

Endless Happiness: Confessions of a Recovering Addict

By Luke McCracken

Admittance: I Have a Problem

I set out to write about how to be happy, and I've ended up with an essay on addiction. Whether that's more indicative of my own struggle or the genuine elusiveness of a sober-minded happiness, I am not sure.

In what follows, I will walk through how the questions I asked of happiness led me to (an analysis of) addiction and how I came to see addiction not merely as an exceptional case of dysfunction in the "pursuit of happiness," but as paradigmatic of the human condition.

In other words, my original question, "What does it mean for a human to be happy?" after years of rumination seemed better formulated, instead, as "If being human is a 'condition', then what are its symptoms, and, furthermore, what would it mean to recover from it?" given what I began to see as the fundamental challenge to *being* happy: the passing-away of all things. The parallel is plain: we mortals suffer a dependence on finite substances for our joy, and their passing away always means a comedown.

Therefore, at the heart of every happiness, an eventual sadness lies in wait—one precisely as sad as the happiness was happy. Human joy, like that of the addict, goes up in smoke; thus Isaiah's prophecy comes true again and again: "The high shall be brought low" (Is. 2:12). What results is a jagged emotional path (I'm picturing an electrocardiogram readout) on which one cycles necessarily between up(per)s and down(er)s.¹

To remark that death and decay pose an issue for human happiness is nothing new—perhaps most succinctly observed by Buddhism's First Noble Truth: Life is

¹ What do [humans] demand of life and wish to achieve in it? [...] They strive after happiness; they want to become happy and to remain so. [...] This program [of the pleasure principle] is at loggerheads with the whole world. There is no possibility at all of its being carried through; all the laws of the universe run counter to it. What we call 'happiness' is by nature only possible as an episodic phenomenon. We are made such that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things. Thus our possibilities of happiness are already restricted by our constitution" Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (Chapter 2). Freud describes the situation of an addict: we are dependent for our feelings of happiness on precisely that which guarantees our eventual unhappiness—finitude. The passing away of things means that our happiness is always "episodic" or fleeting (thus leaving us unhappy), but it also therefore provides that contrast in relation to which we more deeply enjoy our enjoyments.

suffering because of the impermanent nature of all things. If impermanence means suffering, and impermanence is our lot, then what can be said of happiness? Shall we aim more modestly for non-suffering, for tranquility...or tranquilization? Shall we hope and strive to overcome impermanence altogether, in this life or one to come? Or maybe happiness paradoxically involves suffering? This apparent impasse forms the heart of my thinking.

Although we surely face a dead end here, I have tried to find my way. That means venturing to imagine a mortal happiness that would be no less happy, no less “true,” because it is transient. In writing this, I am coming to terms with the fact that, for us mortals, being happy means having something to lose.

For help in this quest, I went first to one of the most poignant and impactful reflections on the relationship between death and happiness in the Western tradition: Augustine’s *Confessions*. Thanks to its unique genre, the text is as philosophically rich as emotionally raw, with Augustine carrying the reader painstakingly through his own traumatic losses and his efforts to cope and heal.

Augustine’s responses to my original questions raised new ones, and I looked to modern interpreters of Augustine to pursue the line of questioning I had opened. For me, this meant bringing my inquiry about happiness to Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, for which *Confessions* was a key source. As I worked through this lineage of thinkers, the work of Jean-Luc Marion—an important contemporary commentator on both Augustine and Heidegger—entered the conversation.

It was Marion who injected the language of addiction into my thinking of happiness. In his *Being Given*, Marion endeavors to refine traditional conceptions of the human being—not content with classic notions of “ego,” “subject,” “consciousness,” or Heidegger’s neologism, “Dasein.” In place of such terms, Marion describes the human as *l’adonné*.

Rendering *l’adonné* in English certainly caused Marion’s translator some grief. The difficult term consists of the definite article ‘the’ (*l’*), the preposition ‘to’ (*a-*) and the past participle ‘given’ (*-donne*). Hence, linguistically, “the given-to” would have sufficed—the receiver. However, not only must the translation cohere etymologically to the French, but also it must represent the term’s philosophical significance in Marion’s idiosyncratic usage. For him, the term designates both that the human self is the receiver of all phenomena or “gifts”—i.e. that “to which/whom” all experiences are “given”—and that the self receives its own self from those very “gifts.” The self is both a receiver and a thing received. In his words, the human being “receives its ‘self’ entirely from what it receives” (*BG*, 268). Put differently, the nature of the human being is to receive its “self” in the process of “being given” all its life experiences, which are “gifts” in the sense that they are the “givens” of which one’s life consists. For example, it is given that I was born

male and in the United States; thus, the “self” which I now am consists partly of my maleness and U.S. citizenship. I am myself a product of the experiences which I have received and undergone.²

The translation of *l'adonné* as “the gifted,” then, means to convey this double sense of the human self as that to whom experiences give themselves and that whose self is given by those experiences. Furthermore, within continental philosophy at the time of *Being Given*'s publication, there were debates surrounding “the gift”—most notably in conversation with Derrida's work—and this text was Marion's intervention. Thus, the translation of *l'adonné* as “the gifted” manages to convey Marion's technical inflection of the term while remaining true to its etymological roots, all while explicitly tying it into contemporary debates within the field.

But every translator makes sacrifices. Despite its nuance, the rendering leaves dormant one provocative aspect of the French.³ *Adonné*, in colloquial French, simply means “addict”—one who is “given over to” or, literally, “sworn to” something (ad-dict) in the sense of fully devoted to or controlled by. With this detail in mind, as a sort of experiment, each time I saw “the gifted” I read “the addict,” and the text appeared quite differently. No longer was Marion replacing classic definitions of selfhood (e.g. ego, subjectivity, consciousness, Dasein) with his own technical neologism (the gifted); his proposed successor to classic definitions of selfhood was, strangely, “the addict.” The claim seemed out of place, yet it was plain as day in the language: “Thus is born *the addict*...successor to ‘the subject’” (*BG*, 268). To be a human is to be an addict; such was Marion's statement, point blank. With a slightly modified translation, the book now articulated a compelling description of the addictive nature of human being.

Now, I acknowledge that basing one's research on a colloquialism seems dubious, but I agree with Marion when he defends his own reliance on plays on words to stimulate his thinking: “I am not just playing on the ambiguity of a signifier...it's not a matter of exploiting an ambiguity but of honestly observing the fact of it; it would be more arbitrary to deny this patent ambiguity than to admit it as a difficulty still to be illuminated” (61).

With that same spirit, I questioned the significance of Marion's ambiguous definition of the human as “the addict.” I wondered how his analyses of Augustine and Heidegger

² As Kosky explains, “the gifted’...should be taken in the sense of having a talent for...(converting the given into the seen) but also as a substantive made from the passive form of the verb *to gift*. This latter sense is meant to convey that the self, too, happens originally in and through a givenness in which I receive myself at the same time as and along with the given” (“Translator's Note” in *In the Self's Place*, xx).

³ Kosky acknowledges this sacrifice: “What is lost in ‘the gifted’ is the sense of the ordinary French (*s*)*adonné*, which means something more like ‘to give oneself over’ and is used to describe an addict, a devotee, or someone who applies himself seriously, as to study. The gifted, receiving himself at the same time as the given, is, like the addict and perhaps the devotee, one who cannot live without that on which he depends. That sense of dependency is removed from my rendering” (ibid.)

had led him to describe the human as fundamentally an addict. Thus, I retraced my steps, returning to *Confessions* and *Being and Time* to see how the dynamics of addiction might be present in Augustine's account of himself and Heidegger's of Dasein and, further, how those dynamics would bear upon my original questions about the relationship between happiness and finitude.

In Part One (*i.e. what you're currently reading*) of a longer work, I will show the ways in which Augustine's conversion narrative tells/acts out a story of addiction and recovery. Next (*in a Part 2 I haven't yet written*), if it proves true that *Confessions* can be fruitfully read as a treatment of addiction, then certainly Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which could be considered something like its secular translation, would need to be reconsidered in light of that theme. I hypothesize that if Augustine himself exhibits an addictiveness in his *Confessions*, then so too will Heidegger's Dasein in *Being and Time*, since significant elements of his Dasein analytic were drawn from Augustine's self-diagnosis.

Given the "de-theologizing" hermeneutic by which Heidegger appropriates much of *Confessions*, exploring this hypothesis will demand that I consider how the different metaphysical frameworks of each thinker (one Catholic and the other "methodologically atheistic") affect the ways in which their works can be read to respond to the idea that the human being suffers a fundamental addictiveness. That is, if indeed the human as such manifests some basic addictiveness (as Marion, reading Augustine and Heidegger, seems to say), then how might one's religiosity/secularity affect the diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis of such a condition? I will respond to these questions by observing the key discontinuities between *Confessions* and *Being and Time* that result from Heidegger's "de-theologizing" interpretation.

Ultimately, there will be a Part 3 on David Foster Wallace, whose Infinite Jest is almost entirely about addiction, entertainment, distraction, boredom, consumerism, etc., all of which become central to this research.

Confessions of a Recovering Addict

If only it could last...

- Augustine

Augustine finds himself lost when he loses his beloved friend. Upon his death, Augustine confesses, “My heart grew sombre with grief and everywhere I looked I saw death. My home town had become a torture, and my own home was a grotesque abode of misery; all that I had shared with him was, without him, transformed into a cruel torment” (4, 4). These few lines reveal the layers of Augustine’s grief: First, he suffers acutely from the loss of his friend (“[his] heart grew sombre with grief”). Second, he suffers chronically from the fact that his familiar haunts had become haunted by the all-too present absence of his beloved (“[his] own home was a grotesque abode of misery”). Third, and most insidiously, he suffers a festering anxiety from the realization that the world—no matter how homey—can at any moment transform into such a torture chamber, since “not everything grows old, but everything dies” (“everywhere [he] looked he saw [the possibility of] death) (4, 9).

Thus, Augustine finds himself lost in the geographic sense that he’s lost his bearings in this now alien land, marooned in a “strange place of unhappiness.”⁴ At the same time, he finds himself lost in the existential sense that, with the loss of his beloved, he has lost his own self:

I was...surprised that when he was dead, I was still alive, for he was my “other self.” Someone has well said of his friend, “He was half my soul.” I had felt that my soul and his soul were indeed “one soul in two bodies.” So my life was a horror to me. I did not wish to live with only half of myself (4, 6).

Augustine, at a loss, questions himself: “Why, my soul, are you so sad?” In the midst of a lament over the death of his friend, the answer seems obvious. The concrete cause of his sadness could not be more clear. However, the ‘why’ asks after something more fundamental: What is my condition such that the loss of my beloved also means the loss of myself? More broadly, what is the human condition such that “the lost life of those who die becomes the death of those still living” (4, 9)?

The fact that Augustine finds himself lost when he loses his friend signals, at base, that “[they] were deeply dependent on one another” (4, 4). But what was the precise nature of this dependence? Although a seemingly trivial observation, Augustine

⁴ Moods/affects are commonly spoken about in topological terms: One can go to one’s happy place, be in a dark place, a world of hurt; home is where the heart is, etc.

expresses genuine surprise that he survives the death of his friend, which reveals a central paradox of his selfhood: Augustine himself continues living after he loses himself. Like a zombie in a state of living death, he was “through with living but scared of dying” (4, 6). In times of extreme loss and grief, one feels as though “My world is ending” or “My heart is broken,” and, for the bereaved, the world can truly be over⁵ and the heart, truly broken.⁶ Yet the impossible fact of the matter is that—like Augustine surviving the loss of himself—the world goes on after its end, and the heart keeps beating after it breaks, even against the survivor’s will. “This monstrous fact” demonstrates the precise sense of Augustine’s dependence (8, 9). In losing his friend, he loses something vital to his self yet without which he can, only unwillingly, survive: “I had lost the *source of my joy*” (4, 5). Returning, then, to his original question—“Why, my soul, are you so sad?”—he sees that the death of his friend functions like a violent intervention which cuts him off from his source of joy and forces him to admit that he suffers a dependence on those whom he loves for his happiness.

With the admission of his dependence, it dawns on Augustine that “misery is the state of every soul overcome by friendship with mortal things and lacerated when they are lost, which causes the soul to become aware of the misery which was its actual condition even before it lost them” (4, 6). In other words, the profound happiness he shared with his friend, because it has now mutated into a correspondingly deep grief, makes Augustine retrospectively see his past happiness as deceitful or “false.” When the source of joy passes away, “[past] sweetness is turned into [present] bitterness.” In this way, “the lost life of those who die becomes the death of those still living” (4, 9). Like a turncoat, his happiness betrayed him by switching abruptly to its opposite; like an unfaithful lover, his happiness did not stay true but left him, feeling deceived.

Augustine’s happy memories with his friend, upon his death, unmask themselves as what they truly were the whole time: pain lying in wait. For this reason, he claims that “we cannot think of the things which we formerly enjoyed...we shrink back from the memory of them” (4, 5). In fact, for Augustine, “happy memory” is an oxymoron. The happier the memory, the more one grieves its having passed away. Happiness *now* means grief *later*, and such “miserable felicity” is the absurdity that defines the mortal

⁵ For a careful reflection on this phenomenon of living beyond “the end of the world,” see Jonathan Lear’s *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, which details the experience of Plenty Coups, the last Chief of the Crow Nation, who lives through and beyond the end of the Crow way of life, the utter disintegration of his world.

⁶ According to the American Heart Association, “Broken Heart Syndrome [yes, a diagnosable condition] can strike even if you’re healthy. [It] may be misdiagnosed as a heart attack because the symptoms and test results are similar. In fact, tests show dramatic changes in rhythm and blood substances that are typical of a heart attack. But unlike a heart attack, there’s no evidence of blocked heart arteries. In BHS, a part of your heart temporarily enlarges and doesn’t pump well, while the rest of your heart functions normally or with even more forceful contractions” (heart.org).

condition (3, 2).⁷ Viewed in this light, human happiness is “a disease which brings its own punishment” (11, 30).

The twofold sense in which Augustine has “lost himself” consists in this radical reevaluation of memory. Insofar as one’s “self” and one’s “world” consist of the aggregate of one’s past experiences and the ways in which those memories are interpreted and brought to bear on present experience and future possibilities, the reinterpretation of memory entails at least a temporary disintegration of one’s self and one’s place. Because Augustine’s past experiences are not what he thought they were (what was once happy has now shown itself, ultimately, to be sad), he no longer recognizes himself in his own memory. He becomes alienated from himself by what is most intimate to his self—the memories held closest to his heart. Thus, when he “shrinks back from the memory of [things which he and his friend formerly enjoyed]” he attempts, futilely, to escape his now uncanny self:

I had become to myself a place of unhappiness in which I could not bear to be but from which I could not escape. To where should my heart flee to escape itself? Where should I go to escape myself? Where is there where I cannot pursue myself? (4, 7).⁸

Indeed, where? Futilely, he relocated to Carthage to escape the “strange land of unhappiness” his hometown had become. “The greatest source of repair and restoration,” though, “was the solace of *other friends*, with whom I loved what I loved as a substitute” (4, 8). For the same reason happiness passes away, so too does grief: “Time is not inert...its passing has remarkable effects on the mind. It came and went from day to day, and by its coming and going it...repaired me with delights such as I used to enjoy, and to them my grief yielded” (4, 8). Although taking refuge from one’s grief in the arms of loved ones seems like a healthy form of coping with loss, there is tragedy afoot.

Augustine finds solace for his trauma in the very thing which traumatized him—“friendship with mortal things.” In despair, he realizes that such coping, despite its immediate relief, mires him in a cycle of suffering. The friendships in which

⁷ While Augustine discusses the ways happiness can be miserable, Eric Wilson describes the potentially felicitous aspects of misery in his *Against Happiness: In Praise of Melancholy*

⁸ The psychological claustrophobia one feels in these lines reminds me of the famous 1979 horror film *When a Stranger Calls*, whose gripping opening scene (now a horror trope) stages a similar phenomenon: Jill Johnson is babysitting when she receives a call to the house asking if she has checked on the children recently. At first, she dismisses the call, but then she receives several more, and they become more frequent and threatening. Frightened, Jill calls the police, who promise to trace the call if she keeps the caller on the line long enough. She does so, and the police call her back and inform her that the call is coming from inside the house. At that moment, a light flicks on upstairs, and the stalker’s shadow appears backlit atop the stairs. In a panic, Jill drops the phone, runs to the door, frantically unhooks the lock, and screams—the scene cuts. The horror of the scene consists in learning that instead of being safe and sound in the most intimate and familiar place, you are actually in utmost peril, pain impending. Such is Augustine’s relation to himself in this time of loss.

Augustine takes refuge for his sorrow were merely “the causes of new sorrows,” for these friends, too, shall pass (4, 8). Thus, he despairs that the “restoration [provided by] the solace of friends...was a vast myth and a long lie. By its adulterous caress, my mind was corrupted. This fable did not die for me when one of my friend’s died” (4, 8). Augustine feels like he has not learned his lesson from the teachable moment of his initial trauma; “as a dog returns to its own vomit, so a fool repeats his folly” (Prov. 26:11).

This cycle of suffering is the behavior of an addict. As defined by the American Addiction Centers, “the term ‘addiction’ is used to describe a recurring compulsion to engage in some specific activity despite harmful consequences to one’s health, mental state, and/or social life. The addicted person may find the behavior rewarding psychologically or get a ‘high’ while engaged in the activity but may later feel guilt, remorse, or even overwhelmed by the consequences of that continued choice.” Augustine diagnoses himself as suffering from precisely that condition—compulsively engaging in a pattern of behavior whose enjoyment induces a severe consequence.

At the heart of the matter, Augustine suffers these highs and lows because he sources his joy from finite resources, resulting in an emotional boom-bust cycle. Like a miner chasing the vein, his pursuit of happiness becomes literal, leaving him both emotionally and physically itinerant.⁹ As we have seen, when Augustine’s friend dies, he feels forced to depart his hometown, as his source of joy has been exhausted. Because this resource is both vital and non-renewable, he must find a replacement. After the initial period of intense grief, Augustine does precisely that: he finds a new place and new friends, whom he “loved as a substitute,” thereby restoring himself with joy “such as [he] used to enjoy.” Augustine undergoes this same movement when he loses his longtime lover years later: “The woman with whom I habitually slept was torn away from my side because she was a hindrance to my marriage. My heart, which was deeply attached, was cut and wounded and left a trail of blood. She returned to Africa [from Milan, where Augustine had since migrated]...and I was unhappy” (6, 15). Facing yet again the loss of his source of joy, Augustine must look elsewhere for happiness; as lovers do, he moves on:

I procured another woman...and by this new relationship, the disease of my soul was sustained...or even increased, so that the habit was guarded and fostered...but my wound, inflicted by the earlier parting, was not healed. After inflammation and sharp pain, it festered. The pain made me cold and desperate (6, 15)

⁹ Throughout my paper, I have included language meant to signal that and how the dynamics of addiction and recovery are unmistakably at play in our environmental crisis. Central to both are questions of sustainability, preservation, dependence on finite resources, self-destructive forms of indulgence, care/negligence of the future, etc.

Finding a new source of joy caused the “wound inflicted by the earlier parting” to “fester” because no replacement can fill the hole created by the previous loss. Because each new source of joy is a fix, it is never a cure. In this way, Augustine’s desire for happiness “takes him for a ride” in both the literal sense that it pulls him to and fro—from Thagaste to Carthage to Milan, from friend to friend, and lover to lover—and the idiomatic sense that it deceives him, since each time he finds happiness, he finds something to lose. For this reason, Augustine inhabits his happy place as a tenant—holding on to that which slips away—rather than as a freeholder, who resides in a state of belonging (of the place to him and him to the place).¹⁰

Augustine cannot settle down with his love but “meanders on and on” lurching after that which unpredictably flees—happiness (4, 15). Such is the sense of Augustine’s most famous confession: “My heart is restless” (1, 1). Inasmuch as Augustine desires happiness in the land of death, he condemns himself to what he paradoxically calls “this wandering pilgrimage.” Unlike a wanderer, he does not travel aimlessly; rather, he aims for a singular yet moving target. Thus, in pursuing happiness, Augustine ends up running after something that, to his dismay, always ends up behind him—that is, he chases his tail, turning circles in the addict’s cycle. Always forced to “move on,” the wandering pilgrim is paradoxically trapped in his roaming, unable to rest:

What tortu[r]ous paths! How fearful a fate for the rash soul which nurses the hope that...it would find something better elsewhere! Turned this way and that, on its back, on its side, on its stomach, all positions are uncomfortable (6, 16).

Augustine senses this paradox when he confesses, “I had attained the joy that enchains” (3, 1). Faced with the seeming inescapability of the addict’s cycle, Augustine concludes that “wherever the human soul turns itself...it is fixed in sorrow” (4, 9). Where there is death, there can be no true happiness, that is, no happiness that stays true: “You seek a happy life in the land of death; it is not there” (4, 12).

In this despair, Augustine sees through everything by looking past the present and fixating on the eventuality that everything will have been. Since he sees clearly what lies on the other side of life, he concludes that life itself must be see-through, which is to say, vain. “The vanity of life” he says, consists in the fact that “I am ‘mere flesh and breath passing through and not returning’” (1, 13).¹¹ In other words, as long as we are

¹⁰ ‘Tenant’ (a person who occupies a place which does not belong to them) derives from the Latin *tenere*, which means ‘hold or grasp’. A ‘freeholder’ is someone who owns an estate which has been inherited or held for life (a freehold) on which they have resided for a specified length of time (OED).

¹¹ Augustine’s description of vanity echoes the opening of Book II of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*: “Whatever this is that I am, it is a little flesh and breath, plus a mind. [...] A mess of blood, pieces of bone, a woven tangle of nerves, veins, arteries. Consider...what the breath is: air, and never the same air, but vomited out and gulped down again every instant.” Later, Marcus says the human body is no more than “rotting meat in a bag” and suggests that one should feel “disgust at what things are made of: liquid, dust, bones, and filth” (2, 2; 8, 38; and 9, 36 in *Meditations*, translated by Gregory Hays).

drawing breath, we are full of hot air.¹² The language of Ecclesiastes confirms Augustine's suspicion: "Vanity of vanities...vanity of vanities! All is vanity!" Thus rings Solomon's refrain. What's being translated as 'vanity' is the Hebrew *hebel*, which literally means 'breath, wind, or dust'. The claim that "all is *hebel*" therefore expresses that everything has a vaporous quality; that everything is vapid. After his pronouncement, Solomon asks us, "What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?" (Eccl. 1, 2). In Augustine's eyes, all is vanity because what is gained by all our toil is merely something to lose: "Was not the whole exercise mere smoke and wind?" (1, 17).¹³ According to this perspective, Augustine's loving of mortal things and his seeking for happiness in them means that "[he] had loved vanity and sought after a lie" (9, 4). The eyes of despair survey a world of possibility yet deem it "vanity of vanities" because all life paths eventually lead to the same dead end: "All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, they continue to flow" (Eccl. 1:7). Vanity is a grave matter.

By seeing through all possibilities and apprehending one certainty (of death), the landscape of the future appears flattened—a topography undifferentiated by better and worse routes to pursue. Someone lost in a desert faces an absurd impasse precisely *because* all routes are passable—which is to say they are all possible and therefore none stand out: "Divergent wills pull apart the human heart while we are deliberating which is the most attractive option to take[.] One is as good as the next, yet they are in contention with each other...the soul is not wholehearted in its desire for one or the other" (8, 10). The objective differences that each choice would make on Augustine's life, to him, make no difference, as they all represent one and the same outcome.

In vanity, differences make no difference—all possibilities hold the same weight, which is to say none, everything being vapid. However, that vapidity is onerous: "The burden of the world weighed me down" (8, 5). Because everything is deadweight, weighing a decision among possibilities means being pulled equally in all directions. In other words, since all things have equal gravity, they are all equally attractive. Hence, Augustine says "the heart is torn apart in a painful condition" (8, 10). To affirm that "all

¹² In many ancient languages, the words for 'breath' and 'spirit' are, if not the same, at least closely related: *pneuma* (Greek), *spiritus/spiritum* (Latin), *prana* (Sanskrit), *ruach* or *neshama* (Hebrew), *ruh* or *nafs* (Arabic), *qi* (Classical Chinese), *Sila* (Inuktitut). Typically, this etymological connection is used to suggest the existential significance of the breath; however, the transitive relation between the two, etymologically speaking, implies the converse as well: the vapidity of existence.

¹³ Albert Camus tries to write his way out of this same problem: Sisyphus' "condemnation" to labor in vain allows his heavy burden to become light. Solomon's refrain—"Vanity of vanities...vanity of vanities!"—declares that all is *hebel*, airy, breathy, empty. For Solomon, such is the cry of despair, but for Sisyphus, it is the rejoicing of absurd happiness. Vain work is breezy, a constant draft, because mounting the hill amounts to nothing final. One is tempted to think that because Sisyphus shoulders his burden time and time again, he labors in vain. However, the absurd insight of Camus is to show the converse: Only because Sisyphus labors in vain, can he shoulder his burden time and time again. He makes light work of his heavy task thanks to, not despite, its vanity: "*Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.*"

is vain” is therefore *discouraging* in the sense that it triggers this heart condition, which Augustine calls “distraction” (the Latin *dis-trahere* literally meaning ‘pulled-apart’). Augustine feels pulled apart by the possible routes he could take to pursue happiness because all sources of joy appear the same in the end; that is, they disappear.

While distraction pulls him apart in a “painful condition” wherein he cannot devote himself wholeheartedly to anything and so gives himself half-assedly to many things, distraction also thereby inoculates him against the dreaded comedown which only the devoted lover undergoes when they lose the object of their love. In this way, distraction entails a hardening of heart, a resistance to the vulnerability which mortal love entails. This distracted form of loving, perverted through suffering, is what Augustine calls “lust.” “All that you experience through [lust] is only partial” (4, 11)

As with the losses of his friend and his mistress, Augustine’s love has so far attached him to mortal things such that their passing away means his sorrow. Unlike that attached form of love—i.e. dependence—which moves on reluctantly and with great pain, lust does not suffer the passing away of its object but actually relishes in the transition from one to the next: “While I pass from the discomfort of lack to the tranquility of satisfaction, the very transition contains for me an insidious trap of insatiable desire. The transition itself is a pleasure” (10, 31). In this way, lust takes pleasure in that which is, for love, a source of pain. In a radical reversal, the distracted heart thus embraces transience in a coldhearted way. Earlier, when Augustine lost his longtime lover, he indeed transitioned to another woman (“from the discomfort of lack to the tranquility of satisfaction”) but described the process, then, as leaving him “cold and desperate.” Now, however, he admits that “the transition [from lack to satisfaction] is itself a pleasure.” If we read these passages in tandem, then we see how the broken heart that is left “cold and desperate” by the repetitive process of loss and replacement eventually resigns itself to take pleasure in the formerly maddening cycle, finally disenchanted with the myth that he will find a “one true love”—a love that will stay true and never leave him.

As Augustine’s love turns to lust, correspondingly, his pursuit of happiness becomes a pursuit of pleasure. While repeatedly losing the object of love thwarts the lover’s pursuit of happiness, the distracting pleasure of lust depends on the recurrence of loss as its condition of possibility. To use Augustine’s example, the discomfort of hunger is essential to the pleasure of eating; and the fact that, no matter what I eat, I always get hungry again does not mean that I am cursed with vanity but that I am blessed with always more pleasure to come (10, 35). Lust therefore poses “the insidious trap of insatiable desire” in that it does not seek satisfaction in the first place; it does not seek some singular object by whose possession it could be satisfied or fulfilled. Rather, lust takes pleasure in a repetitive process, of which satisfaction is only one step (in fact, the least satisfying one)—the movement itself from want to gratification.

Those pursuing pleasure therefore manifest, according to Augustine's self diagnosis, a "curiosity," which operates "with the motive of seeing what experiences are like, not with a wish to undergo [them], but out of a lust for experimenting and knowing" (10, 35). This curiosity, Augustine thinks, places entertainment front and center in the daily living of distracted people: "To satisfy this diseased craving, outrageous sights are staged in public shows. [...] So many things of this kind surround our daily life on every side with the buzz of distraction...tugg[ing] at my attention to go and look at it" (10, 35).

Since the distracted heart cannot give itself wholeheartedly to anything and therefore gives itself piecemeal to many things, the theater provides an ideal source of pleasure—offering an emotional connection each time without consequence, a high with no comedown. In this way, entertainment (suggestively, *divertissement*, *diversion*, *divertimento*, *divertisment* in the Romance languages¹⁴) serves to divert the self away from the loss at which it would otherwise find itself, that is, away from its very self:

I was captivated by theatrical shows. [...] When an actor on stage gave me a fictional imitation of someone else's misfortunes, I was quite pleased; and the more the actor compelled my tears to flow, the more vehement was my attraction. [...] Hence came my love for sufferings, but not of a kind that pierced me very deeply; for my longing was not to experience myself miseries such as I saw on stage. I wanted only...[to be] scratched on the surface (3, 2).

The spectator goes along for the ride of the ups and downs of human life as staged by the actors; yet, thanks to the distance of spectatorship, the theatergoer does so without actually going through them. Thus, theater allows Augustine to "see what experiences are like" without having to commit himself to any actual living, or loving—the perfect partner for the distracted heart seeking merely to satisfy its curiosity. However, Augustine confesses that scratching the itch of his lust "like the scratches of fingernails...produced inflamed spots, pus, and repulsive sores" (3, 2). Pleasure catches up with him as he chases it.

Like an addict who endeavors to preserve the high, Augustine's distraction, while pleasurable, leaves him strung-out: "My life is a distention" (11, 29).¹⁵ Since Augustine passes time through distracting entertainment, his life consists of a daisy-chain of pleasurable episodes, one after another, rather than a continuous string.¹⁶ Pursuing

¹⁴ *Divertissement* is French, *diversion* Spanish, *divertimento* both Italian and Portuguese, and *divertisment* Romanian.

¹⁵ Strung out: a state of continuous drug use where the user tries to stay high all the time in order not to come back down to reality. After this continuous drug use, the user feels like they're not high despite being heavily impaired, resulting in continued dosing (urbandictionary.com).

¹⁶ Daisy-chain: (1) a string of daisies threaded together by their stems; (2) a wiring technique that connects multiple devices together in a linear fashion; (3) to smoke continually by lighting a new cigarette from the butt of the last one smoked (4) a sexual position involving multiple partners where one partner pleasures

pleasures leave him strung-out, therefore, in a temporal sense: “I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand. The storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul” (11, 30). There is no coherence or consistency to a life of distraction—it does not string together. The coherence of the human self, says Augustine, is like the coherence of a sentence; each part must have a certain meaningful relationship to the other:

...to be parts of things which do not all have their being at the same moment, but by passing away and by successiveness, they all form the whole of which they are parts. That is the way our speech is constructed by sounds which are significant. What we say would not be complete if one word did not cease to exist when it has sounded its constituent parts, so that it can be succeeded by another” (4, 10)

The past is remembered in the present, and the present is heard with expectation of the future. That stretch or tension held by the mind across memory and expectation, which is the attention itself, forms the coherence (i.e. the ‘holding-together’) of the self or phrase. The meaningfulness (of the sentence or one’s life) thus depends on the conservation of the past in the present and the preservation of the present for the future. In Augustine’s state of distraction, though, he says he is “unable to gather [him]self out of the old days” (11, 29). His past has not been conserved in his present. Distraction creates a disconnect between each part of himself (past, present, future), as a result of which neither his past (through memory) nor his future (through expectation) is heard in his present. In the pursuit of pleasure, each stage on the way (the old days, today, and the days to come) relates to the other as a matter of historical contingency (“a storm of incoherent events”) rather than according to a consistent pattern that gives the entire sequence meaning (“they all form the whole of which they are parts”)—the difference between a cacophony and a symphony. That meaninglessness, the sense that the sequence of one’s life is of no consequence, characterizes the experience of being strung-out or distended. Such is the “repulsive sore” caused by scratching the itch of lust. “[Augustine’s] life is a distention” because he “lives in a multiplicity of distractions by many things” (11, 29).

Miserable with his love and torn to pieces by his lust, Augustine cries out for a cure to his compulsion for a fix: “Let my soul not become bound to transient things, tied to them with love...for these things pass along the path of things that move towards non-existence, rending the soul with pestilential desires” (4, 10). He wants to quit “cold turkey,” renouncing the substances on which he depends once and for all. However, he finds that he is not his own maker; he cannot *make himself* quit. He cannot become

another, the second pleases a third, the third a fourth and so on, until the line comes full circle (urbandictionary.com). The significance here is that in a daisy-chain, A connects to B, B to C, and C to D, etc., but A does not connect to C. Thus, it forms a whole whose non-adjacent parts do not interrelate: a disconnected unity—like Augustine’s life, which is singular yet fragmented.

independent by the sheer force of his will: “The mind orders the mind to will something, and while the recipient of the order is itself, it does not perform it” (8, 9). No matter how clearly Augustine perceives the consequences of his behavior and how forcefully he wills himself to abstain, he finds himself unable to get himself together: “How stupid is man to be unable to restrain feelings in suffering the human lot! That was my state at the time. So I boiled with anger, sighed, wept, and was at my wits’ end” (4, 7). He cannot get himself together because he is of two minds on the matter—or, more accurately, he is of one mind, yet two wills. He wishes to untether himself from the mortal coil and yet to keep open the ties that bind:

My old loves held me back. They tugged at the garment of my flesh and whispered, “Are you getting rid of us?” [...] They held me back. I hesitated to detach myself, to be rid of them, to make the leap to where I was being called. The overwhelming force of habit was saying to me: “Do you think you can live without them?”

Here, Augustine confronts what David Foster Wallace calls “a little-mentioned paradox of Substance addiction...that once you are sufficiently enslaved by a Substance to need to quit the Substance in order to save your life, the enslaving Substance has become so deeply important to you that you will all but lose your mind when it is taken away from you” (*Infinite Jest*). Augustine faces the absurd fact that he cannot survive without what’s killing him. Simply put, he can’t live without the thing that’s beating him to death—it’s his heart. The condition of his existence is the very condition which he attempts to quit, yet there is nowhere to abscond mortal things in “the land of death,” and there is no way to avoid loving when “there is nobody who does not love” (*Sermon 34, Patriologiae Cursus Completus*). Thus, when “the overwhelming force of habit” asks Augustine, “Do you think you can live without [your old loves]?” the answer is no. If his addiction consists in loving mortal things, then breaking the habit would entail no longer inhabiting the world.

This internal tension forces a more nuanced reckoning with his addiction. “The reason why grief had penetrated me so easily and deeply,” he realizes at last, “was that I had poured out my soul onto the sand by loving a person sure to die *as if he would never die*” (4, 8). According to this new perspective, recovery would consist not in avoiding the addictive substance altogether but in negotiating a different relationship to it—that is, “understand[ing] how to love human beings with awareness of the human condition [i.e. mortality]” (4, 7).

For Augustine, Christianity introduces, models, and provides the resources for—that is to say, sponsors—precisely this alternative mode of loving whereby the lover can engage in relationships with mortal things while avoiding an unhealthy dependence on them. In effect, Augustine sees in Christianity a truly happy life, one not subject to

the highs and lows of the addict. Thus, recovery and conversion become concomitant processes.

Turning His Life Around

In converting [*con-vertere*], Augustine literally “turns to(ward)” God. As two modes of coping with the adversities of life (i.e. the times when life “turns against” you), the “turning towards” of conversion offers a therapeutic alternative to the “turning away” of diversion.¹⁷ While diversion, which takes the form of distracting entertainment, “causes old wounds to fester,” conversion to God is a source of healing because he turns out to be a different kind of lover. His eternity allows the addict’s heart to rest, assured that this love(r) alone will stay true, thereby providing an undying source of joy. Because only God’s love “is the place where love is not deserted,” Augustine urges himself and his reader to “Fix your dwelling there...[for] you will lose nothing” (4, 11). Unlike the happiness sourced from the love of mortal things, by whose passing away “sweetness is turned to bitterness,” Augustine’s love of God provides “a sweetness touched by no deception, a sweetness serene and content,” and such is the difference between “miserable felicity” and “true happiness” (2, 1). God’s steadfast love thereby reveals something essential about the addict and his substance: substance addiction paradoxically rests on the illusion of substance; that is, the illusion that the happiness given by the substance is substantial, which is to say satisfying and enduring.¹⁸ The addict suffers the “comedown” when the seductive illusion of substantiality meets the brute reality of vanity. God, whom the Nicene Creed explicitly characterizes as being “of substance” (*ousia* in Greek), exposes the insubstantiality of both finite substances themselves and the happiness sourced from them.¹⁹

God’s substantiality—which consists in his immutability and eternity—ultimately means that his love alone, as a source of joy, is trustworthy; as such, one can give one’s heart to God without fear of its being broken. Such fearlessness contrasts the insecurity of mortal love:

In adversities, I desire prosperity; in prosperous times, I fear adversities. [...] Cursed are the prosperities of the world, not once but twice over, because of the fear of adversity and the perishability of joy. Cursed are the adversities of the world, not once or twice but thrice over, because of the longing for prosperity,

¹⁷ The shared root here signals a future analysis of the emergent roles of ad-vertisement and, with it, consumerism within the economy of happiness in the secular context of today, hence the future role of David Foster Wallace in this work, who writes prolifically on marketing.

¹⁸ In a similar vein, Jean Luc Nancy elaborates a connection between addiction and “hallucination” in his *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*: “Addiction, whatever its object or its nature might be, implies a relationship to a tangible, appropriable presence. ‘Drugs’ are what cause me truly to perceive another regime of presence, an ‘elsewhere’ in which I am able to forget or convert the ‘here’ that I wish to leave. In addiction, there is something that ultimately comes down to hallucination” (8).

¹⁹ “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, *of one substance with the Father* [Greek: ...γεννηθέντα οὐ ποιηθέντα, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ; Latin: ...*natum, non factum; ejusdemque substantiae qua Pater est*].”

because adversity itself is hard, and because of the possibility that one's endurance may reach a breaking point. Is not human life on Earth a trial in which there is no respite? (10, 28)

On this gloss, the human's restlessness of heart consists in its unceasing "vacillation" between the fear of loss in times of happiness and the longing for happiness in times of loss (6, 10). If, as we have seen, this restlessness forms the heart of Augustine's addiction, then recovery would mean finding "a middle ground between these two [fear and longing] where human life is not a trial" (10, 29).

The love of God, being the only form of love untouched by the fear of loss, provides precisely this "middle ground"—the only stable foundation on which one could "fix one's dwelling."²⁰ Indeed, at the moment of conversion, Augustine recalls feeling "relief from all anxiety flood[ing] into his heart" (8, 12). While *mortal* love "brings its own punishment" by attaching the heartstrings to things which fly away, "*perfect* love [i.e. the love of God] drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment," and there is no punishment borne within a love that never loses its beloved (1 John 4:18).²¹ Because "the person who enters into the joy of the Lord...will not be afraid," they can therefore rest easy on the solid ground of a dependable happiness (2, 10; citing Matt. 25:21). In this way, only when the heart fixes its dwelling in God can it finally settle down with its love: "Our heart is restless until it finds rest in You [God]" (1, 1). Conversion helps Augustine recover from his addiction because the joy of the Lord frees him from the cycle of up(per)s and down(er)s in which his mortal happiness—"the joy that enchains"—had formerly entrapped him. It allows him to get off the emotional roller coaster of human life.

God's love helps the addict to recover by providing a dependability which mortal things cannot supply by virtue of their mutability. Contrary to the insubstantiality of finite things, Augustine describes God as "an imperishable substance" who therefore offers "the inexhaustible treasure of imperishable enjoyment" (2, 6). Thus, Augustine's recovery paradoxically does not consist in being liberated from his state of addiction (i.e. the condition of being-given-over-to) and delivered to in-dependence. Instead, recovery means transferring his substance dependence to a more dependable substance, whose

²⁰ "The Wise and Foolish Home Builders: Everyone who comes to me [Christ] and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well-built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was total" (Luke 6:46-49). The emotionally unstable foundation of fear and longing results in a house whose standing is always insecure; whereas the "middle ground" of God's perfect love is a foundation of rock, which the flow of time cannot wash away.

²¹ Hannah Arendt succinctly corroborates this analysis in her dissertation, *Love and Saint Augustine*: "The sign of *caritas* on earth is fearlessness, whereas the curse of *cupiditas* is fear—fear of not obtaining what is desired and fear of loving it once it is obtained" ("Love as Craving," 35).

enjoyment is therefore more substantial. Substance dependence, on this analysis, is a fundamental and irresolvable condition of human existence. The question comes down to this: To what will I be addicted? To what will I give myself over?²² Recovery is therefore never a matter of becoming independent, of getting back on one's own feet; more modestly, it means forming a "healthy dependence." By converting, then, Augustine gives himself over to the only distilled Spirit whose uplift does not eventuate a comedown: the "living water of God" (John 7:38). As Jesus says to a Samaritan woman drawing from an earthly well, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never be thirsty again; the water I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." In this passage, Jesus echoes what Augustine has undergone: the peril of the addict, who depends on that which, because finite, is not dependable. Augustine's conversion echoes the woman's response to Christ: "Sir, give me this water that I may not thirst nor come here to draw again" (John 4:13-15).

However, God is also the source of "recovery" in another crucial sense: He promises eternal life to those who place their love in him. This promise sets Augustine down the road to recovery in two interrelated but distinct ways: (a) by turning to God, he begins to learn how to derive his joy from a more dependable source, thereby healing his broken and restless heart with a love that stays true; and (b) instead of looking past the present in the mode of "seeing through" mortal life (with the eyes of vanity), he looks past the present in the mode of "looking forward to" eternal life (with the eyes of faith). Faith does not provide an alternative to vanity but includes it as it overcomes it: both vanity and faith "see through" transient reality to that which is fixed and certain—the end of life. Further, they both assess the ultimate meaning of temporal life on the basis of its end.²³ However, where the eyes of vanity see "The End" in the sense of *fine* (a curtain-drop, a closure), the eyes of faith see "The End" in the sense of *telos* (a climax, a consummation). Thus, while vanity remains on the level of "seeing through," faith converts "seeing through" into "looking forward to" by differently interpreting the sense of the end. As a result, each perspective elicits a distinct affective mode in and through which the viewer approaches life's "end." Just as mortality's guarantee that the beloved will be taken away changed Augustine's joy into grief, God's promise that the beloved will be given back, which is to say recovered, "changed [his] grief into joy" (Ps, 30:11, cited in 8, 12).

²² Foster Wallace goes to the heart of the matter: "We are all dying to give our lives away to something, maybe. God or Satan, politics or grammar, topology or philately—the object seemed incidental to this will to give ourselves away, utterly. To games or needles, to some other person. Something pathetic about it. A flight-from in the form of a plunging-into. Flight from exactly what? These rooms, blandly filled with excrement and heat? To what purpose?" (*Infinite Jest*).

²³ Credit Kierkegaard, sublation of infinite resignation by faith

God's love fundamentally alters Augustine's approach to human relationships by reconstituting the meaning of death. Before converting, Augustine experiences his friend's death as an absolute loss; his friend is dead *and gone*:

If I had said to my soul "Put your trust in God" (Ps. 41:6, 12), it would have had good reason not to obey. For the very dear friend I had lost was a better and more real person than the phantom in which I would have been telling my soul to trust. [...] I had no hope that my friend would come back to life, and my tears did not petition for this. I merely grieved and wept. I was in misery and had lost the source of my joy" (4, 4-5)

On this account, Augustine perceives death as privative; he suffers his loss as a literal bereavement ('bereave' coming from the Old English *bereafian*, meaning 'to take away by violence, rob, or seize'). "The more I loved [my friend] the more I hated and feared *death, which had taken him from me*, as if it were my most ferocious enemy" (4, 6). Death, like a home burglar, visited Augustine in his most intimate place—for home is where the heart is—and stole away his most precious possession (Matt. 6:19-21). Worse yet, death remained at large: "I thought that since death had consumed [my friend], it would suddenly engulf all humanity" (4, 6). Because death poses an ongoing threat, the joy Augustine derives from his love of mortal things becomes tinged with that aforementioned fear that only imperfect love knows.

According to Christianity's promise of eternal life, however, the dearly departed (at least those among the saved) are not dead *and gone* but *in a better place*. So too, therefore, are those left behind on Earth, for if they see with the eyes of faith, they no longer face the absolute absence of their beloved but merely the beloved's deferred presence to which they can look forward. When death is interpreted as opening onto eternal life, it no longer acts as a thief in the night, robbing me of my source of joy; instead, it appears generous, promising to restore my happiness in the double sense of giving it back to me and putting it in better condition—the condition of eternity: "All that is ebbing away from you will be given fresh form and renewed, bound tightly to you" (4, 11). In this way, "to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21) or, as Augustine paradoxically claims in *The City of God*, "Death, which all agree to be the contrary of life, has become the means by which men pass into life" and, later, "the very act of dying...is a precaution against death" (13, 4; 13, 8).

To measure the affective difference this resignification of death makes, consider the aftermath of his mother's death in contrast to that of his friend's:

We did not think it right to celebrate [my mother's] funeral with tearful dirges and lamentations, since in most cases it is customary to use such mourning to express sorrow for the miserable state of those who die, or their complete extinction [*omnimoda extinctio*]. But my mother's dying meant neither that her

state was miserable nor that she was altogether dead [*omnino moriebatur*] (9, 12).

When Augustine's friend died he "merely grieved and wept" because, in his unbelief, he "had no hope that he would come back to life." However, when his mother dies, it was not fitting "to express sorrow" because, according to his faith, she is not "altogether dead." In fact, when Augustine's son, Adeodatus, "cries out in sorrow" upon witnessing the death of Grandma Monica, "he was...checked and silenced" by Augustine, in whose eyes such sorrow signaled the rearing head of a congenital addiction—the self-destructive attachment to mortal things.

In the striking contrast between these two accounts, we see the crucial turnaround that conversion inaugurates: the passing away of all things no longer guarantees perpetual misery in the restless vacillation between fear and longing but, instead, promises eternal happiness and the repose of faith.²⁴ As a result, when Augustine loses what he loves, he no longer sets out like a vagabond looking all around for a new source of joy; instead, he looks forward to the *end*, in the sense of *telos*, whose fulfillment is tantamount to total recovery. As he teaches in *City of God*, "The saints' joy at what they assured for themselves...outweighed their sadness at the loss of their possessions" (1, 10).

From Augustine's perspective, then, one can recover from an unhealthy dependence on mortal things if one sees through the beloved's end (*fine*) and perceives rather—yet precisely therein—the ultimate end (*telos*), in relation to which the beloved's loss is both trivialized (because of its provisionality) and made significant (because of its place in the teleological horizon of promise and fulfillment).²⁵ In the same way that a

²⁴ Augustine discusses the deaths of two other close friends, and both accounts further illustrate the grief-mitigating, if not grief-effacing, effects of his conversion. First, there is the death of Verecundus, a companion who was slowly coming around to Christianity: "When [Augustine and his friends] were absent [from Verecundus' home] during our stay in Rome, he was taken ill in body, and in his sickness departed this life a baptized Christian. So you had mercy not only on him but also on us. We would have felt tortured by unbearable pain if, in thinking of our friend's outstanding humanity to us, we could not have numbered him among your flock. Thanks be to you, our God.... Faithful to your promises, in return for Verecundus' [hospitality], you rewarded him with the loveliness of your evergreen paradise" (9, 3). Next, there is Nebridius, who was a fellow Christian and longtime friend: "[Nebridius] was serving you in perfect chastity and continence among his own people in Africa, and through him his entire household became Christian, when you released him from bodily life. Now he lives in Abraham's bosom. [...] He no longer perks up his ears when I speak, but puts his spiritual mouth to your fountain and avidly drinks as much as he can of wisdom, happy without end. I do not think him so intoxicated by that as to forget me, since you, Lord, whom he drinks in, are mindful of us" (9, 3).

²⁵ Clifford Geertz theorizes religion along similar lines: "As a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, wordly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of others' agony something bearable, supportable—something, as we say, sufferable. It was in this effort that the Ba-Ila woman—perhaps necessarily, perhaps not—failed and, literally not knowing how to feel about what had happened to her, how to suffer, perished in confusion and despair. Where the more intellectual aspects of what Weber called the Problem of Meaning are a matter affirming the ultimate explicability of experience, the more

word's "meaning" consists in its reference to something other than itself, mortal life—formerly conceived as pure vanity—becomes "significant" or "meaningful" only by signaling or referring to the end which stands apart from it.²⁶ His therapeutic teleo-logic enfolds ends (*fine*) within the end (*telos*) and thereby not only annuls the former as such but also gives it a positive content: recovery. This double movement of annulling and fulfilling finitude marks a defining shift in Augustine's outworking of grief from necrophobia to necrophilia. He transforms his initial fear of death into a hope in and for death.

In this way, the paradoxically significant triviality of mortal life and, therefore, mortal death is made lovable in a mode other than fear. The lover who loves in view of the *telos* and not solely in view of the *fine* of the beloved is thereby inoculated to the end-less sorrow which mortal love otherwise ineluctably entails. For Augustine, how one loves, which inherently includes how one copes with loss, comes down to a single question: "With what end in view do you again and again walk along these difficult and laborious paths?" (4, 12). Loving mortal things while looking forward to the (happy) ending allows the patient to overcome the addict's jarring comedown by locating losses along a progressive timeline, whose end marks their complete recovery. The time-table of recovery therefore stands in stark contrast to the unstable time-line of addiction, which, like a broken heart's EKG, consists of irregular ups and downs.²⁷

Yet, however much Augustine performs the outward serenity, even gratitude, that would ideally correspond to his theology, he nevertheless confesses undergoing an inward struggle between familiar feelings of grief and a converted sense of relief in the wake of his mother's death: "We were confident [that Monica was not altogether dead] because of the evidence of her virtuous life, her unfeigned faith, and reasons of which we felt certain. Why then did I suffer sharp pains of inward grief?" (9, 12). Augustine is perplexed that, while believing that "death is the means by which we pass into life," he could still experience grief at his mother's "loss." His surprise demonstrates that the promise of eternal life is meant to function as a prophylactic against precisely such grief and, thus, plays a fundamental role in recovery. As Augustine tells us, "I was using truth

affective aspects are a matter of affirming its ultimate sufferableness. As religion on one side anchors the power of our symbolic resources for formulating analytic ideas in an authoritative conception of the overall shape of reality, so on another side it anchors the power of our, also symbolic, resources for expressing emotions-moods, sentiments, passions, affections, feelings—in a similar conception of its pervasive tenor, its inherent tone and temper. For those able to embrace them, and for so long as they are able to embrace them, religious symbols provide a cosmic guarantee not only for their ability to comprehend the world, but also, comprehending it, to give a precision to their feeling, a definition to their emotions which enables them, morosely or joyfully, grimly or cavalierly, to endure it" ("Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*. Ed. Michael P. Banton. London: Frederick A. Praeger Press, 1966. 1-46

²⁶ For Augustine and many others, this appears to be the exclusive condition of life's meaning; however, for Nietzsche, the reference of the world to something extra-worldly is "nihilism" par excellence.

²⁷ The heart is the primordial chronometer.

as a poultice to alleviate the pain”—a form of alleviation unavailable to him in his unbelief (9, 12).

Even as he applies his theological poultice, a familiar pain seizes his heart: “Now that I had lost the immense support she gave me, my soul was wounded, and my life was torn to pieces, since my life and hers had become a single thing” (9, 12). In this description, we hear the echo of his former grief over his friend (“My soul and his soul were one soul in two bodies”), yet this time he attributes the pain to a different root. When his friend dies and he asks “Why, my soul, are you so sad?” he answers that he was miserable because he “had lost the source of [his] joy,” but when his mother dies, he says the “sharp pains of inward grief...must have been a fresh wound *caused by the break in habit* formed by our living together” (9, 12). This difference of attribution demonstrates the progress in recovery that conversion has meant. According to Augustine’s own narration, while his love for his friend was a form of dependence for happiness, his love for his mother was merely a form of habituation to her support. Thus, while the loss of his friend resulted in an all-consuming trauma, the loss of his mother causes a grief which, though poignant, he can resist:

I was reproaching the softness of my feelings and was holding back the torrent of sadness. It yielded a little to my efforts, but then again its attack swept over me—yet not so much as to lead me to burst into tears or even to change the expression on my face. But I knew what pressure lay upon my heart (9, 12).

His resistance, while a positive sign of recovery, ultimately signals that he remains in the thrall of addiction. Thus, “there was another pain to put on top of my grief, and I was tortured by a twofold sadness”: (1) He grieves the death of his mother because it forcibly breaks his comfortable habit, and (2) he grieves *that he grieves* this break in habit because it demonstrates the ever-presence of his addiction. In this way, the addict’s recovery shows itself to be “an inward struggle” of resistance—as much his resistance to addiction as his resistance to recovery (9, 12).

In the death of his mother, then, Augustine confronts a phenomenon that only the recovering addict knows—the temptation of relapse. He describes his suppressed feeling of sorrow as “something childish in me that was, through the youthful voice of my heart, slipping toward tears” (9, 12). In other words, his sorrow sounds of his former self. In the temptation of present grief, he sees his all-too repeatable past of love and loss, joy and devastation: “I *slip back* [literally, *re-lapse*]²⁸ into my usual ways under my miserable burdens. I am reabsorbed by my habitual practices. I am held in their grip. I weep profusely, but still I am held. Such is the strength of the burden of habit” (10, 41). Thus, resistance to this grief is an effort not to circle back to the addict’s cycle but, instead, to forge ahead towards recovery. Conversion, as recovery, does not entail a

²⁸ Augustine’s word translated here as ‘slip back’ is the Latin *reccido*, which is the root of our ‘recidivism’ and a direct synonym of *re-lapsare*.

singular event of renouncing mortal love altogether but rather a continuous process of resisting the temptation to “love as if [the beloved] would never die” (4, 6). Augustinian conversion is therefore not a turnaround but a turning-around, wherein mortals are not abandoned but progressively loved anew in view of their end, that is, loved “with awareness of the human condition” (4, 6-7).

Augustine distinguishes between these two modes of love as “use” (*uti*) and “enjoyment” (*frui*), which he most thoroughly expounds in an extended metaphor from *On Christian Doctrine*:

Suppose, then, we were wanderers in a strange country, and could not live happily away from our homeland, and that we felt wretched in our wandering, and wishing to put an end to our misery, determined to return home. We find, however, that we must make use of some means of conveyance, either by land or water, in order to reach that homeland where our enjoyment is to commence. But the beauty of the country through which we pass and the very pleasure of the motion charm our hearts, and turning these things which we ought to use into objects of enjoyment, we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey; and becoming engrossed in a fictitious enjoyment, our thoughts are diverted from that home whose enjoyment would make us truly happy. Such is a picture of our condition in this life of mortality. We have wandered far from God; and if we wish to return to our Father’s home, this world must be used, not enjoyed...by means of what is material and temporal we may lay hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal (*OCD*, 1, 4)

In this picture, loving something as if it would never die, which is to say “resting with satisfaction in it for its own sake,” means enjoying it; whereas loving something for the sake of its end, or as a “means of conveyance” to something else, means using it. According to Augustine, because only God is eternal, only he can be properly enjoyed; correspondingly, all of creation, as finite, is fit only for use.²⁹

The use of creation then is to function as a means by which to love God all the more: “If physical objects give you pleasure, praise God for them and return love to their Maker” (4, 12). In short, we properly use mortal things when we love them “in God” or for the sake of loving God, in which alone true happiness lies: “The good which you love is from God, but it is only good and sweet insofar as it is related to Him. Otherwise, it will rightly become bitter; for all that comes from Him is wrongly loved if he is left by the wayside” (4, 12).³⁰ Augustine employs this distinction between use and enjoyment

²⁹ “The true objects of enjoyment, then, are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (*OCD*, 1, 5). Although the language of use and enjoyment has roots in *Confessions*, Augustine most thoroughly expounds them in *On Christian Doctrine*, so I will have to draw from that text.

³⁰ Hannah Arendt suggests that loving others “in God” according to the Augustinian injunction—i.e. for the sake of a telos—amount to not really loving them: “The believer relates in love to this individual...only

(both being forms of love) to make sense of the apparently contradictory commandments “to resist our love for [mortal] things, but also...[to] love not only you [God] but also our neighbor” (10, 37). He discerns that loving one’s neighbor, as a form of obedience to God, is fundamentally a mediated form of loving God, or a permutation of loving God, rather than an alternative to it.

Loving mortal things in the form of using them resolves the dependence of the addict, while simultaneously avoiding the self-defeating impulse to quit cold turkey, because the mortal beloved no longer functions as a direct source of happiness but as an indirect means to it. Paradoxically, he loves mortal things “not because I love *them* but *so that* I may love you, my God...from love of your love” (2, 1). In this Augustinian economy of happiness, the mortal beloved, which appears lovable only inasmuch as useful, assumes a dispensable role—as opposed to the indispensable status it holds for the substance-dependent addict.

The root of addiction, visible only in recovery, is therefore the failure to discern which substances are proper for use and which for enjoyment. By taking finite things to be objects of enjoyment, the addict fails to properly use them and thus fails, also, to locate the source of happiness independently from finite things. Contrary to modern diagnostics, then, the addict does not suffer from substance abuse but, rather, from substance non-use. From the Augustinian perspective, one becomes an addict, ironically, by failing to be “a user.” In fact, the only abuse of the addict is that he enjoys things too much. “My sin,” Augustine confesses, “consisted in this: that I sought pleasure and sublimity not in God but in his creatures...so I plunged into miseries confusions and errancy” (1, 20).

Life appears to be “in vain,” then, simply because the addict fails to make use of it. Only when put to proper use—that of loving God—does mortal life become genuinely *fruitful*, which is both to say useful and enjoyable. If, instead, I enjoy life itself, then I am led into “the state of distraction in which I had been fruitlessly divided” (2, 1). Put differently, the *fruit* of an improperly used life can only be ripe with pain because the enjoyment of finite things actually keeps us mired in our “miserable felicity” since, by enjoying them, we fail to use them as “means of conveyance” to true happiness.³¹ Thus,

insofar as divine grace can be at work in him. I never love my neighbor for his own sake, only for the sake of divine grace. [...] We are commanded to love our neighbor, to practice mutual love, only because in so doing we love Christ” (“Social Life,” 111).

³¹ Jean Luc Marion echoes this claim with even more emphatic language than Augustine himself:

“Enjoyment is possible only of God, who alone does not disappoint, because he alone stays in place (the privilege of immutability) and alone offers the good without reserve.... Consequently, pretending to enjoy any other thing, one that cannot offer the absolute good, whether it be myself, others, or some other body, leads to the disaster of *cupiditas*: disappointment, then hatred of oneself, others, and this very body itself. But reciprocally, to enjoy God—in fact the sole enjoyment possible—renders possible at the same time, by extension and with reference to it, enjoying all the rest, since this rest constitutes precisely a gift of God. Whence the possibility and even the promise that if I enjoy *only* God for himself, all the rest can become

in this model of life as a homebound journey, potential sources of enjoyment no longer appear as equally vain possibilities in an errant quest for mortal happiness but as temptations to stray, or divert, from the “straight and narrow path” that leads to eternal happiness—that is, the road to recovery (Matt. 7:13-14).

Conversion therefore transforms the wandering of addiction into the journey of recovery. It does so by affixing a new sense to the end of life, which now represents a singular destination (*telos*) in relation to which the recovering addict can discern among progress, regress, and egress—unlike the addict’s vain wandering wherein all possible life paths appear passable because they all lead to the same end (*fine*). Simply put, only when you have a fixed destination (unlike the moving target of the addict: temporal happiness) can you take a right or wrong turn. Augustine was wandering because he “had no certainty by which to direct [his] course” (8, 7). After his conversion, he expresses this new sense of direction in life with his concern for “perversion” (literally, a “wrong-turn,” *per-vertere*), which is the fruitless form of love that “loves God’s creation instead of God” (2, 3).

In this way, starting down the road to recovery generates a normative framework that resolves the levelling of vanity. Unlike the vain pleasure of addiction, wherein all possibilities for happiness hold the same weight (i.e. none, everything being vapid), the fruitful labor of recovery gives a lot of weight to certain possibilities for achieving that end. In other words, not every form of life is equally attractive, since only one (namely, using things instead of enjoying them) leads to true happiness. Hence, when weighing decisions, the recovering addict is not pulled equally in all directions as before; he therefore does not suffer dis-traction. In this way, life becomes a weighty matter rather than pure “smoke and wind,” but this weight is not onerous like vanity: “I submitted my neck to your easy yoke and your light burden” (9, 1).

Augustine undergoes a different internal tension which he perfectly expresses in a rare moment of humor: “I prayed to You and said, ‘Grant me chastity and continence but not yet!’ I was worried you might hear my prayer quickly and that you might too rapidly heal me of the disease of lust which I preferred to satisfy than suppress” (8, 7). In resistance, the self pulls against itself in “a struggle between enjoyments which I should regret and regrets which I should rejoice” (9, 28). In other words, Augustine resists temptation yet, in the same breath, resists this very resistance. Full recovery, then, as the end of resistance, would mean the consolidation of what is otherwise pulled apart: his desire. The recovering addict pulls himself away from the seductive tug of perversion (and the distraction into which it leads) and attempts, instead, to pull

lovable, no longer by *cupiditas* but well and truly by *caritas*” (*In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, 277).

himself together or, in his words, achieve “contenance” (*con-tenere* meaning “pulling or holding together”).³²

On the one hand, lust—the misdirected love by which the heart becomes attached to what is passing and multiple—leads to distraction (recall, “the heart is torn apart in a painful condition”). On the other, charity—the rightly directed love by which the heart cleaves to God, who is steadfast and singular—leads to continence: “When the delight of eternity draws us upward...the soul [is] wholehearted in its desire” (8, 10). Continence, then, means not indulging one’s insatiable lust but saving oneself by and for the one true love of God, which alone makes one happy in a substantive way. In his attempt to achieve continence, Augustine is fundamentally no different than any recovering addict: he is simply trying to get his shit together.³³

Put differently, Augustine resists the temptation of pleasure by which he becomes distracted in order to achieve some consistency in his life rather than continue to suffer the irregularity precipitated by addiction’s up(per)s and down(er)s. In the throes of addiction, Augustine did not resist such pleasurable distractions but pursued them errantly because he lacked the pivotal sense of direction by which that enjoyment would appear as a per-version. As a result, he felt himself to be “distended,” or strung-out, which fundamentally entailed a lack of consistency. Augustine’s life was inconsistent in the sense that its constituent parts—past, present, and future—did not stand together (*con-sistere*) as a coherent series “wherein all actions are parts of a whole and of the total history where all human lives are but parts” (11, 28). Instead, his life was an anthology of stand-alone episodes “whose order I do not understand...storms of incoherent events” (11, 29).³⁴

In this way, continence, which represents the consolidation of that which is irregularly flowing away (*defluxus in multum*), has to do fundamentally with Augustine’s experience of time. Because the recovering addict can only achieve consistency through continuous resistance (*re-sistere*)—which means standing firm again and again against temptation—a difference and a delay is opened. Augustine’s resistance—both that *of* recovery and *to* recovery—renders him different from himself.

³² In noun form, *continentia*, signifies a pulling- or holding-together. In its verbal form, *continere*, it has the added sense of “to hold back, to check.” Thus, continence is a holding-back by which I am held-together; a reserve by which I maintain integrity. Continence, then, directly contrasts entertainment (recall, that which pulls me in and strings me out).

³³ Get (one’s) shit together: 1. *slang*, To work to become stable or consistent in order to deal with or achieve something, to start to make progress in one’s life; 2. *slang*, To organize one’s belongings (urbandictionary.com).

³⁴ I use television vocabulary to highlight the connection between entertainment and distention. Within television show formats, there is the “series,” wherein each episode connects and furthers an overarching plot (like *Mad Men*), and the “anthology,” which is a collection of episodes that each have their own plot arc and do not interrelate in a single timeline (like *Black Mirror*). Furthermore, ‘antho-logy’ derives from the Greek *anthos* (flower) + *logia* (collection), making it a near synonym to ‘daisy-chain’, which is my other image for Augustine’s distention.

In this distance opened between his addicted past and his recovered future, both of which are present in his resistance, time plays itself out. Put differently, it takes time for the recovering addict's repeated decisions to resist temptation to free himself from what turns him away from recovery. Thus, recovery demands a particular type of vigilance whereby past, present, and future are co-implicated in a meaningful thread. On the watch, the recovering addict must keep an eye on "the old days," which stay present as temptation to relapse, while simultaneously looking forward to a happier, healthier future, whose outstanding promise keeps the recovering addict going (11, 29). In simultaneously *holding the past* at a distance while *drawing the future near* (the phenomenon of resistance), the recovering addict must maintain a grasp on both. This tenacity, demanded by recovery, renders his life coherent (i.e. held-together). Quite simply, recovering from addiction means becoming able to *have* the time of your life without being strung-out.

Rather than remaining distended, recovery inaugurates a timeline that, as such, provides a throughline to one's life, stringing together one's past, present, and future in a meaningful history where time plays itself out as progression towards the end. As opposed to distention, then, the tenacity of recovery comes with a new experience of temporality which Augustine calls "extension" or "reaching-out." Rather than being "stretched out in distraction" by grasping at straws for happiness in "those future things which are transitory," Augustine "extends in reach" "to that which lies before me...which neither comes nor goes"—that is, the eternal enjoyment of God (11, 29; citing Phil. 3:13). Extension towards this end demands that Augustine resist enjoyment of earthly things, which is always a distraction. If "time flies when you're having fun," then Augustine's extended resistance to enjoying things transforms his experience of time: by resisting enjoyment, time no longer flies by him; instead, he flies through time, hastening his way to the end he attempts to reach. In other words, reaching out (ex-tending) towards the end reconstitutes time as a quasi-spatial expanse—just like the "strange country" of his earlier metaphor—through which he must progress if he is to become "happy without end" (9, 3).³⁵

According to this recovery program, you will be cured of your condition only by reaching the end of life. Augustine's extended recovery therefore opens an indefinite temporal expanse—*now . . . then*—which he attempts to traverse via his ongoing resistance. In this way, the recovering addict "does time" in the double sense that he ongoingly enacts the progress of his life itself; and yet, in so doing, creates a life of indefinite awaiting or expectation, like a psychological purgatory. Thus, by setting down

³⁵ Missing from this draft is an discussion here of *ambitio saeculi* (something like "career ambition" + "self-importance), which at this juncture in his thought process reveals itself to be a fundamental obstacle to recovery because it offers a worldly teleology that, as such, provides a false fruitfulness, false continence, false extension, false meaning. He sees career goals as ultimately another form of distraction—albeit a very compelling one, which actually makes it worse.

the road to recovery, the addict places himself indefinitely in a state where he does not want to be; by doing time, he does hard time: “I can be *here*, but don’t want to stay; I want to be *there*, but cannot go—misery on both grounds!” (10, 40).

Recovery, then, transforms the time of one’s life into a mean-time. When one lives *now* in and through reaching out for *then*—the mode of extension—the present becomes the meantime as in the *not-yet*, the *until*. However, this meantime is not neutral; it is precisely mean. As Kierkegaard says, “The indefinite as-long-as-it-takes-until...has something curiously corrupting about it” (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 282). That is, recovery’s transformation of the present into the meantime results in an urgency whereby the recovering addict ironically drags out time as he tries to fly through it. Put differently, by holding the past at a distance and reaching out for the future (which makes his life coherent), the recovering addict puts time in (slow-) motion.

Theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff aptly summarizes this frustration:

Has Augustine not overlooked the fact that [to resist enjoyment] is to open oneself to a new mode of grief? When Augustine recommends to us the love of God as the only source of abiding happiness...[h]e is urging that we delight in the experience of the *presence* of God. It was the *presence* of his friend that “was sweeter to me than all the pleasures of life...” (*Confessions* IV, 44). This sweetness was to be replaced by the sweetness of God’s presence. Augustine knew of that sweetness. Looking out from a window into the courtyard in a house in Ostia, he was discoursing with his mother, shortly before her death, about God. “And while we spoke of the eternal wisdom,” he says, “longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it” (IX, 10). He imagines that blissful experience prolonged. But it is never prolonged, not in our world. The experience of the saints through the ages is the experience of the presence of God interrupted.³⁶

For the recovering addict, life is a perpetual *fructus interruptus*—an enjoyment that remains incomplete. Aptly, Marion translates Augustine’s *extensio* not as extension, or reaching out, but as extraction: pulling-out.³⁷ According to him, pulling out of the world is the only way to properly enjoy it (ironic, coming from a Catholic!). In other words, as

³⁶ Nicolas Wolterstorff, “Suffering Love” in *Augustine’s Confessions: Critical Essays*. Ed. William E. Mann. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. 111.

³⁷ “We could understand [the advancement of faith] this way: the *attraction* can be liberated from (or renounce) the distraction of *distentio*, which dissipates in the passing stream, all the while remaining in temporality (which is maintained in the completion *after* this life), not through the illusion of being frozen in eternity (which remains decidedly proper to God) but by stretching out in *extensio* toward ‘the things that are ahead’, the things of God, going so far as to be extracted from the variations of the world. [...] A translation...now becomes possible, despite the difficulty acknowledged by all. I suggest...*extraction* for *extensio* (in the sense of a broadening and sometimes equivalent to a liberation” (*In the Self’s Place*, 227).

long as we are alive on earth, we cannot fully come into God's love—all our enjoyment remains provisional and mediated until we reach the end, that is, completion, at our (not-so-little) death, through which alone we become truly happy because eternally present with God.³⁸ In this way, the recovering addict trades irregular heartbreak for consistent frustration. But what is a heart without its ups and downs? Flatlined.

³⁸ Although it is we who wait until we can come fully into God's love, it is God who fills a hole inside us that we cannot fill on our own. The sexual metaphor as a paradigm for understanding the Christian's and the Church's relation to God is nothing new. It begins in the Song of Songs (which is an erotic poem love letter) and continues through early Church fathers (like Origen) who self-castrates (google the Medieval paintings of this; there are so many) in order to physically embody their spiritual identity as "the bride of Christ."