

On Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein Reading

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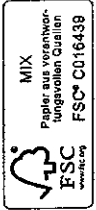
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Steven G. Affeldt

Being Lost and Finding Home: Philosophy, Confession, Recollection, and Conversion in Augustine's *Confessions* and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*

You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.
(Augustine 1991, p. 3)

The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself in question.
(PI 1968, § 133)

1. Introduction

Among works that we know Wittgenstein read and admired, Augustine's *Confessions* might well be thought to enjoy a certain pride of place. He once described the *Confessions* as “possibly ‘the most serious book ever written’” and the ways in which he invoked it in conversation reflect an impressive intimacy with the text (Rhees 1984, p. 89–90). Furthermore, unlike other works we know Wittgenstein treasured – works by Kierkegaard, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, or Emerson, for example – the *Confessions* figures explicitly within *Philosophical Investigations*, the major work of his later philosophy. Indeed, in a text notable for the all but complete absence of other thinkers, no figure appears more frequently than Augustine and only Frege and William James are mentioned as often. But the most obvious reason for thinking that the *Confessions* enjoys a special status is the fact that the *Investigations*, famously, opens with an extended passage from the work, a passage in which Augustine recounts how he (must have) learned to speak and in which Wittgenstein claims to find a “particular picture of the essence of human language” that a large part of the *Investigations* is devoted to examining and contesting (PI 1968, § 1).

Even so, Wittgenstein's relation to Augustine has received relatively scant attention. There has, of course, been a great deal of attention devoted to Wittgenstein's critique of the so-called “Augustinian picture of language.” But little of this attention has actually been devoted to Augustine or to any broader bearing

of his work on Wittgenstein's. Indeed, the manner in which most commentators have attended to the "Augustinian picture" involves treating the opening passage from Augustine as a self-contained document that is neatly severable from any surrounding narrative and the significance of which is wholly exhausted by the gloss that Wittgenstein provides. In effect, this approach implicitly denies that Wittgenstein's invocation of Augustine could reflect any more systematic influence of, or engagement with, his work while also blinding itself to potential evidence for any such influence or engagement by dismissing Augustine's text.

These attitudes and practices cannot simply be dismissed. After all, Wittgenstein's explicit invocations of Augustine are few, brief, and largely linked to his discussion of the "Augustinian picture." It is also not immediately clear how the *Investigations* could be more systematically engaged with the *Confessions*. At least on the surface, Augustine's spiritual autobiography and theological reflections have little connection to a work whose "subjects" Wittgenstein identifies as "the concepts of meaning, of understanding, of a proposition, of logic, the foundations of mathematics, states of consciousness, and other things" (PI 1968, p. ix). Furthermore, Norman Malcolm has offered an explanation for Wittgenstein's opening quotation that seems to authorize the idea that Augustine's relevance is restricted to his problematic "picture" of human language. Wittgenstein decided to use a quotation from the *Confessions*, Malcolm reports, "not because he could not find the conception expressed in that quotation stated as well by other philosophers, but because the conception *must* be important if so great a mind held it" (Malcolm 1980, p. 71).

The burden of justification, then, falls upon those who claim to discern a broader and more systematic influence. It is incumbent upon them to make the case for Augustine's influence – to show, that is, how our reading of Wittgenstein is deepened, enriched, or transformed by seeking to discern and trace the impact of his reading of Augustine. That is my aim in the present essay. I want to suggest that Wittgenstein's reading of the *Confessions* played a critical role in shaping the fundamental conception of, and practice of, philosophy developed in *Philosophical Investigations* – that it systematically informs Wittgenstein's vision of what philosophy is, what motivates it, what kinds of difficulty it involves, and what ends or goals it is directed toward.¹

¹ In pursuing this aim I am, in part, making explicit thoughts about the influence of Augustine on *Philosophical Investigations* that were left largely implicit in Affeldt (1999) and (2010). My thinking about relationships between Augustine and Wittgenstein is especially indebted to: Cavell's "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy" (Cavell 1976c); Cavell's "Notes

2. Philosophy and Representative Confession

In his monumental history of modern identity, *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor argues that Augustine's decisive philosophical importance lies in developing at "bequeath[ing] to the Western tradition of thought" a new form of inwardness (Taylor 1989, p. 131). This form of inwardness, which Taylor calls the "inwardness of radical reflexivity," consists in making my experience itself the object of my experience; in directing my attention, that is, not simply at other objects of my attention but toward the character of my experience itself.

If one embraces a view of Wittgenstein as challenging notions of the inner or private and as assigning ultimate primacy to public practices and outward criteria, this Augustinian emphasis on inwardness will seem to mark a decisive difference between the two. However, as I read Wittgenstein, the centrality of inwardness actually represents a deep point of commonality with Augustine: a place from which a rich set of connections begins to unfold.

Wittgenstein is likely surpassed *only* by Augustine in the intensity of his attention to his own experience – to his "inner states" – and in his insistence upon revealing his temptations, desires, cravings. *Philosophical Investigations* is replete with notations of the writer's straits of mind and feeling – with remarks such as "I want to say...", "I feel like saying...", "I feel as though...", "I am tempted..." or "Here the urge is strong...", and the like. It is critical to recognize that this is not simply an idiosyncratic mannerism but, on the contrary, a deeply important manifestation of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy. In the first instance it expresses Wittgenstein's view that philosophy involves "long and involved journeying" in which the movements of thought and the paths that it follows are as important as any conclusions it may reach (PI 1968, p. ix). But Wittgenstein's attention to and recording of his experience equally express his conviction – a conviction that he desires to remind us – that philosophy is a human practice. It is undertaken in incarnate human beings and, as such, it is necessarily and ineradicably shaped by, and revelatory of, the full range of human desires, fears, drives, aspirations, temptations, and so on. Indeed, it is the centrality and significance of this feature of Wittgenstein's writing that lies behind Stanley Cavell's early observation that the *Investigations* participates in the genre of confession (Cavell 1976c, p. 71).

If, following Cavell, we think of Wittgenstein's registrations of his experience as confessional gestures, a striking feature of these gestures immediately presents itself; namely, that they are very often expressed in the second-person

and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*" (in Cavell 1995); Eldridge 1996; Mulhall 2005; Warner 2011; and Wetzel 2010.

plural — “We want to say ...”, “We feel as though ...”, “We are tempted ...”, and the like. This type of gesture is also present, albeit often less explicitly, in Augustine’s *Confessions*. The famous sentences of the opening paragraph, for example, include several of the text’s most important instances: “Man, a little piece of your creation, desires to praise you. ... Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man. ... You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (Augustine 1991, p. 3).

It can be easy to miss the deep significance of this type of gesture in both Augustine and Wittgenstein. In Augustine, we miss its significance by imagining that the generality of his claims, his speaking for “us,” is grounded in a philosophical anthropology or a theological doctrine of the nature of man as created by God and as a part of God. However, rather than resting on any antecedently given theory, Augustine’s confessional interrogations of his own experience precede and are the source of any theory he may develop. In Wittgenstein too, we miss the significance of these gestures by imagining that they rest upon some antecedently given ground and we do this by eliding the distinction between an (Austinian) claim to voice what we ordinarily say and a (Wittgensteinian) confession of our common secrets. This needs a bit of explanation.

In his groundbreaking essay “Must We Mean What We Say?,” Stanley Cavell argued that the procedures of ordinary language philosophy rest upon the fact that speakers of their native tongue are, generally, fully competent to express what “we” say or to declare what “we” mean by what we say. Possessing this ability is part of what it means to be a native speaker, a master of your own language, and this is why, as Cavell argued against Benson Mates, claims to express what “we” say do not require grounding in empirical research or data. “To answer some kinds of specific questions,” Cavell allows, “we will have to engage in that ‘laborious questioning’ Mates insists upon, and count noses.” However, he continues, “... in general ... the native speaker can rely on his own nose; if not, there would be nothing to count” (Cavell 1976a, p. 4). But it is vital to recognize this type of account does not apply to (much of) Wittgenstein’s practice. It does not apply for the simple, but very important, reason that his plural confessional gestures are not (Austinian) examples of what we ordinarily say. As Cavell has emphasized, Wittgenstein’s “sampling [of] what we say goes beyond the mere occurrence of words in ways that make him unlike other philosophers who proceed from ordinary language.” “He proposes words,” Cavell continues, “that he says force themselves upon us in certain contexts, or words that we wish or would like or are tempted to say, and he cites words that he says we do not mean or have only the illusion of meaning” (Cavell 1979, p. 20). Although this distinction has, so far as I am aware, received no attention or comment, it is absolutely critical. It means that the basis for Wittgenstein’s

claims to speak for “us” is not simply his possessing the mastery shared by all native speakers of the language. Accordingly, the *nature* of his claim to speak for “us” in these instances stands to be explained as does his remarkable success in doing so. As Cavell puts it:

[H]ow can he so much as have the idea that these fleets of his own consciousness, which is obviously all he’s got to go on, are accurate wakes of our own? But the fact is, he does have the idea.... And the fact is, so much of what he shows to be true of his own consciousness is true of ours (of mine). This is perhaps the fact of his writing to be most impressed by; it may be the fact that he is most impressed by — that what he does can be done at all (Cavell 1979, p. 20).

And “what” Wittgenstein does, like Augustine before him, is engage in a form of confession. They each, that is, assiduously search their own experience, burrow into their own inwardness, and unflinchingly announce what they find. Critically, however, they each present their confession as representative. To borrow Cavell’s words in speaking of Wittgenstein, they “undertake to voice our secrets, secrets we did not know were known, or did not know were shared” (Cavell 1979, p. 20). In Augustine the claim to representativeness is housed in the narrative of a life in which common structures of human longing, folly, blindness, misdirection, pride, and the like emerge. (We may not all have stolen pears, but we have all wished to appear Godlike — above the law because the source of law — before companions.) For Wittgenstein, the claim to representativeness is housed in forms that appear to be more restricted, in vignettes of often specialized philosophy. This should not suggest, however, that Wittgenstein is simply concerned to address a restricted class of professional philosophers. On the contrary, Wittgenstein shared Augustine’s ambition to reveal the human, to reveal “us,” but he sought to do so within these scenes of philosophy. Indeed, part of Wittgenstein’s genius was to recognize and to show that our thoughts and attitudes about meaning, understandings, propositions, and the like are as expressive of fundamental human drives as any of Augustine’s tales.

My discussion to this point has begun to suggest that for Wittgenstein (inspired by and following Augustine), philosophy is essentially confessional in the following senses. First, it is (and records) a human journey that is shaped by and reveals human drives, fears, temptations, and the like. Second, the drives that motivate and shape the journey are as important as any destination reached and so philosophy must seek to discover and record them. Third, while it proceeds through an examination of individual experience, it looks to what is representative in that experience and uses it as the basis for a claim to speak for “us.” And fourth, since philosophy’s claim to speak for us rests on the interrogation of individual experience, those claims can only be assessed and measured by our

own confession – by, as Cavell puts it, “look[ing] to ourselves to find whether we share another’s secret consciousness” (Cavell 1979, p. 20).

Directly or indirectly, each of these points highlights connections between confession and self-revelation, albeit the revelation of oneself as representative. This is important; confession does, after all, essentially involve self-revelation. However, neither Augustine nor Wittgenstein conceives of confession as merely self-revelation and the propriety of linking them as confessional writers cannot rest on this alone. Rather, for both Augustine and Wittgenstein confession is a practice of representative self-revelation that acknowledges that you are lost and suffering, that seeks to uncover the causes of your being lost and the sources of your suffering, and in which the revelation of these causes and sources is part of a process of conversion and recovery from being lost.² It is, in fact, in his embrace of this rich sense of the practice of confession that the impact of Wittgenstein’s reading of Augustine is deepest. Indeed, if we recognize that the *Investigations* as a whole is composed as representative confession, then we can also see that the drive of that confession – like that of Augustine’s *Confessions* – is precisely to show us that “we” are lost and in torment, to trace how and why we get lost, and to reveal and exemplify the process and practice of conversion through which we are found.³

3. Being Lost: Odysseys of the Tormented Soul

It could not be clearer that Augustine regarded himself, and us in so far as he speaks for us, as lost and in torment – whether we recognize this as our condition or not. We are turned away from God, the sole source of rest and peace, and Augustine tells us that “wherever the human soul turns itself that is not to [God], it is fixed in sorrows” (Augustine 1991, p. 61). Speaking to this soul that is turned from God (his and ours), Augustine asks:

² Furthermore, for both Augustine and Wittgenstein confession is shaped by the fact that it is directed toward an audience/auditor that, in some sense, already knows what is confessed. This is a very important matter that I cannot discuss in the present essay.

³ It is, I think, this kind of confessional drive that underlies Wittgenstein’s remarks about “therapy” and gives them their depth. As I’ve argued elsewhere (Affeldt 2010), very little of this depth is captured in the so-called “therapeutic reading” of Wittgenstein on offer in Cray and Read (2000).

With what end in view do you walk along difficult and laborious paths? There is no rest where you seek it. Seek for what you seek, but it is not where you are looking for it. You seek the happy life in the region of death; it is not there. How can there be a happy life where there is not even life. (Augustine 1991, p. 64)

Hence the *Confessions* teems with remarks of the form “I was dust going to dust” or “I became to myself a region of destitution” (Augustine 1991, p. 16 and 34). However, as Augustine’s remark about seeking happiness in the region of death makes clear, we mostly do not recognize that we are lost. Indeed, a great deal of what is most powerful in the *Confessions* lies in revealing that we are lost, separated from God, and the misery inherent in this separation even when we neither recognize that we are lost nor experience the misery of separation. Hence, for example, Augustine castigates his youthful delight in weeping over tales from Virgil, confessing that “in reading this, O God my life, I myself was meanwhile dying by my alienation from you, and my miserable condition in that respect brought no tear to my eyes” (Augustine 1991, p. 15). Or, reflecting on the desolation he felt as a young man at the death of a dear friend, Augustine confesses:

I was in misery, and misery is the state of every soul overcome by friendship with mortal things and lacerated when they are lost. Then *the soul becomes aware of the misery which is its actual condition even before it loses them* (Augustine 1991, p. 58, my emphasis).

The *Investigations* too contains memorable depictions of derangement and anguish, as when, to offer only a couple of examples, Wittgenstein’s undermining of a picture of “complete” explanation provokes an interlocutor to cry: “so I still don’t understand what he means, and never shall!” (PI 1968, § 87) or when his unraveling of the picture of pain as a private mental object leads someone to “strike himself on the breast and say: ‘But surely another person can’t have THIS pain!’” (PI 1968, § 253). What is important, however, is that Wittgenstein regards these types of moments as possessing the same kind of existential importance and spiritual depth as the more obviously freighted moments in Augustine.

This begins to emerge if we unpack one of his more famous epigrammatic descriptions of philosophy: “A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about [*Ich kenne mich nicht aus!*]’” (PI 1968, § 123). Notice three things about this remark. First, it is not a generalization but a grammatical remark. Rather than describing something found to be true of (many/most) problems that we antecedently think of as philosophical, it tells us that we may identify a problem as philosophical based, in part, on its form. That is, a criterion for a problem counting as philosophical is that it has a particular

form. Second, part of that form is that a philosophical problem is ineluctably first personal. There is only a philosophical problem (for me) if it is *my* problem. This registers Wittgenstein's view that, as confessional, philosophy cannot be approached as a spectator, a detached theorist, or merely out of "interest" or "curiosity."⁴ Third, when I have a philosophical problem, the condition in which I find myself is that I don't know my way about, that I am lost. But being lost is not the same as lacking identifiable information, being uncertain about a particular point or conclusion, being confused about nameable alternatives, or the like. To be lost is to be without orientation. It is not only to be ignorant of the direction to one's goal (and so unable to determine whether a given path leads toward or away from that goal) it is to lack a clear and stable sense of a goal. Further, to be without orientation in this sense is often to be, or to feel oneself to be, cut off, isolated, and alone. If we bear in mind this sense of utter lack of orientation and of isolation, we can appreciate Wittgenstein's remark that "[n]o greater torment can be experienced than one human being can experience. For if a man feels lost, that is the ultimate torment" (VB 1984, p. 46).

But it may seem arch or melodramatic to associate this "ultimate torment" or the kinds of torment that Augustine recounts with the types of (philosophical) grief that Wittgenstein reveals in *Philosophical Investigations*. However, while it's true that many of the figures whose straits of mind are confessed in the *Investigations* are not presented as suffering torment, this just means that for Wittgenstein, as for Augustine, there are stages in recognizing that one is lost and one's experience changes as one moves through them.

Consider, for example, Augustine's recently cited remarks about the death of his friend. In his love for his friend, Augustine sought the kind of completion and satisfaction that, he comes to realize, can only be found in God. Throughout his friendship, then, he was lost and his "actual condition" was misery. However, he did not recognize himself to be lost or experience any misery. On the contrary, he experienced delight in what he took to be the satisfaction of his desires. It was only the death of his friend that revealed what, as Augustine comes to see it, had always been the truth of his condition. This example is typical and reveals the underlying dynamic that structures much of the *Confessions*. At each stage of Augustine's odyssey prior to his finding rest in God, he believes himself to have found the satisfaction that he seeks. It is, in fact, his effort to fully enjoy this

⁴ This was a main reason for Wittgenstein's suspicion of academic philosophy and for his aggressive efforts to drive his students toward other pursuits. For a rich discussion of the idea that philosophy is ineluctably first personal, see Cavell's "An Audience for Philosophy" (Cavell 1976b).

satisfaction that fuels his movement to another stage, for it unravels all illusory satisfactions and shows his actual condition to be that of misery.

While the movements of the *Investigations* are not driven by any single dynamic, this same structure at work in the *Confessions* is very frequently in play: while lost, we only realize this fact and experience its torments when we press for the satisfaction that seems to lie within our grasp. This dynamic underlies many of the most significant sections of the *Investigations*, but it can be seen with special clarity in Wittgenstein's critique of the vision of language and logic developed in the *Tractatus*.

Like Augustine, Wittgenstein insists that, initially, the one who is lost does not experience himself as such. In fact, as the *Investigations* presents this particular odyssey of the tormented soul, the protagonist feels as though he *was* lost but has now, finally, found the home he seeks. The author of the *Tractatus* had been swamped, the possibility of determinate sense and meaningful communication had come to seem a mystery, the proposition a queer thing. He felt tormented by this condition, but then "discovered" that "logic presents an order, in fact the a priori order of the world: that is, the order of *possibilities*, which must be common to both world and thought" (PI 1968, § 97). With this "discovery," his torment vanishes and he feels himself to be found. From the standpoint of the *Investigations*, of course, the protagonist is still lost, but his being lost expresses itself as certainty, conviction, or the assurance that he is found. As Wittgenstein puts it, the crystalline purity of logic "does not appear as an abstraction; but as something concrete, indeed, as the most concrete" (PI 1968, § 97). In fact, part of the force of the protagonist's conviction that he is found lies in his sense that the crystalline purity of logic is not a matter of (mere) *belief*. On the contrary, he *sees* it. "We think [the ideal] must be in reality; for we think we already see it there" (PI 1968, § 101).

However, not only is the protagonist still lost, his finding certainty and release from torment mean that he is more deeply and dangerously lost since the tension that fuels change has been removed. At this stage of being lost, he is fixed in the rigid blindness of conviction. But in his blindness, he thinks that he looks closely and sees clearly. He does not regard himself as opposing "an examination of details in philosophy." Rather, being "convinced," there seems nothing to examine and any further investigation seems "superfluous" (PI 1968, § 52). Accordingly, if this lost soul is to be found he must discover that he is still lost and, as in Augustine, this discovery comes in trying to enjoy the satisfaction it takes itself to have found. Wittgenstein depicts one central element of the unraveling of this particular illusory satisfaction this way: you are convinced that the possibility of determinate sense depends upon the crystalline purity of logic and that "every sentence of our language 'is in order as it is';" that "our ordinary

vague sentences ... [have] ... got a quite unexceptionable sense" (*PI* 1968, § 98). Whatever prima facie tension there may be among these convictions, it seems, can be dissolved with the thought that "there must be perfect order even in the vaguest sentence" (*PI* 1968, § 98). This thought, after all, expresses the reality that you already "saw." However, as you endeavor to demonstrate this truth so as to fully celebrate the triumph of logic, problems begin to appear. "The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement [of the crystalline purity of logic]" (*PI* 1968, § 107). Eventually, "the conflict becomes intolerable; the requirement is now in danger of becoming empty" (*PI* 1968, § 107).

Of course, as Wittgenstein's further development of this particular odyssey reveals, the protagonist may clutch at various stratagems to try to preserve his view. However, his position of certainty and conviction has been broken. While he may continue to flee the recognition, he knows himself to be lost and feels the torments of his condition. Importantly, as Wittgenstein depicts them, they are torments of impotence. On the one hand, the protagonist suffers a kind of impotence in being unable to do something that he feels, rightly or wrongly, he should be able to do. Hence, for example, Wittgenstein speaks of being unable to describe extreme subtleties — "as if we had to repair a torn spider's web with our fingers" (*PI* 1968, § 106). This, then, is exactly the type of impotence the protagonist thought his "discovery" of a perfect logical order had allowed him to escape. However, the fact that this impotence has returned produces a second, more painful, sense of impotence. Confronted with the fact that his escape had been illusory, the protagonist now realizes that he cannot trust himself. He feels powerless to judge his own problems or to determine whether he has found genuine satisfaction. Hence, the protagonist knows a new depth of torment; such peace as he may now find is shadowed and infected by corrosive doubt. He knows himself to be lost and despairs of both his ability to find himself and to judge whether he is found. This escalation of torment mirrors the progress of Augustine's *Confessions* and Wittgenstein expresses its anguish by voicing a desperate longing for the "real discovery" that will "give philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question" (*PI* 1968, § 133). With this desperation, the protagonist is ripe for conversion.

4. Finding Home: Recollection and the Work of Conversion

Philosophical Investigations matches the *Confessions* not only in revealing the tormented human soul, but also in insisting that these torments are self-inflicted and in the urgency of its call for conversion. In fact, largely inspired by the work of Stanley Cavell, many readers of Wittgenstein have argued that the *Investigations* is infused throughout with a deep moral purpose that is intimately linked to a call for some type of conversion or redemptive transformation. Indeed, Richard Eldridge has argued powerfully that Wittgenstein's engagement with Augustine is driven primarily by his attraction to Augustine's picture of conversion. He not only emphasizes that Augustine's "picture of conversion is enormously attractive to Wittgenstein" (Eldridge 1997, p. 125), but goes on to argue that

[i]t is the presence within language learning of an active power of thinking that is itself latently an active power of conversion that attracts Wittgenstein's interest, and it is Augustine's sense of the presence of this power, and his account of its subsequent flowering in conversion, that makes his mind, to Wittgenstein, great. (Eldridge 1997, p. 127)

However, even those readers who see deep connections between Augustine and Wittgenstein's confessional depictions of the human as lost and their share longing for transformative conversion, generally see the two as decisively parting company with regard to the nature (and possibility) of conversion itself.⁵ This I have come to think, is a serious mistake that is rooted, at least in part, in an inaccurate view of Augustine's conversion as a wholly miraculous, irrational "moment" that we are asked to believe effected at a stroke a wholesale change in his character. However, a richer understanding of the *Confessions'* view of conversion allows us to see that this is, in fact, an area in which Augustine's text exercised a deeply important influence on Wittgenstein.

In order to move beyond a simplistic picture of Augustine's conversion, we do not need to deny the importance of the moment. The conversion scene in *Book Eight* is justly celebrated for its vivid depiction of a mounting crisis leading to a climactic moment that produces a decisive change. Augustine tells us that even though he implored himself to "[l]et it be now, let it be now," the "near" approached the moment of time when [he] would become different, the great

⁵ This view of Wittgenstein as having a bifurcated relation to Augustine is expressed, in different forms and for different reasons, in Affeldt (1999), Eldridge (1996 and 1997), and Muhihall (2005).

the horror of it struck [him].” Hence, he “hesitated to make the leap to where [he] was being called.” However, when the sound of children chanting in play prompts him to read a short passage from *Romans*, “at once ... it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into [his] heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled” (Augustine 1991, p. 150–153). The moment, then, is clearly critical. However, in order to appreciate the richness of Augustine’s view and its impact on Wittgenstein, we must properly understand what does, and does not, happen in this moment and we must understand that, while Augustine thinks conversion requires a decisive moment, he does not regard conversion itself as that moment or, indeed, as momentary. On the contrary, much of Augustine’s depth lies in illustrating that conversion is a *practice*; a practice of turning, or returning, to a forsaken source that begins with a moment but must unfold and develop over the course of your life. In fact, the *Confessions* shows that, for Augustine, living a Christian life essentially involves the ongoing practice of conversion understood as unfolding and fulfilling the insight granted in the moment of conversion.

The decisive feature of Augustine’s moment of conversion stands out most clearly against the background of his life as disclosed in the first seven books of the *Confessions*. There we see that, whether engaged in demonstrations of childish bravado, winning academic acclaim, seducing lovers, cultivating friendships, or studying philosophy, Augustine’s life is structured by a drive to discover *something* that will quiet his existential restlessness, and his actions embody the conviction that he can, and must, solve the riddle of his life. Indeed, he is, in a sense, heroic in his tireless persistence and in his faith, despite all, in the sufficiency of his own powers. Most of Book Eight demonstrates this same misplaced faith. Augustine’s friends are sharing inspiring tales of conversion and he is determined that he too will, finally, give himself to God. Hence, he takes himself in hand and tries desperately to will his own conversion. Augustine spares no effort: “With what verbal rods did I not scourge my soul so that it would follow me in my attempt to go after you!” And yet his “soul hung back” (Augustine 1991, p. 146). In order to avoid having anyone “interfere with [his] burning struggle with [himself],” Augustine moves outside to the garden in which, ultimately, his famous “moment” of conversion occurs (Augustine 1991, p. 146).

Against this background of heroic struggle, the moment of conversion can seem a disappointing anti-climax. Augustine does not win his battle with himself. He does not succeed in forcing himself, or shaming himself, or arguing himself into wholehearted submission to God. He does not *make himself* convert. Instead, in the moment of conversion he stops struggling and does nothing. Famously, Augustine’s attention is drawn to the sound of children in play. And without disputing his claim that their chant of “pick up and read” is an inspired utterance, its crucial feature is that it does precisely what Augustine had moved to the garden

to avoid; it breaks into and interrupts his battle with himself. For a moment the din of Augustine’s own inner voices falls silent and his battle armor is dropped. This is a moment of receptive openness, and it is this attitude that allows Augustine’s conversion to happen (or, rather, to begin).⁶ In this condition of receptivity the short passage he reads from *Romans* has the power to open a new perspective on his life, a perspective in which, rather than struggling to embrace God, he recognizes himself as always already within the embrace of God.⁷ This does not mean that all of Augustine’s problems are solved and all his struggles ended. In fact, his problems persist and what I called Augustine’s practice of conversion is devoted to maintaining, deepening, and coming to inhabit his new perspective. What the perspective of his conversion does, however, is transform Augustine’s relation to his problems and his understanding of how they may be solved.

While I will say more about Augustine’s practice of conversion shortly, enough of the initial structure of his view is in place to begin tracing connections with Wittgenstein and the work of conversion in *Philosophical Investigations*.

The basic structure of conversion in *Philosophical Investigations* is identical to that in the *Confessions*; it involves relinquishing a fantasy of self-sufficiency and recognizing dependence upon a supporting and sustaining ground. There is an obvious, and obviously critical, substantive difference in that for Augustine the sustaining ground is God and for Wittgenstein it is the rough ground of our ordinary language and the forms of life held in language. But this does not alter the structural parallel. For Wittgenstein, too, our human propensity for becoming lost means that we deny or cut ourselves off from the ground of meaning and orientation. In this condition we are swamped by a sense that the most basic phenomena have become problematic. It seems utterly mysterious how one might,

⁶ My focus on Augustine (momentarily) stopping his struggle is meant to elaborate his emphasis on weakness. Given his view of pride as the besetting human sin, the achievement of weakness is central to Augustine’s Christology and to his conception of redemption. In becoming human and submitting to death, Augustine maintains, Christ taught his followers that “[t]hey are no longer to place confidence in themselves, but to become weak.” “In their weariness,” he continues, they are to “fall prostrate before this divine weakness which rises and lifts them up” (Augustine 1991, p. 128).

⁷ The fact that Augustine’s conversion centrally involves a moment of reading is extremely important. On the one hand, it reflects and intensifies Augustine’s attention to issues of reading throughout the text, issues that include what kinds of texts he takes pleasure in reading, the power of allegorical reading to illuminate portions of the Bible, and his concern with how his own text will be, and should be, read. More generally, however, this fact points to Augustine’s conviction in the power of inspired reading to help produce conversion and this is a conviction that Wittgenstein clearly shared. While I cannot develop this connection here, I am grateful to William Day for showing me that it should at least be noted as a site for further work.

for example, give or understand an ostensive definition, mean Mr. N.N., point to a shape, express pain, or know that another is in pain. And Wittgenstein, too, shows us heroically and tragically struggling to solve these problems while repudiating our sustaining ground. Hence, for example, we invent a super-order among super-concepts, or create special concepts that have no employment other than in "solving" our problem, or attribute fabulous powers to our minds and "discover" all manner of processes in this endlessly malleable medium (PI 1968, § 97 and § 308). These efforts are no more successful than Augustine's and, as Wittgenstein suggests, amount to trying to find home by "building houses of cards" (PI 1968, § 118). It is here that the discovery of impotence that I noted earlier plays a crucial role. Like the chanting children in Augustine, it interrupts our misdirected efforts, ruptures our faith in our procedures, and brings us to a (momentary) stop. We are then receptive to the idea that "the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated" and are open to gaining a new perspective that allows us to recognize and draw upon the ground that we require (PI 1968, § 108). Wittgenstein has no more expectation than Augustine that this change of perspective will eliminate all of our problems at a stroke or end our propensity to create them. However, he follows Augustine in showing that this changed perspective of conversion fundamentally alters our understanding of our problems and our sense of how they may be treated.

In fact, Wittgenstein's "post-conversion" view of how our problems may be treated reveals another level of his inheritance from Augustine. As I've emphasized throughout, for Wittgenstein, philosophical problems are human problems; they express and reveal the kinds of drives, temptations, fantasies, and the like that structure our human nature. This is why he does not expect that the change of perspective brought by conversion will wash these problems away. However, when we recognize our ordinary language and the forms of life held within that language as our sustaining ground, we see that everything that is required to treat our problems "lies open to view" and must, in fact, be simple and familiar (PI 1968, § 126 and § 129). Hence, in contrast to our pre-conversion view of ourselves (philosophers) as heroically self-sufficient discoverers or creators, we instead see that the "work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (PI 1968, § 127). Treating our problems, that is, involves a kind of work of recollection. Indeed, Wittgenstein once remarked that "Learning philosophy is really recollecting. We remember that we really used words in this way" (PH1993, p. 179).⁸

⁸ Here is one place to pick up the issue of reading mentioned in note 7; for while "assembling reminders" speaks most directly to Wittgenstein's practice of writing, "remembering" or "recollecting" what "lies open to view" suggests tasks of reading.

But to say that everything lies open to view and that philosophy consists in recollecting and assembling reminders of what must be simple and familiar is not to say that it is easy. (Hence Wittgenstein, like Augustine, shatters the fantasy that even a life-changing conversion makes life easy.) Instead, the difficulties of philosophy are the difficulties of fruitful recollection, and it is in just this connection that one of Wittgenstein's pivotal, explicit citations from Augustine occurs.

In *Investigations* § 89, Wittgenstein says this:

Augustine says in the *Confessions* "quid est ergo tempo? si nemo ex me quaerat scio; si quaerenti explicate velim, nescio".⁹ — This could not be said about a question of natural science ("What is the specific gravity of hydrogen?" for instance). Something that we know when no one asks us, but do not know when we are supposed to give an account of it, is something that we need to remind ourselves of. (And it is obviously something of which for some reason it is difficult to remind oneself.) (PI 1968, § 89)

Although he emphasizes a difficulty about reminding ourselves, initially Wittgenstein can seem to suggest that it is easy to meet. "We remind ourselves," he says, "of the kind of statement that we make about phenomena." "Thus," he continues, "Augustine recalls to mind the different statements that are made about the duration, past present or future, of events" (PI 1968, § 90).

However, Wittgenstein is quite aware of the difficulties of fruitful recollection and tends to present them as falling into two broad categories (both of which bear on this case from Augustine): difficulties of collecting the material needed to address our problems and difficulties of effectively assembling or arranging that material. The difficulty of collecting material doesn't lie in recalling the kinds of statements that we make *per se*. It lies in overcoming the kinds of fixations, convictions, certainties, and the like that direct our recollection along narrowly restricted paths and in becoming willing to imagine that some kinds of statements may be relevant. This is why, in good Augustinian fashion, Wittgenstein insists that "the edifice of your pride has to be dismantled" and why he remarks that, in order to understand something "significant and important," "what has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect" (VB 1984, p. 26e and p. 17e). The difficulties of arranging are also connected with the will in at least the following sense. Since philosophical problems express positions, pictures, ways of looking at things, in which we are invested, freeing us from the grip of these investments requires more than simply reminding us

⁹ "What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know" (Augustine 1991, p. 230).

of relevant information. The reminders must be crafted and assembled so as to loosen our attachment to our investments and allow us to recognize that they do not meet our “real needs” (PI 1968, § 108). They must, as Wittgenstein puts it, “strive to find the liberating word” (PH, p. 165).

Important as these points are, I think the pertinence of Wittgenstein’s invocation of this passage from Augustine is broader and deeper than these methodological affinities.¹⁰ To see how, consider that Augustine’s philosophical reflections on time are intimately bound up with the nature and possibility of recollection, and recollection is at the heart of the project of the *Confessions* as a whole. Here it is critical to realize that, in a very real sense, the conversion that Augustine describes in Book Eight is, in fact, the inaugurating event of the text and systematically determines its nature and structure. The biographical books of the *Confessions* do not, that is, simply narrate the events of Augustine’s life that lead to a culminating conversion. Rather, they represent Augustine’s effort to recollect and present his life from the perspective offered in his conversion. That is, Augustine works to recollect his life in a way that demonstrates his realization that he has always been within God’s sustaining presence and that he “would have no being if [he] were not in [God] of whom are all things, through whom are all things, and in whom are all things” (Rom. 11:36)” (Augustine 1991, p. 4). This is why I claim that the *Confessions* illustrate conversion as an ongoing practice; for Augustine’s practice of recollecting and telling his life is shaped by the imperative to continuously rediscover and ratify the perspective opened in the moment of conversion. Further, for Augustine, this practice of conversion is, at the same time, a practice of praise since it recalls and celebrates God’s power and goodness. Thus, when Augustine tells us in the opening paragraphs of his text that “In seeking [God people] find him, and in finding him they will praise him,” he isn’t simply predicting that those who seek and find God will be moved to the further act of praise (Augustine 1991, p. 4). That is likely to be true. But the *Confessions* shows that recounting your efforts to seek and find God is to praise him.

I want to suggest that Wittgenstein’s own practice of recollection inherits these Augustinian depths and dimensions. In particular, we’ve seen that Wittgenstein’s efforts to resolve philosophical problems turn on recalling our words to their “original homes” by leading them “back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (PI 1968, § 116). However, these efforts of recollection are not simply

¹⁰ These affinities seem to be what von Wright had in mind in observing that “the philosophical sections of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* show a striking resemblance to Wittgenstein’s own way of doing philosophy” (Malcolm 1980, p. 21).

directed at resolving problems. Rather, as in Augustine, each effort of recollection essentially involves rediscovering and ratifying the always astonishing and persistently rejected recognition at the heart of Wittgensteinian conversion — the recognition that our ordinary language and the forms of life held in language are our sustaining ground. This means that for Wittgenstein, too, conversion is an ongoing practice. It is not completed in the moment of conversion but is repeated or re-enacted in each treatment of philosophical disorder. But this, in turn, means that for Wittgenstein philosophy is essentially this very practice of conversion.

We have now arrived at a point from which we can return, briefly and by way of conclusions, to Wittgenstein’s expression of longing for the “real discovery” that “gives philosophy peace.” It’s important to recognize that this longing is not satisfied and that the perspective opened by Wittgensteinian conversion is not the “real discovery.” In fact, Wittgenstein explicitly takes some distance from this longing and follows its expression with: “*Instead*, we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off” (PI 1968, § 133, my emphasis). Part of Wittgenstein’s point in distancing himself from the fantasy of any final peace is that, as in Augustine, conversion is never the end of the story. As the *Investigations* shows, the perspective conversion opens is subject to perpetual repudiation and so, as I’ve argued, conversion must become an ongoing process. Accordingly, the fact that the *Investigations* do not break off quickly but consider an extensive series of examples can be understood as demonstrating this need for continual conversion.

This seems right.¹¹ However, reading Wittgenstein with Augustine suggests a motive for the ongoing practice of philosophical conversion that is not simply corrective and directed toward providing measures of respite from our capacity to subject ourselves to torment or from our endless “drive to misunderstand” (PI 1968, § 109). The motive I have in mind is an analogue of Augustinian praise; namely, delight and joy. The philosophical practice of recollection and assembling reminders does resolve our problems. But it also discovers and reveals the all but unimaginable richness, texture, flexibility, and power of our ordinary language and forms of life. It allows us, that is, to appreciate our home, the ground on which we walk, as marvelous and invites us to “awaken to wonder” (VB 1984, p. 5e). To adapt a remark of Wittgenstein’s: “The delight [we] take in [our] thoughts is delight in [our] own strange life. Is this joy of living?” (VB 1984, p. 22e).

¹¹ See (Affeldt 1999 p. 260–261).

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