

Augustine's Intellectual Conversion

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The history of Augustine's thought is the history of the limitations of the
infantile apprehension of reality and the history of the shift to the true.
(Bernard Lonergan)¹

Most prominent in the **Confessions** is Augustine's moral and religious strivings and the moment of his religious conversion in the garden in Milan in August of 386. But equally present in Augustine's story is his philosophical journey and what Bernard Lonergan called his intellectual conversion, which took place in the Spring of 386 and which he describes in Chapter Seven of the **Confessions**. This paper will focus on teaching the **Confessions** in such a way as to give sufficient weight to this great "change of mind" that prepared the way for his later religious and moral conversion. But what is intellectual conversion? If we are going to use this as a heuristic for understanding the **Confessions**, we need to be clear about what we are talking about. In the first section of this paper we will give some idea of the meaning of this event – and in the second section we will show this change of mind exemplified in the **Confessions**.

¹ Bernard Lonergan, Topics in Education, 170.

1. Intellectual conversion

It would help to start with an example and then analyze what is involved in it. The physicist and Nobel Prize winner, Freeman Dyson, once described the process involved in his students learning quantum mechanics. He divides the process into three stages.

The student begins by learning the tricks of the trade. He learns how to make calculations in quantum mechanics and get the right answers...To learn the mathematics of the subject and to learn how to use it takes about six months. This is the first stage in learning quantum mechanics, and it is comparatively easy and painless.

The second stage comes when the student begins to worry because he does not understand what he has been doing. He worries because he has no clear physical picture in his head. He gets confused in trying to arrive at a physical explanation for each of the mathematical tricks he has been taught. He works very hard and gets discouraged because he does not seem able to think clearly. This second stage often lasts six months or longer, and it is strenuous and unpleasant.

Then, quite unexpectedly, the third stage begins. The student suddenly says to himself, "I understand quantum mechanics," or rather he says, "I understand now that there really isn't anything to be understood."²

Or, in my terms, the student comes to understand that there really isn't anything to be understood in the "clear physical pictures" she had been seeking. Certainly the student has been learning something – quantum mechanics – but at the same time she comes to understand that that involves "unlearning something," that is, one's spontaneous anticipations about reality. As Dyson puts it, the student "worries because he has no clear physical picture in his head." For after all, "clear physical pictures" are the normal companions of our thinking. We are constantly creating pictures of what we know. The student's presupposition at this stage is

² F. Dyson, "Innovation in Physics," in Rapport and Wright, eds., Physics, New York, Washington Square Press, 1965, pp. 259-260.

that the only "real" knowledge is the type that is accompanied by a "clear physical picture." For most of our common-sense knowing is this kind of "picture-thinking."

Finally, after a period of struggling and confusion, the student suddenly and unexpectedly begins to understand. He understands that there is nothing to be understood in the mental pictures he had sought. He had been asking the wrong questions. His new understanding of quantum physics consists in becoming content with the intrinsic intelligibility, the meaning, immanent in the theoretical language itself. This new knowledge is purely intellectual, purified of pictures, expressed only in the non-representative symbols of mathematics.

Now the point of this description of Dyson's students is, first, to point to their conversion in their understanding of physical reality; secondly, to highlight the possibility of a conversion in their understanding of themselves. For just as they can puzzle over what, in fact, their mathematical formulae meant; so they can puzzle over their own ability to understand in a way not limited to pictures. At least possibly, their growing knowledge of quantum mechanics might be accompanied by a growing knowledge of themselves. Just as they ceased to demand of their physical knowledge the pictures that previously they had considered the only warrant of truth, so they might grow in an understanding of themselves by ceasing to think of themselves in ways limited by picture-imagery. But this is a radical development in a person's self-knowledge. It is one thing to learn physics or any other science; it is quite another to learn about ourselves.

Bernard Lonergan calls this event intellectual conversion and, in its fullest sense, it is the key to understanding all his works. If this event has occurred in a reader of his books, those books can be full of significance. If it has not, then they are like quantum mechanics to Dyson's students before they begin to puzzle – or a disquisition on light to someone who is blind.

Lonergeran develops his analysis of intellectual conversion by clearly distinguishing the child's world of immediacy from the adult's world of meaning. The world of immediacy is the world of sights and sounds, tastes and touches, feelings and perceptions. The world mediated by meaning, however, is the world brought to us by language, through understanding, judging and believing; through trusting the words of our parents about the contours of reality, our teachers, the tales of travelers, the reflections of philosophers and of saints. The upshot of intellectual conversion, then, in its fullest sense, is the awareness that full human knowing is not the image- or picture-thinking that reduces the world to our own little world. Rather, human knowing

...is experiencing, understanding, judging and believing. The criteria of objectivity are not just the criteria of ocular vision; they are the compounded criteria of experiencing, of understanding, of judging, and of believing. The reality known is not just looked at; it is given in experience, organized and extrapolated by understanding, posited by judgment and belief.³

Just as Dyson's students by means of an "inverse insight," an awareness that they have been asking the wrong questions, make the breakthrough to quantum mechanics, so Lonergan's readers are invited to make a similar breakthrough to an understanding of themselves. Such a breakthrough is a new beginning. "Conversion involves a new understanding of oneself because, more fundamentally, it brings about a new self to be understood."⁴

Our thesis, then, is that just as any course or science heads for an intellectual conversion about a particular realm of reality, so an adequate philosophy of the human person heads for an intellectual conversion in our knowledge of ourselves. On a first level, it heads us away from a picture-image of ourselves - St. Thomas spoke of it as homo sensibilibus immersus - to an

³ Bernard Lonergan, **Method in Theology**, 138.

⁴ Bernard Lonergan, **A Third Collection**, 247.

explicit acknowledgement of the character and capability of our own spirit - what Aquinas spoke of as homo maxime est mens hominis - roughly: the human spirit is the key to the human person.

The question about what exactly is happening to Dyson's students or to anyone when they make an intellectual breakthrough in any particular area transcends any particular area of science or scholarship. For it is the question about who is the scientist? who is the scholar? who is the human person who can have such breakthroughs in science or scholarship? Ultimately, it is the question "Who am I?" And this was the question Augustine faced.

2. Augustine's Intellectual Conversion

According to Augustine's great biographer, Peter Brown, Augustine could not have told us such an interesting story if he had not had at hand a language which helped him understand his own story and to tell it so well. A significant contribution to that language, as he tells us in Book Seven, came from some "books of the Platonists" lent to him by an acquaintance in the spring of 386. As Brown puts it,

For the Neo-Platonists provided [Augustine] with the one essential tool for any serious autobiography; they had given him a theory of the dynamics of the soul that made sense of his experience.⁵

It was the Neo-platonic "theory of dynamics of the soul" that enabled Augustine to give testimony to what God had done in his life. Augustine's appropriation of that theory in his own experience enabled him to highlight the key turning points in his own life precisely as "key" – as significant. The Platonic writings gave him an account of what "counted" as

⁵ Peter Brown, **Augustine of Hippo**, 168.

significant in his own story. What counted were the levels of his own being which according to the Platonic theory were also the dispersed levels of the universe on their way back to union with “the One.”

The whole story, as recounted in the **Confessions**, is, of course, the story of one who has fallen in love with God and is praising him for the wonders of his mercy. It is primarily a prayer, not a philosophical treatise, and Augustine is in dialogue with God. He recounts his wayward youth, his sins, in order to praise God’s mercy in turning him around. “I was very far away from you, but you were very close to me.”

But we usually do not credit sufficiently enough the role that books played in this journey back to God. Key turning points were his encounters with certain texts. One was his reading of Cicero’s **Hortensius** at the age of nineteen - a book since lost to history.

From the age of nineteen, having read in the school of rhetoric that book of Cicero's called **Hortensius**, I was influenced by such a great love of philosophy that I considered devoting myself to it at once. (De Beata Vita, V 1,4)

In the **Confessions** Augustine described the effect of that work on him.

Quite definitely it changed the direction of my mind...Suddenly all the vanity I had hoped in I saw as worthless, and with an incredible intensity of desire I longed after inward wisdom. I had begun that journey upwards by which I was to return to You...The one thing that delighted me in Cicero's exhortation was that I should love, and seek, and win, and hold, and embrace, not this or that philosophical school but Wisdom itself, whatever it might be.

What the Hortensius represented for Augustine was a disinterested search for the truth, a desire that remained in him through the years and kept him moving from one vision of life to another, one school of philosophy to another: from Manichaeism to Academic Skepticism and beyond. Though he had suffered under harsh and incompetent schoolmasters, though he had been intellectually disappointed again and again, still at times

there welled up within him a desire to know the truth. His own sins and failures led him ever more insistently to wanting to know the truth.

Having become disillusioned with the fantastic myths of the Manichees and the quite evident lack of erudition of the sect's chief exponent, Faustus, Augustine was of a more or less skeptical frame of mind when in the spring of 386 he happened upon some key books. At the time he was thirty-one years old and living and teaching in Milan. There he had encountered a group of intellectuals who met to study Platonic philosophy and one of them, Romanianus, gave Augustine "some books of the Platonists" in Latin translation. (C 7,9,13) These books were "packed with thought," (*libri quidem pleni*), and they produced in him a marvelous effect:

Augustine does not say what exactly the books were but probably they were works by Plotinus, and perhaps some by his student, Porphyry, who had organized Plotinus' unsystematic treatises in *Enneads* - groups of nine - to make them more accessible to readers. Augustine elsewhere describes the effect of these books on his life:

They at once enkindled in me such a conflagration that I scarcely believe it of myself. What importance did I then attach to any honor? Was I affected by human pomp? by a craving for empty fame? or, in fine, by the bond and bondage of this mortal life? (**Contra Academicos** 2, 2, 5)

In other words, these books brought Augustine to a whole new level than the one on which he ordinarily operated. They focused him on a level beyond that of reputation and honor and indeed on a level transcending ordinary human life. As Peter Brown says:

It was a reading that was so intense and thorough that the ideas of Plotinus were thoroughly absorbed, "digested" and transformed by Augustine...For Augustine...Plotinus and Porphyry are grafted almost imperceptibly into his writings as the ever present basis of his thought.⁶

⁶ Brown, 95.

And what did Augustine find in these books that they had such a massive effect on him? First of all, they explicitly “turned him inward” toward his own conscious self. “Being admonished by all this to return to myself, I entered into my own depths...” (C 7, 10)

There is then a process that Augustine himself experienced of moving from being so wrapped up in the senses to another type of thinking, a type of thinking that is characterized by *veritas*: “the truth:” Although Augustine came across this Platonic schema in the late spring or early summer of 386, he thoroughly interiorized it.⁷ Under the influence of this reading, he began to think of “spirit” in its own terms and not as understood in bodily ways. This theme is present in Augustine’s early Cassiciacum dialogues in embryonic form. For example, what struck Augustine in listening to the sermons of St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, was the incorporeal character of God and the soul.

For I have noticed frequently in the sermons of our priest, and sometimes in yours, that, when speaking of God, no one should think of Him as something corporeal; nor yet of the soul, for of all things the soul is nearest to God. (DBV 1, 4; cf. SOL 2,4,6; 2,17,31)

And again, in the *Contra Academicos*:

The populace is rather prone to rush into false opinions, and through familiarity with bodies, a person very readily - but very dangerously, as well - comes to believe that all things are corporeal. (CA 3, 17, 38)

A major step in Augustine’s journey was his realization that his chief intellectual obstacle was his need to imaginatively “picture” things which cannot strictly speaking be pictured – beginning with the very being of God. He discovered that his all his understandings, had been clouded by imagination.

Though I did not even then think of You under the shape of a human body, yet I could not but think of You as some corporeal substance, occupying all

⁷ As Peter Brown says: “It was a reading that was so intense and thorough that the ideas of Plotinus were thoroughly absorbed, “digested” and transformed by Augustine...For Augustine...Plotinus and Porphyry are grafted almost imperceptibly into his writings as the ever present basis of his thought.” **Augustine of Hippo**, 95.

space, whether infused in the world, or else diffused through infinite space beyond the world. (Confessions 3, 1; cf. 3, 6)

When I desired to think of my God, I could not think of him save as a bodily magnitude - for it seemed to me that what was not such was nothing at all: this indeed was the principal and practically the sole cause of my inevitable error. (5, 10)

Augustine even thought of evil as a type of bodily substance. For a long time he had been troubled by the nature of evil and the Manicheans had influenced him to think of evil as some kind of "thing," another principle opposed to the good God.

I did not know that evil has no being of its own but is only an absence of good, so that it simply is not. How indeed should I see this, when the sight of my eyes saw no deeper than bodies and the sight of my soul no deeper than the images of bodies? (3, 7)

In my ignorance I thought of evil not simply as some kind of substance, but actually as a bodily substance, because I had not learned to think of mind save as a more subtle body, extended in space. (5, 10)

At one point Augustine set out to write a treatise "On the Beautiful and the Fitting" and in the course of this writing he faced the question of the character of his own mind and soul.

...it was by corporeal examples that I supported my argument. I did consider the nature of the soul, but again the false view I had of spiritual things would not let me get at the truth - although by sheer force the truth was staring me in the face. I turned my throbbing mind from the incorporeal to line and color and bulk, and because I did not see these things in my mind, I concluded that I could not see my mind. (4, 15)

The philosophical issue, as he slowly began to realize, was the character of his own mind.

My mind was in search of such images as the forms of my eye was accustomed to see; and I did not realize that the mental act by which I formed these images, was not itself a bodily image. (7, 1)

Slowly, under the influence of this introspective method Augustine began to believe not only in the unseen, but in the totally different character of such reality from that of our bodily experience.

I began to consider the countless things I believed which I had not seen, or which had happened with me not there - so many things in the history of nations, so many facts about places and cities, which I had never seen, so many things told me by friends, by doctors, by this man, by that man; and unless we accepted these things, we should do nothing at all in this life. Most strongly of all it struck me how firmly and unshakably I believed that I was born of a particular father and mother, which I could not possibly know unless I believed it on the word of others. (6, 5)

Augustine longed for certitude.

I wanted to be as certain of things unseen as that seven and three make ten. For I had not reached the point of madness which denies that even this can be unknown; but I wanted to know other things as clearly as this, either such material things as were not present to my senses, or spiritual things which I did not know how to conceive save corporeally. (6, 4)

Concomitant with Augustine's growing ability to distinguish between sense and spirit was his growing ability to think in terms of "veritas," or true reality rooted in God.

I was now studying the ground of my admiration for the beauty of bodies, whether celestial or of earth, and on what authority I might judge of things mutable and say: "This ought to be so, that not so." Enquiring then what was the source of my judgment, when I did so judge I had discovered the immutable and true eternity of truth (veritas) above my changing mind. Thus by stages I passed from bodies to the soul which uses the body for its perceiving, and from this to the soul's inner power, to which the body's senses present external things, as indeed the beasts are able; and from there I passed on to the reasoning power, to which is referred for judgment what is received from the body's senses. This too realized that it was mutable in me, and rose to its own understanding. It withdrew my thought from its habitual way, abstracting from the confused crowds of phantasm that it might find what light suffused it, when with utter certainty it cried aloud that the immutable was to be preferred to the mutable, and how it had come to know the mutable itself; for if it had not come to some knowledge of the immutable, it could not have known it as certainly preferable to the mutable. Thus in the thrust of a trembling glance my mind arrived at That Which Is....but I lacked the strength to hold my gaze fixed, and my weakness was beaten back again so that I returned to my old habits, bearing nothing with

me but a memory of delight and a desire as for something of which I had caught the fragrance but which I had not yet strength to eat. (C 7, 17)

Augustine is telling us that he has just taken his first step toward a fresh world-view, the kind of world-view he needed in order, among other things, to respond to the array of questions posed by the problem of evil. That problem, he is saying, along with all the sub-problems undivorceably connected with it, could not be resolved to the mind's satisfaction unless one first "saw" that a higher spiritual world really existed, and unless one learned to think of that spiritual reality in appropriately spiritual terms. Thus, the Augustinian scholar, Robert O'Connell focuses on the terms Augustine uses to discuss this turning point in his life – "I saw," "I came to know," "it was made manifest to me" –

...these are all terms which stress the fact that he has passed beyond the need to "believe" the truths he is talking about, on the authority, say, of Ambrose; he has passed from the stage of "belief" and come to knowledge, insight, understanding, certainty." (O'Connell, 107)

Accordingly, O'Connell writes, that the imagery Augustine uses is his...

"personal code for saying he did not 'see' God's reality directly and immediately (as is normally implied by the term 'mystically') but 'glimpsed' that reality immediately and indirectly. That is, he understood it... (O'Connell 117) [Cf. Richey's review 641-642]

There is then this process that Augustine experienced of moving from being so wrapped up in the senses that he could not think except in representative images to another type of thinking, a type of thinking that is characterized as *veritas*: "the truth:"

Will anyone deny that that is truth itself through which all branches of learning are true?...that by which all things are true is through itself and in itself the true truth. (SOL 1,11,21)

Such is the truth of the soul; such is the truth of God. And that is all that Augustine desires: "Noverim te; noverim me." (SOL 1,2,7; cf 2,1,1; also DO 2,18,47) It is the

philosophic desire in his soul, first manifested in his reading of the **Hortensius**, that has brought Augustine back to himself and to the courts of "true philosophy."⁸

Centuries later Bernard Lonergan, writing in a scientific and evolutionary context, will write of the “vertical finality” of the whole universe and of “Christology within an evolutionary framework.”

Similarly, St. Augustine, who was a man of extraordinary intelligence, was for years a materialist. He knew he was a materialist, and he said so. But he changed. And then when he wanted to talk about the real, what is really so, what word did he use? Veritas. Augustine does not talk about realitas, but about veritas, about what is true. And the truth is known not without, non foras, and not just within, non intus, but above us, in a light that he describes as incommutable and eternal. The history of Augustine's thought is the history of the limitations of the infantile apprehension of reality and the history of the shift to the true.⁹

Finally, to again connect Augustine’s achievement with the achievements of modern science, we can again quote Lonergan in his massive analysis of modern science, **Insight: A Study of Human Understanding**.

⁸ In the **Confessions** Augustine lists a hierarchic movement of perception from awareness of physical existence, to perception of the soul through the body, and finally to the inward power of the soul. (C7, 17) Karl Morrison notes that this movement is the same taken by Augustine and Monica in their extraordinary dual ecstasy at Ostia:

from conversation, to affective exaltation past all corporal things to inward thought and speech and wonder at God’s words, then transcending their own minds and entering the region of unfailing plenty where immutable wisdom is. There they were touched sublimely by a heartbeat (ictu cordis) and fell back, returning to the sounding of their speech, where words begin and end. (9,10) 8

⁹ Bernard Lonergan, Topics in Education, 170. Cf. also **Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies**, Vol 10, (1992) n. 1, p.10: ‘Without such self-appropriation and the critical appraisal it generates, one may repeat all that an Augustine says of veritas, or all that an Aquinas says of being, but in doing so, I believe, one will not be raising oneself up to their level but cutting them down to one’s own size.’

St. Augustine of Hippo narrates that it took him years to make the discovery that the name, real, might have a different connotation from the name, body. Or, to bring the point nearer home, one might say that it has taken modern science four centuries to make the discovery that the objects of its inquiry need not be imaginable entities moving through imaginable processes in an imaginable space-time. The fact that a Plato attempted to communicate through his dialogues, the fact that an Augustine eventually learnt from the writers whom, rather generally, he refers to as Platonists, has lost its antique flavor and its apparent irrelevance to the modern mind. Even before Einstein and Heisenberg it was clear enough that the world described by scientists was strangely different from the world depicted by artists and inhabited by men of common sense. But it was left to twentieth-century physicists to envisage the possibility that the objects of their science were to be reached only by severing the umbilical cord that tied them to the maternal imagination of man. (I xxi)