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Augustine on Heart and Life

Essays in Memory of William Harmless, S.J.

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Augustine & the Mystery of the Human Heart (*opus imperfectum*)

Introduction

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In 401 CE, one of Carthage’s leading citizens, a wealthy banker named Faustinus, abruptly decided to convert to Christianity. He had been a longstanding and vocal opponent, and so his announced conversion came as a surprise. Rumors were afoot that Faustinus aspired to be magistrate for the city and realized that he would never get the job unless he became a Christian. Augustine had come to town for a major conference of the North African bishops,

¹ Editors’ note: The “Introduction” was last revised by Bill on August 17, 2014. It has subsequently been revised and edited for publication, but careful attention has been given to preserving Bill’s content and meaning.

and Aurelius, Carthage's bishop, invited him to preach.² Such invitations were routine. Augustine was an immensely popular guest-preacher, and many of his surviving sermons were recorded there. Aurelius used this occasion to saddle Augustine with the rather dicey task of presenting the newly converted Faustinus to a wary Carthaginian congregation.

Augustine opened with a lengthy sermon on the conversion of St. Paul and, at its end, invited Faustinus to come up to the raised platform in the church's apse. He then turned to his hearers:

Let me announce to your ears what you discern with your eyes: Prey has been snatched and rescued from the wolf's jaws by our great Shepherd's doing and mercy. [Christ] the Shepherd has brought back the one that [God's] flock used to shout about. . . . The one they shouted about, the one who used to be an enemy of the Christian faith, has now taken up the Christian faith (*S.* 279.10; Harmless 2010: 91).³

Early Christian congregations could be boisterous. Augustine used to use their applause and rhythmic acclamations as a barometer of his effectiveness. On this day he decided to exploit a call-and-response technique. He asked his hearers: "Who used to do such-and-such?" The congregation called back: "Faustinus." He repeated the question: "Who used to do such-and-such?" "Faustinus," they cried. A third time he asked, this time more explicitly: "Who used to be against Christ?" Again the answer: "Faustinus." He and his hearers were clearly in sync. And so he asked a fourth question: "Who now fears Christ?" The congregation probably found itself surprised to call out: "Faustinus" (*S.* 279.11; Harmless 2010: 91).⁴ Augustine acknowledged their doubts: "Some of you may say: 'Who? That guy, a Christian? That guy, he has come to believe?'"

Augustine played on his hearers' skepticism to launch into a favorite theme: "We cannot peer into the human heart nor bring it out into the open" (*S.* 279.10; Harmless 2010: 91). The roots of the claim, he argued, were biblical: "The Apostle Paul says: 'Brothers and sisters, do not make any judgment before the appointed time, until the Lord comes, for He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will manifest the heart's motives, and then each one will receive praise from God' (1 Cor. 4:5)" (*S.* 279.10; Harmless 2010: 91). This turn to Paul is classic Augustine. Fifteen years earlier, in 386, reading verses from Paul's letter to the Romans had catalyzed his own dramatic conversion in the garden in Milan. On the far side of his ordination, Augustine used to cite Paul in virtually every sermon, every commentary, every treatise (see Martin). Paul was Augustine's lens for reading the Bible. So on this occasion, he invoked Paul's example and Paul's views as his optic for interpreting suspicious conversions:

² This sermon, unlike the majority of Augustine's sermons, can be dated with considerable precision: Sunday, June 23, 401. For a discussion of this sojourn in Carthage, see Perler: 232-40. Augustine had attended a council in Carthage a week earlier, on Saturday, June 15th.

³ This section of *S.* 279 is preserved as *S. Morin* 1.

⁴ In his sermons, Augustine often roleplays both sides of these dialogues, but here the congregation seems to have called out Faustinus' name; the scribe (as was customary) dutifully recorded the congregation's responses. On Augustine the preacher, see Mohrmann; Madec 1998; Müller.

You cannot peer into the heart of new Christians. Look: Can you do so with the hearts of veteran Christians? But you're going to say: "But Faustinus believed because he had to." The same could be said of the one I spoke about a little earlier. St. Paul, too, at one point was 'a blasphemer and a persecutor and a scoffer' (1 Tm 1:13). He also got forced, a certain necessity imposed on him. A heavenly voice knocked him flat (S. 279.10; Harmless 2010: 91).

Paul's conversion provided Augustine an unimpeachable biblical precedent for arguing that Faustinus be given the benefit of the doubt.

In a treatise written just a few years earlier, *On Lying (De mendacio)*, Augustine explored the dark moral consequences of false speaking. Augustine's hearers presumed Faustinus' conversion-claims to be just that: a lie, false words masking his heart's deeper desires. Augustine considered lying among the gravest of offenses, but even in this treatise he argued: "it belongs to the Christian discipline never to despair of the conversion of anybody and never to block the opportunity for repentance" (*Mend.* 14.25; Muldowney: 87; cf. S. 71.21). No surprise, therefore, that he asked that Faustinus be given a fair hearing. And so at the sermon's close, without denying the congregation's wariness, he added:

In the meantime, brothers and sisters, let us stay with what has been conceded to us, to what we as human beings can do, and not lay claim to what's beyond us. The Apostle says: "Welcome the one weak in faith, not in judgments on thoughts" (Rom. 14:1). Let us not lay claim to judging others' thoughts, but let us set before God our prayers, even for those about whom we maybe have doubts (S. 279.11; Harmless 2010: 91).

This incident is charming in many ways. It reveals much about Augustine's personal style and his remarkable rhetorical gifts. My interest in this book is with the core principle that he enunciates in defending Faustinus:

We cannot peer into the human heart nor bring it out into the open.
(*Cor hominis nec videre possumus nec ostendere*) (S. 279.10; Harmless 2010: 91).

This sermon is one vivid instance of a pervasive and underappreciated principle of Augustine's theology: that as human beings we remain profoundly indecipherable to one another, that in this world we live under the curse of a fundamental inaccessibility to one another's hearts.

Augustine invokes this principle repeatedly and widely. It appears in works spanning the length of his decades-long literary career and the breadth of his voluminous writings. This assertion of the mystery of the human heart interweaves with many of the most fundamental themes of his thought. It undergirds his theories of language and of biblical interpretation, his pedagogy as a preacher, his spirituality of the interior life, his theology of the resurrection and the beatific vision, his understanding of the Trinity and much else. It is, at times, his theological gambit, the first move he makes in exploring one or another dimension of Christian theology. Other times, it sits within the interstices of his thought as a linchpin, scarcely visible yet subtly shaping the direction of his argument. As I hope to demonstrate, this theme – that we remain perilously and fundamentally indecipherable to one another and even to our very selves – is central to understanding Augustine the thinker and theologian. It is a meta-theme, so to speak,

a thread that intersects with and holds together many other threads within the vast tapestry of his thought.

When we think of Augustine ruminating on the human heart, we think first, almost instinctively, of *Confessions*. That is partly because it is the work that most know best. It is also because of our own very modern biases. We are children of Freud, and nothing fascinates us more than our own psychological complexities. We instinctively imagine *Confessions*, where the autobiographical is so central, to be the natural starting point where Augustine, by introspectively probing his inner self, came to uncover and name the heart's subtleties and vagaries. But that is not where Augustine himself began. It is easy to forget that *Confessions* was a mid-career work, composed between 397 and 401, when he was in his mid-forties.⁵ He had already been pondering the issue of the human heart and its mysteries in varied writings and in varied ways for over ten years.

My own pondering of Augustine's thinking on these matters of the heart has led me to focus on five distinctive threads that I will tease out from a cross-section of Augustine's life and work. I begin where he himself began. Augustine was, by temperament and training, an orator. Long before he was ordained and long before he wrote *Confessions*, he was a professional teacher of rhetoric. Orators are in the communications business. They speak to audiences. They seek to sway those audiences, to win them over. The problem is both obvious and urgent to anyone who has to stand up in front of a group and speak. There is a pivotal moment as one looks out at all those upturned faces and asks oneself: what are they thinking? what do they feel? For hidden beneath those visible faces lie invisible hearts and minds. Reading an audience, discerning what their thoughts are, what their feelings are – it is decisive to the speaker's task of communicating and persuading. One cannot very well persuade those one does not understand. Augustine's earliest recorded reflections on the mystery of the human heart appear in *On Order* (*De ordine*), a philosophic dialogue composed immediately after his dramatic conversion in August 386 and prior to his baptism in April 387. In this work and over much of the next decade, Augustine's reflections on the mystery of the human heart hovered around an array of communications issues, some theoretical (e.g., what do such struggles at communicating say about the nature of the human person?), others, practical (e.g., how best does one communicate the Christian faith to Christians and non-Christians alike?).

A second thread leads to the inward journey. How much do we really know of our own hearts? How well do we understand what moves us to think the way we think, to feel the way we feel, to act the way we do? We will concentrate here especially on *Confessions*, which is a linchpin. But we first need to look at his earliest articulations of this interior turn. In the months after his dramatic conversion, soon after composing *On Order*, he turned the philosophic dialogue inward and invented a new genre – the inner dialogue – and a new word to name it: "soliloquy." In his *Soliloquies* (*Soliloquia*), Augustine offered a first sketch of how we do not know who we are and why that not-knowing matters, both philosophically and religiously.

⁵ The generally accepted dating of *Confessiones* is 397 to 401. Hombert has argued for a modification, namely, 397-400 for Books 1-9, and 403 for Books 10-13.

Yet a third thread is theological in its original sense, that is, “speaking about God.” While this book’s focus is Augustine’s thinking about human beings and the human condition, we need to follow him where he himself goes. And when Augustine thinks about the human condition, he instinctively turns to thinking about God. Again, we begin with early reflections. A few years after his ordination as presbyter, he was invited to speak before a gathering of North African bishops, an address later published as *On Faith and the Creed* (*De fide et symbolo*). There he contrasted the mystery of the human heart with the opening of God’s heart revealed in Christ. For Augustine, the mystery of the human heart is one doorway into the mystery of God, that the restless human heart, if graced, has an inner compass that leads inward and upward into the infinite, ineffable mystery that is God.

Augustine’s meditations on evil and its origins in the darkness of the human heart form a fourth thread. Augustine would insist that ours is a self-made darkness, that the heart’s darkness is our own doing. Here we will follow his unfolding speculations on how that darkness came to occupy and unmake the very core of our being. We will focus on an issue he returned to almost obsessively: lying. Lying, he believed, sprang from our “double-heartedness.” It is a disruption of and subversion of the sign language we direct to one another, a deliberate masking of that privileged window into human interiority that wrecks havoc on human community. This, as we will see, led Augustine to speculate on evil’s origins, namely, the disruptions in our relationship with God on the far side of Adam’s fall and with one another on the far side of Babel’s pride.

Finally, as a fifth thread, I explore Augustine’s conviction that the mystery of who we are and who God is only comes into view only at history’s end, in that final future of the resurrection. There and there alone will the mysteries of the heart be unveiled. But Augustine was convinced that even now we possess these halting but precious glimmers of endtime, taking his cues from Paul’s phrase that we see now “as through a dark glass . . . as in an enigma” (1 Corinthians 13:12). However partial and dim, that final horizon orients us. It is an occasionally sighted still point for navigating life’s journey.

Again, Augustine did not explore these matters of the heart in the crisply enumerated, clear-and-distinct categories of someone like Thomas Aquinas. His systematics follow an ordering more musical than architectonic. He thought more like Bach than Bernini.⁶ In practice, these five threads often interweave in fugue-like patterns. The challenge is to unfurl Augustine’s musical densities. There is another even greater challenge: Augustine’s thinking is a moving target, constantly shifting, constantly adjusting. He himself was alert to this. As he notes in a recently discovered sermon: “I make progress as I write, learning every day, exploring as I dictate my books” (*S.* 162C.15 = *S. Dolbeau* 10; author’s translation).⁷ His surviving writings give us freeze-frame moments, still shots of sometimes rapid, unpredictable unfoldings. To try and capture something of this, I examine the threads as each surfaces over the course of Augustine’s career. This chronological ordering opens a window into his restless inventiveness. But if followed rigidly, this method would require excluding his sermons since

⁶ Henri Marrou (667-72) retracted his criticism of Augustine from a decade earlier, that “Augustin compose mal,” and argued for understanding Augustine’s organizational habits in musical terms.

⁷ Augustine speaks of this “making progress” repeatedly: *Ep.* 143.3; *Retr.* Prol. 3; *Persév.* 21.55.

most are difficult to date. To sidestep the sermons would mean excluding some of his most poignant reflections. The sermons, more importantly, offer glimpses into the very way he thought things out. In preaching, Augustine did not write things out in advance. The texts, as we now have them, record his on-the-spot improvisations (preserved thanks to stenographers known as *notarii*). Augustine's sermons let us see him doing "live theology," thinking out loud and in public about the heart's mysteries (on his improvised theology, see Harmless 2012: 157-62).

In order to close out this introduction, let me sketch, albeit in a rough preliminary way, what I mean by the phrase "mystery of the human heart." First, the term "heart." For us who dwell on the far side of 19th-century Romanticism, the word "heart" is evocative. We – at least those of us who are not physicians – tend to think of the heart as the locus of emotions, where we feel what we feel. In everyday speech, we tend to contrast "heart" and "mind." The pairing "heart and mind" flows off our tongues as a sort of thumbnail summary for who we are, the "I" we define ourselves to be. This way of speaking owes something to Augustine but does not precisely match his usage. In the thought-world he inherited, the standard term for our emotional center was not *cor* (heart), but *affectus* (affectivity) (see de la Peza; O'Daly and Zumkeller; Bochet). *Affectus* was the philosopher's term. *Cor*, by contrast, was the poet's word, and in Latin epic poetry, *cor* was a commonplace way of speaking of one's self. But the term lacked technical precision. It could refer just as easily to the locus of one's thinking or of one's deciding. Augustine knew and drew on *cor*'s secular, literary uses, but he also imbibed how it was used in the Old Latin translation of the Bible, the *Vetus Latina* (see Burton). Those anonymous second/third-century translators who took the Greek Bible and rendered into an often awkward and un-idiomatic Latin chose *cor* to translate the Old Testament notion of *lev*, the Hebraic term for our center of thinking-feeling-willing (see Schuele; Wolff; Baumgärtel and Behm). The word *cor* appears especially in the Psalms as Augustine knew them. Over his long years of praying and memorizing and preaching on the *Vetus Latina*, Augustine made its vocabulary his vocabulary. He came to speak "Bible," to let its words become his words. And so the *cor* of the Latin Old Testament, especially, the *cor* of the Old Latin Psalms, became Augustine's favored terminology. He spoke of this "heart" in *Confessions* where he quotes or echoes the Psalms on virtually every page, famously proclaiming in his very first paragraph:

<i>domine, . . . inquietem est cor nostrum</i>	Lord, . . . our hearts are restless
<i>donec requiescat in te.</i>	'til they rest in You
	(<i>Conf.</i> 1.1.1.; Harmless 2010: 3).

He came to infuse the word with much of the psychological and affective coloring that now shapes our usage. But he retained the Biblical sense of it as a source of thinking and willing. While I will focus on his uses of *cor*, I also explore related terms, for example: *animus* ("mind," "self"), *anima* ("soul," "life-force") (see O'Daly 1987, 1994; Teske; Cary; Lagouanère). Augustine always chose his words with the greatest of care, but he was not concerned in any global sense with a technically precise vocabulary, the way the medieval scholastics would. The words he chose came from the texts he found himself explaining (mostly the Bible) or were words he knew his very mixed audiences could understand. These more local literary and rhetorical settings shaped his word choice about our hearts.

What, then, do I mean by “mystery”? The very idea of studying “mystery” can, on the face of it, sound nonsensical. How, after all, can one know about what one does not know? This very conundrum is one Augustine himself names and often used as a starting point for his own meditations. Only occasionally did he apply the word “mystery” (*mysterium*) to the heart. He usually speaks of it in other terms, such as a *quaestio* (“question,” “riddle”), *profundus* (“depth”), *abyssus* (“abyss”), or simply as something we do not just know. Augustine applies *mysterium* mostly to other matters. He often speaks of Scripture’s “mysteries” whose dense thicket of meanings require the preacher’s careful and sustained exegesis. Augustine applies “mystery” not only to the Bible’s words but also to the Church’s rites. In Christian Latin, *mysterium* and *sacramentum* (“sacrament”) were synonyms (Dodaro). That might sound odd, but the Christian rites of baptism and eucharist were cloaked under the discipline of secrecy (*disciplina arcani*). No one unbaptized (whether pagans or catechumens) were permitted to witness either. Both took place behind locked doors. Baptism in Augustine’s church was celebrated at the Easter vigil, and, like his colleagues across the Empire, he spent Easter week doing *mystagogia*, “teaching of the mysteries,” sermons that unfurled the dense symbolism of the once-secret sacraments (Harmless 1995: 302-13).

Back to the conundrum: What does it mean to study “mystery”? Let me suggest an analogy. Medieval and Renaissance cartographers who set about mapping the world sometimes drew, as best they knew, the frontiers of the uncharted. These large blanks in their maps got labeled *terra incognita*, “unknown territory.” What we will be doing here is something similar: watching how and where and when and why Augustine maps out the *terra incognita* of the human heart. Mysteries are not all of a kind. There are all sorts of reasons one does not know things. One sort: We think we know something or someone and then something happens and we realize that the thing we knew or the person we knew is, in fact, something else or someone else, that what we knew was partial or false, that hidden beneath what we knew was an unexpected depth, a “more” that defied what we thought we knew to be true. It might be a good depth or a bad one. But in such moments, mystery comes into view. Such an encounter with mystery has a precise location even if its depths defy full or even partial knowledge. Such mysteries catch us by surprise. They are discoveries of ignorance and define how we see ourselves and our world, as this patchwork of knowns and unknowns.

We will follow Augustine here, to see what he names as frontiers of that “great deep” that is human heart. The chapters of this book mirror the five domains that I have found him speaking of amid his surviving writings. The first is the mystery of the interpersonal. It comes into sight through the medium of words, in the experience of conversation, whether between two persons or between a public speaker and a gathered audience. Words are *the* privileged medium whereby we reveal our hearts to one another. But words are also fragile, ambiguous, and equally capable of blocking our sight of one another as well. The second is the introspective, the discovery that we are mysteries even of our very own selves, that the person we thought we were is deeply, hidden from our gaze. The third is the mystery of the divine, the discovery that God is at once infinite mystery and yet, at least for Augustine and for Christians, that God has chosen to reveal his very self in and through the person of Jesus, a revelation that simultaneously unfurls both the mystery of God and the mystery of our selves. The fourth is, in a sense, an extension of the first and second, the discovery of the mystery of evil, both within our human world and within very own hearts. The fifth is the mystery of our

ultimate future, that we are not a fixity, but have the seeds of an identity that will emerge from the everyday gray of our world and show itself forth into the yet-to-come fullness of a final ultimate future.

So often Augustine is thought of as someone who had very definite ideas on many things, whose ideas in the long run profoundly came to shape Western philosophical and religious traditions. True enough. But too often scholarly studies have glossed over the obvious in Augustine: how many questions he asks and how few answers, how often he says he was unsure of things, how often he found things mysterious. And the human heart was one of those. By this study, I hope to restore some attention to this probing, searching, indecisive quality of Augustine's thinking, to his accents on naming what he did not think we know.

While I hope this study may be of service to those who specialize in the study of Augustine, my hope is to engage a much wider circle. For most readers, ancients come off as arcane in their thinking and remote in their concerns. But Augustine is different, remarkably different. Readers and thinkers of all stripes find that he speaks with an unexpected, uncanny immediacy. He remains among the few figures of antiquity whose voice seems capable of – indeed, seems at ease with – traversing the centuries-long chasm. He speaks with just enough of a contemporary accent that his voice catches our ear, and the concerns he voices still concern us. As one reads him, it is easy to forget that he died some 1600 years ago. One reason, I believe, that his words still speak to us is that the heart mattered to him as much as it matters to us. He was deeply in touch with his own heart and with that of his hearers. He knew the heart's passions, its sometimes violent and addictive yearnings, its acute restlessness and unexpected depths, its silences and graced tranquilities – in a word, its mysteries. I engage him here because I believe he still has things to say to us. I am not alone in this. Augustine continues to attract contemporary dialogue partners, especially among an array of philosophers (e.g., Arendt; Taylor; Lyotard; Sorabji; Marion). For all his "otherness," he remains a bearer of a wisdom worth engaging – or at least, arguing with – and a bearer of hard warnings worth taking to heart.

This book, like my previous book-length ventures, required that I draw heavily on historians as conversation partners. We who do history are professionals in the art of memory (a very Augustinian concern). As public rememberers, we are required to be expert detectives, skilled assemblers of often hard-to-decipher evidence, reconstructors of long-forgotten persons and events, all that who-did-what-to-whom-and-why, not only knowing how to read strange languages and piece together strange worldviews, but also acutely aware of the irremedial biases and limits of surviving evidence. We who do history are required to enter the foreign, remote worlds we explore with some measure of sympathy. It sharpens the ear and enables us to listen in on the often subtle hearts of those who populate those foreign and remote worlds. As historians, we are specialists in conversing with the dead. We also, in turn, engage in a sort of shuttle diplomacy, speaking our findings to the living. Our journeys of retrieval and translation require bringing the past into a close – and at times risky – proximity to a present which all too often prefers forgetting and indulging in talking only to itself. This diplomacy renders the past not only present but proximate with the concomitant risk of letting its humanity and its exotic otherness cast a hard, harsh light on our own milieu.

In writing this, I have spent many hours thinking this through not only with historians, but perhaps even more with philosophers and poets, with those whose profession has accustomed them to the hard requisites of this cartography of mystery and the subtle art of spelunking the human heart. They have continually reminded me of the need to stretch language into uncomfortable realms to better name the mysteries that spill out before our eyes and lie at our feet and thump with loud regularity within our chests. One of those poets is an eloquent contemporary, Charles Wright (b. 1938). In a recent collection, whose very title – *A Short History of the Shadow* – names a deeply Augustinian outlook, he writes of matters that seem well suited to this embarkation:

It's only in darkness you can see the light, only
From emptiness that things start to fill,
I read once in a dream, I read in a book
under the pink
Redundancies of the spring peach trees.

Old fires, old geographies.
In that case, make it old, I say, make it singular
In its next resurrection . . .

Something dead comes back and lifts up its arms,
puts down its luggage
And says . . .
I bring you good news from the other world (Wright: 3-4).

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