Augustine's Intellectual Conversion

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Most prominent in the Confessions are 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 are his philosophical journey and what Bernard Lonergan called his “intellectual conversion,” which took place in the spring and summer of 386 and which he describes in book VII 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 a great theme in the Confessions, we need to have some idea of what we are talking about. In the first section of this paper we will present an example from learning a science and some account of the meaning of this event; in the second section we will show this change of mind exemplified in the Confessions.

The physicist Freeman Dyson once described the process involved in his students learning quantum mechanics. It involves 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.” (259-260)

In other words, 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 learning involves “unlearning something,” that is, one’s spontaneous anticipations about reality. And that can be a painful process. In a more contemporary language, one ceases to consider knowing to be merely experiencing or having representative images, and one comes to realize that genuine knowledge consists in accurate understanding and true judgment. Realizing this—coming to understand one’s own understanding—is what Bernard Lonergan calls intellectual conversion. For, as he puts it,

some form of naïve realism seems to appear utterly unquestionable to very many. As soon as they begin to speak of knowing, of objectivity, of reality, there crops up the assumption that all knowing must be something like looking. To be liberated from that blunder, to discover the self-transcendence proper to the human process of coming to know, is to break often long-ingrained habits of thought and speech. It is to acquire the mastery in one’s own house that is to be had only when one knows precisely what one is doing when one is knowing. It is a conversion, a new beginning, a fresh start. It opens the way to ever further clarifications and developments. (239-240)

Elsewhere Lonergan notes that one has not made such a breakthrough yet if one has no clear memory of its “startling strangeness” (22).

Now what does this have to do with Augustine’s Confessions? Well, in the Confessions, it is clear that Augustine does have a clear memory of such a startling breakthrough, and it is chiefly recounted in
book 7, but its echo can be heard throughout the Confessions. According to his great biographer, Peter Brown, Augustine could not have told us such an interesting story about his life 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 7, 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. (95)

One element in those "dynamics of the soul" was Augustine's radical desire to understand. At the age of nineteen, buffeted by the winds of desire, Augustine happened upon Cicero's Hortensius, a book since lost to history. Through that book he discovered in himself a new dimension of desire, the desire to understand.

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. (Confessions III,4)

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 school of philosophy to another: from Manichaeism to Academic skepticism and beyond. Having eventually 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 books of the Platonists," probably the books of Plotinus and some by his student Porphyry. These books were "packed with thought," (libri quidem pleni), and they produced in him a "conflagration" (Contra Academicos 2, 2, 5).

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 . . ." (Confessions VII,10).
Secondly, under the influence of this reading he began to think of "spirit" in its own terms and not as understood in bodily ways. He came to realize that his chief intellectual obstacle had been his need to imaginatively "picture" things which cannot strictly speaking be pictured—whether his own mind, his own being, reality, evil or God.

For example, right from the first pages of the *Confessions*, Augustine reflects on the nature of the divine and how it transcends any images he could construct. How could he call on God, for example, he asks, to "come into him," if it is indeed true that God is everywhere and in all? Eventually he recounts his discovery that all his understandings of the divine had been clouded by his 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 space, whether infused in the world, or else diffused through infinite space beyond the world. (VII.1)

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. (V.10)

In other words, what Augustine thought was God he came to discover was not God. 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 "bodily substance," 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? (III.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. (V.10)

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. (VII.1)

Slowly, Augustine began to believe not only in the unseen, but also in the totally different character of such reality, reality mediated to us by language and words.

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. (VI.5)

Lonergan would speak of this as Augustine’s discovery of the world mediated by meaning, that is, by acts of understanding, judging and believing. Such a world goes far beyond the world of immediacy: of sights and sounds, touches and smells, tastes and feelings. It is a world in which Augustine had lived since he had learned how to speak, but it was a world he was, at the age of thirty-one, just coming to recognize. This world mediated by meaning is a fragile world, for besides fact, there is fiction. Consequently, there was his growing ability to think in terms of “veritas,” or true reality, rooted in God.

Centuries later, Bernard Lonergan, writing in a scientific context, will write of the similarity of this transition in Augustine’s life to the transition that is implied in doing modern science—the transition to which Dyson’s students were exposed.

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. (15)

If Dyson's students had spent as much time thinking about themselves and their own spirit as they did about quantum mechanics, they might have had as startling and strange experience as Augustine did in the spring and summer of the year 386.

**Works Cited**


