

### Augustine Anatomized

The word ‘desire’ appears 565 times in the Christian Bible and 113 times in *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. These numbers reflect how prevalent ‘desires’ are in the Christian Foundational Writings and in Saint Augustine’s text. Commonly defined as a craving or longing for something pleasurable, Augustine takes the literal meaning of ‘desire’ and pushes it even further. For Augustine desire can sometimes be classified as a sin in the sense that “[one would look] for pleasures, exaltations, truths not in God Himself but in His creatures, and so [one would fall] straight into sorrows, confusions, and mistakes.”<sup>1</sup> The desires of the world and society around Augustine had become one that produced temporary satisfaction. It is critical to establish what the common desires of individuals are because it represents what society as a whole values most. Through *The Confessions*, Augustine deduces what society desires, why said things can be desired, the effects of the desires, and their remedies.

In Augustine’s first book of *The Confessions*, he admits that what he sought most, or his deepest desires, was “pleasures and exaltations” from the wrong source: God’s creation and not God himself. To understand why this was wrong in the eyes of Augustine is to be familiar with his definition of time and its relevance to material goods. “For the cause of its being is that it shall cease to be. So that it appears that we cannot truly say that time exists except in the sense that it is tending towards nonexistence” (Augustine, p. 262). Time is something that is always changing; it moves from one point

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Rex Warner (Mentor, 1963), p. 24.

in time to another as its nature and will never cease to move. All things created are then subject to time. Material goods, such as tangible objects, or even intangible items such as love or happiness, are thusly all subjected to time because they are items that are *created*. Since objects, tangible and intangible alike, both have beginnings or points of creation, they must also have a point in time in which they will cease to exist. God, however, never had a point of creation; He just was. God is eternal, and in fact, is the only eternal thing to exist. Therefore, Augustine writes that it is fruitless to look for pleasures and exaltations in God's creation, as all these things will pass away with time leaving the seeker with nothing.

For Augustine, the reasons people deviate from seeking pleasure in God and seek pleasure in God's creation instead is because of free will.

“And I made an effort to understand what I had heard, that free will is the cause of our doing evil and your just judgment the cause of our suffering it...I was just certain that I had a will as that I had a life. So, when I willed to do or not to do something, I was not anybody else's, and I was now getting near to the conclusion that here was the cause of my sin” (Augustine, p. 127-8).

In making His creation, God instilled all individuals with the free will to choose their own path in life. It is this ability that allows society to turn from investing their desires in God and vainly investing their time in His creation that will soon pass. To Augustine, using free will to turn away from God is to pervert the free will, to turn towards the lower realms of creation, and ultimately to sin. To sin is to go against God, and since God is an innate part of humans (His creation), to sin is really turning one's back against his own inner existence.

What is existence then and how does turning against existence affect one's relationship with God? Whatever God has made has come into existence. The nature of this existence is what Augustine reasons out in *The Confessions*.

“So I saw plainly and clearly that you made all things good, nor are there any substances at all which you have not made. And because you did not make all things equal, therefore they each and all have their existence; because they are good individually, and at the same time they are altogether very good, because our God *made all things very good*” (Augustine, p. 141).

Implied here is that in as much as creation exists, it is good. All creation, therefore, regardless of its physical appearance or material value, is good because God has created it, and everything that God has created is good. Since God made all creation that was made and has created everything good, there is a natural order in the world to move towards God, which is also good. Therefore, if one were to turn their back against being good, he would essentially be turning his back against God, going against the natural order of all things to move towards goodness. The perversion of free will and turning away from God is to cause a separation from God. This separation is unnatural, leading an individual away from an ordered sense a life as opposed to following the laid out path of always moving towards goodness, therefore always moving towards God.

The remedy to purify free will (or to make an individual's free will one with God) and to rejoin God is to turn to Christ for salvation.

“And I tried to find a way of gaining the strength necessary for enjoying you, and I could not find it until I embraces that *Mediator betwixt God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who is over all, God blessed for evermore*, calling to me and saying, *I am the way, the truth and the life*” (Augustine, p. 145).

Christ acts as the man's mediator to God for Christ was God who became man. This melding of divinity and humanity allows humans to understand their existence through

their Lord made flesh. As Christ was the Word made flesh, humans can recognize themselves in the human struggle that Jesus might have endured and realize their ability to mimic the same. Christ being God in flesh then narrows the gap between God and man, and reverses the separation of the two, by understanding what Christ's actions on earth meant to the human race.

“In this lower world He build for Himself a humble dwelling of our clay, by means of which He might detach from themselves those who were subdued and bring them over to himself, healing...their pride and fostering their love; so that instead of going further in their own self-confidence they should put on weakness...by wearing our “coat of skin” (Augustine, p. 145).

Essentially Christ taught by action and example how humans are to return to God. In first the initial humbling of God to the form of man is remarkable in itself to Augustine, and provides the first means to returning back to God: humility. The second method Augustine points out is Christ's encouraging love he gave and helped other gives. Lastly, Augustine pushes the idea of Christ's humility further, insisting that one replace self-confidence with weakness. Almost to say that only by attaining meekness and recognizing how lowly one is can one move towards God and goodness. To attain meekness is to let go of all the situations that the world can hold on an individual keeping them from turning towards goodness. To recognize how insignificant one is, is to keep humility in the forefront of an individual's mind, allowing the material possession and worldly lusts to pass by unnoticed, keeping the path towards goodness as a target goal. Christ was the best role model for such endeavors and acts as a source of guidance to all mankind.

In conclusion, the word ‘desire’ plays an important role in a human's life – a role Augustine fully analyzes in his *Confessions*. Individuals that have their desires set in

God's creation do not recognize that all things God has created are bound by time, and to put effort into something that will have an end is to waste valuable effort. Rather, one should bestow all their energies in God for He is timeless and that effort will never go without reward. The ability to choose where an individual will invest their effort is a cause of free will; to move against God is to pervert free will. To abuse free will and place desires and efforts into God's creation rather than God Himself, is to make an unnatural path away from God and all things good. The remedy for such a folly is turn to Christ, the Word made flesh, for a lesson regarding turning back to God. A testament to the truth of Augustine's deductions is to acknowledge how *The Confessions* have withstood the test of time, ultimately implying the truth behind his words.