

Praying and Teaching Christian Ethics: Socratic Dialogue with God?

Brian Brock, submitted to SCE, September 2019

(6,765, without notes, 5,896)

Augustine's *Confessions* is the finest, most subtle, and most successful work of patristic apologetics. The delicate interleaving of biblical, Plotinian and Ciceronian ideas led most early modern Augustine scholars to read the work as a baptized Neoplatonism for a Christian audience. Contemporary Augustine scholarship has begun to unpick this consensus by emphasizing the rhetorical complexity of the book¹ as well as the structural importance of Augustine's engagement with his Manichean past.² Yet the Augustine who continues to serve as an anchoring figure in contemporary Christian ethics and political theology often sounds like the Augustine of the early modern interpreter, concerned with becoming virtuous by conforming the order of creation or hierarchical political authorities, oriented by a cosmic ascent teleology, and yearning for the contemplative life yet condemned to making tragic compromises in the murky world of the fallen city.

There is another Augustine in the *Confessions*, one oriented by converse with a God who speaks. It is true that Augustine affirms the Neoplatonic God's incorporeality, changelessness and transcendence of the world. Yet Augustine refuses the conclusion of every Platonist: that God is unmoved and unmovable, beyond all feeling and capacity to have an interest in we mutable, fleetingly existing temporal creatures. Augustine's God is a speaking God, the God of the Bible. The core claim of this paper is that this biblical insight not only orients the faith of the Augustine of the *Confessions*, but provides the central impetus for his rewriting of the Greco-Roman pedagogical form of the philosophical dialogue. For centuries the philosophical dialogue had been the main pedagogy in the philosophical schools, yet no one within this tradition had imagined a dialogue between an author and God. Augustine's reasons for doing so, I will suggest, give cause for contemporary theologians trained in the age of the

¹ Edward Morgan, *The Incarnation of the Word: The Theology of Language of Augustine of Hippo* (London: T&T Clark, 2010); Jean-Luc Marion *In the Self's Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine* Jeffrey L. Kotsky trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012) [additional from Psfffenroth?]

² Jason David BeDuhn, *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma, Volume 1: Conversion and Apostasy* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) and *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma, Volume 2: Making a "Catholic" Self* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

lecture to consider afresh the importance of dialogical pedagogy in the teaching of Christian ethics.

Everyone concerned to teach Christian ethics soon discovers the necessity of thinking about appropriate pedagogical forms. I want to suggest that teachers of Christian ethics are beholden to go beyond presenting digested conclusions, to teach how theological insight is generated or received. Any thinker who is not just repeating themselves has to be engaged in this investigative work, but if theologians only write polished lectures and texts summarizing their conclusions, they hide the processes of investigation. Students of theology never get to enter the investigative process unless privileged to study directly at the feet of a master.

My own interest in the pedagogical and investigative reach of the practice of dialogue began from several attempts to capture live explorative theological dialogue in print.³ With precious few exceptions, such dialogical work has been absent from contemporary theology and theological ethics,⁴ despite having a significant, if limited place in continental and Anglo-American philosophy.⁵ In this connection the falling fortunes of dialogue as a pedagogical form in the transition from ancient to modern scholarly contexts were especially thought provoking. Though some scholars have noted the problematic implications of the over-reliance of the modern university on the lecture,⁶ to my knowledge there has been no explicit consideration of dialogical pedagogy in modern theology. The time may be ripe for a reconsideration.

³ Brian Brock and Stanley Hauerwas, *Beginnings: Interrogating Hauerwas*. With Stanley Hauerwas, Kevin Hargaden ed. (London: Continuum 2016); Brian Brock, *Captive to Christ, Open to the World: On Doing Christian Ethics in Public*, Kenneth Oakes, ed. (Eugene: Cascade, 2014).

⁴ Hauerwas, Stanley and Romand Coles. *Christianity, Democracy and the Radical Ordinary*. Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2008; Herman Paul and Bart Walleet eds. *Oefenplaatsen: Tegendraadse theologen over kerk en ethiek*, (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2012).; Boris Gungivic and Slavoj Žižek. *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012); Luke Bretherton and Russell Rook eds. *Living Out Loud: Conversations about Virtue, Ethics, and Evangelicalism* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2010).

⁵ bell hooks and Cornell West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* reissued version (New York: Routledge, 2017); Amalia Mesa-Bains in *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism*; Serres and Latour's *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*; Jacques Derrida, *Points: Interviews, 1974-1994*, Elisabeth Weber ed., Peggy Camuf trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); Jean Baudrillard, *Baudrillard Live: Select Interviews*, Mike Gane ed., (London: Routledge, 1993); Hanna Arendt, *The Last Interview and other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2013), Umberto Eco, Stephen Jay Gould, Jean-Claude Carrière, and Jean Dolemeau, *Conversations about the End of Time*, Catherine David, Frédéric Lenoir and Jean-Philippe de Tonnac eds, Ian Maclean and Roger Pearson trans. (London: Penguin, 1999).

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (London: Duckworth, 1990), 231-233.

Socrates, Plato, and the Problem of Idealism

The figure of Socrates established conversation as a philosophical practice at the origins of western thought. Socrates taught only through dialogues because he believed that truth is not just information, but is also context and agent related. This more expansive definition of truth demanded the conversational form in insisting that *who* makes a truth claim impacts its veracity. Conversation thus emerged as an investigative method out of the determination to know not only how a truth relates to all other truths, but its location in the social and material universe of a specific time and place.

Since truth is inseparable from our lives together it always needs to be tempted out from behind the masks of convention. Hence dialectical method must in principle be a dynamic and open-ended inquiry. The Greek for “method” emphasizes the point, “*hodoi*” literally meaning a way or path. To engage in dialectic is to venture on a journey (*poreia*) which has as its aim not complete knowledge but the removal of successive *barriers* to knowledge (*aporia*).⁷ Truth will only be won in a conversation by seducing it to show itself.

Socrates is an attractive figure in highlighting these erotic and surprising aspects of intellectual pursuit. By proclaiming that he does not know Socrates commits himself to a hastening toward engagement that nevertheless is fundamentally a waiting. In so doing he locates conversation as the premier matrix in which to practice complete presence to one another, to one’s self, and so to the world. He saw intimate connections between the capacity to dialogue well with others and the capacity to encounter one’s self without illusion.

Plato was convinced of the bracing moral seriousness and intellectual coherence of his teacher’s approach, as he emphasizes in the succinct charge to his students that he puts on the dying Socrates’ mouth in the *Apology*: “Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth [*aletheia*] or thought [*phronesis*] or the perfection of your soul [*psyche*]?”⁸ Plato, for one, accepted the challenge, designating dialectic as the coping stone of the long human search for wisdom in his masterwork, the *Republic*. For Plato dialectic is the one discipline whose object is being and truth itself. As the aim of philosophy is to know truth and being itself, an

⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 531d-534e

⁸ Plato, *Apology*, 29d5-e3.

overwhelming undertaking, intrinsically limited human beings must approach them piecemeal, step by step—dialectically.⁹

At times Plato presents this investigative process in genuinely Socratic terms, as a collective endeavor between teacher and student. “Only when all of these things—names, definitions, and visual and other perceptions—have been rubbed against one another and tested, pupil and teacher asking and answering questions in good will and without envy—only then, when reason and knowledge are at the very extremity of human effort, can they illuminate the nature of any object.”¹⁰ More often, however, Plato replaces Socrates’ practice of live conversation with pedagogical method in the narrower modern sense. The dramatic flatness of the interchanges in many of the platonic dialogues hints that Plato only stages conversation between idealized interlocutors in order to disabuse students of their fallacious presumptions. Plato has turned Socrates live pedagogical practice into a method of systematic progress in teaching sequentially higher-level concepts.¹¹ Dialogue as interpersonal converse has become a procedure for distilling “certified truths” without the messiness and risk of live converse.

But as Kierkegaard observed, dialectic as a ratcheting up toward conceptual mastery can easily become superficial and therefore sterile. Kierkegaard took Hegel to be the paradigm exemplification of this fault, who, “when the phenomena are paraded, he is in too much of a hurry and is too aware of the great importance of his role as commander-in-chief of world history to take time for more than the royal glimpse he allows to glide over them”.¹² Such a commander is gloriously alone, looking at entities in the world only long enough to assign them a place in typologies of thought to get them marching. For Kierkegaard the supposed centrality of dialectic in Hegel masks a fundamentally individualistic enactment of the intellectual will to power. He also suggests that it is the intellectual will to power configured in this high modern form that undergirds the pedagogical dominance of the modern university lecture. This construal of intellectual investigation and teaching positions the university lecturer as a cow needing to be milked at the right time, disburdened of a capacity load of collated and organized ideas. The

⁹ Ref to centrality of dialectic in *Republic*

¹⁰ Plato, *Letter VII*. 344.b, in *Plato: Complete Works*, John M. Cooper ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 1661.

¹¹ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Arnold I. Davidson ed, Michael Chase trans. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 92.

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With Continual Reference to Socrates*, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 222.

contrast could not be more stark with the pedagogy of Socrates, who comes empty to conversation. Precisely because Socrates declaims knowing anything, he is able to discover something in the world through conversations with the people he meets, just as his interlocutors are learning about themselves as agents in the world.¹³

The Drama of Conversation

These rival accounts of dialectics turn on divergent assessments of the pedagogical value of interpersonal dependence. Genuine conversation is like acrobatics or gambling in being a social form sustained through participants taking calculated risks and opening themselves to relinquishing control of final outcomes.¹⁴ Dramatic tension that goes with all participants being prepared for journeys into the unknown is intrinsically linked to the self-investment required by the teacher and student in dialogical investigation. Each participant enters a dialogue aware that their own self-perception may be changed, sometimes in painful ways. But the commitment to keeping conversation partners engaged demands a commitment to battling one's desires to impose one's own views on the conversation partner.

Teaching understood in these terms is analogous to marriage. Marriage is a freely joined union formed around a joint vision of the purpose of that union. Living conversational intimacy maintains contact not only between the spouses, but also between the spouses' views of the world and their positioning in it. In converse they struggle together to keep a shared story, a tradition, alive.¹⁵ Yet love may die, a couple may lose sight of their joint vision getting in the day to day, or their unity of purpose may unravel under the pressure of changing circumstances. Divorce happens when conversation ceases, allowing increasingly divergent views to develop about what the marriage is for and how it should respond to its external context. In such moments it is understandable when one or both of the spouses no longer wish to undergo the suffering of transformation necessary to maintain their joint life.¹⁶

The example of marriage highlights how conversation is not just a moment but a life. The social form called marriage is in essence a necessarily constant

¹³ *The Concept of Irony* 32-33.

¹⁴ Eleanor Kaufman, *The Delirium of Praise: Bataille, Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, Klossowski* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 28.

¹⁵ hooks and West, *Breaking Bread*, 3.

¹⁶ D. N. Rodowick, *Philosophy's Artful Conversation*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 246-260.

renegotiation and reconceiving of the union itself. We can even say that conversational dialectic is a love ethic taking expression in linguistic form, since daily conversational negotiation must be suffused by the affirmation and re-affirmation of the partners.¹⁷

A commitment to teaching dialogically is radical in its commitment to the political importance of valorizing the ordinary givenness of the interlocutors. Neither chaotic nor anarchic, conversation is a disciplined practice of deploying the advantage of the teacher in a manner that empowers both teacher and learner.¹⁸ Dialogical teaching requires a humility and trust unnecessary in a lecture, which is much more driven by self-confidence and secure mastery. As bell hooks has observed in the course of her book of conversations with Cornell West, vulnerability is “one of the conditions for intimacy but, in fact, it is very hard for academics who are often isolated to accept placing themselves in roles where they might be emotionally vulnerable.”¹⁹

Even academics need genuine conversation to know the world truly. Committing to converse is a modality for unhanding the power of the teacher by fighting our tendency to only hear others in the inevitably procrustean terms of our own thought and language.²⁰ To open one’s self to genuine conversation is to admit that our terms and perceptual frames, as powerful as they are, are never comprehensive. Intellectual liveliness depends on the continual disruption and reformulation of our perceptual frames as they become more truly coherent with the world. The conversation partner thus stands in for the otherness of all other creatures, the act of conversation being an explicitly cooperative activity designed to reveal its truth.

My suggestion is that this emphasis on converse as an investigative method is finally demanded in theology. Neither philosophy nor theology are disciplines capable of achieving final answers. But the non-finality of theology and

¹⁷ “...this dialogical form of two intellectuals coming together, trying to take quite seriously the love ethic in its dialogical and intellectual form. ...it is dialogue that is the true act of love between two subjects.” bell hooks and Cornell West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* reissued version (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.

¹⁸ “Privilege does not have to be negative, but we have to share our resources and take direction about how to use our privilege in ways that empower those who lack it. Let’s talk about reciprocal education, not just reciprocal art. Let’s talk about sharing conversation as a radical act.” bell hooks, *Homegrown*, 61, cf xiii.

¹⁹ The quote continues, “..... It is partially friendship that makes certain forms of vulnerability possible, certain forms of interrogation possible. At certain points I really feel like Cornel sensitively interrogates me around areas which I find myself much more reticent to speak publicly about and I, on occasion, push him to reveal and discuss points of contradiction in his life.” bell hooks in bell hooks and Cornell West, *Breaking Bread*, 4.

²⁰Kaufman, *The Delirium of Praise*, 126-127.

philosophy are not identically configured. Philosophy is intrinsically controversial because the discourse is itself fundamentally a dispute about the rules that best allow access to reality.²¹ Theology, in contrast, is intrinsically conversational because bound to a holy scripture inextricable from the revelation of the master whose seminal act was to divest himself of knowledge.²²

The *form* of scripture and the incarnation as works of divine lowering and mediation draws attention to scripture's *content*. The overwhelming majority of the biblical material is concerned to follow the twists and turns of essentially dialogical activity. The Bible is one long tale populated stories of people who sometimes resist and other times make peace with God—and who are finding their form as human beings in this open-ended dialogue that constitutes their salvation. As the Bible depicts it, human life is always lived at the border of another consciousness. The discovery and reshaping of the believing subject in intersubjective relationships climaxes in the arrival of the Word of God, whose life animates the lives of his witnesses. Christians live as witnesses to a God capable not only of staying silent, but also of saying unexpected things, like any other dialogue partner. Theology's desire and drama depends on its capacity to continually rediscover and make its living object, the Trinitarian God, palpable for a new generation.

Contemplation vs. Conversation

It is the Bible, then, that forces theological thought back to its fundamentals: the conversation with God that is prayer. One way to understand Christianity is as the vehicle by which the world was introduced to the Jewish practice of prayer. For the first-century Greek or Roman, prayer was an essentially formal transaction, a rite that needed to be accomplished to secure one's civic rectitude and material security. There was no sense of personal relationship to the god to whom one prayed. Prayer was like writing an e-mail to one's insurance agent, prudent obligation maintenance.

For the Jews, however, prayer was much more. It was an exchange in which one brought one's whole self before God, including one's deepest desires and

²¹ Robert Spaemann, *Happiness and Benevolence*, Jeremiah Alberg trans. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 205-207.

²² "It is part of the unity of the divine revelation that the Spirit of god, through the man's pen belonging to the holy men whom it has led, humbled itself and made itself of no majesty, just as the Son of God did through the form of a servant, and as the whole creation is a work of the highest humility." Johann Georg Hamann, "Cloverleaf of Hellenistic Letters," in *Writings on Philosophy and Language* Kenneth Haynes trans. and ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 39.

disappointments. Israel's God was a genuine conversation partner, sometimes a confidant, other times a friend. Israel's God could at times reprove like a father or teacher and at other times be tender and comforting like a mother. And this God was a jealous conversation partner, who wanted engagement from his people that was not halfhearted and distracted, but "all in".

No one did more than Augustine to offer this Jewish form of prayer to the western world. His genius was to intuit that the best of Greco-Roman philosophy could not be drawn together with the biblical traditions simply by merging biblical truth claims with the powerful metaphysical insights of ancient philosophy. The two traditions more organically met in the pedagogical form of the dialogue. Scholars often note that the most likely model of the *Confessions* is Cicero's *Hortensius*, but the more obvious fact is that in the ancient world the dialogue was the axiomatic pedagogical form. As a teacher of rhetoric in Rome and north Africa, who retreated with his friends to Cassiacum to form a philosophical community just before his conversion, we can be assured that Augustine was well versed in this pedagogical practice, which demands committed engagement, attentive listening, and careful memorization from its participants.²³ It was his supple engagement with the Psalms that allowed Augustine's deployment of the ancient form of the dialogue to transcend the stilted form of many of the platonic dialogues.

Like the dialogues of Plato, the *Confessions* is staged, yet the manner in which this staging is understood clearly aims to upstage the author of the text. In this middle period of Augustine's theology he focuses his attention on the role of alterations in the use of language in the conversion of the self, which operates at a more fundamental level than preparatory changes of belief and practice. Augustine explicitly presents himself as sifting his memories and the dissipated and fragmented self of his past through linguistic processing. The *Confessions* does not read as a sterile dialogue because he is using living people's ideas, ideas he shared with those he hopes will read his work, while giving their once-shared vocabulary new religious meanings. In sum, the *Confessions* is lively because Augustine is speaking between his own selves alongside those with whom he once was a fellow traveler. As BeDuhn observes, Augustine,

Read by reciting aloud the text before his eyes, speaking the words of others out of his own mouth just as he would have recited a prayer, a

²³ Thomas F. Martin, "Book Twelve: Exegesis and *Confessio*," in *A Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, Kim Paffenroth and Robert P. Kennedy eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 199.

creed, or a hymn. He composed his own works the same way, by dictating aloud to scribes, repeating his thoughts, hearing himself say them, doubling back and refining what he wanted to express. A number of his “books”, of course, are only slightly redacted transcriptions of publicly delivered rhetorical performances, not to mention his liturgically framed sermons. Thus, we can be sure that Augustine was listening to himself, and responding to his own words as they came out of him, as part of his religious “indoctrination”... As Augustine developed aptitude in hitting the marks of orthodoxy in his speech acts, he continually adjusted his relation to this authorized phrasing of his tradition, reconsidered its meaning, and found a way to make it his own.²⁴

Augustine himself clearly understands this pedagogy to be moving toward placing the conversation with God that is prayer at the pinnacle of the inner life of the believer. Prayer could be a vehicle for both speculative enquiry and sanctifying ethical formation. Augustine’s theological masterstroke was to grasp that in texts like the Psalms, Israel too was conceiving of the mechanics of salvific transformation as a lively, risky, and formative conversation.²⁵

Augustine probably made the connection as he critically sifted the Neoplatonic account of contemplation. Augustine affirmed the Plotinian account of contemplation as an awakening of the inner self, as a practice that orients the inner depth of the self as the site of divine disclosure, and the reliance of the formation of identity on a source beyond the self. But his account diverges from Plotinus in presuming that the revelatory insight needed to orient the self does not exist within the self, but must be presented from outside. Furthermore, the emotional tonality of Augustine’s intimate and direct divine address is essentially absent from Plotinus. Augustine has rejected Plotinus’ belief that the human soul has a natural claim on the eternal One. Augustine’s God has an ontological location distinct from the soul, and yet actively closes that gap.²⁶ The Neoplatonic account of contemplation has been replaced by a biblical account of meditation on God’s law drawn from Psalm 1 (“Blessed is the one whose...delight is in the law of the Lord, and meditates on it day and

²⁴ Beduhn, *Augustine’s Manichean Dilemma*, 19.

²⁵ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 166-167.

²⁶ John Peter Kenny, *The Mysticism of St. Augustine: Rereading Confessions*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 57-60.

night.” vv, 1-2).²⁷ Bringing these two traditions together in the staging of a dialogue with God had no precedent in the Greek or Roman worlds.

Dialogue with God

It is clear that at a literary level Augustine has transformed the philosophical dialogue form into a textually captured dialogue with God. As an author Augustine has cleverly stage managed every move in the final text of the *Confessions*. But he has done so to highlight that it is not finally being that matters for theology, but converse. As Robert McMahon observes,

confession derives from *con-fari*, “to speak with.” As an oral and spontaneous prayer, it necessarily presents itself as unrevised: a dialogue, by definition, cannot be revised by the speakers in it. An oral speaker cannot erase an utterance to correct it: he can only rephrase or qualify it by speaking further. So, too, the narrator of the *Confessions* may correct an earlier statement on, say, the nature of time, not by erasure and revision, but only by adding to what he has said. The narrator can and does come to new understandings in his quest for Truth, and we see this happening over and over in the *Confessions*. Though the narrator makes discoveries, Augustine *the author* did not: by definition, he comprehended the finished work as a whole, for he has shaped and revised it. I write of Augustine the author in the past tense, because I identify him with the historical Augustine. Augustine the narrator, however, is a figure who functions in the literary present, for he continues to pray his *Confessions* “now” every time we read it.²⁸

Confessions is unique among Augustine’s works in taking this dialogical form, which (outside his sermons) are presented as treatises written by an author. The conversational form he gives the *Confessions* intentionally goads the reader into a conversational process exactly the pedagogical purpose of the dialogue form of much Greek philosophy.

The literary form is thus enacting and not enacting conversation. It is not enacting it in that it is a revised and complete text in which Augustine as the subject achieves a completed redeemed state. But the text presses readers to an understanding of Christian faith as one lived in prayerful conversation with God and lively conversation with other human beings whose terminus the

²⁷ the *Confessions* XI.2.2, 4, p. 193, 197. [passage from psalm commentaries]

²⁸ Robert McMahon, “Book Thirteen: the Creation of the Church as the Paradigm for the Confessions,” in Paffenroth, 218-219.

believer cannot not know. Taking up the dialogical form allows Augustine to offer his readers a theological account of the Christian life as it is experienced.²⁹

Formative Prayer

Once the risk of converse with God is dared, prayer is a conversation that can become better. Augustine understands scripture to offer believers forms through which they can enter into the song of God's saints. In the community of the saints the cacophony of many horizontal conversations are unified in their origin.³⁰ In Books IX-X Augustine offers readers an account of redemption and formation grounded in an address that is catalyzed by words from outside, which lodge in and remake the inner being, emerging as a new and unified self not initiated by the believer. Augustine makes this point in his *Confessions* by placing his own singing of a hymn at the center of his book. Here we see the redeemed and unified Augustine after the long depiction of his fragmented and disoriented self, highlighting his central understanding of redemption as a singing the ethos of God. To address God truly is to have been unified in God's word, with the self, the church, and God. To be redeemed is to be drawn out of fragmented "chatter, into engaged converse with God that is aware of the role of the agent, and the context of utterance, as bearing on the truth of the words being uttered.

When Augustine first addresses God directly in the vocative voice in the opening of Book IX, he performatively affirms that the Word has become incarnate in his own life. He has made a transition from Christ as the object of his address to being the means through which the address is made. From here to the end of the book Augustine presents himself as one whose loquacity has been rescued from shamefully dissolute chatter into a blessed chattering to God like that of the sparrows. In making this turn the reader discovers that Augustine's whole story to this point was driven by a search for a way to speak with God. In book VII Augustine tells the reader of his attraction to the Neoplatonic affirmation that God is always drawing humans. In book VIII he discovers that his own life is encompassed in the narrative of scripture in very similar terms. The opening of Book IX thus shows the convergence of these

²⁹ Robert McMahon, "Book Thirteen: the Creation of the Church as the Paradigm for the Confessions," in Paffenroth, 221-223.

³⁰ *Confessions* IX.8, There is a rich vein to be explored here about the role of musical themes as metaphors for political unity which were much more developed in Greek than Hebrew thought. Cf.

two trajectories in his discovery of his own voice *in* God, because animated by God's *words*.

Hence the signal interpretative importance of this first vocative address to God. Augustine is signaling growing certainty about his place in God's life and story. To have achieved this has meant uncovering the close proximity of Jesus Christ to scripture. In Book III Augustine had not yet been able to "bow his head to scripture's yoke", but Book IX shows how far he has travelled. He now not only avows the truth of scripture, but he finds his most direct address to God to only be possible by taking those divine words on his own lips. Once having confronted him as a warning admonishment, scripture has now become the means enabling a first-order conversational address to God.³¹

Having been someone who knew the *terms* and *language* of Christian faith, without understanding how these terms linked to his lived life,³² his transition into the truth of Christian life comes when he understands these words not only in speaking but in thinking and action, so sharing in the joys and sorrows of his true community, the city of God.³³ This is to read the hymn at the center of Book X as the picture Augustine is offering his reader of the aim of Christian formation. A conversation with God has been provoked by saints who speak of God in a way that is winning and attractive, so introducing him to the language of scripture. Taking up and meditating on scripture, Augustine so internalizes the forms of Israel's converse with God that he has to revisit and renarrate his own story in their terms. At the end of this trajectory lies a consummation and unity of the self, a unity achieved in the hymn of Book X, now uttered as a display of achieved sanctification, not of a whole life without remainder, but a real unification of memory, affect, speech and action.

Late have I love you, O Beauty, so old and so new: late have I loved you.

And look! You were within me, and I was outside myself...

You called and shouted: and broke through my deafness.

You flamed and shone: and banished my blindness...

I have tasted you: and now I hunger and thirst for more.

³¹ Cf. Morgan, *The Incarnation of the Word*, 122-123.

³² Confessions X.15.23

³³ Confessions X.4.6

You have touched me: and I burned for your peace.³⁴

Augustine has presented redemption as a process of hearing and resaying (confessing) words said in the beginning by God, who was the first say the world into existence. It is therefore both true that Augustine's redemption is to express praise in his own words, and that these are not his words, but the words given in his finite particularity by the Holy Spirit. Praise is God's word received and resaid back to God.³⁵

The content and the goal of conversion coincide in the singular return of my word in and through the Word. This hermeneutic recovery is enough to accomplish the psychological conversion—or better, the entire theological *metanoia*. The entire structure instituted at the opening of the *Confessions* is verified in the conversion of St. Augustine, paradigm of confession and praise. Thus, conversion counts as *ratio occurrendi* of praise, and praise as *ratio intelligendi* of conversion. Both the one and the other operate the same and as the single [check] *praise as the hearing of a call.*³⁶

Jean Luc Marion takes the prominence of this account of redemption in the central Books IX-X to be offering readers a communicative theology more basic, and more fertile, than Augustine's theological appeals to being, teleology, or order. Confession is not so much a topic within Augustine's *Confessions* as the frame within which Augustine discovers himself positioned.

Praise is thus not one language game among others, it defines the activity of every other human word. Praise also reveals that redeemed life is necessarily liturgical. "Starting with Book X, the praise becomes definitely always plural, because the *confessio* becomes communitarian."³⁷ Augustine can now only speak and write with the aim of provoking all his readers to join the

³⁴ Confessions X.27.38, p. 135.

³⁵ Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 22-24.

³⁶ Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 26-27

³⁷ Marion, *In the Self's Place*, 40. Taking this communicative relation as the hermeneutic key to the *Confessions* is resisted by those thinkers who insist that Augustine is a theologian of Being at root, in common with the ancient philosophers with whom he is so clearly in dialogue. Von Balthazar's rejects this reading in *the Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Vol II, Clerical Styles*, Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil trans., John Riches ed., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 110. For a defence of the ontology entailed in a conversational account of human formation and sanctification see, Christoph Schwöbel, "The Eternity of the Triune God: Preliminary Considerations on the Relationship between the Trinity and the Time of Creation" *Modern Theology* 34:3 July 2018, 345-355.

community of praise, and sustain their life in this community. The unity of the *Confessions* as a whole emerges as the readers discover the work as a single effort aiming to unite people across space and time in Augustine's praise of his Creator and Redeemer.

Self-Discovery in Scripture

The *Confessions* offers many examples of the subtle interweaving of the dialogical pedagogy tradition with the central place given in the biblical traditions' to the dialogue with God that is prayer. Augustine's allegorical interpretation of the "lights of the firmament" of Genesis 1:6 offers one such example. He reads the heavenly lights of the creation account metaphorically, as drawing attention to the role of the authoritative preachers of the church in mediating knowledge of God. Like the philosophers in Plato's cave, tasked with bringing insights from above down to those grown used to illusions, the teachers of the church mediate the blinding light of God. But they do so not because they have glimpsed God, but because they comment on a second mediation that stands over them, scripture.

Anyone who is earthly minded is like a little child in Christ, still drinking milk; until they mature and take solid food, and their gaze is strong enough to look at the sun, they should not abide their night devoid of any brightness, but be satisfied with the light of moon and stars. In perfect wisdom, O our God, you deliberate [*disputo*] with us upon all these subjects in your book (of which the firmament is a symbol), so that we can distinguish between all things in a marvelous contemplation, though still in signs and seasons and days and years.³⁸

Augustine has narratively depicted his own ignorance and confusion while in the darkness of Manichean belief by the light shed in Ambrose's. In the narrative of the *Confessions* Augustine emphasizes that it was Ambrose's holy life that won him over to listen to his preaching as he presenting an integrated performance of his words and his life. Augustine comes to believe that in the presence of Ambrose he is encountering the opposite of his former hero Cicero: entirely adequate eloquence emanating from a life pervaded by virtue. This obvious unification of form and content in a human life becomes an exemplar Augustine finds himself unable to shake off.³⁹

³⁸ Augustine, *Confessions* XIII.18.23. From *Confessions*, vol II Carolyn J.-B. Hammond ed. and trans, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 375.

³⁹ the *Confessions* 6.34 [revisit]

Augustine's presentation of his own conversion presents scripture as God's chosen site for calling out to fallen creatures, the forum provided in salvation history to focus the work of conversational wrestling with God by the people who have been gathered in hearing God's call. Augustine presents his mother Monica as the paradigm exemplification of this sanctifying sequence. She precedes him in first seeing the beauty of Ambrose's life and teaching, and so positioning herself to hear God's mediated word loud and clear.⁴⁰ In another one of the cliffhanger formulations that drives the *Confessions* forward, Augustine implants this point firmly in the reader's mind early in the narrative with dramatic final words of Book III: "She took these words as pronouncements resounding from heaven."⁴¹ Monica simultaneously displays God's faithfulness in speaking in order to reveal Godself, enabling human ears to hear, and raises the question of whether the reader dare expect such divine speaking through the teachers of the church.

Beginnings for a theology of dialogical pedagogy in Christian ethics:

This account of praise as the domain of Christian formation may help us today to think about the power dynamics inherent Augustine's account of the mediating forms of God's word as we teach Christian ethics. Augustine ends his *Confessions* by asking for prayers for his mother. This appeal amounts to a prompt to the departing reader to remember that each person's primary relation is to God. Other human beings are always opaque to me except in the light projected on them by God's gaze upon them. Whereas Socrates may have pedagogical reasons for declaiming knowledge, Augustine's insistence that Christian formation is always taking place in relation to the universal third person in all human relations demands the Christian teacher continually resist overstating what they know about God, creation, and the student.

I take Augustine's example to offer contemporary teachers of Christian ethics a picture of conversational engagement that can be summarized in seven theological affirmations:

1) Human beings are limited and fallen creatures. The multitude of creaturely eyes by definition only see limited aspects of the vast creation, and the intrusion of sinful self-interest often skews even this limited view. The modern

⁴⁰ the *Confessions* 127-131.

⁴¹ the *Confessions* III.12.21, p. 131.

quest for a final unification of all knowledge must be relinquished as a grasping after what God alone can possess.

2) This epistemological point rests on an ontological claim: creation itself is far more multilayered than we can know. The depth of what science today calls “information” in creation is, for all we know, bottomless. The Christian tradition resists the claim that human creative willing is the generator of value in the material world. When Christians refer to the cosmos as “creation” they affirm that the fantastic diversity and fertility of the physical world precedes all human willing. The best we can do is recognize and respond responsibly in our agent-specific place to its given form.

3) To know ourselves and the world demands a politics of finding and listening to one another. This is ultimately an ecclesiological claim. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “if the eye says to the hand, I have no need of you” there is no body. Much like a marriage, the church only continues to exist as long as its conversation is ongoing about the One who it seeks, and what that one is revealing about how their lives together should be practically configured and lived out. In the church, conversation is a circulation of mutually edifying witness to this God⁴² that nurtures others and the world.⁴³

4) Ecclesial conversation is mediated by scripture. The existence of the church is impossible ontologically, given the reality of sin. But its non-necessary existence is as an artifact of the divine calling to humanity, the opening of a divine-human conversation. Scripture gathers the community’s various hearings of this call so that new generations can take up the *disputatio* with God that is prayer, and the *confessio* that is praise.

5) Ecclesial conversation, mediated by scripture, is as a consequence freed to intellectually investigate the world by beginning with any created particular. Theology does not have to begin with prolegomena. In fact, it can only appear prefaced by prolegomena and digested as the lecture because it has previously begun from particular insights born in the converse with God, prompted by creatures, within the acoustic space of the church discussing scripture. Modern

⁴² “That spirit of testimony is a very hard spirit to convey in written text, so when I began to think about you and me actually doing more dialogue, it struck me that dialogue was one of the ways where that sense of mutual witness and testimony could be made manifest.” hooks and Cornell West, *Breaking Bread*, 1.

⁴³ “[C]onversation should nurture others...by actions like these, which are forms of activism, we repudiate the notion that as cultural workers and intellectuals, we are at odds with the world that we come from. ... That’s precisely why this conversation is itself a form of activism; it’s our resistance to that ... idea of separation.” *Homegrown*, xii-xiii

theology's entrapment in the model of "knowledge production" characteristic of the modern university is a sign of its loss of theology as the conversational discovery of the given.

6) The openness of any such conversation is finally eschatologically grounded. Christians are being incorporated into a community much as spouses are being incorporated and re-incorporated into a marriage. To not be talking within that community is thus not to risk commitment or to know ourselves. Theology is the never-ending attempt to rationally articulate a life together that Jesus indicates must always be born anew in the present: "the kingdom is close at hand". The kingdom of Heaven is both concrete in our time and place, but will only be fully revealed when we see the One who is the Truth, face to face. The theological teacher will therefore take seriously the kenotic example of Jesus Christ, who neither acted as if he had nothing to teach, nor lorded his knowledge over those he wished to call into truth.

7) A church practicing such opening listening will be prepared to meaningfully contribute to public converse, even when in a minority position. A church practiced in this type of theological investigation is especially well positioned to serve a world in which political converse is becoming far more difficult to sustain than modern liberal political philosophers have tended to assume. A church practiced in close investigative listening will be prepared to engage in public converse: a) without insisting others accept their premises, b) by supplely contributing to the material discussions at hand, and c) having practiced the skills necessary to model engagement in constructive converse.