

Lecture 2. The Confessions of St. Augustine

Overview: St. Augustine of Hippo (354 CE-430 CE) exercised inodorous insight into the nature of will, memory, the power of rhetoric, the nature of conversion, what it means to be human - to glimpse into the heart of divinity. By examining his Confessions, we can see the deeper Augustine, looking beyond modern day conceptions of his thought. It allows us to glimpse into the operations of his soul - his psychology, theological yearning, spiritual learning, and chronicle of memory. It brings us into the struggle, eloquent transparency, and extraordinary psychological world in which Augustine examines intentionality, motivation, the contradictions of humanity, the struggles with ideas and flesh, and the struggle with hope and despair.

L Background: The narrative component of Confessions covers the period of Augustine's birth in 354 CE to the death of his saintly mother, Monica, in 387 CE. The first nine books chronicle Augustine's complex, contorted, labyrinthine, and tumultuous search for truth. The remaining three books are more exegetical, ruminative and homiletic in form and thrust.

II. "Affect and Alter"

- Classicist and translator Garry Wills sees the entire work as a theological construct with autobiographical elements in the way of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Wills notes that "like Dante, Augustine moves simultaneously both outward, exploring the revelation of God, and inward, letting that revelation affect and alter him."
- The details of this "affect and alter" process constitute the Confessions.

III. A Yearning for God

• From the very opening we are drawn into the inner world of the young thinker and his struggles, made aware of his acute longing for God, the supreme point of rest, the locus of his life, his stability: "Vast are you. Lord, and as vast should be your praise - vast what you do; what you do beyond as saying. Yet man, a mere segment of what you have made, strives to appraise you—man, 'confined by a nature that must die.' confined by this evidence of his sin, the evidence that you rebuff the overweening, yet man would still appraise you, this mere segment of what you made. . . . [O]ur heart is unstable until stabilized in you" (Confessions).

IV. The Quest for Truth: Augustine's love life, his mistress, his son Adeodatus, his skill as a rhetorician, his dalliances with unorthodox thought, his teaching stint in Carthage, trips to Rome and Milan, his encounter with Ambrose, and his intricate and moving relationship with his mother Monica - all of these and more

constitute the core of his narrative of discovery.

Augustine's search for the truth is a psychological tour de force, a spiritual masterpiece of introspection, and an intellectual probing of the falsities and deceptions of untoward thinking.

Review Questions

1. What does the story of the pear teach us?
2. What did Augustine learn from the Platonists?
3. What role did St. Monica play in Augustine's life - affectively and spiritually?