Confessions* are thus first and foremost the story of man's struggle within the *metaxy* of being. Augustine's merit lay in describing the struggle. As he writes in a passage which captures the essence of the first 8 books: "I tried to raise my mental perceptions out of the abyss which engulfed them, but I sank back into it once more. *Again and again* I tried, but I always sank back."¹²⁴

We can now understand how Augustine's conversion distinguishes itself from other popular accounts of conversion.¹²⁵ While it does represent a turning point in his life, it does not mark a radical break with the past. Augustine has experienced reality but he has not overcome it. He remains imperfect.¹²⁶ The *Confessions* do not come to a close at the end of Book IX. Indeed Book X is both an examination of memory and a detailed account of the many faces of temptation. "I do not know which temptations I can resist and which I cannot," he writes.¹²⁷ Augustine is still not continent.¹²⁸ He remains "troubled by this kind of evil [lust]."¹²⁹ Through all five senses, and even in sleep, he is tempted to indulge in the pursuit of worldly pleasures. His daily life "is passed in the midst of the clamour raised by so many temptations."¹³⁰ Even after his two visions and the turn to Christianity, Augustine has not resolved the problem of temptation.¹³¹ In fact, his conversion has heightened his awareness of it. Whereas the first nine books mostly dealt with lust, pride and childhood follies,

122 Voegelin, *Experience*, 125.

123 Voegelin, *Reason*, 287.

124 *Conf.* VII, 3, emphasis added.

125 For examples, see Brown, 177.

126 *Conf.* X, 4.

127 *Conf.* X, 5.

128 *Conf.* X, 29.

129 *Conf.* X, 30.

130 *Conf.* X, 35. Cf. X, 40: "But my heavy burden of distress drags me down again to earth. Again I become prey to my habits, which hold me fast."

131 *Conf.* X, 31.

Book X exposes the vast array of temptations that plague man—from the seemingly innocent love of music to the perversity of praising God to draw attention to oneself. Augustine makes it abundantly clear that man can neither overcome the unrest of the *metaxy* nor can he quiet his unremitting passions.

Augustine has of course changed. His passions have not been overcome but rather sublimated into a higher state of existential consciousness. He is no longer alone in confronting them. "Deep still calls to deep, but now the call is made *amid the roar of the floods you send*."¹³² In Augustine's good actions, the divine presence reveals itself: "The good I do is done by you in me."¹³³ His once rearing pride has now been curbed.¹³⁴ While still not continent, Augustine is much more moderate. Before his conversion, the death of a friend left him wallowing in tears and "sick and tired of living and yet afraid to die."¹³⁵ At the death of his mother—the person dearest to him as is evident from the *Confessions*—Augustine is able, with much effort, to hold back his tears as "a more mature voice within me, the voice of my heart, bade me to keep my sobs in check."¹³⁶

The most important change in Augustine's life is the choice to follow the pull of reason, as is evident in the narrative structure of the *Confessions*. Reason, of course, has revealed its limitations. As such, Augustine abandons his reading of philosophy and turns more to Scripture.¹³⁷ As the book unfolds, its biographical aspect increasingly gives way to the examination of theological questions. Indeed, Augustine is almost absent from his *Confessions* after the conversion—except of course in his role of narrator. It is thus fitting that the *Confessions* should end with an in-depth interpretation of the first verses of genesis, thereby demonstrating the powers of reason in the service of God.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to illuminate Saint Augustine's *Confessions* while revealing the limits of Eric Voegelin's symbolization of man's participation in reality. While Augustine and Voegelin have both recognized the metaxic structure of reality and the impossibility of overcoming it, they choose to emphasize different aspects of it. Voegelin concentrates his analysis on the life of philosophy, on those who follow the pull of reason. Augustine looks at the depths of the *metaxy*, at the sick souls dragged down by the relentless counterpull of the passions.

As such, Voegelin's writings may easily leave the reader with an oversimplified picture of reality. It almost appears too easy to choose the life of

¹³² *Conf. XIII*, 13.

¹³³ *Conf. X*, 4.

¹³⁴ *Conf. X*, 36.

¹³⁵ *Conf. IV*, 6.

¹³⁶ *Conf. IX*, 12.

¹³⁷ As he writes in the *City of God*, "philosophers refuse to believe in this blessedness [salvation in the world to come] because they do not see it, and so they attempt to fabricate for themselves an utterly delusive happiness by means of a virtue whose falsity is in proportion to its arrogance" (XIX, 4). Saint Augustine, *City of God*, translated by Henri Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1984).



reason and participate in the process of reality becoming luminous to itself. Augustine forcefully draws attention to the lifelong struggle against the counterpull of the passions, to the chain of habit which shackles man as he tries to move toward the Divine ground. In Augustine's cave, the men do not "converse with one another"¹³⁸ about the nature of the shadows on the wall. Many, if not most, are too caught up in their own passionate pursuits to even notice the shadows or hear the echoes coming from above. Seething with lust and cruelty, they fornicate, drink and revel in the bloodshed and savagery of gladiatorial shows. They sin for the sake of sinning.

Unlike Plato's prisoners, these men are not born in shackles but rather forge their own chains, link by link, as their burning desires take the shape of habits and become necessities as they cool off. In this cave, the incessant clang of their chains resonates loudly.

None of these men are compelled to turn around and walk to the light. Some may choose to do so, but only after having grown disillusioned about the possibility for true happiness in the pursuit of pleasure. They now face an arduous task. In this cave, no one is released. The chains are never broken and the road out is treacherous and slippery. The chains of habit often mislead the men, setting up false luminous exits which in fact draw them further into the abysses of the cave. Even when the exit has been discerned, the ascent is hampered by the heavy chains of habit that still bind the men and slow their progress.

In this cave however, the path to the Sun is illuminated. The men know that Jesus walked the same path as they are about to embark on. By looking at his life, they can draw the courage and the guidance to embark on the long journey out of the cave. The Sun has already revealed itself through a man. He calls us, saying "*I am the way; I am truth and life.*"¹³⁹

After many slips, falls and backslides, some of these men will make it out of the cave and glimpse at the Sun—the same Sun which Plato's prisoner saw. This vision will not break their chains; it will only make the load easier to bear as they return to live in the cave, where they will continue to live the death which will eventually grant them life.

¹³⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 515b.

¹³⁹ John 14:6.