

St. Augustine's *Confessio*: The Ethico- Ontological Ground of *Logos*

ENRIQUE PALLARES

INTRODUCTION

Most commentators of St. Augustine's *Confessions* identify it as the source of the modern autobiography. However, some recent interpretations challenge this view. The significance of this challenge is that the conventional interpretation itself is a product of a common misunderstanding of the basic ethical and ontological requirement that Augustine places on himself and on the reader. The *Confessions* is not just a deeply intimate narrative of events, but it is above all a penetration into the act of *confessio*, into the disposition by which Augustine engages with the revelatory process of Being. It is the discovery of God in inwardness and of the dispositional precondition for the use of reason. When taking a vantage point that is intrinsic to the work, instead of that of a solipsism-prone-ego, we find a seeker, a *zetete*,¹ that is able to open up the possibility

ENRIQUE PALLARES is a PhD candidate in Political Theory at The Catholic University of America. He holds a BA in Literature and Philosophy from The New School University in New York, where he wrote his senior thesis on Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Unamuno. His research focuses on the relationship between thought, being and action, particularly as it becomes luminous in the 19th and 20th centuries through the articulation of the person as the source and horizon of existence.

of knowledge by engaging with his own ethical and ontological insufficiency in relation to Being. In the *Confessions*, we find one of the most sincere and penetrating attempts at discovering what *is*. Reading it any other way is to impose forceful presuppositions on a work that is far too vulnerable to be swayed by force.²

The *Confessions* is an act of love that illuminates the existential possibility of knowing, living and thinking from within knowledge, life and thought. It is an engagement with Being through the only vantage point afforded by the particular existence of the self. David Walsh, in his book *The Third Millennium: Reflections on Faith and Reason*, explains how the first opening of knowledge is in fact the opening itself from within which we begin our inquiry: “Dropping the overweening self-confidence that everything can be mapped by us, we might open toward the mystery of the realization that we are searching for our way from within the map.”³ In other words, the first insight afforded by existence is existence itself. This realization of one’s place within the order of reality is, as will be seen, the grounding of any rational inquiry. St. Augustine’s text, if we really try to understand it, demands from us nothing less than the unconditional engagement of its author. We are called, first and foremost, to join Augustine in the act of *confessio*, and anything less will inevitably yield a partial and equivocal understanding of the work. It will result in a refusal to participate in the fullness of reality, and of the conditions of existence.

¹ This term should be understood in terms of the Platonic inquiry of the philosopher, who is perpetually engaged in the quest for truth. The difference between the possibility of knowing in Plato and Augustine is indeed relevant, but it will be further clarified later in the essay. For now it should suffice to highlight that the common conception sees the relationship between the knower and the transcendent as more active in Plato and more passive in Augustine. Throughout this essay, this notion will be challenged by implying there is an important revelatory (passive) element in both that stems from the primordial ethico-ontological disposition of *confessio*. Additionally, the relevance at this particular point is that unlike the epistemological problems of modern philosophy, the *zetete* is already engaged in truth. For Plato and for Augustine, the problem of knowledge is not epistemological, but ethical and ontological.

² The paradoxical aspect of this formulation merely reflects the paradoxical nature of the process of conversion itself. Augustine shows the way in which one can only begin the process of meaningful transformation by surrendering, by entering into the vulnerability of opening oneself to transcendent reality. In other words, meaningful change cannot be effected by one’s forceful means, and in the *Confessions* we find one of the clearest examples of this paradox.

³ Walsh, David, *The Third Millennium: Reflections on Faith and Reason* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999), Pp. 10.

Therefore, following Jean Luc Marion's recent study on St. Augustine, this essay argues that the *Confessions* makes an ethico-ontological demand that illuminates the existential ground of reason. Engaging in the process of *confessio* is already both an ontological status and an ethical claim that results from a response to the revelatory call of Being. This insight, therefore, shows the possibility of understanding to what extent Augustine's entire corpus is an act of *confessio* and an *ethics of humility*.⁴ This ethico-ontological response to God's revelation opens up the possibility of reason and moral action through the struggle against the *libido dominandi* as the source of all evil. *Confessio*, as we shall see, is the existential mechanism by which the redemptive process is carried out. It is not an intellectual exercise but an ethical and an ontological one. Furthermore, it is not just an *act*, but it is the basic *disposition* by which the insufficiency of human existence transcends itself and reaches into the source of order. It is the mode of being through which man can strive to exist ethically, in active relation to the *vita beata*, the happy life.

Despite the vast field of knowledge that *confessio* opens up, the present inquiry is concerned with *beginning*, with the question of the precondition for reason, knowledge, and ethics. Most, if not all, of the groundwork needed in order to understand the whole of the present argument is already found in the first paragraph of the *Confessions*:

You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised: great is your power and your wisdom immeasurable. Man, a little piece of your creation, desires to praise you, a human being bearing his mortality with him, carrying with him the witness of his sin and the witness that you resist the proud. Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your

⁴ Although this particular point will lay beyond the reach of the present essay, it is important to see how an assessment of Augustine's ethics requires a study of *confessio*. Most of his writings were written *contra*, as a reaction to the reality of his post as the Bishop of Hippo. In particular examples—like the Donatist controversy, the sack of Rome by the Visigoths, or the riots at Calama in 426—one always sees, first and foremost, that Augustine battles the gnostic impulses of particular groups by trying to reveal the disposition of *confessio* that lies at the core of reason, by making explicit the impossibility of ethical existence without *humilitas*.

creation. You still man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.⁵

What, therefore, does it mean to claim that the disposition of *confessio* opens up the possibility of reason? In order to approach this question it is necessary to penetrate deeper into the process of *confessio*. But before engaging in this inquiry it is important to lay some foundations regarding the mechanism of reason itself and the way in which it is bound to existential order and balance.

THE TRANSCENDENT GROUND OF REASON

In order to explore the basis of reason, we should first proceed by taking a look at the opposite of our object of inquiry, namely, the source of irrationality. By analyzing the nature of imbalance, the relationship between existential balance and reason will become clearer. Perhaps one of the best frameworks for an analysis of the existential basis of reason and irrationality is provided by Eric Voegelin. In his *Order and History: The Ecumenic Age*, he explains, very much within an Augustinian framework, how the source of irrationality lies in the gnostic impulses of the soul:

Since Gnosticism surrounds the *libido dominandi* in man with a halo of spiritualism or idealism, and can always nourish its righteousness by pointing to the evil in the world, no historical end to the attraction is predictable once magic pneumatism has entered history as a mode of existence. Nevertheless, it is a dead end inasmuch as it rejects the life of spirit and reason under the conditions of the cosmos in which reality becomes luminous in pneumatic and noetic consciousness. There is no alternative to an eschatological extravaganza but to accept the mystery of the cosmos. Man's existence is participation in reality. It imposes the duty of noetically exploring the structure of reality as far as it is intelligible and spiritually coping with the insight into its movement from the divine Beginning to the divine Beyond of its structure.⁶

However, as any person would concede, this demand imposed upon us by the very fact of existing is not an easy burden to carry: human beings exists in a *metaxy*, in an in-between, where opposite poles pull the self

⁵ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Pp. 3. Unless otherwise noted, this edition pertains to all English references. Henceforth referred to as *Confessions*.

⁶ Voegelin, 28.

towards imbalance. In Marion's words, "This in-between defines the sole honest condition of man, whose instability now becomes the sole constant."⁷ The defining characteristic of man's tragic existence is this difficulty to bear the yoke of his own mortality, the "this man, bearing about his own mortality with him, carrying about him a testimony of his own sin (*testimonium peccati*)."⁸ Therefore, rather than remaining in the tension, it is far easier to shy away from the noetico-pneumatic requirement of existence, and to escape into the placid self-enthralment of ideology.

The possibility of imbalance is inherently imbedded in our *metaxic* existence: we are both finite and have a vision of the infinite; we exist between the *libido dominandi* (desire to dominate) and *laudare delectet* (desire to praise); we are mortal and desire immortality; we inhabit the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena*; we battle between transcendence and immanence; we move in the frenzied ambivalence of *amor Dei* and *amor sui*; we want the perfection of the *vita beata* yet can never achieve it; and the *libido dominandi* ceases upon the slightest sign of carelessness by promising our most coveted objects of desire: mastery and certainty.⁹

Thus, human consciousness is easily seduced by the almost irresistible temptation of escape. Whether that escape is extramundane,

⁷ Marion, Jean-Luc, *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press: 2012), Pp., 88.

⁸ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Loeb Classical Library with a translation by William Watts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), Pp., 2. All references in Latin belong to this edition. Henceforth referred to as *Confessions Loeb*.

⁹ Two points should be made about this. First, that the very notion of "certainty" includes in it an implication of repose. It is a stagnant synthesis of the inherent tension of existence; thus, it is irrational in so far as there is no experiential basis for conceiving of a synthesized existence. The second point refers to the "existential slip" on which the *libido dominandi* capitalizes. Plato, in his analysis of evil in the *Republic*, has some of the most incisive insights regarding the possibility of slipping into disorder. First, he explains how evil first becomes manifest in one's dreams, when in the absence of vigil the careless mind is open to its own disorderly tendencies. Even the man who pursues virtue, rather, particularly the man who pursues virtue, is susceptible to the inclination towards the poles of disorder. Thus, the philosophical soul is always vulnerable to the possibility of slipping through the funnel of evil until it has wagged open war on reality itself and does not accept any of its terms, until it has become a tyrant by rejecting its own *metaxic* condition. The tyrant, therefore, possesses absolute certainty; however, not a certainty of reality but a certainty of nothingness itself— which, of course, he mistakes for reality.

like many of the world-rejecting forms of ancient gnostic manifestations of imbalance—or whether it is intramundane, like the more modern utopian ideologies that attempt to “immanentize the eschaton,”¹⁰ the escape is, strictly speaking, a failure of rationality. The gnostic impulse makes a claim on reason, for it accounts for itself through rationalization, but it has no experiential or rational ground.¹¹ In other words, reason cannot provide its own basis.¹² The *libido dominandi* takes such a strong hold over the imbalanced consciousness of the ideologue that reality itself becomes the primordial obstacle for the actualization of his messianic purpose:

They [ideologues, or, as Voegelin calls them, the ‘new Christs’] deliberately transpose reality and the paradox of its structure into the medium of an imaginary ‘Second Reality’ in which the mystery of cosmic-divine reality that must be lived through, and died through, can be speculatively [sic] solved and actively abolished by men whose existence has been disordered by their *libido dominandi*.¹³

Therefore, the apparent rationality of the different forms of Gnosticism and messianic ideologies is exposed in its rampant irrationality when one

¹⁰ This phrase is used by Eric Voegelin to explain the way in which different gnostic ideologies try to actualize transcendent reality in immanence. They hope to fundamentally transform reality by trying to effect the final eschatological transformation.

¹¹ Clear examples of this can be found in the different ideological movements of modernity. Marxism, for instance, expects that human nature will undergo a fundamental transformation, yet it cannot explain how that transformation will happen. Marxism itself, on its own grounds, does not have the tools to account for that expectation; for historical materialism must resort to the immaterial symbolism of “transformation” in order to achieve its purpose. All forms of Gnosticism, ancient and modern, follow similar patterns of escape from *metaxic* reality, and an imagined, “better” reality is superimposed upon the *metaxy*.

¹² See, for example, Walsh 8. Although Augustine takes this for granted, the excessive emphasis of modernity on the autonomy of reason has obscured reason’s dependence on faith. This reinvigoration of the relationship between faith and reason is a central feature in some of the most important efforts of modern Catholic thinkers—Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Fides et Ratio* is perhaps its most significant representative.

¹³ Voegelin, 254. A few examples of these “new Christs” that attempt to transfigure reality can be found in figures like Comte, Feuerbach, Bakunin, Hitler, Stalin, and all the other libidinous messiahs of our time. Thus, the dark history of modern totalitarianisms provides the most transparent evidence of the grave danger of severing reason from its revelatory ground, of the irrationality of existential imbalance.

considers that reason is not merely a hermetic logic but a *zetetic*¹⁴ mechanism with a particular orientation whose ability to function properly is fully contingent on an existential disposition towards Being, on the balance afforded by *confessio*.¹⁵ Walsh accounts for the problems of instrumentalizing reason and refusing to acknowledge its transcendent ground: "We cannot regard reason as a self-contained instrument to be used for whatever purpose we choose, because then reason cannot provide the direction in which it will be applied. If reason is instrumentalized, then we lack any rational source of direction."¹⁶ The success of gnostic movements hinges on the fact that they capitalize on the difficulty of maintaining existential balance. They aim precisely at this discomfort with reality. By dislodging the source of evil from within the person and externalizing it, they appeal to the *libido dominandi* and the self-righteousness of an artificial inward perfection.¹⁷

¹⁴ As has been previously explained, this term aims at including the Platonic meaning of "inquiry." The relevance of this is that it stresses the way in which knowledge is fundamentally tied to its transcendent source. The concept of *zetema* fundamentally prohibits an instrumental view of reason.

¹⁵ Perhaps one of the most important things to keep in mind is that they symbol of *confessio*, although it represents a Christian articulation of truth, should not be take in its dogmatic sense, but with a strong emphasis on the experience from which it emerges. We see, for example, more compact forms of the truth that underlies *confessio* in two important instances in Plato. First, the beginning of philosophy as *thaumazein* (wonder) includes the recognition of a particular positioning in relation to *apeiron* (the beyond) from which truth emerges. Similarly, the recognition of insufficiency that is embedded in Socrates' "All I know is that I know nothing" points towards an essential positioning in relation to the source from which truth emerges that acknowledges its fundamentally transcendent quality. Important differences do exist in terms of the role that the concept of "sin" plays in the recognition of the ethico-ontological limitations, but the important insight here lies in the fundamental similarity of the personal disposition that is required to enter into relation with the transcendent.

¹⁶ Walsh, 8. Augustine, through his personal experience with the emptiness of rhetoric and different forms of Gnosticism, understood the libidinous source of this error perhaps better than anyone else. He knew that the ability to use reason is not contingent on eloquence, argumentation or logic, but on the love that defines the directionality of that reason, on the mode of being of *confessio*.

¹⁷ Although this is particularly differentiated in Christianity, we see articulations of similar impulses in previous symbolic structures. Plato, for example, expresses this through the symbol of the tyrant and the Thrasymachean attempt at redefining the terms on which reality operates, of transforming justice into "the advantage of the stronger." We can also see it in the earlier Protagorean formulation of "man is the measure of all things." Despite the clear

The existential courage required to engage willfully in one's *metaxic* (in-between) condition is not easy to gather. Therefore, the danger of imbalance is inextricable from the process of revelation, and the balance that maintains the tension between Being and its symbolic manifestations is dependent on a particular disposition of struggle against imbalance.¹⁸ This struggle is the mode of *confessio*, the disposition through which man constantly engages in the ordering mechanism of recognizing his ethico-ontological insufficiency and of attuning himself in relation to Being. But how exactly does *confessio* bring about the existential balance that opens up the field of reason?

CONFESSIO AND THE POSSIBILITY OF REASON

As Marion points out, *confessio* is twofold. It is an admission of faults, and it is praise. Yet here the symbolic structure of *confessio* presents the risk of obscuring its experiential basis.¹⁹ What is important for the present inquiry is not so much Augustine's theological categories, but their experiential correlatives. *Confessio* is a response to an ethico-ontological demand because 1) it admits an ethical insufficiency, and 2) it recognizes its place in the order of being and gives praise. This existential disposition is so primordial to human existence that praise must, as Augustine shows, precede all thought or speech, for *Confessio* gives reason its direction. Thus, the very first line of the *Confessions* reads: "*Magnus es, domine, et laudabilis valde.*" Praise presents itself as the necessary beginning that

differences that all of these accounts present, they exhibit one similarity: an inherent, existential tendency towards the poles of imbalance in the *metaxy*—which, in turn, justifies itself through attempts at mastering reality and instrumentalizing reason. All of these symbolic structures point to the fundamental truth of the irrationality of evil.

¹⁸ Walsh, 52.

¹⁹ The symbol of "*confessio*" opens up an entire field of meaning—namely, the inward process of the narrative of the *Confessions*. However, as with all symbols, it is twofold: on the one hand it "enables," and, on the other, it "encloses." As a determinate articulation of an indeterminate experience, the symbol can *enable* us to access and experience, but the danger always remains of *enclosing*—i.e., of mistaking the symbol for the experience that engendered it. Therefore, in this essay, we consider Augustine's conversion as equivalent to Plato's *metanoia* (turning of the soul). Of course, each symbolic structure has particularities that the other does not. It should be said that Augustine's conversion is a more differentiated form of *metanoia*; for it is a transformation that occurs in a Christian milieu, where the transcendent has entered history through the incarnation. This allows the relationship to the transcendent to be a *personal* one, rather than merely intellectual. However, the differences should not obscure the similarities, and the emphasis of the present essay is on reading symbols with a particular attention towards the shared reality from which they emerge.

provides the self with enough existential balance to open up the possibility of *logos*.²⁰

These two aspects of *confessio*, however, are bound together as each other's condition of possibility.²¹ They emerge simultaneously as the necessary response to existence.²² Both—admission of guilt and praise—are bound by necessity because it is in the recognition of one's own insufficiency that the recognition of God's sufficiency appears. By definition, God is worthy and deserving of praise²³ and, in his radical transcendence, does not respond to demands of knowledge but is only knowable through self-revelation. At the same time, however, He *draws* man to praise, "*tu excitas, ut laudare te delectet.*"²⁴ Therefore, human existence is always responsorial: all human activity—thought, speech, action—is a response to the call of Being, and praise is the primordial way in which the created enters into relation with the creator. Thus, "praising does not designate one speech act among others, one that would be equally applicable to God and other similar targets. Praising offers the sole way, the sole royal road of access, to his presence."²⁵ Far from occupying the ranks of an outdated ornament, praise opens up the possibility of all other thought and action.

These reflections bring us to the very core of the problem of interpretation that we have intimated in the introduction to this essay: the existential demand, or what Marion refers to as the "spiritual refusal."²⁶

²⁰ Marion, 13.

²¹ This internal mechanism of *confessio* is also what reveals the inextricable link between the ethical (fault in action) and the ontological (praise).

²² Marion, 28.

²³ *Confessions*, 3.

²⁴ *Confessions* Loeb, 2.

²⁵ Marion, 14.

²⁶ The distinction made here between "existential" and "spiritual" is not arbitrary. The latter category, used by Marion, is indeed more accurate for the treatment of the issue as a whole: ultimately, Augustine is concerned with God and the whole of the theological mystery. Here, however, the "existential" designation serves to emphasize the specific way in which this is, at a very basic level, a positioning in relation to Being. "Spiritual," on the one hand, refers to a fuller relationship with Being, and presupposes a commitment to the revelatory process and to theological categories. The existential dimension of this mode of being, on the other hand, refers to the basic disposition towards Being as the source of order, and operates at an experiential level. It aims at emphasizing the givenness and the facticity human existence with an intuition of a transcendent order. Therefore, the purpose of replacing "spiritual" for

Any resistance to engage in the existential demand of *confessio* presents an impasse in the ability to understand the text, “if he who does not praise cannot approach God, then any reader who would refuse to praise would by that very refusal be blocked from understanding and even reading the *Confessions*. The hermeneutic obstacle would therefore stem from a properly spiritual refusal.”²⁷ This refusal, however, has a further implication: it eliminates the possibility of *logos* because it refuses to engage with the process from which reason and language emerge. To be sure, by *logos* we mean a notion of substantive reason and language. Of course, reason and language in their instrumental capacities remain available regardless of the acceptance or rejection of the ethico-ontological demand of *confessio*. However, the present point is that reason, when severed from its transcendent source, loses its directionality and becomes nothing but an instrument like any other. Indeed, as Voegelin has argued, it is not long before the severance of reason from its transcendent source leads to utter irrationality.²⁸

As the basis of *logos*, *confessio* does not only enlarge and direct reason, but it also grounds the possibility of substantive communication. It is no coincidence, as Marion notes, that not only the *Confessions* itself begins with praise, but almost every book of the *Confessions* begins with praise. Augustine recognizes the need to confess in order to engage in reasoning and communication, because only the existential movement achieved by *confessio* can situate man in the necessary disposition towards Being that authentic dialogue and reason require.²⁹ Augustine is fully

“existential” is simply to place greater emphasis on the experiential basis of the spiritual symbolism.

²⁷ Marion, 14.

²⁸ Perhaps the best evidence that reason cannot provide its own ground and direction is found in the different apocalyptic ideologies of modernity and in the macabre totalitarian history of the XX century.

²⁹ Before Augustine, Plato and Aristotle already had a deep awareness of the fundamental disposition of openness that substantive communication requires. Although this particular point is beyond the limits of this essay, a clear example of this point can be seen in the very first scene of *The Republic*. Socrates asks if he could persuade Polemarchus and his friends to let him continue on his way to Athens, and Polemarchus replies, “Could you really persuade if we don’t listen?” (327c). Although we would require a more extensive reflection to further clarify this point, it should suffice to point out the way in which a particular disposition is required for a communication event.

engaged in a *maieutic*³⁰ project. In performing public *confessio* through the act of writing itself, Augustine is not only directing himself to God, but he is doing so with the other (*alii*) as his witness. This *maieutic* aspect of the text—namely, the possibility of effecting a transformation in others through *confessio*—is the very reason of its existence:

Lord, eternity is yours, so you cannot be ignorant of what I tell you. Your vision of occurrences in time is not temporally conditions. Why then do I set before you an ordered account of so many things? It is certainly not through me that you know them. But I am stirring up love for you in myself and in those who read this, so we may all say 'Great is the Lord and highly worthy to be praised' (Ps. 47: 1)"³¹

The social nature of *confessio* is expressed in the public response to the call of Being, which places upon the reader a demand to perform his own act of *confessio*. Further, Augustine makes this process explicit by narrating how he himself was drawn to *confessio maieutically*. The fulfillment of his own *metanoia* springs from a "*tolle lege*," a "take it and read it," where he encounters St. Paul's own *confessio*. All the subsequent communication is secondary: the fullness of *logos* appears as the consequence of this one crucial existential movement, which the *maieutic* nature of the *Confessions* presents as its primordial demand.

Although the praise and prayer of the *Confessions* can be (and have been) taken as superfluous rhetoric, Augustine has irrevocably opened up the possibility for understanding that the ethico-ontological movement that is at the heart of *confessio* contains within it the central purpose of the *Confessions*, and the possibility of substantive reason and communication. Indeed, our understanding of this feature guides understanding itself:

Considering the confessions that frame each book of the *Confessiones* as a literary ornament or a pious convention already makes for a massive

³⁰ This term refers to the element of "midwifery" in the inward turning towards truth, in the *metanoia*. Although the term is generally used in the Socratic context, here it aims at showing the indispensable role of the intermediary in the process of *metanoia* or conversion. Augustine, in writing the *Confessions*, hopes that he might act as a midwife in the process of conversion of others, and that his text may mediate the full transformation so as to form a liturgical community.

³¹ *Confessions*, 221.

misreading, but there is one more grave: imagining that the theoretical statements scattered throughout the *Confessiones* are not found amidst prayer, indeed, that they dispense with it. Of course, one can always not want to see. But then one should not be surprised to no longer comprehend.³²

The existentially numb reader, unable to see past a symbolic structure that he does not understand and that he refuses to engage, is in danger not only of misinterpretation but also of falling into the opacity of gnostic imbalance. In other words, the danger is not only hermeneutical but also ethical.

Confessio, however—taken not as dogmatic symbolism but as the experiential requirement of for the full transformation of *metanoia*—reveals the nature of knowledge as dependent on existential engagement, as fundamentally social and responsorial. *Confessio* discloses that existence is already a response to God. As an admission of one's incapacity to live well and in a proper relation to Being, *confessio* reveals that a failure of praise is an inability to exist with God and others. In its rejection of the conditions of existence the refusal to enter into *confessio* can lead only to isolation: "Among the terrestrial animals man was made by Him in His own image, and... was made one individual, though he was not left solitary. For there is nothing so social by nature, so unsocial by its corruption as this race."³³ *Confessio*, Augustine argues, is the only way to overturn the isolating and disordering effects of corruption. The social dimension of *confessio*, therefore, lies not only in the responsorial nature of *logos*, but also in the insight that *confessio* is the necessary beginning of an ethical existence, and the opening towards the *vita beata* as defined by the proper love, by *amor Dei*. Thus, as evidence of its knowledge-endowing effects, the mechanism of *confessio* reveals that when I see myself involved in the mystery of reality and I recognize my own insufficiency and perform praise, I already love, and this is the decisive factor for an ethical existence:

I am, certainly, but inasmuch as I love (and desire the *vita beata*). The *lover* loves so radically that loving decides everything about him and first of all his being. Accordingly, to reach himself, he does not have to be

³² Marion, 35.

³³ St. Augustine, *City of God*, in *The Great Books: Augustine*, Vol. 16, translated by Marcus Dods (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 1993), Pp. 414.

preoccupied with knowing *himself* but with knowing (or at least identifying) what is truly decisive for him—namely, what he loves in truth. More intimate to me than any equality of the *self* to itself thus turns out to be the distance of the lover to what he loves.³⁴

Thus, even the question of the self loses its solipsistic penchant and becomes a question about reality, about what it is that the self loves and how this is constitutive of existence.³⁵ In this way, we finally come to the end of the first paragraph of the *Confessions*: where man, engaging in the act of *confessio*, praises his love and realizes that he is so irrevocably defined by it that he cannot rest until he is in his love: “for our heart cannot be quieted till it may find repose in thee.”³⁶

CONCLUSION: EXISTENCE AS *RESPONSE-ABILITY*

Confessio, as a mode of being, is the balancing disposition that allows for reason to operate not merely as the wheel of ideology that spins without traction, but in the direction from which reason itself emerged, as *nous*. Further, *confessio* opens up the possibility of an *ethics of humility* that seeks to recover order by overturning the disordering effects of the *libido dominandi*. If the source of sin is pride, the source of the possibility of ethics is its opposite:

Indiscipline has its source, not primarily in the unruliness of temper that will not accept a master, but in the prior disposition of revolt that sets its own will above all others, including the will of the whole. St. Augustine refers to it as pride, the assertion of human primacy before all other reality. Even God cannot supplant the self-will at the center of the soul that has chosen its own way irrespective of consequences. Persistence in revolt is the great imbalancing force of human existence because it cannot be deflected by rational consideration of the costs. Revolt and irrationality go together, and the symbolic elaboration of its thrust is the great alternative to the Christian redemption of disorder.³⁷

³⁴ Marion, 96.

³⁵ With this same intuition of man as lover, Miguel de Unamuno advanced the idea that love precedes knowledge, that one must love before one can know.

³⁶ *Confessions*, 3.

³⁷ Walsh, 195.

Through *confessio*, the self appears as existing in response to Being; in Marion's terms, it presents itself as *the gifted*. In this way, human life can be considered not as a stand-alone *egological* existence with reality at the disposal of its mastery, but in its *response-ability*,³⁸ namely in its ability to respond to the demands of existence. *Confessio* is precisely what the *Confessions* achieves and requires from the reader. The reader, as has been said, can of course reject the ethico-ontological engagement that the work requires. But rather than saying something about the validity of Augustine's claim, doing so only brings into focus the ethico-ontological basis of *logos*: communication remains fundamentally impossible unless reason itself is directed towards its transcendent source. Authentic human existence cannot but present itself as *response-ability*, as the demand to exist in the mode of *confessio*, which places upon itself the incumbent requirement of responding to the call of Being.

³⁸ The emphasis on the composite parts of this term might shed light on the inextricable link between the term responsibility and human existence. This, of course, has important consequences for politics and for the limits of critique. All meaningful critique must be accompanied by the question "what is *my* responsibility in it?" Consequently, all thought that refuses to engage the question of responsibility remains blind to a fundamental aspect of human existence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Augustine. *The City of God*. In *The Great Books: Augustine, Vol. 16*. Translated by Marcus Dods. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1993.
- . *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- . *Confessions*. Translated by William Watts. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012.
- Voegelin, Eric. *Order and History: The Ecumenic Age*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000.
- Walsh, David. *The Third Millennium: Reflections on Faith and Reason*. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1999.