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## AUGUSTINE

*Lilianne Manning*

Grant me, O Lord, to know and understand . . . whether first to know you or call upon you . . . I will seek you, O Lord . . . .

*(The Confessions, 1.1.1<sup>1</sup>)*

### 1. Introduction

When Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis (354–430 CE), referred to as St. Augustine or Augustine, converted to the Christian doctrine, he set himself the aim of understanding God, although, as it is explicit in the quotation above, he did not know where to start. The answer, ten books later in his *Confessions* (*Conf.*), is that the only place to search for God is in his own memory:

I shall mount beyond this power of my nature, still rising by degrees towards Him who made me. And so I come to the fields and vast palaces of memory, where are stored the innumerable images of material things brought to it by the senses.

*(Conf. 10.8.12)*

The aim of the present chapter is twofold: (i) to describe some of Augustine's personal characteristics, which in interaction with his cultural context, may explain the modernity of his writings on memory despite the interval of 1,600 years, and (ii) to develop the central components of his theory of memory, taking into account that Augustine was interested in the memory process, which he considered to be the unique method to know God.

In Section 1, his capacity of introspection and his personality are commented on against the background of two philosophical currents, Neo-Platonism and Christianity (the only true philosophical theme for Augustine). In Section 2, we see that the formation of mental images of the external world is the fabric, so to speak, of recollections, but that this general memory process raises important questions and some problems when Augustine wonders about memory-images of God, emotions, and forgetting. The section ends with his notions about the self.

As mentioned above, Augustine reflected and wrote on memory not to know about memory, not even to know about his own recollections, but because he was adamant that by remembering his relation to God, he would be following the only way of knowing what a human being can know about their maker.

Besides knowing God, Augustine also aimed at both understanding the soul—bearing in mind that he considered memory to be part of the soul—and awakening his fellow Christians' thoughts and emotions towards God. His surviving works attest to how committed he was in the pursuit of his objectives. His work includes many books, apologetic and exegetical works, hundreds of lectures, letters, and sermons. Not surprisingly, the seventh-century theologian, Isidore of Seville expressed his deep admiration, addressing him directly: “Augustine, he lies who says he has read you entirely . . . for you Augustine, glow with a thousand volumes” (translated version: Barney et al. 2006).

It has been suggested that the first precedent of the twentieth-century memory taxonomy could be situated in book 10 of Augustine's *Confessions* (Cassel et al. 2013; see this chapter's Conclusion), and that books 10 and 11 of the same work, contain the foundations of the current notion of “mental time travel” (Manning et al. 2013; see the Conclusion). In the present chapter, an attempt is made to focus on Augustine's memory theory with no other reference to the present day than the current reader's impression of remarkable modernity when following Augustine's introspective conclusions about memory processes. The present text is decidedly set to “listen” to the author in his context and from there, try and describe (a minute) part of the results of his complex meditations in his search of God. Therefore, before tackling his concept of memory, this chapter starts with a brief reminder of some of our author's characteristics that seem interesting to better contextualize his work on memory.

Among Augustine's “thousand volumes,” in Isidore of Seville's parlance, the *Confessions* and most particularly book 10 are consensually acknowledged to represent, *par excellence*, his work on memory. However, it is also well-known that from book 10 to the end of the *Confessions* there are many issues that were Augustine's topics of meditation in an earlier book, *On the Trinity*. The present text is therefore largely based on passages from these two volumes, the *Confessions* and *On the Trinity (Trin.)*, which are thought to represent the work on memory in Augustine's theological vision of what it is to be human (Clark 2005).

## 2. The man behind the writer

Augustine's biography is widely accessible: as a recent example, a brief but fairly comprehensive list of his biographical facts can be found in Cassel and colleagues' article (2013). The present subheading briefly focuses on two personal features, crucial for his quest on memory: (i) his capacity of introspection and the role played by Neo-Platonism in his self-analysis, and (ii) the complementary characteristic, i.e., passionate (almost obsessive) way, in which he pursued his introspective activity. It is possible that these personal features explain, at least partially, why what he wrote on memory, 16 centuries ago, still pulsates with the imprint of modernity.

Due to human reason's mutability, rational comprehension of God will always be partial, stated Augustine. Intensely aiming at this partial knowledge of God, he decided that it could be achieved by a correctly guided self-knowledge. This decision meant to rely entirely on the understanding of his memory and, in that endeavor, his likely natural capacity and also his training to carry out self-analysis were crucial. The influence of Neo-Platonism on Augustine's conceptions, in general, has been amply debated. Did he follow the Platonists' teachings to use and therefore understand his memory to find God? Augustine encountered Neo-Platonism in the spring of 386, as he mentioned eleven years later, in the *Confessions (Conf. 7.6.9)*. Undoubtedly, Augustine shared with Neo-Platonism the notion of order and the hierarchical places that God and the soul occupy in that ordered world. Importantly, however, Augustine differs from the Greek tradition in his attempts to understand memory from his human perspective, and independently of any ontological aim. Despite this difference though, the influence of

Neo-Platonism is noticeable in the *means* chosen to understand memory (O'Daly 1987). Both Plotinus and Augustine advocate for the human being's inner life. It is the interior man's sense that will yield the responses about God as Plotinus explained in the *Enneads*: introspection coincides with contemplation of God. What seems uniquely Augustinian is the Christian perspective of self-examination. The *Confessions*, particularly but not exclusively, were written as a speech addressed to God, asking for help, and expressing full confidence in him. This allowed him to reveal freely and naturally his inner life and self-awareness (Clark 2005), by means of scrutinizing his inner being.

It appears therefore that Augustine's method to understand and eventually conceptualize memory, resulted from both the influence of Neo-Platonism and the fact that his introspective technique was grounded in the Christian tradition, and more precisely, rooted in the contents of the Psalms, which were ubiquitous in his everyday life after his conversion.

The role of the Psalms (being a powerful declaration of loving God), in interaction with his capacity of introspection, enhanced Augustine's naturally passionate character, and this combination probably holds an important key to understanding the context in which he achieved such an imposing work on memory.

At the age of 19, after having read Cicero's *Hortentius*, Augustine commented (in *De Beata Vita*) how intensely he desired to devoting himself to the learning of wisdom (philosophy). He remembers again this first passion for wisdom, in the *Confessions* (3.4.8): "How did I then burn, my God, how did I burn to wing upwards from earthly delights to You." By the same token, an important transformation is manifested: the love for wisdom of his youth is amalgamated in this passage of the *Confessions*, with his love for God.

Finally, aside from his most salient personal features, it is interesting to note Augustine's use of the metaphor as being his literary style to convey his meditations. In this characteristic style of the ancient Roman writers, his metaphors to explain memory are rich and varied; sometimes they are spatial and architectural, evoking palaces, halls, vast courts, avenues, or fields, and sometimes they are associated with the human body. Related to the latter, memory is seen as the stomach of the mind or the mind's eye, and the will's eye to direct attention in order to retrieve memories (see "Mental images of emotions" in Section 3).

In summary, his outstanding capacity of analysis, including self-analysis of his sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and memories, likely enhanced by long-standing Neo-Platonist notions, and his passionate personality, highlighted by the daily manner in which Christians praise God, were the bases to construct the first model ever of human memory, amply using the metaphoric style.

### 3. Augustine's conceptualization of memory

As it was mentioned above, it would be a mistake to think that Augustine wrote hundreds of pages because he was "interested" in memory. He was not. What he deems important is not what he remembers from his past, but *how* he remembers the past (Clark 2005). The mental activity of remembering paves the way to reflect on our existence in relation to God, and how reflecting in that manner leads to knowing God. This notion is his guiding theme, and it was already explicit in his *Soliloquies*, as the central subjects of the two books that form the volume: knowing his creator and knowing his own soul. Interestingly, O'Daly (1987) remarks that the dichotomy of these two kinds of knowledge is only apparent due to the influence of the Neo-Platonist notion that knowing one's own mind is tantamount to knowing its source. (A different matter is the *a priori* knowledge of God, which is commented on below.)

The theoretical frame of Augustine's concept of memory is that memory that is able to know God is part of the intelligent soul (intelligent memory), and different from the sensitive

soul (sensitive memory). Augustine makes this distinction explaining that the latter (*anima*), is a vital and inferior part of the soul (animals have *anima*), while the former (*animus*) is the rational superior part of the soul, exclusively present in the human being.

In *On the Trinity* (10.10.13), it is said that *animus* comprises the superior form of memory, together with the faculty of understanding and the will. Knowledge and science of many things are contained in memory and understanding, he stated, while will allows us to enjoy or use them.

Memory, operating as the link between the senses and intellect, is the basis of Augustine's reflections on the whole processes of storing images, remembering, and forgetting. The starting point is, therefore, to consider sensory perception and the workings of memory to use the products of perception.

### *Mental images*

In Augustine's terms, the representations of the physical world are mental images formed thanks to the senses and stored in our memory. Moreover, to the countless images brought by the senses, Augustine adds the memory's own imaginative creation. He illustrates this notion in a passage from *On the Trinity* (11.8.13), in which he describes the recollection of having seen only one sun together with the possibility of multiplying this memorized unique image in order to "see" two, three, or more suns, and memorize the images.

We think owing to memory-images; they are the necessary link between the objects or events themselves, and the objects or events as being perceived. However, although memory for the physical world corresponds invariably to perceptions, we need our conscious will to form the mental images and retain them:

for it happens even when reading . . . that I have read through a page or a letter and did not know what I was reading, and so had to read it again. For when the attention of the will is centered on something else, then the memory is not so applied to the sense of the body as the sense itself is applied to the letters.

(Trin. 11.8.15)

When the perceived object is withdrawn, he says, its image "remains in the memory, to which the will may again turn its gaze in order to be formed by it from within, as the sense was formed by the sensible body that was presented to it from without" (*Trin.* 11.3.6): this results in the individual recollecting, retrieving memories. The "will turning its gaze" triggers recollections, which implies that we cannot recollect without wanting to recollect, but willingness cannot suffice, if the image is not there any longer, no recollection will take place. But what triggers the will to direct its eye to some place in the mind to direct attention and retrieve memories? Augustine's response is that when people say that future events are seen, it is not the events themselves, but their signs that are seen. Those signs are present "and from them things to come are conceived by the mind and foretold" (*Conf.* 11.18.24). What triggers the will to direct attention in one way or the other seems to be expectation based on present signs. In attentive actions, intentional will would be the directional path between memory and expectation.

Recollection is nothing else than the perception of mental images. However, mental images cannot be called true. In fact, they differ from perception in an essential point, which is that only the objects can be perceived by other than the perceiver himself. It follows that memory-images and therefore recollections, being impossible to be verified as real objects, are less reliable. Moreover, remembering does not imply a direct contact with the past event and therefore memories of past events can be distorted. However, memory distortions are not lies, they have

evidential solidity, but only for the rememberer. (A passage in *Trin.* 15.9.16, describes these distortions. They are called “false memories” in current neuropsychological literature and are the subject of intensive research and abundant publications.)

We may have the impression that perceptions are more reliable than the images formed through them, since the external object can be verified. Can perceptions be called true?

Objects of sight, which are presented from without, where the eye may be deceived, as it is deceived when it sees the bent oar in the water, and when the navigators see the towers moving, and thousands of other things which are otherwise than they appear.

(*Trin.* 15.12.21)

Our senses can also be mistaken, though in a lesser degree than the mental images that we remember.

Memory-images are neither a precise nor an accurate reproduction of the external reality; they are rather the result of reconstruction.

### ***Are there mental images of God?***

Only the things that always exist, as eternity itself, he says, do not need mental images. Augustine asks God where, in what quarter of his memory he is, since he, Augustine, has searched through his body images, affect recollections, and passions, he has searched even in the memory of his memory as far as memory remembers itself, and did not find his image. God is not an image. However, if he were not in his memory, Augustine could not search for him (*Conf.* 10.25.36). He wonders where did he get the knowledge of it (*it* being “the happy life,” *beata vita*, which is God), that he should so desire and love it? God must be in his memory . . . but how, he does not know (*Conf.* 10.20.29). Augustine compares the images of a series of different non-corporeal things such as numbers, eloquence, or emotions with remembering the happy life to conclude that only God has no images in the memory (*Conf.* 10.21.30).

According with these comments, Augustine’s basic concept of memory, as mental images created through senses and recollections made possible through the will, is not directly related to his search for God. This observation leads him to one of his most complex propositions: divine illumination. In fact, to explain a priori knowledge and the presence of God in his memory, he seems to adhere to Plato’s theory of reminiscence. However, considering other passages of *On the Trinity*, it can be seen that Augustine clearly refutes Plato’s theory. Thus, in *On the Trinity* (12.15.24), he starts by contesting Plato’s example describing the slave-boy’s knowledge of geometry (in the *Meno*). In Augustine’s view, rooted in his context of Christianity, it is not a previous life experience that could account for reminiscence, but “a sort of incorporeal light of a unique kind” (*Trin.* 12.15.24). It is divine illumination that acts in memory, and memory is viewed as desire of the happy life (in opposition to remembrance of past lives). The happy life being the knowledge of truth, Augustine’s elucidation appears qualitatively different from Greek explanations of reminiscence. By the same token, Augustine’s meditations on memory in this perspective, make it obvious that his theory should not be conceived as a simple palace of the mind, a storehouse of a great variety of items. The palace of the memory would apply to mental images of objects and the contents of teachings such as language, numbers, laws, etc., but not to his ultimate goal. His model of memory should be seen rather as having at its core the relationship between the knowledge of God, through divine illumination, and the knowledge of his own memory, through the introspective method applied to sensations, perceptions, images, and recollections. To go a step further, it has been stated that self-knowledge and knowledge of

God stand in a dialectical relationship (Crouse 1999). Memory turns inwards to itself, in order to ascend to the knowledge of God; however, that knowledge, in turn, involves a transformation of the self-identity.

### ***Mental images of emotions***

We do not necessarily relive an emotional state, since “I remember past fears without fear, and past desire without desire” (*Conf.* 10.14.21). However, what Augustine wishes to understand is how those emotional recollections are recalled, since they have lost precisely the quality by which they entered the memory. The “representations” of emotions must be in our memory, owing to the fact that at some point we felt the emotions themselves. Recollecting emotional states must follow the same processes than recollecting other types of contents. Although not physically present, emotions have mental images. In a passage of the *Confessions* (10.15.23), he explains how he knows that the memorized image of an affect exists and is accessible, despite the fact that the initial feeling is absent. When he names “pain” without feeling pain, he does so thanks to the storage of an emotion of pain; otherwise, he says, he would be unable to distinguish pain from pleasure. However, this account is not sufficient to understand how emotions are represented in our memory and Augustine’s attempts to clarify this difficulty resulted in one of his most astonishing metaphors, namely, memory seen as being the stomach of the mind. He thought that, most particularly regarding the recollection of emotions, it was necessary to consider some sort of “digestion.” Both the stomach and the memory store food and memories, respectively. Bitter and sweet food and affects of joy and sorrow are stored but they no longer taste/feel. Augustine’s metaphor allowed him to solve the problem of how we can think of our emotions without reliving (“tasting”) the emotions themselves, and how different and opposed emotions can be present simultaneously (Vaught 2005).

### ***Forgetting***

The problem of forgetting is that accepting the fact of having forgotten implies remembering it:

Are we to understand from this that when we remember forgetfulness, it is not present to the memory in itself but by its image: because if it were present in itself it would cause us not to remember but to forget? Who can analyse this, or understand how it can be?

(*Conf.* 10.16.24)

Remembering that we have forgotten is comparable to recollecting emotional states in that the reason itself of the recollection, *why* it is recollected, is forgotten or not relieved. Thus, as commented on above, the emotion itself that originated the emotional state is absent in recalled emotions since the person may be sad while recollecting happy moments, and the thing itself is absent in forgetfulness when remembering that we forget. However, the problem is more difficult to resolve in the case of forgetting, since the presence “through its image” solves the problem for emotions, but does not solve it for forgetting. The reason is that forgetting, unlike emotions, does not have an original presence, no “original” thing could have existed to create at some point certain traces in the mind.

In the case of forgetting, he is confronted with a double problem: how to explain the image of forgetting itself, and since this seems impossible, how to account for remembering forgetting. Using solely his introspection, these problems seemed unsolvable. Therefore, bearing in



mind that Augustine's meditations on this topic are meant, as are all his reflections, to lead him to know God, he resorted to a theological reasoning point of view. Augustine concluded that:

by forgetting God, as though forgetting their own life, they had been turned into death, i.e., into hell. But when reminded they are turned to the Lord, as though coming to life again by remembering their proper life which they had forgotten.

(Doctrinal Treatises 13.13.17)

What is important about forgetting is that one kind of forgetfulness means death.

### ***Memory and the self***

Our identity is based on what we remember of ourselves, and also what we know of ourselves with no particular recollection of a memory (e.g., I know I am a kind/aggressive person, but don't remember the events that formed that knowledge). What we know and what we remember about ourselves extends in time because, owing to the ephemeral and fleeting nature of the present, our self is grounded in our past and future. Memory becomes in Augustine's construction, the pivotal entity through which we can think meaningfully of the self across time, i.e., phenomenological continuity: "The present of things past is memory, the present of things present is sight, the present of things future is expectation" (*Conf.* 11.20.26).

Augustine states that whatever is in the memory it is in the mind, the mind is what we are, our self-identity, which implies being conscious of ourselves. Having established this sequence, Augustine asks what is the self or what the meaning is of the personal identity of which we are conscious:

Great is the power of memory, a thing, O my God, to be in awe of, a profound and immeasurable multiplicity; and this thing is my mind, this thing am I. What then am I, O my God? What nature am I?

(*Conf.* 10.17.26)

The following quotation could be seen perhaps, as an indirect answer to these questions: "It is an inner knowledge by which we know that we live" (*Trin.* 15.12.21). It is worth recalling here that for Augustine, to be alive and to have a soul are tantamount. Although the soul cannot be perceived by the senses, our constant awareness of its existence is the awareness of being alive: "For what is so intimately known, and what knows itself to be itself,<sup>2</sup> than that through which all other things are likewise known, that is, the soul [*animus*] itself?" (*Trin.* 8.6.9). Moreover, when the mind knows itself, it does so because it is present to itself, in the present moment (see *Trin.* 10.10.12). This is the memory in which the subject knows himself, and from this memory he visits his own past, and projects into future actions, events, and expectations. More importantly for Augustine, from this memory the creature can address his creator and construct his relationships with him across time.

In summary, Augustine's central notion of the self is that its formation is possible thanks to the recollection of our experiences and thanks to the fact that we are conscious of our self-knowledge. This is possible only in the extended temporal dimension that becomes present at any given moment, therefore the importance of memory. We are no longer who we were, but we remember who we were and therefore who we were in the past becomes a present representation of ourselves. We are not yet who we hope to become, and again thanks to the memory

of ourselves, expectations are present. Ultimately, as the most basic expression of the memory of our self, it is defined by the knowledge of being alive, which is equivalent to having a soul, and the action of the mind that recognizes itself as itself.

#### 4. Conclusion

The present chapter suggests that Augustine's works on memory result, among other factors, from an outstanding capacity for introspection and a passionate pursuit of his own memory examination. The latter, put to the service of God, guided the former. In this context, the influence of the Neo-Platonist doctrine modulated probably the selection of his central topics. A cultural specificity, the use of metaphor, was widely practiced in the writings of this period, but never in this manner. In fact, Augustine's writing style is considered a turning point in Western literature (Clark 2005), owing to the fact that for the first time ever, the author writes about how he sees himself to himself; the style is entirely personal, emotional and relational. Augustine's personal features and literary style—applied to the thorough and meticulous description of memories and reflections of memory—resulted in the brilliant work that captivates us today, and gives us the disorienting impression of modernity and freshness.

Augustine's theory of memory states in the first place, the formation of memory-images brought by the senses, that is, the sensible memory. The introduction of the Christian notion of divine illumination opposing that of previous life experiences, explains why there are no memory-images of God. Moreover, he tackles subtle questions such as the recollection of emotional states and memory-images of emotions, and that—unresolved—of forgetfulness and recollection of forgetfulness, for whose explanation he adopted a theological perspective. With regard to the self, his reflections produced a coherent, articulate, and far-reaching description of phenomenological continuity and the necessary kind of memory to be closer to the knowledge of God.

His powerful mind, through the pursuit of moral excellence, prepared for nineteenth-century psychology as the science of consciousness (Klein 1970), and foreshadowed the twentieth-century neuropsychology of memory (Cassel et al. 2013). The latter authors hypothesized that Augustine's work on memory was the first complex categorization proposal. Although he did not aim at organizing memory systems, describing different types of memory meant *ipso facto* the construction of the first taxonomy of memory. Moreover, Augustine's descriptions are close to those of modern neuropsychology initiated by Tulving (1972).

Finally, Manning and colleagues (2013) proposed that Augustine's work, due to the universality of its contents, i.e., memory and time, heralded the twenty-first-century notion of "mental time travel" (Suddendorf and Corballis 1997; Tulving 1985). Augustine's meditations on the continuity of the self are close to ours and their influence on our way of reflecting on subjective time must have been important, though never acknowledged.

To conclude, it can be said that although Augustine wished to know only God and his own soul, nothing more; in the end, his aims meant aspiring to know everything about human memory.

#### Notes

- 1 Augustine's citations indicate the name of the work, and the book, chapter and subheading numbers.
- 2 In 2000, Gallagher suggested that even if all of the unessential features of identity disappear, we still know and feel that there is a primitive and immediate "something" that we are willing to call a self.



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