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**HBC 2 & 19**  
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**PAPER PROMPTS ON AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS***

Choose one of the questions below. Rather than choosing the question that seems easiest to resolve (stating the obvious is a waste of time for everyone!), you are encouraged to go for the question that you *most care about* and that therefore promises to render the richest, most interesting results. No need to worry, of course, if both are the same.

Support all your claims by quotes from the text and make sure you explain for each quote in what exact way it illustrates your point. Please choose your quotes with great care and precision. It is one of the peculiarities of Augustine's style that many instances from the text seem almost too ready to hand – they only 'sort of' support a point, without actual illuminative force. Instead of quoting whatever comes to mind first, then, research the text carefully and then select one or two instances that most effectively serve your purpose.

Finally: Uncertainty – to find oneself unable to resolve an issue – at the end of an essay is not necessarily a bad thing. It can be stated in clear terms, and under no circumstance it justifies weak thought and vague formulations. So while ending your essay by a conclusion stating 'results' seems a viable idea in most cases, you may just as well end by posing a question or problem.

(1) What, in Augustine's *Confessions*, is conversion? On the one hand, the protagonist's story seems a gradual approximation of true belief, on the other, conversion is cast as an emphatically singular event. Is it a process or an instant, a journey or an event, a continuity or a rupture? To get the alternatives clear, discuss both possibilities separately and support your claims with detailed observations from the text. Then compare them, argue for either side, or suggest a solution to the problem of how both can be thought together. If helpful, include in our argument other examples of conversion besides Augustine's own. You may (but you don't have to) work with Augustine's theory of time in book XI. You may also make use of the various models of spatialization offered to us in the conspicuous metaphors throughout the text.

(2) How can we best make sense of the role of the 'double perspective' of narrated self and narrating self (or, as we found in class, perhaps 'triple perspective') from which the *Confessions* are written? Which specific tasks is the perspective of the earlier self supposed to perform, and which tasks the perspective of the later one? Describe the poetic strategy at work here and use examples. In particular, choose one or two passages from the text and analyze them with great attention to detail to support your claims. Proceed to reflect on some of the aesthetic, psychological, theological or political

possibilities made available by such a strategy. You may, of course, for your argument draw on Augustine's reflection on memory in book X.

(3) What is the poetics of the 'conversion scene' in book VIII.xii? Analyze in detail the literary means by which the scene is staged. Show how its core thematic elements are being previously rehearsed and prefigured by the text, so that the teleological fulfillment of conversion becomes the place of a teleological fulfillment on the level of literary motives and strategies as well. Consider in particular – in a close reading of the central sentences of the scene – how the extravagant reading technique of *tolle lege* assists the conversion, as well as the importance of language and text in the chapter more generally: What is heard or read? What understood? Who talks (or doesn't talk) to whom, when, and why? Finally, how does the role language plays in the scene relate to Augustine's project of the *Confessions*?

(4) What is the role of *vis sortis*, the "power of chance"? First, carefully reconstruct Augustine's discussion of chance in books IV.iii and VII.vi of the *Confessions*, as well as in the 'conversion scene' in VIII.xii. What is the human relationship to chance, how is it problematic, and to what extent can one know, produce, control or exploit it? Second, reinterpret your previous discussion in the theological terms of Augustine's discussion of the tale of Jacob and Esau in the *Letter to Simplician*: How does the doctrine of salvation relate to the contingencies of human fortunes? In what ways are divine grace and chance structurally different, and what do they have in common? What specific kind of certainty do they provide, compared to science or philosophy? Third: What can the conjunction of grace and chance tell us about Augustine's notion of conversion?