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Augustine on God and Memory

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ELIE WIESEL in both his literary work and his social activism has committed himself to recollection as a moral enterprise. In the private sphere created between his text and the reader, Wiesel explores his personal past to invoke the memory of charged presence—of loved ones, of lost worlds, of a silent God. In the public sphere of humanitarian activity, Wiesel holds those present accountable to the moral lessons of history, the communal past, creating from the memory of Jewish victimization an ethics of universal responsibility. In both endeavors, memory provides the matter for moral reflection.

Wiesel's ability to put his own, profoundly Jewish experience in service to his larger philosophical and ethical vision gives his writing its poignancy and power. In so doing, he follows a tradition in Western letters that goes back at least as far as the fourth century, to the work of the profoundly Catholic bishop Augustine of Hippo. In 397, looking back over the external events and drastic inner reorientations that had ruptured his own past, Augustine composed his uniquely original work of autobiographical philosophy, the *Confessiones*.[1] By investigating

1. The most recent scientific text of the *Confessiones*, together with a commentary encompassing a tremendous range of secondary works, may be found in O'Donnell (1992). I use here the English translation of Chadwick (1991).

the structure and argument of this work, we can see how the reflections of another introspective, religiously sensitive thinker, at a completely different cultural and historical moment, also put memory at the juncture between past self and present self, and at the juncture between Self and God.

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The *Confessiones* has been called the first introspective autobiography in history, and in one sense this is so. Constructed as a prayerful address to God, the work opens with speculations about who or what Augustine was even before birth, through birth ("from the parents of my flesh, him from whom and her in whom You formed me in time," 1.6, 7) and early education, up through the death of his mother Monica in 387 shortly after his conversion to Catholicism (9.13, 36). But once we conclude our reading of book 9, the final narratively autobiographical section, we have some 40 percent of Augustine's story still to go: book 10, on memory; book 11, on eternity and time; book 12, on material and spiritual creation; book 13, on revelation and time's end. Augustine may be using his past to make his points, but clearly he has more than autobiography in mind.

I find it more helpful to regard the *Confessiones* as a sort of meditative triptych, conceived around the problem of how the individual,

Parts of the present discussion draw on two of my earlier essays, Fredriksen (2000b), "Patristic *Pramā* and *Pramāṇa*," and Fredriksen (2000a), "Allegory and Reading God's Book." Those interested in a closer consideration of the dynamics of retrospection and knowledge in the *Confessiones* might consult the fine essay "Augustine: Reason and Illumination," by R. A. Markus (1970). Peter Brown's now-classic biography, *Augustine of Hippo*, has a valuable discussion of the autobiographical aspects of the *Confessiones* (1967, 146–81).

trapped in time, can know the eternal God. Its triple structure recapitulates its theme, for the three uneven "panels" of Augustine's presentation have as their subject, respectively, the Past (books 1–9, his retrospect on events from 354 to 387), the Present (books 10 and 11, on memory and the nature of time), and the Future (books 12 and 13, on the beginning and, thus, the end of time). The argument of the whole rests on the central argument of the central "panel": that memory is necessary not simply for recollection, but also for cognition and perception. It is through the exercise of his or her memory that the individual—time-bound, imperfect, mortal—is enabled to know and to recognize both him/herself and, most especially, Truth. Truth for Augustine relates immediately and necessarily to God—not the God of the philosophers, toward which all this self-conscious speculation might seem to tend; but the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Bible, the God who created and pronounced his creation good. Put simply: Memory is the site of our illumination. Memory is our bridge to the world outside ourselves, to ourselves, and to God.

How does man find God? He turns first to God's creation, his mighty works: God made them, but is not of them.

> What is the object of my love? I asked the earth and it said, "It is not I." I asked all that is in it; they made the same confession. I asked the sea, the deeps, the living creatures that creep, and they responded, "We are not your God. Look beyond us." . . . I asked heaven, sun, moon, stars; they said, "Nor are we the God you seek." And I said to all these things, "Tell me of my God who you are not; tell me something about him." And with a great voice they cried out, "He made us." *Confessiones*, 10.6, 9

Having exhausted external possibilities, Augustine then turns inward, to the soul. He ranges past the vital force his soul shares in common with animals, past the consciousness through which they

and he process sense perception, until at last he reaches a place uniquely human, "the fields and vast palaces of memory" (10.8, 12). And it is from here that Augustine sees the way that man is made most truly in God's image, for human thought, human memory, is purely nonmaterial. The memory of an object displaces no volume. Mental life, like God, is purely spiritual. Indeed, the vastness and power of memory—"a spreading limitless room within me"—overwhelms Augustine. Memory is the seat of human self-transcendence, despite being that part of the soul where the individual is most deeply his or her individual self. "Who can reach memory's utmost depth? Yet it is a faculty of my soul and belongs to my nature. In fact, I cannot totally grasp all that I am. The mind is not large enough to contain itself" (10.8, 15). In both its utter nonmateriality and in its self-transcendence, human memory is an indwelling analogy of God.

More than a warehouse of images and past feelings, memory also serves an essential cognitive function: it is the seat of a priori knowledge (such as mathematical principles and other kinds of abstract thought [10, 17; 12, 19]). The mind, through memory, *re*cognizes truth. When such truths were formulated for him, asks Augustine, "how did I recognize them and say, 'Yes, that is true'? The answer must be that they were already in my memory, but remote and pushed back . . . as if in most secret caverns" (10, 17). Through memory, too, language is processed, because the sounds of words only signify the things to which they point (in this case, ideas without sense-referents), yet Augustine had understood them. The Augustinian *memoria* thus functions in much the same way as the Platonic *anamnesis*, though whereas in the pagan system this capacity points toward the life of the soul before its existence in the body, for Augustine it points to a preconscious intuition of the mind, implanted through Christ, on account of which the soul instinctively yearns to know God, the ultimate object of its love. In this last sense, memory provides the readiest analogy to the sort of unmediated apprehension by which God knows us, and with which humans, eschatologically, will know both themselves and God: "When I remember memory, my memory is present to itself by itself" (16, 24).

Yet animals, too, have memory. Human knowledge of God calls for something even greater. Accordingly, Augustine urges himself onward, inward, upward: What am I to do now, O my true life, my God? I shall mount beyond this power of memory, I shall mount beyond it, and come to you, O lovely light. . . . I shall pass beyond memory to find you: but where will I find you? If I find you beyond my memory, then I shall be without memory of you. And how will I find you if I am without memory of you?" (17, 26).

An indwelling memory of God, through which the soul's innate desire for happiness orients it toward God, may go back, Augustine conjectures, to humanity's primal parents (20, 29). With this allusion to Adam, Augustine invokes, as well, the Fall, for he identifies Adam as "that man who first sinned, in whom we all died." From this point on, Augustine's meditation grows increasingly elegiac, and the themes of the ubiquity and subtlety of sin, of the moral ambiguity of sexual desire experienced in sleep, of the dangerous manyness into which the soul, slipping into love of creature rather than Creator, can dissipate itself, sound increasingly. Hence, argues Augustine, the necessity of sexual continence that God commands, "for by continence we are collected and bound up into unity within ourselves, whereas we had been scattered abroad in multiplicity" (29, 40).

Memory as now constituted was called into existence by sin, because sin—historically, Adam's; existentially, everyone's—separates man from God. But sin affected the divine/human relationship in a way that was, itself, precisely historical: after Adam, humanity was sunk into a new experience of *time* and, thus, of perception, most es-

pecially vis-à-vis the divine. God continued transcendent and outside time; humanity's entire existence became temporally conditioned. Knowledge, most especially knowledge of God, which was once immediate and unmediated, changed as man's soul, after the Fall, became itself distended in time, fraught with disunity.

The nature of time itself, Augustine maintains, underscores and feeds this distension. Time is a psychological function: it exists within the soul. While we speak of time as Past, Present, and Future, only the middle term has any "being" or reality. The Past no longer exists; the Future does not yet exist. The present alone is. Yet of what duration is the present? Reflection reveals that the present itself is an ungraspable, elusive *punctum*. All of man's consciousness, his memory, his entire ability to grasp truth exists within and is circumscribed by the present, a razor-thin slice of reality suspended between two infinitely receding types of nonbeing, Past and Future.

> Not even one day is entirely present. All the hours of the day add up to twenty-four. The first of them has the others in the future, the last has them in the past. . . . A single hour is itself constituted of fugitive moments. . . . If we can think of some bit of time which cannot be divided into even the smallest instantaneous moments, that alone is what we call "present." And this time flies so quickly from the future into the past that it is an interval with no duration. Any duration is divisible into past and future: the present occupies no space. (11.15, 20)

This distension in time constitutes the great measure of difference and distance between our mode of consciousness and God's. God, in eternity, knows all things simultaneously, as do the angels who dwell in the "heaven of heavens," the "intellectual, nonphysical heaven where the intelligence's knowing is a matter of simultaneity—not in part, not in an enigma, not through a glass, but

complete total openness, face to face. . . . concurrent, without any temporal successiveness" (12.13, 16). God is not in time.

Man's existence in time affects the nature both of experience and of language. Time constantly, literally, rushes by him, too swift and atomized to process: man's experience—by definition, solely of the present—constantly runs between the fingers of his soul like sand. Meaning is distilled only retrospectively, through the integrative functioning of memory: it is only in recollection that the person can actually understand what he has experienced and see true meaning in it. By making this argument at the close of his book, Augustine thus teaches us to see, retrospectively, the point of his autobiographical narrative in the first nine books: he understood the meaning of all those events—stealing the pears, reading Cicero, joining the Manichees, quitting Africa for Italy, listening to Ambrose—not as he was living them, but only retrospectively from the vantage point of his conversion, once God had revealed himself to him. His closing arguments teach us that, epistemologically, this was the only way he could have understood his experience—that is, once his memory, "the stomach of the mind" (10.14, 22), had done its digestive work.

Language itself is tangled up in time, distended and thus itself intrinsically narrative, dependent on the linear passage from being (present) to nonbeing (past) before it can be understood. Consonants and vowels alternate to create phonemes, words follow words, nouns verbs, until we get to the end of a sentence, remember the whole, and so understand what this unit of sound has meant to convey. (Like all ancient people, Augustine thinks of words and texts orally, in terms of their being spoken and heard; compare 11.7, 9.) Memory is the means of the soul's contact with time, since memory, to function, functions only in the present. Meaning is thus necessar-

ily mediated—through memory, images, signs, words. And just as time is not the same as the units we measure it by, so meaning is not the same as those words we use in our attempts to convey it.

This mediation is true even of scripture, God's word, conveyed as it is through the signs of contingent languages. Though divine revelation, scripture itself is infinitely interpretable (12.23, 32), capable of sustaining a diversity of truths whose validity cannot be limited by the historically contingent intentions of their original authors (12.23, 32–30, 41). Scripture mediates knowledge of God; it bridges time and eternity. But since it (necessarily) describes God through narrative, it measures the difference between God and us:

> O man [Augustine imagines God explaining to him], what my scripture says, I say. Yet scripture speaks in time-conditioned language [*temporaliter dicit*], and time does not touch my Word, existing with me in an equal eternity. So I see those things which through my Spirit you see, just as I also say those things which through my Spirit you say. Accordingly, while your vision of them is temporally determined, my seeing is not temporal; just as you speak of these things in temporal terms, but I do not speak in the successiveness of time [*non ego temporaliter dico*]. (13.29, 44)

Love of truth, knowledge of God, true perception of self and other mediated through memory, available through personal recollection made public through the written word—these convictions motivated Augustine's *Confessiones*; they shape as well the work of Elie Wiesel. In honor of my colleague and his work, I have tried to share with you some of the grand themes that contour Augustine's.

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God's Memory

NEHEMIA POLEN

DOES GOD HAVE A MEMORY? Why of course, we are tempted to respond; in fact, God has a perfect memory. But a moment's reflection reveals how problematic such a notion would be. For to have a perfect memory—presumably because past, present and future are all the same for a Being existing in an eternal now—is to have no memory at all, since one does not remember the moment we call now, one simply lives in it. Perfect memory self-destructs into incoherence.

The Bible knew better than that. It endows God with a memory, but not a perfect one. God remembers Noah in the ark, but when he makes a covenant with Noah, he provides himself with a visual aid: "I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. And it shall come to pass, when I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow is seen in the cloud, that I will remember my covenant" (Gen. 9:13–15). So the rainbow jogs God's memory. It is a kind of arched string around the divine finger. Using the same terms, *ot brit*—sign of the covenant—God provides another visual sign, that of circumcision, for his covenant with Abraham. And sometimes God writes notes to himself, a list of names to cherish and remember, worn on the garments of his special