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The Role of Memory in Saint Augustine's *Confessions*

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I

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine claims that the three times which exist are not past, present, and future. Rather, "there are three times, the present of things past, the present of things present, and the present of things future". Moreover, he advises that these three times "are in the soul, but elsewhere I do not see them: the present of things past is in memory; the present of things present is in intuition; the present of things future is in expectation" (11.20).[1] Augustine believes that all of these times function in a dynamic way in the soul's encounter with eternity. However, in the context of the *Confessions*, the present of things past enlivens the text, both for Augustine himself, writing the text as an older man, and for the reader, traveling with Augustine in his reminiscences. Therefore, it seems quite natural that Augustine would spend a good deal of reflection on the functions and role of memory, both in a theoretical as well as a narrative sense.

While he takes up memory as a theoretical problem in Book 10, its significance in Augustine's narrative account of his life remains largely implicit in the text. Put another way, memory functions to mediate the relating of the existential account of the *Confessions* and, therefore, remains transparent for Augustine as storyteller. However, what remains transparent in the storytelling becomes thematic in Book 10. Given this relation, Augustine provides his readers with the basis for utilizing the theoretical account of memory in Book 10 as a means of elucidating the role of memory in his narrative account. Such will be the aim of this essay. Most discussions of Augustine's account of memory focus on epistemological issues, granting only passing glances at the role of memory in the formation of personal identity. For instance, Gerard O'Daly's commentary in *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* (1987) "confine[s] itself to Augustine's treatment of memory in the empirical sense" (181). Likewise, Bruce Bubacz's "Augustine's Account of Factual Memory" (1975) focuses on defending Augustine's placement of memory at the center of his epistemology (131). In this essay, I will take a different approach, concentrating my attention primarily on the significance of memory in the creation of a unified self-identity. Specifically, I will attempt to show that the philosophical discussion of recollection presented in Book 10 provides an elucidation of the way in which memory takes on a healing role for Augustine's dispersed self.

II

The heart of the "Philosophy of Memory" which Augustine develops lies in chapters 8 through 23 of Book 10. The context gleaned from the preceding chapters consists (as does the entire work) of Augustine's effort at "ascending by steps to him who made me" (10.8). Having moved past "The Power of Sensation," Augustine enters into the "spacious palaces of my memory, where are treasures of countless images of things of

every manner, brought there from objects perceived by sense." In this portrait, memory is the court in which Augustine rules by calling forth images at will, welcoming those which have been invited and brushing away "others [which] rush forth in mobs," while the senses are the portals which keep things "distinct and according to kind."

Here, Augustine speaks of the memory of sensations, which act as the gatekeepers to memory: "the things themselves do not enter there, but images of things perceived by sense are kept ready there for the one recalling it" (ibid.). Unfortunately, while he understands that the sensations enter through certain portals, he is not certain how they are formed. Along with the images of Augustine's past sensations and deeds lie the stories told to him by others about his own deeds. These memories consist of such important stories as the ones that his parents and others have told Augustine about his infancy.

Furthermore, before moving into the next chapter, Augustine tells the reader that "from that same abundant stock I combine one and another of the likenesses of things ... with things past, and from them I meditate upon future actions, events, and hopes, and all these again as if they were actually present" (ibid.). This active gathering functions creatively, i.e., by producing a space in which the "present of things future" can be constructed. According to Hannah Arendt in her *Love and Saint Augustine* (1996), "The triumph of memory is that in presenting the past and thus depriving it, in a sense, of its bygone quality, memory transforms the past into a future possibility" (48). Thus, memory provides, through active and creative synthesis, the background and direction out of which the thrust toward expectation and futurity arise.

The next chapter in Book 10 focuses on "A Higher Memory." Here Augustine acknowledges that the contents of memory are not exhausted by reference to the images of sensations for "Here also are those things learned from the liberal studies which have not yet slipped away" (10.9). These memories constitute a higher realm since "of these things it is not images that I carry about, but the things themselves." Unlike the sensations, which impress images of the things upon the memory, these higher memories consist of the things themselves. Thus, Augustine believes not only that these memories are more significant, but that the capacity of memory to hold these things indicates that memory acts as more than a mere receptacle of images of sensations.

However, a problem is introduced into the account of memory for, while Augustine knows that the images of sensations enter into memory through the sensory organs, he does not know how to account for the introduction of these higher things into memory. "Whence and how," he queries, "did these things enter into my memory? How, I do not know, for when I learned them I did not give credence to another's heart, but I recognized them with my own, and I approved them as true, and I entrusted them to my heart" (10.10). He turns to the Platonic terminology of recollection to make sense of this conundrum:

> For this reason, we find that to learn such things, images of which we do not take in through the senses, and which apart from images we discern within us, just as they are in themselves, is simply this: by acts of thought we *gather together and collect* as it were things that memory contained here and there *without any order*, and then observe them to see to it that they be placed near at hand as it were in that very memory, where they previously lay scattered and neglected. (10.11; emphasis added)

This point is crucial for Augustine's theoretical understanding of memory. The active function of re-collection in this account mirrors, albeit on a higher level, the active function present in the realm of sensations. Here, Augustine characterizes memory as an active function able to collect and order objects lying scattered about the dark corners of the mind and to bring them 'near to hand', that is, ready to be recalled.

Augustine takes this point even further to claim that this re-collection constitutes the very basis for knowing. He notes that if he ceases to recall these things from where they lie submerged in the dark depths of his mind, they will slip ever further down into the darkness. Therefore, "they must be brought together [*cogenda*] so that they may be known" (10.11). Without that act of collecting them from the darkness into the light of a meaningful order, they cannot be known. This, in turn, indicates that a creative act lies at the very heart of knowing.

This way of construing Augustine's appropriation of Plato's notion of recollection stands somewhat in contrast with interpretations of Augustine which center primarily around epistemological issues. For example, O'Daly (1987) claims that Augustine's use of "such Platonically influenced terms as 'forgetfulness' and 'recollection' could be no more than a convenient, symbolic ('in a certain sense') way of speaking of the mind's access to a priori truths and the fact that such truths have to be actualized in thought" (200). I agree with O'Daly that Augustine's use of such terms may be symbolic in this way, for Augustine is indeed struggling with the source of such truths that "were there even before I learned them" (10.10). However, I take issue with O'Daly's claim that such usage possesses only symbolic significance. For Augustine's appropriation of recollection points to an actual, active faculty of the mind which creatively synthesizes the "things that memory contained here and there" (10.11).

Note furthermore Augustine's claim that what is collected by memory previously lay about in the mind "without any order" (ibid.). "They must," he says, "be collected together [*colligenda*] as it were out of a sort of scattered state." Thus, re-collection must not be conceived as taking on an encyclopedic form, i.e., as a mere collection of factual 'memory-images'.[2] Instead, Augustine's employment of such terms as 'near at hand' and 'ready at hand' (10.10 and 10.11) suggests a resonance with a Heideggerian account, in which these factual data constitute the contents of a workshop. In his account of the workshop, these bits of data are not merely collected and cognitively perceived; rather, they are instruments or tools and, as Heidegger says in *Being and Time* (1996), "the less we just stare at the thing called hammer, the more actively we use it, the more original our relation to it becomes" (65). This portrayal of memory and knowledge suggests that memory operates less like someone putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and more like a sculptor working in his studio, creating a work of art from the objects lying scattered about the floor. While the former attempts to replace the various pieces in their proper positions within the preordained whole, the latter attempts to construct a whole by connecting the pieces in a creative way. While the former seeks to *imitate* the 'true' order, the latter seeks to *create* a unique and coherent whole.

Furthermore, following the resonance with Heidegger (1996), the source of these bits of memory is not the central issue, for "the context of useful things appears not as a totality never seen before, but as a totality that has continually been beforehand in our circumspection" (70). In other words, the important issue is why these bits of data have come to the foreground of our awareness. Heidegger claims that things are theoretically thematized only when there is a disturbance in the workshop, and the tone of Book 10 of the *Confessions* is most certainly theoretical. So, insofar as we take Heidegger to be helpful in elucidating Augustine's discussion of memory, we must ask, "What disturbance has arisen for Augustine such that he must take up memory thematically?"

For Augustine, the crisis creating this disturbance is the dispersion of self-identity. According to Arendt (1996), "remembrance in Augustine is primarily recollection, 'collecting myself from dispersion' ... and to recollect myself from dispersion is the same as to 'confess'" (48-49). Hence, the narrative account which constitutes the greater portion of the *Confessions* consists of Augustine's attempt to re-collect himself in terms of the scattered pieces of his life, i.e., to heal himself. This healing, according to Arendt, by means of "remembrance, recollection, and confession" is guided by "the quest for the origin of existence, the quest for the One who 'made me'" (49).

III

The first nine books of the *Confessions* consist of Augustine's active recollection of his life. However, he does not enter into this activity in the interest of strolling down memory lane, for these memories often bring him great pain and sorrow. As Paul Archambault (1982) points out, "Augustine himself never favored indulgent self-examination for its own sake but always in the light of God's grace" (28). Augustine undertakes the activities of remembering and confessing in an effort to re-collect the scattered events of his life as episodes of the interaction between his soul and God. He construes these events in this way in the *Confessions* with an eye toward bringing himself closer to God:

> In the bitterness of my remembrance, I tread again my most evil ways, so that you may grow sweet to me, O sweetness that never fails ... which gathers me together again from that disordered state in which I lay in shattered pieces, wherein turned away from you, the one, I spent myself upon the many. (2.1)

Here Augustine points out that the episodes of his life lie scattered and unordered "in shattered pieces." Thus, since the pieces of his life were shattered, Augustine believed himself to be broken or unwhole because he lacked an orientation toward the One which could help to unify the many events.

This lack of wholeness took hold of Augustine in two senses. In the first sense, Augustine construed himself as at war with himself, divided between two opposing wills. He confesses, "Thus did my two wills, the one old, the other one new, the first carnal, and the second spiritual, contend with one another, and by their conflict they laid waste my soul" (8.5). Through conversion and the strengthening of the new will Augustine

overcomes this sense of division. However, the second sense of self-division, in which Augustine's life seems to him a meaningless procession of consecutive moments, finds its cure in memory.

Augustine was acutely aware of the intimate link between time and human existence and understood the need for humans to hold together their lives in a unified whole, that is, to fight against the tendency to lose oneself in the repetitive succession of present experiences. Arendt (1996) explains, "It is not just perishability but also temporality that stands as the stigma of all created things" (54). To overcome the slipping of temporality, humans seek their origin. According to Arendt, this return to the origin functions to bring the 'absolute past' into line with the 'absolute future' in order to create wholeness. She says, "the person who turns back to the absolute past, the Creator who made him, the Whence-he-came reveals itself as identical to the Whither-he-goes. Thus the postulated eternity of Being makes beginning and end interchangeable in terms of the temporal creature's reference to its own existence." In other words, when Augustine turns toward his Creator, he brings into a coherent whole the past, understood through memory, and the future, created by memory and understood in expectation. Furthermore, "In so doing," she says, "he also unites into a whole his own existence, which otherwise would be nothing more than an orderly succession of temporal intervals" (56).

It should be noted that, for Augustine, this unity of the past and the future does not degrade the significance of the present. Rather, the wholeness that it brings enlivens the present because "in making and holding present both past and future, that is, memory and the expectation derived from it, it is the present in which they coincide that determines human existence" (ibid.). Insofar as the remembering functions as a "making present," it constitutes a present couched in the dynamic space between memory of the past and expectation of the future. Arendt describes this process as a quest: "In this quest which takes place in memory, the past comes back into the present and the yearning for a return to the past origin turns into the anticipating desire of a future that will make the origin available again" (57).

Thus, Augustine's quest to return to the Creator takes the shape of confession, in which he seeks to re-collect his origin in anticipation of his return to it: "Permit me, I beseech you, and enable me to follow around in my present recollection the windings of my past errors, and to offer them up to you as a sacrifice of jubilation. For without you what am I to myself but the leader of my own destruction?" (4.1). This passage poignantly indicates Augustine's need to re-collect and reappropriate the diverse episodes of his life as a coherent series guided by the providential hand of God. He believes that the dispersion of the events of his life, brought about by his own hand, cannot be cured without God as the central point of reference.

So, by creatively re-membering and re-collecting the events of his life with reference to God, Augustine becomes healed, that is, made whole. While the memories of the episodes of his life previously caused him sorrow (2.1), he now recalls them with great joy, not because he loves the acts themselves, but because he now sees them as acts of God in his life. With this in mind, he proclaims, "With thanksgiving let me remember, O my God, all your mercies to me and let me confess them to you" (8.1). This

proclamation, made at the beginning of Book 8, stands in stark contrast with the desperate question Augustine asks early in Book 1: "Who will help me, so that you will come into my heart and inebriate it, to the end that I may forget my evils and embrace you, my one good?" (1.5). Clearly by the end of the *Confessions* Augustine has utilized memory's active re-collection as a tool of healing and as a means of centralizing the role of God in his life. In the fullest sense, then, Augustine can claim that "in the vast court of my memory ... I encounter myself and recall myself" (10.8).

IV

Hence, in the *Confessions,* the theoretical and the narrative senses of memory converge such that the theoretical commentary functions to elucidate the acts of remembering which constitute the autobiographical account. Furthermore, the portrait painted by this convergence characterizes memory as an active agent with the potential of healing the divided self through active recollection, reinterpretation, and reappropriation. Archambault (1982) claims that, for Augustine,

> it is memory that makes the subject's self-apprehension possible. It permits the totalization of interior and exterior experience, insofar as both proceed from the experiencing subject. As Augustine puts it, in an apt image from Book I, it is memory that weaves the thread of our diverse experiences into a single cloth, ever bringing together the present and the past, and anticipating the future, in a constant effort at rendering things present. (30)

Certainly Augustine believes that memory has helped to heal his sundered soul. Moreover, the act of re-membering does not indicate that Augustine devalues the present or the future in favor of "living in the past." To the contrary, the act of re-collection redeems the present, for "the happy life is not recalled as past, pure and simple, without further relevance for the present. Insofar as the happy life is remembered, it is part and parcel of the present and inspires our desires and expectations for the future" (Arendt 1996, 47).

Notes

1. All references to Augustine will come from *Confessions* (trans. John K. Ryan).

2. Cf. O'Daly's claim (1997) that "One can think of the individual's memory-images as a kind of depository of empirical knowledge" (136).

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