

From Discord to Harmony: Mapping Saint Augustine's Spiritual Journey

Night and Day. Love and hate. Heaven and Hell. All of these things exist in opposition with each other. However, they are not always in complete isolation from one another but can be found to coexist. For example, people feel like "they can't be with someone but can't be without them". Or a total eclipse where the moon and the sun coincide, or even the entire struggle of a mortal Christian life: to combat the temptations of hell with the truth of heaven. Saint Augustine discusses the presence of this type of opposition as it relates to his spiritual journey in his autobiography, *Confessions*. He presents discordant oppositions that symbolize the struggle with sin and harmonious oppositions that signify the Christian struggle to define and seek God's awesomeness. The paradoxes he observes during his spiritual explorations can either be discordant because they are inconsistent with the truth (God), or harmonious because they attempt to exemplify the truth of God. The former defines an inner turmoil while the latter is the source of an indescribable peace. Consequently, in the *Confessions*, Augustine marks his tumultuous spiritual journey with discordant and harmonious oppositions that lead him to his conversion and the solace of God's truth.

Augustine's goal throughout his spiritual journey is to reach the truth. The truth he seeks is one that is consistent and irrefutable, like that of God. Yet, the truth of God is one that cannot be described with the human language. It can only be expressed with contraries and paradoxes. Being human, sinful and mortal, Augustine lacks the ability to portray the unity of God: the mortal world of multiplicity and time muddles the expression of His true eternal and unified essence. Yet the contraries that Augustine expresses, though inadequate, are the closest kind of discourse that relay the truth of God and are therefore harmonious oppositions. In his opening laudation to the Lord, Augustine muses, "You are jealous in a way that is free of anxiety, you

repent (Gen. 6:6) without the pain of regret, you are wrathful and remain tranquil. You will a change without any change in your design. You recover what you find you have never lost,” (I. iv.4). This is his first attempt to capture God’s being in words and it all comes out in paradoxes. He sets God above humans with the internal juxtaposition of words in his description: “Jealous” in that he wants to be the only one who receives praise but “free of anxiety” because His jealousy is, paradoxically, a form of generosity. This opposition models how God exercises his power without the flaws of mortals. He has constant self-control (tranquil) and sureness (rather than anxiety) when he carries out his will. For humans, something like wrath cannot also be tranquil and so for them to exist together, they must become a unified supernatural force that can only be implemented with the utmost patience. Who but God could unite these opposing qualities? Mortals are too impure to attain this subtle balance; they would be either too wrathful or too tranquil.

Augustine continues his description of God with the observation; “Your omnipotence is never far from us, even when we are far from you,” (II.ii.3). Here, again another harmonious opposition is used to describe God. The present paradox exemplifies God’s benevolence and love for humans. Even if they forsake him, he never abandons them. God is always there to depend on when humans are led astray by their sin. “The satiety of [His] love is insatiable” (II. x.18), meaning that the more He loves humans, the more love humans want from Him. There is no limit to the supply of God’s love but there is also not enough to satisfy the ongoing yearnings of mortals who live His truth and just want to be more like him and closer to him. This is a paradoxical truth about God’s power, or a harmonious opposition. His most important influence comes from his ability to “strike to heal, [and] bring death... that we should not die apart from [him] (Deut. 32:39). (II.ii. 4). This speaks to God’s role in the nature of the mortal condition, and

it is the source of the conflict and dismay in Augustine's life. God does not truly punish people he simply leads them closer to him and offers them true healing. God brings death so that humans can live with him eternally; people must 'die' to worldly things so that they may truly live in worship to Him. Even though people often view death as dismal and dark it is actually a promise of a life in heaven if people are faithful to God while on Earth. This is the solace that Augustine searches for throughout his life. This congruency and peace found in God is Augustine's ultimate goal in his spiritual journey.

It is firstly as a student at Carthage that Augustine begins his spiritual musings. He starts to see faults with his understanding of certain conceptions, specifically with the nature of evil. He notes retrospectively as Bishop that, "while travelling away from the truth I thought I was going towards it," (III.vii.12). This is a discordant opposition because Augustine was going away from the truth of God. It is an opposition that does not create a truth, but something inconsistent with God. He did not realize that God was an omnipotent Being or that evil was the absence of goodness and being; yet he thought he knew the truth. He endures more internal conflict as a Manichean during the death of his friend, reflecting that he and most people "seek the happy life in the region of death," (XI.xii.18) and not in God. The region of death refers to the life of sin that tempts people into trusting false, ephemeral solutions like human relationships. This is in opposition with the happy life, which is eternal, life with God in catholic Christianity. Again, this opposition presents an incongruity with God's truth and power. When Augustine experiences this, he laments and searches for comfort but can find none because he has not given himself to the Lord yet. He is a Manichean and not a catholic Christian yet. In his state of dismay he found that "the faster [mortals] grow to be, the quicker they rush towards non-being" (IV.x.15), which means the farther they stray from God the farther they are from Being. Even though all humans

are moving toward non-being, forsaking God speeds up this process. This again is a discordant opposition that Augustine voices as he reflects on his life as a Manichaean. It highlights that the sin he lived in was moving him faster towards non-being, evil, and away from the truth of God.

Furthermore, Augustine becomes a less zealous follower of Manichaeism as he finds inconsistencies in its beliefs. It does not give him the irrefutable truth and solace that he seeks. Gradually, he notices that in response to arguments to Bible scripture “the Manichee answer seemed... weak,”(V.xi.21). As a Manichee, he believed that evil was “a kind of material substance with its own foul and misshapen mass,”(V.x.20) but also believed that God created everything: he could not come to terms with the idea that God created evil. This marks an internal conflict and realization that leads Augustine closer to Catholicism, a contradictory opposition that lead him to the truth. Augustine even found discordant oppositions within the secular aspects of life. In a general statement about the faults of humans he says, “for it is by climbing up against God that you have fallen,” (IV.xii.19) which applies to his own tendencies. He exhibits this paradox in relation to sex and relationships. He admits that he “used to love people on the basis of human judgment, not [God’s],” (IV.xiv.22), and that “sensual folly assumed domination over [himself]... acts allowed by shameful humanity but under [God’s] law illicit”(II.ii.4). Upon acknowledging this he moves closer to God and the truth. As soon as he determines the source of conflict and turmoil and seeks elsewhere to find some consistent peace.

Augustine progresses through different systems of thought on his way to God but continually rejects them as he views them to be inconsistent with the truth, or unable to satiate his yearning for peace. His decision around the teachings of the Platonists demonstrates this progression. Scholars such as Brian Dobell in *Augustine’s Intellectual Conversion: The Journey from Platonism to Christianity* specify the opposition between the Platonic ascent to the truth and

the Christian ascent to the truth. In response to the passage in Book 7 (VII.xx.26), Dobell explains: “It is not merely that the Platonic ascents lack the way; it is that they constitute an impediment to the way. They caused Augustine to be ‘puffed up with knowledge’, a condition that leads to ‘destruction’ rather than to the blessed life. They offered the false promise of a path to salvation through reason, independent of Christ, when there is in fact only one way to the blessed life: ‘Christ our Saviour’, ” (Dobell, 209). Here, Dobell clarifies the opposition between a way towards Christ (Christianity) and a way away from Christ (Platonism). For Augustine, Platonism creates a discordant opposition that pushes him towards God’s truth. As Augustine reasons through his decision to potentially pursue God he finds that the Platonist method proves inconsistent with the teachings of the church and his ultimate goal to find peace; it makes him haughty, “full of...punishment,” (VII.xx.26) and lack penitence. This realization pushes Augustine to ascend higher in the Lord’s truth and teachings. As he denies one path he stands stronger on that of the Lord.

Additionally, in regards to the knowledge he encountered during his academic experiences, Augustine identifies deviations from the truth. He remarks that in those times, “I had my back to the light and my face towards the things which are illuminated,” (IV.xvi.30). The opposition present in this quote is between the knowledge that comes from the truth and the actual truth. There is also a metaphor that compares “light” to God, the actual truth, and “the illuminated” to the products of the truth, or concepts and creations. This illumination can create delusions and temptations. In other words Augustine lived in darkness, in things that may be “accessories” to the truth. His back was turned away from the Lord and only to his creations. This represents another discordant opposition because he is ignorant of God’s truth, as he focuses only on the pleasures of learning and not on that Being from whence the knowledge

came. He is never truly ‘enlightened’ as a result. Yet upon reflection Augustine explains that even his acute mind needed dependence and consistency in the Lord. He “was not ashamed to profess before men [his] blasphemies and to ‘bark against you’ like a dog (Judith 11:15),” (IV.xvi.31); this means that he needed correction and guidance from God. Even though he felt like he knew the truth, he was led by God to see that he had not completed his quest for the truth since he had not come to understand or accept God’s truth completely. So God let his journey continue.

Correspondingly, Augustine acknowledges how discordant oppositions not only found in his self but also in others, bring him closer to God. God loves “using people who love a life a death,” (V.viii.14) to guide Augustine. The people referenced in the quote are the dishonest pupils of Carthage. The death they love includes vandalism, mindlessness, and disrespect. The opposition found here operates between death and life. Death signifies the sin they enjoy, and life signifies their mortal time on Earth. Essentially, they conduct their lives in a deathly or sinful manner when they should orient themselves towards the eternal, constant, virtuous life, which is only found in God. This is what makes the opposition discordant. At the same time, the sinful students are, paradoxically, pushing Augustine towards God. Since the Carthage students are intolerable, Augustine moves to Rome where he hears there are more respectful students. However, when he gets to Rome he finds that these students live in death as well. The Roman pupils break “their word and out of love of money [treat] fairness as something to be flouted,” (V.xii.22). They move *away* from God through their sinful lives full of “filthy lucre” and “fornication” (discordant opposition), which is in opposition with Augustine’s progression *towards* God. This is similar to the idea that forsaking God moves one towards non-being or away from God at a quicker pace. Their cupidity propels Augustine to take a job offer in Milan,

the place where he ultimately converts. The movement from Carthage, to Rome then finally to Milan represents a spiritual journey where each displacement stems from the discordant oppositions of the previous place. He even admits that his “move [to Milan] was to end [his] association with [the Manichees],” (V.xiii.23), thereby proving that his physical transition mirrors his spiritual journey. This illustrates an apparent progression to the truth, to God, to congruency and peace.

It is evident that Augustine is moving closer to God and his conversion through harmonious oppositions that surface in Milan. Ambrose, the bishop acts as a father to him, preaches and ministers the “sober intoxication of [the Lord’s] wine,” (V.xiii.23) and subliminally Augustine begins to sway towards the Lord. The ideas of intoxication and sobriety stand in opposition within the quote. It demonstrates that truth of the Lord is overwhelming and transformative like alcoholic spirits but does not impair people but rather gives them clarity and direction as if sober. This is a harmonious opposition found in the Catholic faith as it speaks to the truth of God’s power. It illustrates how God convinces people to find congruency in him. Subsequently, upon his encounter with Ambrose Augustine finally begins to explore Catholicism in depth and he even abandons the Manichees and chooses to “be a catechumen in the Catholic Church,” (V.xiv. 25). This is the final path he explores before finding truth in God and converting.

Now, as a catechumen, Augustine struggles with the decision to convert. He underlines this struggle when he says: “the Catholic faith appeared not to have been defeated but also not yet to be the conqueror” (V.xiv. 24). This marks a turning point, as this is the first neutral opposition in the book since the opposition neither negates nor highlights the truth of God. Augustine comes to a realization that what he used to believe was not the truth and so is now

beginning to consider the Lord. Gradually, he transitions to God, in a sort of ascension to the truth. Additionally, the timing of his neutrality is fitting because it comes at the midpoint (Book V) of his journey where he stands equidistant from his past life of sin and his future life with God (conversion in Book VIII). The structure of the chapters is such that the reader can visualize the suspension and standstill that Augustine comes to.

Yet even as he moves closer to God he still confronts conflict and indecision. He walks the path of the Lord tentatively as he stumbles across more discordant oppositions that confuse him. He talks of how he “fled from [the happy life] at the same time [he] was seeking for it” (VI.xi. 20) because he did not fully trust that a life with God was going to satisfy him as much as his life of sin. The idea of fleeing and seeking are in direct opposition from one another to highlight this inner turmoil, and it thus presents itself as discordant as it deviates him from God. The quote demonstrates that even though he has made a firm commitment to explore God’s path, the way he conducts his life may be incongruent with his beliefs in God. His sexual desires and worldly ambitions still tempt him and he remains too weak to overcome his fears of the unfamiliar comfort of God. Clearly, his spiritual journey continues to be marked with the confusion and distraction of these inner discordant oppositions that drag him both towards and away from the truth. He acknowledges: “I was caught up to you by your beauty and quickly torn away from you by my weight,” (VII.xvii.23). It is as if he endures constant hindrances and obstacles to his goal. Augustine clearly delineates this transition period and contrasts his own heavy, dreadful mortal burdens using the word “weight” against God’s lightweight and peaceful nature using the word “beauty”. The opposition of the phrase comes from the prepositions “to” and “by” and the opposing verbs “caught and “torn”. It is as if Augustine achieves unity with the Lord just as fast as he disconnects from him, creating no progress. This lack of progress towards

the truth creates both discordance and a standstill (neutral opposition) with his plan to pursue God's truth.

In considering that Augustine constantly finds himself restless and at an involuntary halt, it is important to contemplate what pushes him forward. Why does he not succumb to his sinful tendencies? It is because in the midst of his turmoil and temptation the power of the Lord reorients him. He receives a trembling vision and he recounts that "at that moment [he] saw [God's] invisible nature understood through the things which are made," (VII.xvii.23), and this inspires him to move forward. Sight and invisibility go against each other in the phrase: seemingly opposite concepts that create a truth. When Augustine observes this paradox about God, he lays eyes on the truth of God making this opposition harmonious. The vision causes Augustine to yearn to reestablish that connection with God and so seeks the intercessor between God and man, Jesus Christ, who keeps him on the path of righteousness. Carl G. Vaught phrases this transition as such: "Augustine moves from bondage to liberation, not only because of the misguided teaching of [the Manichees] but also because the hands of God do not desert him." (Vaught, 125). Again, there is movement from sin to truth, from conflict to resolve. Vaught claims that the ungodly aspects holding Augustine back imprison him, and do not just hinder him from God yet the Lord is still with him. The Lord exposes himself to Augustine through intermittent harmonious oppositions to show that he will "not desert him." This argument remains consistent with idea of moving from burden to comfort or from discordant opposition to harmonious opposition. His own turmoil cannot deter him from God now.

Soon after this reassurance Augustine moves swiftly and directly down the path to conversion, his will to submit to God becomes more palpable and certain. However, even as the

new will solidifies, the old sinful wills are too habitual and thus hold him back. He complains that his “two wills, one old, the other new, one carnal, the other spiritual, were in conflict with one another, and their discord robbed [his] soul of all concentration,” (VIII.v.10). He even notes that the opposition of his wills is in “discord”. This conflict evidently prevents him from moving towards God due to the influence, temptation, and ease at which his sinful will could take over once more. His “carnal”, sinful, human, self collide with his “spiritual” peaceful, and consistently true prospective life: a true discordant opposition. When Augustine listens to other people’s journey to conversion he feels even more encouraged to submit to God and to live His truth but faces even more turmoil because he fears leaving the life of sin that satisfied him for so long. The more he wants to convert, the more opposition he meets with carrying out his decision. “In the agony of death [he] was coming to life,”(VIII.viii.19): this represents a new type of harmonious opposition. The discordance of sin moves him towards God instead of just understanding a statement of the Lord’s truth. This is a necessary part in the build up to the conversion. He must endure this discordance of his divided will, the “death” of sin before he can truly be with the Lord. He must use God’s grace to vanquish all of the holds his sins have over him with long enough to let God fill him.

In the midst of this struggle he comes to a standstill; as he says, “I was neither wholly willing nor wholly unwilling,” (VIII.x.22). This is a neutral opposition seeing as he neither moves towards God or away from God. The strength of his wills are equal and opposite causing him to move nowhere. His indecision mounts to a point where he contemplates dying instead of choosing, but then he hears the command to “Pick up and read” (VIII.xii.29). When he reads the scripture (Romans 13:13-14), “it was if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into [his] heart.” (VIII. xii.29),” and he finally finds rest. He fully submits himself to the truth and ways of God.

As we have seen, his journey to his conversion is full of discordant oppositions, harmonious oppositions and neutral oppositions. All of the different types of opposition he faces in his life bombard him during his final moments as an unconverted sinner as if in a last attempt to sway him away from the God's truth. When in fact the overwhelming oppositions did almost did the opposite, by laying the path towards his conversion and not away from it. This conflict is necessary in the pursuit of God so that the peace of God can be that much sweeter. After this, Augustine finally accepts the Lord into his heart and confidently abides in his peace and truth. He has found congruence for all discordant and neutral oppositions in the harmonious opposition that exemplifies the truth of the Lord. In short, he reaches the end of his spiritual journey.

Now that Augustine has found and accepted the Christian God as his truth and solace from the tumult of sin, an evident change can be observed in his mindset. Jason David BeDuhn defines conversion as such: "It entails taking up a role and set of performative expectations, and putting oneself at the disposal of an epistemic apparatus as a reproduction and transmitter of its self-ordering system. Only such a decision of self subjection is required," (BeDuhn, 245). Augustine's conversion is consistent with this definition: he totally submits himself to God and his truth. However, that is not the only requirement for true conversion. After conversion, one must also be ever vigilant in ordering his/her steps in the path he/she commits to. One must be willing to constantly fight against the temptations of one's past sins and remain holy. Augustine demonstrates this will after his conversion. He fears confronting his beliefs less as he comments: "every breath of opposition from any deceitful tongue had the power not to dampen my zeal but to inflame it the more," (XI.ii. 3). Now when he faces intellectual challenges about the nature of God he is confident enough to combat the deceit with his newfound zealousness. Before, when he heard things conflicting with the truth of God, he contemplated them and believed them at

times. This added to his spiritual confusion and strayed away from God. Now that he is steadfast in God's truth no other truth can prosper against it. He even yearns for God more now that he is with him: "You sent your fragrance--I drew in my breath and I pant for you; I tasted you and now I hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I was on fire within your peace."

(X.xxvii.38). Peace and fire are not usually associated with one another but this contrast creates a final harmonious opposition. This opposition illustrates the idea that finding peace in God has given him solace (peace) and rejuvenation (fire) after his overwhelming internal conflicts. This demonstrates that he has undergone a full conversion and has truly found resolve in the harmonious oppositions of the Lord.

Ultimately, Augustine's journey parallels that of many people in their search for happiness and peace. Every time he thinks he has found an answer he is proven wrong and must seek for a new truth once more. He moves from Manichaeism to Astrology to Platonism to Christianity where he ultimately does settle and find reconciliation for his turmoil in God's immutability. It was the acknowledgement of harmonious oppositions in the midst of discordant oppositions that led Augustine to God. The harmonious oppositions attempt to capture the truth and nature of God. These oppositions map out God's unified boundlessness. They illustrate the idea that he is everything because the oppositions that describe him are not in conflict but in full circle with one another. The consistency and all encompassing nature of God exemplify his omnipotence and omniscience; this is the idea that attracts Augustine. Similar to the idea that He is the Alpha and the Omega, beginning and the end, we can see that even when Augustine reaches the end of his spiritual journey he is only just beginning his walk with God.

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