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The Deep Grammar of Augustine's Conversion

Jared J. Ortiz

Hope College, jjortiz@hope.edu

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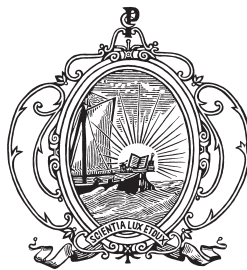
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The Deep Grammar of Augustine's Conversion

Jared ORTIZ, Washington, D.C., USA

ABSTRACT

In light of the growing consensus that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is foundational for Augustine's thought, it would be fruitful to consider more fully its role in the *Confessions*, especially its role in how Augustine understands his conversion in Book Eight. In this short communication, I will argue that Augustine situates his conversion narrative within the context of the Trinity's creative act. His understanding of the ontological distinction between God and the world as well as the creational notion of imitation are the keys to understanding this in Book Eight. They make up the deep grammar of his conversion story. For Augustine, the Word is the Image of the Father, the perfect Imitation, through whom all things are made from nothing in a trinitarian act of *creatio, conversio, formatio*. All things, then, imitate, in varying degrees, the perfect Imitation because they bear the mark of this creative act in their ontological make up. In Book Eight, God puts before Augustine a series of *exempla* to imitate – Victorinus, Anthony, the two *agentes in rebus*, the children of Lady Chastity – who are presented as men and women *converted* through and *con-formed* to the Incarnate Word, that is, they are presented as those who have been *re-created* in Christ by imitating the Imitation. Through these re-created imitators, Augustine sees what he was created to be and is led by the Word into imitation of the Word, who effects his conversion and formation, thereby re-creating him after the pattern of his original creation.

There seems to be a growing consensus that the doctrine of creation is fundamental to Augustine's thought. Carol Harrison, for example, has argued that 'creation from nothing is the point at which [Augustine] naturally begins, but it is also that which determines the way in which he subsequently expounds his entire understanding of the faith'.¹ Marie-Anne Vannier has recently shown how the creational schema *creatio, conversio, formatio* can help make sense of the meaning of the *Confessions* and Luigi Pizzolato and Robert McMahon have demonstrated how the creation story of Genesis can illumine the structure

¹ Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (New York, 2008), 114. For the centrality of creation in Augustine's thought, see also N. Joseph Torchia, *Creatio ex nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichean Polemic and Beyond* (New York, 1999), ix; Tarsicius van Bavel, 'The Creator and the Integrity of Creation in the Fathers of the Church especially in Saint Augustine', *Augustinian Studies* 21 (1990), 1-35, 1; Marie-Anne Vannier, '*Creatio*', '*Conversio*', '*Formatio*' chez S. Augustin (Fribourg, 1997); Frances Young, 'Creation and Human Being: The Forging of a Distinct Christian Discourse', *SP* 44 (2010), 334-48.

and meaning of the *Confessions*.² For Augustine, creation is determinative: it is not just one doctrine or theme among others, but is the foundational context for all doctrines and all themes.

If creation does in fact determine Augustine's thought in the way suggested, then we should see evidence of this in the dramatic center of the *Confessions*, the conversion sequence in Book Eight.³ But what, if anything, do the stories of Simplicianus and Ponticianus, the appearance of Lady Continence, and the struggle in the garden have to do with creation? Seemingly, nothing at all. Indeed, unlike, for example, Augustine's grief over his dead friend, which he interprets as an inordinate love of created things,⁴ or his struggles with the Manichees, who confuse Creator and creation,⁵ Augustine's story of conversion seems to be largely devoid of creational content. Yet, this lack is only apparent, for despite any explicit references to creation, Augustine's understanding of creation forms the deep grammar of his conversion narrative in Book Eight. To see this, we must first consider how Augustine understands creation and then show how it illumines Book Eight.

For Augustine, creation is a revelation: it is that through which the invisible things of God are understood.⁶ 'With the whole creation testifying together', he says, 'I found You, our Creator and Your Word, God with You and with You one God, through whom You created all things'.⁷ Through the witness of creation, Augustine comes to understand that God is not a part of creation, but the ontologically distinct Creator of it.⁸ This insight is not as obvious as it might seem for there is a perennial human temptation to reduce God to another

² See Marie-Anne Vannier, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris, 2007); Robert McMahon, *Prayerful Ascent: An Essay on the Literary Form of the Confessions* (Athens, 1989); Luigi Pizzolato, *Le 'Confessioni' di Sant'Agostino: Da biografia a 'confessio'* (Milan, 1968). See also Jared Ortiz, *Creation in Saint Augustine's Confessions* (Diss. Catholic University of America, 2012).

³ Book Eight is the *dramatic* center, but not the center in other ways. For one illuminating suggestion on the structure of the *Confessions*, see Frederick Crosson, 'Structure and Meaning in St. Augustine's *Confessions*', in *The Augustinian Tradition*, ed. Gareth Matthews (Berkeley, 1999), 27-38. Crosson deftly illumines Augustine's creation insight about the non-competition between God and the world and shows how this understanding determines the structure and meaning of the *Confessions*.

⁴ See Aug., *conf.* 4.4.7-11.17.

⁵ See, for example, *conf.* 3.6.10.

⁶ See *Rom.* 1:20: 'the invisible things of God are understood through the things that are made' ('*invisibilia dei per ea quae facta sunt intellecta*'). This verse (with slight variation) occurs six times in the *Confessions*: 7.10.16; 7.17.23 (2x); 7.20.26; 10.6.10; 13.21.31.

⁷ Aug., *conf.* 8.1.2: '*contestante universa creatura inveneram te creatorem nostrum et verbum tuum apud te deum tecumque unum deum, per quod creasti omnia.*' Latin references to the *Confessions* come from James O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1992). All translations are my own.

⁸ See Aug., *conf.* 7.10.16, the crucial passage where Augustine comes to the distinction between God and the world for the first time. Importantly, Augustine thinks that creation also reveals the co-equality of the Word, though it seems to be silent on the Holy Spirit.

being in the world.⁹ For example, those who ask what God was doing before he created the world¹⁰ and those who imagine God as a great being who creates at a distance from himself¹¹ make God subject to time and space, that is, they make him a being among other beings, albeit a great and powerful one. But, as Augustine says in Book 13, God does 'not exist in a certain way, but he is is', *non aliquo modo est, sed est est*.¹² By reduplicating the word *est*, Augustine invokes *Exodus* 3:14 and suggests that God *is* simply, without qualification. All creatures exist in a certain way – the way God made them – but God is not a part of creation, so he does not exist in a certain way or as a certain kind of thing. God is *est* itself, sheer is. This is true of the Son as well. He is born of God's substance and so is the perfect Image and Likeness of the Father.¹³ This means that, while he is distinct from the Father (because he is not the Father, but the Son), he shares the *est* of the Father. This understanding of God's divinity means that God is utterly transcendent to the world he created while, at the same time, being wholly and intimately present to it without competing with it in any way.¹⁴ God is, as Augustine says, 'most hidden and most present' (*secretissime et praesentissime*).¹⁵

Creation, on the other hand, is not born of God's substance, but is created from nothing. It is therefore distinct and, at least initially, unlike God.¹⁶ For Augustine, creation can only be like God if it turns toward him, if, in Augustine's words, it 'converts'.¹⁷ According to Augustine, God creates all things from nothing in a threefold, simultaneous trinitarian act which he describes under the terms *creatio*, *conversio*, and *formatio*.¹⁸ 'In the beginning, God created heaven and earth' (*Gen.* 1:1) – this refers to the *creation* of formless

⁹ This is a temptation not always resisted in Augustine scholarship either. Vernon Bourke, in *Augustine's View of Reality* (Villanova, 1964), speaks of a 'triple-layered scheme of reality. At the top is God, in the middle is the human soul, and at the bottom is the world of bodies. Apart from these three levels ... there are no other general types of beings' (3). Robert O'Connell also speaks of a 'three-tiered universe' for which he provides a diagram, an image he calls the *Omnia*, 'the all things'. See his *Soundings in St. Augustine's Imagination* (New York, 1994), 21, and *Images of Conversion in St. Augustine's Confessions* (New York, 1996), 105-06. Bourke and O'Connell each make God the highest being *within* the universe, thereby (perhaps unwittingly) reducing him to one being among other beings. Their discussions on this point have been followed by Leo Ferrari, 'Cosmology' and Ronald H. Nash, 'Wisdom', in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, 1999), 246-8 and 885-6, respectively.

¹⁰ See Aug., *conf.* 11.10.12.

¹¹ See Aug., *conf.* 12.27.37.

¹² *conf.* 13.31.46. James O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions* III (Oxford, 1992), 411, suggests the translation 'he is "he is"'

¹³ See Aug., *vera rel.* 34.63, 36.66, 43.81.

¹⁴ This is the meaning of Augustine's oft-repeated phrase, *ubique totus* (*conf.* 1.3.3, 6.3.4); see also, *ep.* 187.5.16: 'God is everywhere present through his divinity' ('*ubique esse deum per diuinitatis praesentiam*').

¹⁵ *conf.* 1.4.4.

¹⁶ See *conf.* 13.2.3.

¹⁷ See *conf.* 13.2.2-3.

¹⁸ See *conf.* 13.1.1-4.5.

matter from nothing.¹⁹ God calls this formless matter back to Himself through His Word (*revocatio*): ‘Let there be light’ (*Gen.* 1:3). This calling back through the Word constitutes the *conversion* of formless matter from unlikeness to God to some kind of likeness.²⁰ In the Holy Spirit, the formless creature simultaneously receives its *form* as whatever it is supposed to be – ‘and there was light’ (*Gen.* 1:3). ‘In this conversion and formation’, Augustine says, ‘the creature, in its own way, *imitates* God the Word’.²¹ For rational creatures, formation means *illumination* which, Augustine says, means being made in God’s image and likeness and having the capacity to participate in the light of his wisdom.²²

Now, what does all this have to do with Augustine’s conversion in Book Eight? The very fact that Augustine is speaking of conversion at all puts his narrative in the context of creation. All conversions, according to Augustine, have their foundation in God’s original creative act, for God re-creates in the same way he creates.²³ In sinning, we have turned away from God, *aversio* instead of *conversio*, and, in a very real sense, this un-makes us: *aversio* deforms the image of God in us and dissipates the unity of our being, making us like that formless abyss out of which we were created. But God calls us back again through the Word, now Incarnate, who converts us, and in the Spirit reforms us after the pattern of our original creation. In Book Eight, Augustine presents a kind of ‘interior view’ of this converting and reforming Trinity who calls Augustine to enter into the Word, that perfect Image toward which he was made.

Book Eight begins with a conflicted Augustine hearing a number of conversion stories after which, he says, he was ‘on fire for imitating’ (*exarsi ad imitandum*).²⁴ This phrase gives an insight into how Augustine understands the process of his conversion, for imitation is a category of created being and the language of ‘fire’ points us to the creative role of the Holy Spirit (that is, to *formatio*). All things are created through the Son, the true Image of God, and so all things imitate God because they bear the creative mark of the Image through whom they were made.²⁵ They are like God because they are created

¹⁹ See *conf.* 12.8.8.

²⁰ See *conf.* 13.2.2.

²¹ *Gen. litt.* 1.4.9.

²² See *conf.* 13.2.3.

²³ See *conf.* 5.7.13 where Augustine says that we are saved by ‘your hand remaking what You have made’ (*‘manum tuam reficientem quae fecisti’*); see *lib. arb.* 3.7 and 3.22.

²⁴ *conf.* 8.5.10.

²⁵ It is important to note that the Son does not convert. Thus, creatures do not imitate the Son’s *turning*, but bear the mark of the Son’s perfect Likeness so that they reflect God in some way. Creatures convert by being made like God; they are turned by being created through the Word. Compare Plotinus, *Ennead* V 2.1, where the Nous does, in fact, convert. It is unclear whether Augustine knew this passage, but either way it is clear that he has a different understanding than Plotinus on this point. In Augustine’s metaphysics, the notion of the Son converting would be ontologically Arian.

through the Likeness. Thus, imitation is written into the very structure of things; it is what makes a thing like God and enables it to exist as that thing.

Imitation is not only a category of creation, but also of re-creation. Following St. Paul, Augustine says that conversion does not begin by imitating Christ directly, but 'by imitating the imitators of your Christ' (*imitando imitatores Christi tui*).²⁶ Those who have achieved the imitation of Christ become his image and thus become imitable images for others; the imitators imitate the Exemplar and so become examples themselves. In Book Eight, Providence puts before Augustine a series of examples to imitate – Victorinus, Anthony, the two government officials, the children of Lady Contenance – who are presented as men and women *converted* through and *con-formed* to the Word, that is, they are presented as those who have been *re-created* in Christ.²⁷ The Holy Spirit sets Augustine on fire to imitate them, for the Spirit is that bond of love between the one imitating and the one imitated.²⁸ By inspiring rightly ordered desire, the Holy Spirit re-forms the distended soul, focusing it on God (*intentio*), 'stretching' it (*extensio*), and thus 'making room' for God to enter in.²⁹ It is no accident, then, that the last examples offered for Augustine's imitation are the children of Lady *Contenance*, for continence is that reforming virtue by which, Augustine says, 'we are collected together and brought back into the One from whom we have been dissipated into many things'.³⁰

The rest of Augustine's conversion story is well known: he struggles, weeps, hears children playing, reads the Scriptures, and is flooded with light.³¹ But what has happened here? The Word being imitated by others prepares Augustine to hear the Word speaking through the children's words, which leads to the Word of the Scriptures, which leads to the Word made flesh. In each of these temporal events, the unchanging Word beckons Augustine to *conversion*, to increased likeness to Christ. When Augustine hears the *tolle lege*, he remembers Anthony's conversion and is moved to imitate him.³² This detail sheds light on the 'mechanics' of how creation is operative in Augustine's conversion: the examples put before Augustine form his memory so that he begins not to be 'conformed to this world, but reformed in [his] mind ... Thus, a man is renewed in the knowledge of God according to the image of

²⁶ Aug., *conf.* 13.21.31.

²⁷ See Lewis Ayres, 'Into the Poem of the Universe: *Exempla*, Conversion, and Church in Augustine's *Confessiones*', *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 13 (2009), 263-81.

²⁸ Compare Aug., *en. Ps.* 37.27: 'By desiring [Christ] and imitating his passion, we are renewed' (*'desiderando eum et passionem eius imitando renovamur'*).

²⁹ See *conf.* 11.29.39, 10.1.1, 1.5.6.

³⁰ *conf.* 10.29.40: '*per continentiam quippe conligimur et redigimur in unum, a quo in multa defluximus.*' See also *conf.* 13.34.49, Augustine's commentary – in the form of an allegorical interpretation of the creation story – on imitation leading to continence.

³¹ *conf.* 8.12.29.

³² *conf.* 8.12.29.

him, who created him'.³³ The examples participate in the Light and thus become a light which can shed light for others. By providing new, light-filled memories, the examples illumine Augustine's mind so he can see the world in a new light. The process of *reformatio* has begun. Augustine is now able to rightly interpret the children's words. He interprets them as a divine command to read the Scriptures and when he sees the Way in the call of the scriptural Word he is further illumined: it was, he says, 'as if a *light* of surety was infused into my heart'.³⁴ Augustine is exhorted to 'put on Christ', to be baptized, which will incorporate him into the Body of Christ, the Church,³⁵ drawing him ever closer to that Image toward which he was made.

Augustine's description in Book Eight of how God interacts with the world arises from his understanding of creation. Since God 'is is,' he is not a competing cause in the world; he acts in the world without violating the natural integrity of its events or Augustine's will. The actors act of their own volition and the events occur from natural causes while *at the same time* God works through them to bring about His own ends. God does not manipulate Augustine's heart to get him to convert; rather, through grace, God frees it so that it can be fully at work while he is fully at work in it.³⁶ The interaction between temporal events and the eternal God as portrayed in Book Eight only makes sense in light of Augustine's understanding of creation.

Augustine's understanding of creation has shed light on both the metaphysics and mechanics of his narrative in Book Eight. Yet, Augustine's conversion and re-formation are not finished in the garden; there is an important sacramental dimension which confirms the process begun there: baptism completes the process of conversion, making one a 'new creation' (2Cor. 5:17),³⁷ while the Eucharist moves one along the scale of likeness to Christ in the lifelong process of re-forming the image of God.³⁸ Baptism incorporates one into the Body of Christ, while the Eucharist con-forms one to the heart of that Body. It is this ecclesial heart which, Augustine says in the opening lines, was created

³³ *conf.* 13.22.32: '*nolite conformari huic saeculo, sed reformamini in novitate mentis vestrae ... ita homo renovatur in agnitione dei secundum imaginem eius, qui creavit eum.*' These two sentences are based on *Rom.* 12:2 and *Col.* 3:10, respectively. See also *conf.* 13.13.14, 13.23.33, 13.26.40, 13.34.49.

³⁴ *conf.* 8.12.29: '*quasi luce securitatis infusa cordi meo omnes dubitationis tenebrae diffugerunt.*' This language clearly refers to illumination, *formatio* for rational creatures.

³⁵ See *conf.* 9.6.14.

³⁶ See *conf.* 9.1.1. Compare *spir. et litt.* 30.52: 'Do we, then, by grace empty free choice? Let that be far from our thoughts! Rather, we establish free choice even more' ('*Liberum ergo arbitrium evacuumus per gratiam? Absit, sed magis liberum arbitrium statuimus*').

³⁷ See *ep.* 98.9, where Augustine calls baptism the 'sacrament of conversion' ('*conversionis sacramentum*').

³⁸ See *conf.* 10.3.4 and 10.4.5. Also, see Gerhart Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge, 1959), 32.

for God and longs for rest.³⁹ This rest is begun in this life and will be accomplished in the next when the Church, like the bread and wine, is definitively taken up and trans-formed into God.⁴⁰ The Church, both nourished by and mystically identical to the Eucharist, will be transformed into what she eats: 'I am the food of grown men; increase and you will eat Me. You will not change Me into you as food of your flesh, but you will be changed into Me'.⁴¹

³⁹ See Aug., *conf.* 1.1.1. I understand the *cor nostrum* of this line to be an allusion to the *sursum cor* of the Eucharistic prayer (see *conf.* 12.16.23 and 13.7.8). See also *s.* 229.3: 'Lift up the heart! The whole life of true Christians: Lift up the heart' ('*sursum cor. tota uita christianorum uerorum, sursum cor*'); *civ. Dei* 10.3: 'When our heart is up to the Lord, it is His altar' ('*cum ad illum sursum est, eius est altare cor nostrum*'); also, *s.* 25.7, 53.13, 68.4, 227; *vera rel.* 3.5; *s. Den.* 6.3.

⁴⁰ Compare *s.* 272 and *s.* 229.1.

⁴¹ *conf.* 7.10.16: '*cibus sum grandium: cresce et manducabis me. nec tu me in te mutabis sicut cibum carnis tuae, sed tu mutaberis in me.*' This passage, importantly, occurs in the context of Augustine's coming to the truth of creation for the first time. Augustine presents it as a revelation of the deep meaning of creation. See also *s.* 272: 'So if you are the Body of Christ and its members, it is your mystery that has been placed on the Lord's table; you receive your own mystery ... Be what you see, and receive what you are' ('*si ergo uos estis corpus christi et membra, mysterium uestrum in mensa dominica positum est: mysterium uestrum accipitis ... Estote quod uidetis, et accipite quod estis*').

STUDIA PATRISTICA
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MARKUS VINZENT

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