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Memory in Christian Education and Liturgy: Reflections on Book X of St. Augustine's *Confessions*



by Terence Kleven

“Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you.”
St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X 27, 38

I

Introduction – Memory in the Bible

The purpose of this essay is to address a topic which, in my critical judgment, is crucial to

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Christian theology and Christian education, namely, the significance of memory. My aim is to explain the central place that memory has in the Christian's journey to God both in Scriptural teaching and in the theological reflections of one of the most renowned of the Church Fathers, St. Augustine. In an age such as ours, which is dominated by the generally-accepted opinion that we are *progressing* into the future, remembrance of what has been true—and may always be true—can be often overlooked or even considered a problem that needs to be overcome. If, however, these biblical and Augustinian accounts of the importance of memory in Christian teaching cannot be ignored—to say nothing in this essay of the need for an appreciation of memory in humanistic education generally—we may need to reflect anew on the place of memory in our understanding of faith. The way in which we teach the young, whether at home, in school, in colleges and universities, or through the types of liturgy we use for individual and common prayers, may only be revived if we are guided by our understanding of the faculty of memory in the soul. Augustine's analysis of memory in the attainment of knowledge in Book X of his book the *Confessions* is a forceful account which influenced various writers throughout the Medieval Period and the Reformation, and its epistemological significance only began to be replaced with the *empirical* tradition instituted by T. Hobbes, F. Bacon, and J. Locke in the seven-

teenth century, as part III of this essay indicates. Thus, our evaluation of Christian theology, both Medieval and Reformed, will require reflection on Augustine's account.¹

Given the title of this conference, I could not help but notice that the Gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, that is, for last Sunday, according to the use of the Revised Common Lectionary, is the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). It may well have been by design that this conference received its title because the organizers were aware that this parable would be fresh on our minds. This "prodigal," or *lavish*, even perhaps *scandalously lavish*, sense of God's mercy is, it would seem, the rationale for the title of the conference, even as the parable shows the *lavish* love of the father for the son. But the lavish love is also a response to another element in the parable, namely, the repentance of the son; this Gospel lesson is quite appropriate for this season of Lent because the parable is about repentance, and also, to be sure, about rejoicing in the repentance, rejoicing in the lavish mercy of the father toward the repentant son. The most common Hebrew word in the Old Testament for *repentance* is the word *šûb* (שׁוּב), to return. For example, the prophet Hosea says in 3:5, "Afterward, shall the children of Israel return (*yāšubû*, יָשׁוּבוּ) and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and shall fear the Lord and his goodness in the latter days." Repentance is a going back, a motion of the soul and body to acknowledge and to recover what was lost. Perhaps what was lost was given away, or perhaps just neglected, or as in the parable, prodigally or lavishly wasted. Yet even if repentance is not and perhaps cannot be a recovery of the goods that were squandered, it is a recovery of a relationship with the father. We can say that in the parable, there is no progress in the relationship without return, which is why the Hebrew word for *repentance* is the word *šûb*. The prodigal son's return is the indication of his repentance.

The Old Testament lesson that is paired in the Revised Common Lectionary with the Parable of the Prodigal's Son is Joshua 5:9-12, a portion of text describing some of the first acts of the children of Israel as Joshua leads them through the Jordan River. These verses tell us that the children of Israel keep the Passover in this land of Canaan, the land

promised to Abraham just about six hundred years previously. The Passover is a "memorial" (זִכָּרוֹן, *zikārôn*), as it says in Ex. 12:14, a feast to be kept so that the community will not forget what wonderful works God had done for them. In a few verses prior to this lection from Joshua 5, the Israelites select twelve representatives, one from each of the twelve tribes, who each take a stone from the river bed of the Jordan to place in a pile as a "sign" (אֵימָה, *'ôl*) and "memorial" (*zikārôn*) of this entry into the land (Josh. 4:6-7). Joshua writes, "When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean these stones? Then ye shall let your children know, saying, Israel came over this Jordan on dry land" (Josh. 4:21-22). In addition, the men who crossed over this day were born in the Wilderness and had their own reasons for remembering, for circumcision had not been practiced in the desert, and it is instituted here at Gilgal for the first time in forty years (Josh. 5:2-9). The males would not forget Gilgal. The Israelites were returning to the land of Canaan, not that this specific group had been in Canaan, but their ancestors had come from there. In various ways, they are to remember the return of the nation to the land and, in doing so, to remember the wondrous deeds of God for the nation both in the past and now in the present. To return to the land ends the punishment for the hardheartedness of the Wilderness generation, ends the remembrance of the need for repentance. As they return to the land, the signs and memorials are to be established which they will use to remember the events of this day in the future. And if we consider again briefly the Parable of the Prodigal Son and notice what Luke writes at the moment of recognition of the prodigal son's change, we read, "and when he came to himself, he said (*eis heauton de elthōn ephē*, εἰς ἑαυτὸν δὲ ἐλθὼν ἔφη)" (vs. 17). This is a similar expression in both Greek and English, the English rhetoric being formed by the Greek, which indicates that something has been lost that needs to return; he needs to find himself again, to remember himself again, to remember that the servants of his father are better off than he. He remembers, and he returns, and he repents. These ideas, in scriptural sensibility, are concomitant. In Scripture, faithfulness is close to remembrance, and forgetfulness is close to unbelief. The lavish, the prodigal, love of

God is concurrent with the human need to remember and, in remembering, to return. In these few but striking examples in Scripture, lavish mercy depends upon repentance, which in turn depends upon remembrance.

II Augustine on Memory in Book X

Book X of St. Augustine's *Confessions* is entitled "Memory." The chapter is perhaps the most deeply introspective of the entire book. In the chapter, Augustine begins by describing the motives for confession. He asks himself how he knows God. He seeks this knowledge initially through God's creatures, from the earth to the heavens, but they all declare to him that he should love God rather than them, for they are signs; they indicate that knowledge of him through themselves is not sufficient. Augustine then asks,

Then towards myself I turned, and asked myself, "Who are you?" And I answered my own question: "A man." See, here are the body and soul that make up myself, the one outward and the other within. Through which of these should I seek my God? With my body's senses I had already sought him from earth to heaven, to the farthest place whither I could send the darting rays of my eyes; but what lay within me was better, and to this all those bodily messengers reported back, for it controlled and judged the replies of sky and earth, and of all the creatures dwelling in them, all those who had proclaimed, "We are not God" and "He made us." My inner self recognized them all through the service of the outer. I who was the inmost self, I, who was mind, knew them through the senses of my body; and so I questioned the vast frame of the world concerning my God, and it answered, "I am not he, but he made me" (6, 9).²

"But what lay within me was better," he says in this quotation; and in the next section he says, "By this same soul I will mount to him" rather than through the creatures in the world. Reason is able to teach Augustine that the images of the creatures of God are surpassed by "what lay within."

At this point we might expect Augustine to elaborate on his account of the relation between the

senses and the mind in his ascent to God. We know from earlier parts of the *Confessions* that it is the very existence of mathematics, the incorporeal abstractions of mathematics, that convince him that the materialism of the Manichaeans is bogus. The recognition of incorporeality had already been recognized by Augustine but is not this truth to which he turns in the argument. At this point in Book X, he turns to memory. In memory, he says, "there I come to meet myself" (8, 14).³ He is amazed at the vast resources of memory; in fact, he says they are "exceedingly great, a vast, infinite recess" (8, 15).⁴ He says we may travel far to see high mountains and crashing waterfalls and so on, but we are able in an instant to recall these in memory. And when we ask whether something exists, or what it is, or what qualities it has, we may have sensory images of them, but we do not grasp the thing only with images of these attributes. He says "But through no bodily sense whatever have I made contact with the realities themselves, for I have never seen these realities anywhere except in my own mind (*neque ullo sensu corporis attigi neque uspiam vidi praeter animum meum*)" (10,17).⁵ It is these things themselves, not images of them, that are stored up in memory. He continues,

What I have stowed away in my memory is not the images of these things but the things themselves. Let them say how they found their way into me if they can, for when I check every physical gateway in myself I find none by which they can have entered. My eyes tell me, "If those things were colored, it was we who reported them"; my ears declare, "If they made some sound, we gave you the information"; [and so on for the five senses]. From what source and by what route did they [the things themselves] enter my memory? I do not know, for when I learned them I did not take them on trust from some stranger's intelligence but recognized them as present in my own, and affirmed them as true, and entrusted them to my memory for safekeeping so that I could bring them out again when I wished. This means that they were there even before I learned them, but not remembered. Where and why did I recognize them and say, "Yes, that's how it is; that is true," when these things were stated? Surely because they were already in my memory, but so remote,

so hidden from sight in concealed hollows, that unless they had been dug out by someone who reminded me, I would perhaps never have been able to think about them (10,17).⁶

The “things themselves,” as is translated here by Maria Boulding, or as she translates elsewhere, the “realities themselves,” are not simply sense images even if the categories of their corporeal being—quantity, quality, place, relation and so on—are images from our senses; they themselves are other than that. Chadwick’s translation will use both “realities” and “ideas” as the subject in this context, terms which also assert that these are things in themselves and are not identical to sense perceptions.⁷ Someone such as a teacher or the speeches from a book may be necessary to be the catalyst to dig them out of the concealed hollows of our memory; yet the external agent will do nothing more than remind us of what is there rather than add anything new. For Augustine, the mind is no *tabula rasa* but a vast, even infinite, recess of realities awaiting to be awakened through memory.⁸

In the next section he writes,

We are therefore led to conclude that when we learn things which are not imbibed through the senses as images, but are known directly in their own reality inside the mind, as they are in themselves, and without the intervention of images, we are collecting by means of our thought those things which the memory already held, but in a scattered and disorderly way. By applying our minds to them we ensure that they are stacked ready-to-hand in the memory, where they may be easily available for habitual use, instead of lying hidden, dispersed and neglected, as hitherto (11, 18).⁹

Those “things” are that which the memory already held independently of sense perception. As these things are recalled to the memory, we can say that we learn them because this is what learning is, nothing else. When we wish to recall them again, we may need to pull them from the places as if they are being newly thought out, but they are present

and are not actually new. As they are pulled out, they are, he says,

... herded together to become knowable once more: that is to say they need to be collected again, which is why we call this activity cogitating, or collecting one’s thoughts. *Cogo* is related to *cogito* as *ago* is to *agito* and *facio* to *factito*. The mind, however, has claimed this verb [*cogito*] as properly applicable to itself, so that only what is “collected,” within the mind, what is “herded together” there, and there only, is properly said to be “thought” (11, 18).¹⁰

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Augustine uses Latin stem variations to elucidate his point. *Cogo* is the verb to collect; *cogito* is derivative from *cogo* and is the verb to think. The parallels with

other verbs with similar derivative forms assist Augustine’s philological point. *Ago* is the verb to put in motion, move; *agito* is a derivative stem verb to set in violent motion, drive onward. *Agito* is an intensification of *ago*, a meaning that is achieved in English with the use of the adverb *violent*. *Facio* is the verb to make, to construct; *factitio* is a derivative stem verb to do frequently, do habitually. The derivative stem is also an intensification of the verb, a meaning again in English that is achieved through an adverb, in this case with the idea of *frequency*. Augustine thus demonstrates that the verb *cogo* is the stem verb and *cogito* is a derivative stem verb; however, the meaning of *cogito* is not to be understood as an intensification or continuation, as is the case with these other two stem variations, because something qualitatively different is intended between *collecting* and *thinking*. Augustine says the mind has claimed the derivative verb stem *cogito* and given it a meaning qualitatively other than intensification or continuation. Thus, although the pattern between the cognate stems is identical among the three sets of verbs, *cogito* means to think rather than to collect hurriedly or to collect vigorously, that is, with some type of intensification. Yet, we ought to credit *cogo*, *collecting*, as an intellectual process; it is the initial process which prepares for and will pass into thinking. The mind comes to think by *collecting*, or in the shepherding metaphor of *herding together*, and what is

this *collecting* but the remembering of what is in the mind. To learn, for Augustine, is to remember, and learning will not take place without remembering.

At this point (12, 19) Augustine uses the argument from mathematics, an argument that is not used for the first time here in the *Confessions*. The laws of mathematics, he says, have no color, nor sound, nor smell nor can they be tasted nor touched. The stated laws may sound one way in Greek and another in Latin, but these sounds are not the laws; he says “the mathematical lines they represent are something quite different, not the images of the lines which my fleshly eye has observed” (12,19).¹¹ And in the same context, he says, “The principle [of number] is not an image of the things counted, and therefore has a much more real existence” (12, 19).¹² Memory is more than a repository of sense perceptions which we recall when we are able. The incorporeal, mathematical realities are in the memory, and learning is to bring them to recollection. Augustine proceeds in the next section to affirm the importance of this recognition. He says that mind and memory are the same: “the person who remembers is myself; I am my mind (*ego sum, qui memini, ego animus*)” (14, 21).¹³ There is no mind without memory. Memory is not some portion of the mind which the mind uses or does not use as it sees fit. Without the operations of memory, there can be no science, no *scientia*, whether the science be natural philosophy, theology, or the reading of the narrative, legal texts, or parables of Scripture.

III

Memory, Education and Liturgy in Our Context

It is not difficult to contrast this Augustinian account with that of the empirical tradition of the early seventeenth century. In the opening sections of Part I of Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan*, it takes little time at all for Hobbes to dispense with thoughts not derived from senses and to diminish the importance of memory for knowledge because they are only weakened and decaying sense perceptions.¹⁴ If ever-new sense perceptions are what matter, why settle for decaying percepts in the memory. Hobbes’s stated opponent is Aristotle. In Chapter I, “Of Sense,” Hobbes says “The Originall of them

all [by which he means thoughts], is that which we call Sense; (For there is no conception in a mans [sic] mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of Sense.) The rest are derived from the originall.”¹⁵ In Chapter 2, “Of Imagination,” Hobbes says that it is due to the transitoriness of our lives that our memories are dim. I quote:

... our imagination of the Past is weak; and we lose (for example) of Cities wee have seen, many particular Streets; and of Actions, many particular Circumstances. This *decaying sense*, when wee would express the thing it self, (I mean *fancy* it selfe,) wee call *Imagination*, as I said before: but when we would express the *decay*, and signify that the Sense is fading, old and past, it is called *Memory*. So that the *Imagination* and *Memory*, are but one thing, which for divers considerations hath divers names.¹⁶

Even though in Augustine, memories may be hidden and tucked away in crevices, they are not fading, old, past, and decaying. They wait, unchanged and unchangeable, ever to be recalled. With Hobbes the empirical tradition is upon us, and memory is of little consequence. External sensation is all.

In regard to education, the emphasis of the empirical tradition will be on what comes to us by way of the senses and is in contrast to the guidance we gain from Augustine. According to the empirical tradition, these sensations need to be always refreshed to capture and satisfy our interests because they can and do decay as they exist as imaginings and memories. The aims of Hobbes’s account of science and of education will inevitably be on the outward rather than inward, and the interiority of Augustine’s account of knowledge is dismissed. In Hobbes’s opinion of education, a lot depends on the teacher and the external stimuli. In Augustine, in contrast, education is focused on the inward, upon a recognition that the teacher does not create what is remembered, but points it out as already there in one’s thought and above all allows the individual to awaken himself or herself, perhaps in the manner of the prodigal son, “when he came to himself.” Augustine’s strategy would not lead to a dizzying practice of learning by rote because that would be

close to the notion that the process is primarily external, something impressed upon the student from the outside, perhaps by a frustrated teacher. For Augustine, reading and study, including observation, in order to create an ease of familiarity would be closer to the mark of what learning should look like. For Augustine, the process of learning would require us to read, then close the book, and recollect in tranquility the math problem, the process we witnessed in nature, or the plot of the novel. Learning for Augustine respects the faculties and intelligence of the student rather than relying upon the external stimulation of the teacher. Augustine would be apt to say to a student, ‘Look what you already know?’ or ‘Do you remember what we recognized previously?’

Augustine’s account at least historically has had a positive impact on education in the Church, especially through the liturgy. Augustine’s account in Book X of *cogo* and *cogito*, of *collecting* and *thinking*, explains the long-standing use in the prayers of the Church of what we still call “collects.” Collects are those short prayers, often at the beginning of our prayers and at the end, which *gather*, or *herd together*, our thoughts so that we can be led to cogitation, to knowing. The *herding together*, or *collecting*, of our thoughts depends on familiarity gained over time, familiarity based on memory, and reawakened regularly in our daily, weekly, and seasonal liturgies. Christian formation of character, spiritual and moral, if indeed Augustine is correct—and in my critical judgment he seems closer than the alternatives—will require memory. No minister or priest has been in the presence of a dying person whose intellectual sensibilities are failing without recognizing that the deepest memories, such as those of the Lord’s Prayer, Psalm 23, and of hymns or psalms sung to plainsong or the Genevan Psalter, are the last connections with this world to be lost. These deepest recollections are also entrances to the world of light. To push the argument further, how can these collects of the Church be understood without Augustine’s account of memory? Their

The ascent to God through mind, that is, through memory, is the journey we have too prodigally squandered and to which we need to return to in order to find our true home.

maturity of theology and richness of phraseology, collected from phrases of Scripture, may not be immediately understood upon first acquaintance, especially if we are young. But they will become familiar, will be remembered and recollected, and shape and guide us more deeply, I think, than Joshua’s stones.

But there is also a shift away from spiritual formation in the accounts of education based upon the *empiricism* of such writers as Hobbes. There is a movement away from the language of well-written texts, which are used with sufficient frequency so that they are known by large numbers of the congregation regardless of education level and vocation in life, to spontaneously-created prayers and “orders” of service whose guiding principle is variety or innovation. If Augustine is correct that “I am my mind” and “Mind is memory,” we need to ponder indeed whether mind is really more in existence in our post-Hobbesian context than in a world shaped by Augustine, or if in fact what Hobbes leaves us with is some truncated version of mind. And if too, as Augustine asserts, memory is the way in which the soul ascends to God, our diminishment of memory separates us from this most beneficial and beautiful ascent to the Good.

IV Recapitulation

I began this study with reflections on biblical texts in order to draw attention to the significance of memory in biblical sensibility; memory in Scripture is close to the notion of faithfulness. Even as Israel was expected to look at those memorial stones piled up on the side of the river, stones which had been rounded off from years of flowing water over them when they lay in the river bed of the Jordan, so we are to recognize that in remembrance of the wondrous events depicted in Scripture, in the sacraments, and in God’s presence in us, we can ascend in the knowledge of God. The

way in which we can find ourselves, as the prodigal son did, is through memory. We can, like him, return, repent, and learn the meaning of knowledge and rejoicing. The ascent to God through mind, that is, through memory, is the journey we have too prodigally squandered and to which we need to return to in order to find our true home. Christian liturgy, which ought to be the best words in the best order for the best *herding*, or *collecting together*, of our recollections, remains a vital way forward for the rediscovery of what has been there for and in us all the time. As Augustine writes in this chapter on memory, “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: Late have I loved you.” It took memory for Augustine to realize that beauty was ever old and ever new.

Endnotes

1. This essay is a continuation of reflections which I presented in a paper at the Thirty-Eighth Annual Atlantic Theological Conference on June 24th–27th, 2018, St. Paul’s Church, Sackville, New Brunswick, Canada. The topic of the conference was “Memory: Its Persistence and Loss in Christian Community.” The *Proceedings* were edited and published by Susan Harris (Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island: St. Peter Publication, 2019). For my essay, see Terence J. Kleven, “And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children” (Deut. v 7): The Scriptural Account of Divine and Human Memory for the Gathering and Binding of the Community,” 1–40.
2. Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, translated by Maria Boulding, preface by Patricia Hempel (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1997), 203. For the Latin of Augustine’s quotations in this section, see Sancti Avgvstini, *Confessionvm Libri XIII, Santi Avgvstini Opera XXVII, Corpus Christianorvm Series Latina*, Lucas Verheijen, editor, (Turnhout: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, MCMLXXXI).
3. Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, translated by Boulding, 206.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 207–208.
6. Ibid., 208.
7. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, translation with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Chadwick, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 188–189.
8. John M. Rist says these “ideas” are the Platonic forms and are the “common” or “embedded” ideas which Augustine uses to argue against scepticism. See John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). See especially chapter three.
9. Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, translated by Maria Boulding, 208.
10. Ibid., 209. Paige Hochschild’s study of memory in Augustine unfortunately passes too quickly over several of these remarkable paragraphs *Confessions X* in chapter ten of her book. Paige E. Hochschild, *Memory in Augustine’s Theological Anthropology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See especially pp. 144–147 where she moves from 9, 16, a section on the liberal arts, to 17, 26, a section in which Augustine says he is climbing through his mind to God. She omits what may have been an invaluable discussion of the origins of “things in themselves” as presented in 10, 17 and following. She also ignores Augustine’s philosophical paragraph.
11. Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, translated by Maria Boulding, 209.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 212.
14. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited with an Introduction by C. B. Macpherson (New York: Penguin Books, 1968). First published in 1651.
15. Ibid., 85. I use the spellings, punctuation, and italicization in Macpherson’s edition.
16. Ibid., 89.