

Dillon Welch

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Confessions Paper

In *Confessions*, St. Augustine lays out a new and more personal model for conversion to Christianity than had existed before in the story of Paul. Before converting to Christianity at the end of Book VIII he first discovers and studies Manichaeism and Neo-Platonism, rejecting the first and utilizing ideas from the second. *Confessions* is characterized by a deep philosophical search on topics such as the nature of God and how concepts like evil can exist in a world created by an incorruptible deity.

Augustine spends most of Book V talking about Manichaeism. The Manicheans believed that there is a conflict between good/light and evil/darkness. Total liberation from evil results in salvation, which is gained by knowledge promised by the faith. Augustine was attracted to Manichaeism for multiple reasons. The first is that Augustine was very open minded in his search for truth, saying “Because a thing is eloquently expressed it should not be taken as necessarily true; nor because it is uttered with stammering lips should it be supposed false. Nor, again, is it necessarily true because rudely uttered, nor untrue because the language is brilliant” (*Confessions*, 5.6.10). The second is that he was impressed by the eloquence, knowledge, and the reputation for godliness and asceticism of the clergy. The third is that Manichaeism had answers to philosophical issues such as the nature of evil that perplexed Augustine at the time. In the middle of Book V, the famed bishop Faustus visits Carthage. Augustine had come to a point with Manichaeism that his continued faith relied only on the reputation of their clergy. Augustine is sorely disappointed in Faustus' lack of liberal arts training though, which resulted in the destruction of his reputation in Augustine's mind. “For as soon as it

became plain to me that Faustus was ignorant in those arts in which I had believed him eminent, I began to despair of his being able to clarify and explain all these perplexities that troubled me” (*Confessions*, 5.7.12). Since Faustus was one of the most famed teachers, Augustine was not interested in more teachers who were even less qualified and was unable to ignore the other issues he had. It greatly disturbed him that the Manicheans were completely wrong on topics such as astronomy that were easily verifiable. He also disliked their pride in the correctness of these teachings and that they perverted the topics they taught while claiming to be divine, which resulted in them claiming that God was capable of suffering evil instead of admitting they were capable of committing it.

After he turned away from Manichaeism, Augustine moved to Rome and while there accepted a job in Milan. There, he came to meet Ambrose the bishop, one of Augustine's biggest influences towards his conversion to Christianity. At first, he evaluated Ambrose's preachings like he did the Manicheans, focusing only on the eloquence of Ambrose's speech. Augustine slowly started to listen and accept Ambrose's teachings though, an important one being allegorical interpretation, a technique the Manicheans did not use. Ambrose's happiness and celibacy served as an inspiration to Augustine as well, as those were both issues that troubled him. Augustine's mother moved to Milan to be with her son; her faith and devotion also served as an inspiration for him as she stopped practicing old customs as soon as Ambrose requested it. As he continued to observe and learn about the catholic faith, he began to prefer its teachings in comparison to the Manichean way, saying that “I felt that it was with moderation and honesty that it commanded things to be believed that were not demonstrated – whether they could be demonstrated, but not to everyone, or whether they could not be demonstrated at all” (*Confessions*, 6.5.7). Around this time, he started to consider the things that he believed that he did not see occur, such as cities that he had not been to and the identity of his parents. From his belief in these things he concludes that God must exist and that all of the Scriptures

have the authority of God. One day he was walking the streets of Milan, his conscience racked with guilt about the speech full of lies he was to give about the emperor. During his walk, he saw a beggar who appeared to be jolly and full, and compared the joy of the beggar to the anxiety and unhappiness he was currently experiencing while having much more in the way of worldly goods and knowledge. In essence, the fruitlessness of his philosophical searching for the truth and his disgust at his own lifestyle made him mentally ill and worn down from stress, and in this state he started to drift more towards Christianity.

Throughout *Confessions*, Augustine contemplates philosophical and theological issues about the nature of God and evil. In the very beginning of Book V, he considers the usefulness of secular philosophy and the place it has in the worship of God. He concludes that it is more important to know and worship God than it is to understand the workings of the world. This later becomes important as Augustine only becomes content when he converts to Christianity; his worldly knowledge did not help him at all. Augustine also has many doubts over the nature of God and Jesus. While under the influence of Manichaeism, he believed that God must be a “huge extended body – for what did not have bodily extension did not seem to me to exist” (*Confessions*, 5.10.19). He also believed that Jesus could not be divine, as “such a nature could not be born of the virgin Mary without being mingled with the flesh. . . he had been contaminated by the flesh” (*Confessions*, 5.10.20). He later refined his thoughts to believe that God extended throughout all of the world and “For in this way a greater part of the earth would contain a greater part of you; a smaller part, a smaller fraction of you” (*Confessions*, 7.1.2). Finally, Augustine pondered the existence and nature of evil. Since God created everything and evil exists in the world, it seems to imply that God created evil and evil exists within God. He ponders whether evil itself is a substance, why God did not destroy evil since He is omnipotent, and why God would create evil in the first place since He is omniscient.

To answer these philosophical quandaries that he had, Augustine turns to the works of the Neo-Platonists. By reading these works, Augustine's doubts about the nature of God and Jesus are quelled and he comes to the belief that they are of the same divine substance, unchangeable and co-eternal. He decides that everything in creation is good, even if it is corrupted. If something is corrupted that means that particular something must have been good in the first place as otherwise corruption would not harm it. All substances are either incorruptible (God) and therefore completely good or they are corruptible and therefore must have some good. Therefore, everything that exists is good and evil has no substance at all. Another influence of Neo-Platonic thought on Augustine's philosophical journey can be seen in his statement that "I saw in our lord Christ only a man of eminent wisdom to whom no other man could be compared" and "This man I held to be superior to all others, not only because he was a form of the truth, but also because of the great excellence and perfection of his human nature. . ." (*Confessions*, 7.19.25). Augustine seems to claim here that while Jesus' nature is only human, he is the Platonic form for humanity made flesh. Overall, the works of the Neo-Platonists taught Augustine to search for incorporeal truths and how to understand spiritual, unseen concepts through the lens of earthly human existence.

While the works of the Neo-Platonists did help Augustine, he did not fully agree with their teachings. While the Neo-Platonists discussed spiritual issues and the nature of God, he felt that they did not properly worship him, saying "Thus, though they know god, yet they do not glorify him as god, nor are they thankful. Therefore, they become vain in their imaginations; their foolish heart is darkened, and professing themselves to be wise they become fools" (*Confessions*, 7.9.14). After studying the works of Paul, he found that the concepts he found in Neo-Platonism were found there as well but combined with "the exaltation of your grace" (*Confessions*, 7.21.27). Augustine liked the philosophy of Neo-Platonism, but could not follow it as it did not properly worship God.

Augustine was converted to Christianity at the very end of Book VIII when he feels compelled by the chanting child to open his Bible and read the first passage he found. Augustine understands conversion to be the moment that he was “infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away” (*Confessions*, 8.12.29). As he had been plagued by doubt all throughout *Confessions*, the moment where he was finally cured of all his doubts was the moment he felt that he found something that works. One of Augustine's models for conversion was Anthony, who also was converted based on the reading of a single passage. The Bible passage that he read was extremely significant for Augustine. The final issue that was holding Augustine back from conversion prior to that point was celibacy and his inability to practice it. This Bible quote clearly stated to Augustine that the way to deal with his struggles on these issues was by putting faith in Jesus and he would be taken care of.

While Augustine was originally attracted to Manichaeism because of promised knowledge and the asceticism and eloquence of its clergy, he could not ignore his doubts after meeting Faustus. Moving to Milan and coming under the influence of the bishop Ambrose moved Augustine in the direction of Christianity, and a guilty conscience continued him down that path. Augustine contemplated philosophical issues about God and evil; his doubts about these questions were answered by Neo-Platonism but he could not turn to that either since they did not worship God. Augustine was converted to Christianity after being inspired to read a passage from the Bible that said to him to put his faith in Jesus and his needs would be taken care of, removing his final doubts about his sexual desires. *Confessions* is a personal, intense conversion story with philosophical questioning worthy of a separate treatise, and served as a model for conversion and life as a Christian for many centuries.