INAUGURATING POSTCRITICAL PHILOSOPHY: A POLANYIAN MEDITATION ON CREATION AND CONVERSION IN AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS*

by R. Melvin Keiser

Abstract. Michael Polanyi names Augustine as inaugurator of his "postcritical" philosophy. To understand what this means by exploring creation in the *Confessions* will clarify complex problems in Augustine and articulate theological implications in Polanyi. Specifically, it will show why an autobiographical account of conversion ends speaking of creation; how creation can thus be understood as "personal" language; how creation can be recovered in a time preoccupied with conversion; how conversion and creation are linked with incarnation, hermeneutics, and confessional rhetoric; and it will suggest a contemporary use of creation language that connects the scientific and the religious.

Keywords: conversion; creation; hermeneutics; light; phenomenology; postcritical.

Augustine has a significant presence in twentieth-century philosophy. While Ludwig Wittgenstein and Maurice Merleau-Ponty incorporate him in the beginning of their major works,[1] Michael Polanyi claims him as the originator of what he calls "postcritical" philosophy: "In the fourth century A.D.," he writes, "St. Augustine brought the history of Greek philosophy to a close by inaugurating for the first time a postcritical philosophy." He says this because Augustine grounds all knowing in belief or faith: "He taught that all knowledge was a gift of grace, for which we must strive under the guidance of antecedent belief: *nisi credideritis, non intelligitis* [unless you believe, you will not understand]" (Polanyi 1958, 266).[2]

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In our concern to find a more fruitful way of comprehending the relation of the religious to nature and its scientific understanding, is it possible that we could learn from this person who stands at the origins of the medieval world and at the close of antiquity? The implication of Polanyi's remark is that he thinks that we can. His opus is to forge a new understanding of scientific knowing, and hence of all knowing, as a fundamentally personal act. While he does at moments reflect on God and the religious, the bulk of his work is to conceive a new epistemology and, based on it, a new ontology. If we can understand what Polanyi's naming of Augustine as inaugurator of postcritical thinking means, we would be in a position through this premodern thinker to draw out some theological implications in Polanyi for our era. Focusing on Augustine's account of creation according to Genesis 1 in his *Confessions* should allow us to discern what these implications are specifically for the relation between science and religion.

Because the task is complex, working on several levels at once, rather than developing a linear argument on one level, I have called this a "meditation." I am throughout, first of all, seeking to understand Augustine from a Polanyian perspective. If Polanyi is right that modernity has been obstructed by its "critical" perspective and that Augustine is conceiving a postcritical point of view, then our normal modern dualistic approach may well miss aspects in Augustine that Polanyi's viewpoint can reveal. I am seeking, secondly, to understand Polanyi better. What is going on in his thought so that he sees the origins of his view in this late antique-medieval transitional figure?

Besides working with Polanyi and Augustine towards their mutual illumination of theological implications in Polanyi and philosophical implications in Augustine, their imaginative interplay can shed light on the theological idea of creation and how we can begin to articulate it in a way that is faithful to contemporary science and yet transcends a dualistic framework. Modern theological reflection has shifted much of its attention from creation to conversion, from cosmos, now left to the scientists, to the individual soul, now staked out as the locus of divine agency. Augustine does not share this allergy to creation as he sees creation and conversion as similar acts, having identical structure. If postcritical reflection (which in the hands of Polanyi is thoroughly conversant with the findings of contemporary science) in fact lies in its origins in Augustine, then we can learn something of how to recover creation-language while not losing conversion-talk. Working with creation and conversion will simultaneously reflect back upon Polanyi. He has little to say about creation or conversion; in this meditation I am groping, therefore, to articulate some of the commitments he finds himself holding in the fruitfulness they intimate for theological reflection.

I also call this exploration a meditation because I am working with a wide range of issues that I believe are interrelated, so that clarification of one will shed light on the other. Understanding the relationship between conversion and creation will clarify some difficulties in his autobiography. One of the major problems in the *Confessions* is the connection between autobiography and Genesis. Why do the last two books, XII and XIII, on creation conclude the lengthy account of his early life as it led up to his conversion at the age of thirty-one? What does all this personal stuff, the bulk of the book, have to do with the origins of the world—conversion with creation?

Understanding this relationship will clarify as well the interconnections between incarnation, hermeneutics, and confessional rhetoric. Augustine describes his conversion from Neoplatonism to Christianity as an acceptance of the incarnation. In his discussion of creation he works out a method of interpretation to make room for his own divergence from what he took Moses to say in Genesis. Finally, he writes in a confessional form, mixing the personal and cosmic—questioning, extending a theme and then bending back upon its origins, and then reaching out again, discussion with, groping towards, importuning, and praying to God.

This is a meditation, furthermore, because I am seeking to reach a depth in Augustine. In seeking to disclose a side of him, not usually seen, it is necessary to descend to a level where some of these notions are latent. It is only in such depth that the wide range of issues can be seen to be interrelated.

Finally, this is a meditation because I seek to engage the reader not in debate but dialogue. The scientist should not be daunted by such a theological exploration nor the non-Christian by interpretation of a Christian text. If Polanyi is right that scientific and religious knowing are "personal," then they are reared upon our own commitments. What this, perhaps, momentary sojourn in Christian theology can provide is an opportunity to become more deeply and broadly aware of what one's own convictions are. It is in this fashion that Polanyi describes "the function of philosophic reflection" as "bringing to light, and affirming as my own, the beliefs implied in such of my thoughts and practices as I believe to be valid" (Polanyi 1958, 267).

Belief in Postcritical Perspective

The belief which Polanyi affirms is not doctrinal assent to an idea of God or Christ but an existential trust, a "tacit indwelling" of, and "tacit commitment" to multiple levels of being of which we are not directly aware: for example, our bodies in a social and natural world, our linguistic and cultural community, our direction for and criteria of the

intellectual quest, and our ultimate context as a cosmic heuristic field. We rely upon, grasp, and organize such levels unconsciously.

Explicit knowledge is the pattern that emerges from, and continues to be sustained by, this "tacit dimension." Thus, when we know 2+2=4, we have indwelt a numerical system, committing ourselves to numbers and the way of working with them we call addition. Yet we are also relying upon our muscles to write or say the numbers, our eyes to see them, and our math teachers who have taught us. Likewise with knowing an idea, such as creation and conversion, we tacitly indwell our bodily capacities to think and speak, our inherited system of thoughts and words, our experiences individual and communal, and our theological and cultural tradition. Such a "personal" concept of knowing means we, individually and communally, can know something of reality only by involving ourselves unconsciously with it, but at the same time we know something of ourselves, since in upholding explicit knowledge we are holding particular commitments of which we are indirectly aware in the act of holding and can become directly aware later in reflecting upon them.

Polanyi calls this personal method "postcritical" because he is concerned to go beyond the separation of belief from a knowledge that seeks to achieve an objective certainty detached from personal involvement, characteristic of the "critical" thinking of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, and the streams of modern empiricism and rationalism that have flowed from them. It is especially surprising, therefore, to find Polanyi locating the origins of postcritical thought in premodern Augustine. He does not intend by this, however, a return to dogmatic authority. He admires the "critical movement" of "the past four or five centuries" as "perhaps the most fruitful effort ever sustained by the human mind" (Polanyi 1958, 265). Yet he sees the need to rectify the alienating effects of critical thought by reuniting knowing with the personal, and he locates the beginning of such concern in Augustine's grounding of knowing upon belief.

The *Confessions* as an account of Augustine's personal life, his coming to Christian belief, should prove particularly fruitful in exhibiting his postcritical orientation. While this personal basis for knowing is quite evident in his autobiography, nowhere does he explicitly define belief as tacit indwelling and commitment. Nevertheless, they are implicit in his personal orientation. When we approach Augustine from a postcritical perspective, sensitive to the tacit dimension, we can discern beneath the usual meaning of belief as doctrinal assent the presence of such unconscious trust indispensable to our being human.

The Matter of Genesis

Augustine's view of creation is developed through an interpretation of Genesis 1. He begins his inquiry with the affirmation that God created the ordinary heaven and earth we dwell within: "you made heaven and earth—this heaven, which I see; this earth, on which I tread and from which comes the earthly body which I wear" (Augustine 1963, 12.2).[3] Yet he finds in Psalm 115:16 talk of an unordinary reality, a "heaven of heavens," distinct from the earth: "The heaven of heavens is the Lord's; but the earth hath He given to the children of men" (Augustine 1963, 12.2). And in Genesis 1:2 he finds talk of an unordinary earth as "invisible and without form" (Augustine 1963, 12.3). He takes the heaven and earth of the opening lines of Genesis, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," to be these unordinary realities, both invisible, the "heaven of heavens" as formed and this "earth" as formless. He sets for himself the task of explaining what these mean and how from these invisible realities God created the visible earth and sky.

The heaven of heavens is an "intellectual creature" which forever contemplates God from outside of time (Augustine 1963, 12.9). While capable of change, it remains unchanged; it never falls away from its contemplative delight in God (Augustine 1963, 12.12,15). While formed, it is invisible, existing beyond our sensuous sight (Augustine 1963, 12.2). It is the "house" or "city" and the created "wisdom" of God. It is the spiritual heaven, the goal of our earthly pilgrimage (Augustine 1963, 12.11,15).

The earth which God made in the beginning is formless matter (Augustine 1963, 12.3,8). While "not absolutely nothing," it is "next-to-nothing" (Augustine 1963, 12.3,15); like the heaven of heavens, it is beyond time (Augustine 1963, 12.12). It is out of this invisible and formless earth that the heaven, that is the sky, and the earth of our visible temporal world are made (Augustine 1963, 12.12). The world we live in is not, therefore, made out of nothing; it is formed out of preexistent matter—although matter does not temporally precede form, since there is no time until there is a formed world, but ontologically underlies it (Augustine 1963, 12.29). Nevertheless, this formless matter is made by God out of nothing: "For you, Lord, made the world out of a matter which was without form, and it was from nothing that you made this formless matter . . ." (Augustine 1963, 12.8).

Why does Augustine take this route to affirm God's creation of the world? One reason is clear, and it is an incident in the history of biblical interpretation worthy of a footnote. The springboard from which this imaginative leap comes is a mistaken translation. Augustine's Latin Bible translates "tohu va bohu" in Genesis 1:2 as "invisible and without

form," whereas the correct translation is "without form and void" (as in the Revised Standard Version). He thus enters upon these complexities because he thinks he must explain invisibility.

However, there is another reason for this. Plato believed in the existence of formless matter. The origin of the world for him was brought about by the creative agency giving form to this formless stuff (Plato 1957, 30A). Augustine by his two-step creation is thus able to remain faithful to the Platonic tradition of creating as a forming of the formless even as he is loyal to the Christian tradition of *creatio ex nihilo*.

Turning to Light: Conversion and Creation

Something further, however, is at work beyond these textual and contextual points. Why does Augustine speak at all of creation in a narrative about his own conversion? His account begins with his birth. He comes into this mortal life or "vital death" from he knows not where. God, he says, "fashioned me in time" (Augustine 1963, 1.6), although he does not remember; nor does he remember the welcoming milk at his mother's breast, the desire for bodily pleasure, or discontent over bodily pain. From these hidden beginnings he describes the emergence of human consciousness, the learning of language, and the fall into sin by the excess of desire, seeking pleasures in creatures rather than in God (Augustine 1963, 1.6-20), by "being turned away from you, the One" so as to be lost "in the distractions of the Many" (Augustine 1963, 2.1).

His conversion comes as a turning away from the Many to the One, from the sins of the flesh to the spiritual life in God, from his own will to God's will (Augustine 1963, 8.6-9.1). This is a turning from darkness to light: "we are enlightened by you, so that *having been sometimes darkness, we may be light in Thee*" (Augustine 1963, 9.4).[4] We become light as we participate in the Light. Turning within, "I entered into the innermost part of myself," he says, "and I saw with my soul's eye (such as it was) an unchangeable light shining above this eye of my soul and above my mind" (Augustine 1963, 7.10). He then describes the mystical ascent just prior to his conversion that carries him from the ordinary world of light to the realization "that the unchangeable is to be preferred to the changeable" and to a "trembling glance" of "That Which Is" (Augustine 1963, 7.17). However, he had not yet the strength to sustain his enjoyment of God until he embraced the Mediator (Augustine 1963, 7.18) and received into his heart the darkness-dispelling Light (Augustine 1963, 8.12).

What then does this autobiographical account leading up through his conversion have to do with creation? The story of his birth, human development, and becoming a fully committed Christian is a genesis of

a kind, like the origins of the world. The *Confessions* are a genesis, an account of origins, personal and cosmic. More precisely, Augustine talks about the creation of the world in exactly the same language as conversion: as a turning to the Light or Word.

> And how had that original beginning of your spiritual creation deserved to have even that dark, watery existence, like the deep, and unlike you? An existence that by the same Word was to be turned [*converteretur*] toward the Word by which it was created and, receiving light from it, should become light, not in equality with you, but nevertheless conformed to a form that is equal to you. . . . But *good it is* for it always to *hold fast to Thee*, lest it should lose by turning away from you the light which it gained by turning toward you [*conversione*], and should fall back again into the life that is like the dark deep. For we too who in our souls are a spiritual creation, when turned away from you, our light, have been in this life *sometimes darkness*, and still labor among the remains of our obscurity, until in your only Son we become *Thy righteousness, like the mountains of God* (Augustine 1963, 13.2).

Indeed, he calls creation a conversion: "I have said much of the heaven of heavens and of the earth invisible and without form and of the dark deep, dark in respect to the flux and the disorder of its spiritual formlessness, until it became *converted* [*converteretur*] to Him from whom it received its humble degree of life and by His illumination became a life of beauty, and was the heaven of that other heaven which was later created between water and water" (Augustine 1963, 13.5; my italics). The creative and converting activities are identical; the *Confessions* are an account of conversion, both personal and cosmic, even as they are an account of creation, personal and cosmic.

This turning from formlessness to form is expressed not only in terms of movement from darkness to light but through a dense weave of images from different aspects of his concrete life. His body is transformed. Where he had sat in the garden in a foetal position, violently clasping his knees, trying to move his body yet feeling bound, he is now freed from those bonds born into new life so that his bones, heart, and tongue can praise God (Augustine 1963, 7.8, 9.1). Where his breath was constricted and his chest had hurt from too much literary activity, impairing his speaking so that he considered giving up teaching, he now has the wish fixed in him for the leisure to see how God is Lord (Augustine 1963, 9.2). Where he had wept copiously, a veritable sea of tears, he is transported into calmness and joy (Augustine 1963, 8.12). Where he had tasted the abyss of corruption in the pleasures of the flesh, he now tastes the sweetness of God who has entered into him (Augustine 1963, 9.1).

Secondly, he is changed in his will. From the incapacitating conflict of will, he passes into the freedom of one whole will in harmony with God (Augustine 1963, 8.8-9.1). Finally, his language is newborn. He is carried by grace into conversion through a rich weave of words. In the

first half of Book VIII he speaks of how Simplicianus had told the story of Victorinus's conversion and then of how Ponticianus had told the story of his own conversion through a conversation with friends who had just encountered a book about the life of St. Antony. Following this account Augustine tells of his own conversation with his friend Alypius, their sitting in the garden adjoining their house in silence, his hearing a voice, as if a child in play, say: "Take up and read," and interpreting it as a command of God. And so, like Antony who was converted by hearing the Gospel being read as if it were speaking to him, opening Paul's Letters he found the words his eyes lit upon to speak as from God to his own condition. Upon reading he is filled with light and then speaks again in an altered way to his friend of what had been wrought in him. Silence is as important as words in this narrative within narratives and accounts of dialogue. Alypius waits in silence (Augustine 1963, 8.8,11) through Augustine's Christ-like anguish in the garden; and then Augustine takes up and reads in silence (Augustine 1963, 8.12). The result is the birth of new language: "my infant tongue spake freely" (Augustine 1951, 150).[5]

On these levels of body, will, and language Augustine is turned from formlessness to form, or at least from less or improper form to more or fitting form. In all this individual turning there are intimations of cosmic converting-creating. There is a resonance in his constricted breathing of the breath or spirit (the word is the same in the Hebrew) of God that moved freely upon the primordial deep by which God shaped the world. All those tears hint of that watery deep that precedes the divine formative activity.[6] Silence is the context of his passage from old to new speech just as silence is that out of which God creates; similarly Augustine's stories and dialogue are the vehicles of God's turning Augustine's self to the light just as the Word is God's vehicle of creating the world.

Out of the formlessness of his neonatality, Augustine enters the human order; out of the formlessness of a life distracted among the many—of a constricted body, conflicted will, and constrained and laborious speech—he is turned to the Christian faith; and out of the formlessness of matter that is next-to-nothing—that watery deep in silence moved across by the breath of God—the world of sky and earth is fashioned. The cosmic genesis is, therefore, a fitting conclusion to this autobiography because it is the full spatial and temporal context of individual genesis, which are alike the formative activity of God.

Personal Knowing of Conversion and Creation

In his description of his journey to Christian faith and this surprising identification of creation and conversion, we can see the postcritical

nature of Augustine's thought. The knowledge he acquires is obviously personal as he seeks to know his past and to understand how he came to faith. Yet this self-knowledge is personal not merely in content but in form as well. Since the knowledge he gains is not simply about himself but also about the cosmos, this identification suggests that the form of cosmic knowing is similarly personal.

While in no way explicit, the postcritical grounding of knowing on belief as tacit indwelling is implicit here, discernible in three ways. First, from his postconversion perspective of faith, as one way, Augustine is seeking to understand his own past. What he comes to know explicitly only after his conversion—the divine formative agency bringing human and religious order out of the formless stuff of his existence—is that which he has already experienced tacitly in living his earlier life. Indwelling tacitly all the ingredients of his life present in his postconversion state, he comes to understand his past life and conversion in terms of this explicit pattern. Second, from the perspective of his preconversion life, an earlier way, indwelling the achievements of human maturity (becoming conscious, learning to speak and think, appropriating a cultural heritage) and failures of his sinful life (wayward commitments to self-will, the flesh, and the many) depicted in his account, he is converted and comes to accept the Christian faith. Finally, from his postconversion perspective indwelling his conversion experience, he sees that it is the same pattern at work in the formation of the world.

Not only does he discover the cosmic pattern by relying tacitly on the individual pattern, he becomes clearer about the nature of the individual by thinking directly about the cosmic. His actual account in Book 8 of his conversion does not state explicitly that this is a turning toward the Light, even though he speaks of the moment ending as "my heart was filled with a light" (Augustine 1963, 8.12); instead it speaks of turning from the flesh and self-will to God. Creation is not mentioned. His conversion is a turning to the Light but he only becomes fully aware of this pattern of interpretation as he seeks to understand the cosmic origins based on his newly found belief. This process of becoming aware of one's own beliefs while exploring a subject matter Polanyi sees as fundamental to Augustine's method: "His maxim *nisi credideritis non intelligitis* expresses this logical requirement. It says, as I understand it, that the process of examining any topic is both an exploration of the topic, and an exegesis of our fundamental beliefs in the light of which we approach it; a dialectical combination of exploration and exegesis. Our fundamental beliefs are continuously reconsiderd in the course of such a process, but only within the scope of their own basic premisses" (Polanyi 1958, 267). Exploration of creation has brought to light this fundamental pattern of belief: that conversion, like creation, is a

movement from formlessness to order, a turning or converting from darkness to Light. To know this is to rely upon unconscious belief as tacit indwelling.

Incarnate Light

How then does the incarnation relate to this identical pattern in conversion and creation; how does it shed light on the postcritical nature of Augustine's thought? The difference, he tells us, between Neoplatonism (or "Platonism" as he calls it) and Christianity lies in the incarnation. While Platonists believed in the presence of the Light in world and soul, "I did not find then," he says, that *the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us*" (Augustine 1963, 7.9). Emptying himself, the Word took on human flesh and came unto his own, was rejected and crucified, but exalted by God (Augustine 1963, 7.9). While Platonists believed in the soul's receiving of the eternal Word's fullness and the mind being renewed by participating in "the wisdom that abides in them" (Augustine 1963, 7.9), they did not understand the necessity to let go of their own wisdom and that they could seek forgiveness for sins in the life of the flesh because the Word had entered human flesh, the mark of such enfleshment being that Christ died. In short, divinity for Platonists is in soul and world but not, as it is for Christians, in the flesh.

While Augustine is surely orthodox in his Christology—the self-emptying of the Son, the crucifixion and resurrection, and the resulting forgiveness of sins and the empowering of us as children of God—there is something in addition at work, for this is a Logos Christology. The Word present in the flesh of Jesus is "*that true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world*" (Augustine 1963, 7.9). The same Light or Word is present in the flesh of Augustine; without its indwelling presence he could not exist: "I could not exist therefore, my God, were it not for your existence in me" (Augustine 1963, 1.2). That which he finds present in Christ, he also finds incarnate in his own experience. The search to understand his past life, and how his conversion has come about, has discovered the presence of this Light enlightening him, drawing him from the formlessness of his origins to the order of the children of God. Moved from unlikeness to likeness by the Light, he knows himself in the Light "by means of your light shining upon me" so as to "become light, not in equality with you, but nevertheless conformed to a form that is equal to you" (Augustine 1963, 10.5, 13.2, also 12.28). Relying tacitly upon the eternal Light in his life, he has come to understand himself and to be conformed to the Light by God's creative-redemptive agency incarnate in the finitude and temporality of his fleshly existence. Incarnation is central to creation and conver-

sion (even though Augustine mentions little concerning Jesus in relation to either) because the Light or Word is embodied in reality, personal and cosmic, drawing it from the formless dark to the order of light. In fact, Augustine may have so little to say about Jesus because he is stressing the all-pervasive presence of the eternal Light incarnate in being and all human flesh. From a postcritical perspective, faith—not as a doctrinal assent but as the experience of this incarnateness, as reliance upon it—is the basis for knowledge—knowledge of conversion and of creation.

Hermeneutics and the Richness of Meaning

What bearing does the hermeneutical have on conversion and creation? The textual problem that precipitates Augustine's hermeneutical reflections is his own interpretation of Genesis 1. Others disagree with his interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2 and say that by heaven and earth Moses, whom they considered the author, did not mean the spiritual heaven of heavens and the invisible formless matter but rather heaven and earth, the ordinary world we know. Augustine then suggests other possible interpretations as well. He responds to these by saying such words can contain various meanings all of which can be true. An interpreter may only fasten on one of these meanings; the author himself may not be aware of all the meanings of what he is saying:

> Now, as with burning heart I confess these things to you, my God, light of my eyes in secret, what harm does it do me if different meanings, which are nevertheless all true, can be gathered from these words? What harm can it do me if my view of what Moses meant is different from someone else's view? . . . what harm can it do if a man grasps hold of something which you, who are the light of all truthful minds, show him is true, even if the author whom he is reading did not grasp this truth—though of course the author did express a truth, but a different one? (Augustine 1963, 12.18).

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what Moses meant; it would be rash to assert he meant only one particular meaning. The interpretative task is then to grasp the multiple meanings within the truth, to "try to find out your meaning through the meaning of your servant" (Augustine 1963, 12.23).

Correlative with this hermeneutical task is the affirmation of the multiple meanings of words; there is an "abundance of perfectly true meanings which can be extracted from those words" (Augustine 1963, 12.25). If he were to have written Genesis, Augustine speculates, he would have preferred to have written in a way that would maximize the richness of meaning of words so that every person, at whatever level of understanding, might grasp some aspect of the truth: "I should prefer to write in such a way that my words could convey any truth that anyone

could grasp on such matters, rather than to set down one true meaning so clearly as to exclude all other meanings . . ." (Augustine 1963, 12.31, cf. 12.26-27). Words are not then literal, in the sense that they have only one meaning nor in the sense that they are all about material things. He says explicitly "that some people are used to thinking in material terms," so that some "think of God as though He were a kind of man or else like some great force associated with an enormous mass, and they imagine that by some new and sudden decision He made heaven and earth outside Himself and, as it were, in some place spatially separated from Himself . . ." (Augustine 1963, 12.27). Nevertheless, there is a protection for the weak in this way of thinking in which a healthy faith can be built. However, for the stronger they "need no longer think of your words as a nest. To them they are shady gardens of fruit, and they see the fruit hidden under the leaves, and they flutter around it in joy, and, cheerfully chirping, they peer for it and pluck it" (Augustine 1963, 12.28).

In Polanyi's language what Augustine is affirming is that "we know more than we can tell" (Polanyi 1967, 4). Our words are freighted with more meaning than the speaker knows or the interpreter grasps. Augustine gives expression to this knowing but nonknowing when, speaking of time, he says: "I know what it is if no one asks me what it is; but if I want to explain it to someone who has asked me, I find that I do not know" (Augustine 1963, 11.14). From Polanyi's perspective we can see in Augustine's affirmation of multiple meanings a tacit awareness of complex significance upon which we rely as we speak, even though explicitly we are only aware of the one meaning we intend. Religious language is rich, and the religious writer should seek in his or her writing to enhance rather than restrict it, while the interpreter should dwell within that abundance and seek to make articulate as much of God's truth as possible.

This hermeneutical approach, which affirms the richness of meaning in words and for interpretation, has an important bearing on the nature of creation and conversion. The *Confessions* are a hermeneutical essay; the text is Augustine's life and world. There is a richness of multiple meaning in his own life comparable to that in Genesis. While he dwells tacitly in or is subsidiarily committed to the multiple meanings of his life in the world, he is seeking in his meditation to make articulate this destiny of personal and cosmic significance. His life knows more than it can tell; he is seeking to tell more of it. There is a correspondence in structure, as there is for Polanyi, between being and knowing. Being, whether personal or cosmic, has moved from formlessness to form; in knowing we move from the "formlessness" of tacit awareness to the form of explicit knowing. His own life is a garden and

the *Confessions* are a seeking for and displaying of hidden fruit, which is ultimately the incarnate Light.[7]

The Rhetoric of Confession

The form of the *Confessions* is appropriate to this hermeneutical task. When one is seeking to bring form out of the formless, when one is seeking to make articulate the faith that one holds, to understand self and world on the basis of these tacit commitments, knowing is groping. The questioning, wrestling, dialogue, admission of ignorance, and so forth are ways of groping by faith towards greater understanding. These make it a reflexive meditation, one that bends back upon itself. As Augustine tries to understand the faith that is the basis upon which he understands, these are ways he uses to uncover that foundation he is standing upon, to grasp what is standing under his understanding. Hence he confesses not only what he knows but also what he does not know, and he seeks for more light in his darkness (Augustine 1963, 11.2).

In these reflexive confessions he is writing not only for the sake of self-discovery and as talk with God but also for others. The expression of personal experience and desire in the presence of God manifests the depths of this tacit foundation, confirms its importance in knowing God, and draws the reader into them and thus nearer to the unchangeable Light within: "But to whom am I relating this? Not to you, my God. But I am telling these things in your presence to my own kind, to that portion of mankind, however small it may be, which may chance to read these writings of mine. And my object in doing so is simply this: that both I myself and whoever reads what I have written may think *out of what depths we are to cry unto Thee*. For nothing comes nearer to your ears than a confessing heart and a life of faith" (Augustine 1963, 12.3). This confessional meditation is not a demonstration of truth; rather, seeing the writer's innermost self, the reader may be similarly evoked into opening so as to encounter the truth in these depths.

This is a "doing of the truth"; he says: "you love the truth and he that *doth the truth, cometh to the light*. This is what I want to do in my heart, in front of you, in my confession, and in my writing before many witnesses" (Augustine 1963, 10.1). Confession for Augustine is "to do truth" because it is to be committed, since his commitments are actively present even as he reflects upon them; confessing commitments in the Light is opening to and owning, and therefore doing, the truth one believes in. Hence the first person nature of his writing. Augustine is constantly speaking in the first person because faith is commitment in the first person singular, and knowing is dependent upon it. Speaking in the third person would lose this personal ambience of commitment

which is both the matter of his search and its foundation. This is also true of his knowledge of creation. He knows creation within this personal context of confession; relying tacitly on the pattern present in his growth in humanity and experience of conversion, he understands the nature of creation. Not only does Augustine differ from Plato in believing in an original *creatio ex nihilo*, he places talk about creation within talk of first person commitments.

As Polanyi would say, it is I as scientist who indwells the clues and arrives through "heuristic passion" at the discovery of the pattern of explanation; it is I who accredit what I have discovered; I who seek to persuade others of my findings; I who sense the fruitfulness in the pattern for further discovery; and I who am always also trying to persuade myself and clarify my beliefs upon which my intellectual endeavor rests. The program of the *Confessions*, as well as of *Personal Knowledge*, is fittingly put when Polanyi says:

> This then is our liberation from objectivism: to realize that we can voice our ultimate convictions only from within our convictions—from within the whole system of acceptances that are logically prior to any particular assertion of our own, prior to the holding of any particular piece of knowledge. If an ultimate logical level is to be attained and made explicit, this must be a declaration of my personal beliefs. I believe that the function of the philosophic reflection consists in bringing to light, and affirming as my own, the beliefs implied in such of my thoughts and practices as I believe to be valid; that I must aim at discovering what I truly believe in and at formulating the convictions which I find myself holding; that I must conquer my self-doubt, so as to retain a firm hold on this programme of self-identification (Polanyi 1958, 267).

Augustine's confessional thinking is faith seeking understanding, a search for "our ultimate convictions" but always only on the basis of faith, "only from within our convictions." Conversion and creation, the autobiographical and doctrinal, the personal and cosmic, belong together because confessional reflection is a "bringing to light, and affirming as my own, the beliefs implied in such of my thoughts and practices as I believe to be valid." To work out a theory of cosmic origins is at the same time to be "formulating the convictions which I find myself holding."

In the uniting of conversion and creation we can begin to see a postcritical orientation in Augustine. While the incarnational and hermeneutical aspects of this relation exhibit the postcritical fact that we know more than we can tell, the rhetorical aspect shows that it is a self committed in the first person singular who is the knower who knows more than he or she can tell. All knowing is grounded in belief: Augustine comes to understand his own past and present life and the nature of the beginnings of the world by relying upon a tacit grasp of a context of multiple meaning and of the Light incarnate in his life, and

by bringing to light through confessional reflection his ultimate convictions from within his own convictions.

Toward a Postcritical Language of Creation

In conclusion we turn to consider the suggestiveness we might find in such a postcritical reading of Augustine for developing a language of creation for our day. One point is that creation should be approached from within our personal commitments; creation is not a detached account. Another is that there should be a similarity between conversion and creation, between our own religious lives and the world.

If we think of this similarity in terms of the movement from formlessness to form, we can easily understand ourselves today as becoming who we are through a process of moving phenotypically from the formlessness of our neonatal or prenatal condition to that of maturity.[8] We can understand this in terms of personal commitments: this movement occurs through a complex network of tacit commitments, including at the beginning those to parents, our body (desires, muscles, organic processes), and our immediate environment, expanding into the increasing complexity of a self inhabiting a culture.

Is there, however, any sense in which we can speak of the world as similarly developing from formlessness to form? We live from our birth in a sphere of commitments to an incipient world which becomes, as we grow, the ordinary world of our being. This is the "lived world" of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that which I take up personally, both in a general human and in my own individual way. This is not the world of scientific observation but the world as I can speak of it in the first person singular; it is *my* world. This world not only develops through my life from formlessness to form; it comes into being from nothing at my birth and passes into nothing at my death.[9] My world originates, develops, and terminates as I undergo my beginning, forming, and ending.

There is in the world of scientific observation as well, however, a movement from formlessness to form in what the scientists are telling us today about the origins of our physical cosmos. As the story is told, there was a primordial "stuff," compact, inchoate, that exploded in a "Big Bang" some ten to twenty billion years ago producing incredible light and heat. While they cannot say what it was like at the big bang, nor before, they believe they can describe the nature of cosmic reality one-hundredth of a second after the original explosion and can trace its development over millions of years from a world of radiant energy to a world of material substance (see Weinberg 1979). There is no *creatio ex nihilo* here. Nevertheless, there is a move from the formless to

the formed, our ordinary world resulting from a dimming of that light and portioning it into specific regions, such as galaxies and stars.

The scientist's own coming to know this about the cosmos is also a movement from the formlessness of not knowing to the form of theoretical understanding. This knowledge and the movement towards it are based, as Polanyi has shown at length, upon the multiple tacit commitments of scientists—to a technical language, mathematical ways of thinking, directions to take towards discovery, criteria of verification, the reliability of fellow scientists, and to the orderliness of nature and its ability to disclose such intelligibility when approached in a fitting manner.

Such scientific faith is not, of course, religious faith, not trust in the ultimate mystery in which we live, move, and have our being. Nor is it lived faith we have dwelling in the lived world—those commitments involved in our moving bodily in space, learning to perceive, using ordinary language, and acquiring a culture. Faith in creation is not any one of these, but it involves all three—scientific, religious, and lived faith. Creation language embodies both religious and lived faith as it expresses our participation in the entire cosmos, and scientific faith as the basis for our view of the cosmos: our trust in the lived world and ultimate mystery are integral to our inhabiting, being a part of, the entire universe as we understand it.

Opening to and confirming such kinship with nature is exactly what Mircea Eliade sees to be the function of symbols. The "common aim" of symbols, he writes, is "to abolish the limits of the 'fragment' man is within society and the cosmos, and by means of making clear his deepest identity and his social status, and making him one with the rhythms of nature—integrating him into a larger unity, society, the universe." Eliade goes on to say that in the use of symbolic thought the self is itself transformed into a symbol:

> Religious experience makes it possible for man himself to be transformed into a symbol. And only in so far as man himself becomes a symbol, are all systems and all anthropo-cosmic experiences possible, and indeed in this case his own life is considerably enriched and enlarged. Man no longer feels himself to be an "air-tight" fragment, but a living cosmos open to all the other living cosmoses by which he is surrounded. The experiences of the world at large are no longer something outside him and therefore ultimately "foreign" and "objective"; they do not alienate him from himself but, on the contrary, lead him towards himself, and reveal to him his own existence and his own destiny. The cosmic myths and the whole world of ritual thus appear as existential experiences to primitive man: he does not lose himself, he does not forget his own existence when he fulfils a myth or takes part in a ritual; quite the reverse; he finds himself and comes to understand himself, because those myths and rituals express cosmic realities which ultimately he is aware of as realities in his own being. To primitive man, every level of reality is so completely open to him that

the emotion he felt at merely *seeing* anything as magnificent as the starry sky would have been as strong as the most "intimist" personal experience felt by a modern. For thanks chiefly to his symbols, the *real existence* of primitive man was not the broken and alienated existence lived by civilized man to-day (Eliade 1970, 451 and 455-56).

Myth and its symbols are for Eliade fundamentally cosmogonic; they open us to and integrate us into the total cosmos. The cosmos for us is unavoidably shaped by what the scientific community conceives. Creation language for us, then, must in some way open us to the universe of modern science. Yet it must do so in such a way as not to alienate us from but to make us aware of our belonging to this world. It does this by weaving together the scientific picture of the universe, arising from scientific trust, with religious and lived trust. Based upon this combination, creation language can perform its authentic task: to evoke, express, and celebrate our being at home in the world.

This, of course, runs contrary to the received theological tradition of our century, which rightly has avoided direct conflict between science and religion but has done so at the expense of separating them entirely from each other. Much of our consternation over creation talk in the modern world has been because the picture science has given us of our origins no longer makes us feel at home. Even though modern science may have intended to reorient us towards the secular world with confidence, it has shattered our domestic views of the world and has threatened us with images as terrifying as the monsters that assail us in our sleep—black holes, supernovae, quasars, radiant energy of incomprehensible light and heat, the big bang at the beginning, and at the end the endless night of our sun turned to carbon, a lifeless diamond. Theologians have tried in our century to give science freedom to develop whatever picture it would, but we have not tried to feel at home in that world. Rather we have reduced creation language from cosmic meaning to that of interior redemption or ontological dependence, which has, however, only underscored the alienation; it has not provided us with a sense of dwelling in a cosmos. Perhaps we might learn something here from psychotherapy: when threatened by images that estrange us from our world and ourselves, we should turn and face them, and embrace them as part of ourselves, which they truly are. Yet how do we do this?

We have already seen in Augustine the discovery of the same conversion pattern in self and cosmos, as both move from unformed to formed being. In identifying creation and conversion he does not reduce the former to the latter, but rather he recognizes the same active patterning in the world as in the self. Finding this same pattern can begin to make us feel at home, but there is a further clue in Augustine.

We can face the terrifying and alien origins the scientist depicts because the Light within us is the same Divine Light within the cosmos; the same depth is present in both. The Logos manifest in Christ is the same Light that enlightens every person and that is present throughout the world. What Augustine found missing from the Platonists was just this, that "He came unto His own" (Augustine 1963, 7.9). It is not only important in this passage that the Logos *came in* Christ but that it came *to his own*; or as the Revised Standard Version puts it still more clearly, "He came to his own home . . ." (John 1:11). The Light in Christ has come to its own home in the world because the world is itself incarnate with Light.

A way to begin to feel at home in the world is to discover Light pervading being. The path to find the Light in the world Augustine suggests is to discover it first within ourselves. After discussing the significance of the incarnation for Christianity, distinguishing it from Platonism, he says: "I was admonished by all this to return to my own self, and, with you to guide me, I entered into the innermost part of myself." What he "saw" there was no ordinary light of our physical seeing however great, but that Light which made us, without which we would not be, which is the Truth. To know any truth is to know (to be in touch with, even if not to discern cognitively) this creative Light that has made it and us possible. "He who knows truth knows that light" (Augustine 1963, 7.10). Through meditation, by entering the innermost chambers of ourselves, we can discover, or be discovered by this Light. Then we would be able, like Augustine, to affirm the presence of the same Light within the story of our origins and the origins of the cosmos, and to express our at-home-ness in the world by saying: "whatever in any degree is, is good" (Augustine 1963, 13.31).

To be at home in the world is to be at home in the truth, which is to be at home in God, for to know this goodness in being is to grow in the truth from the "region of total unlikeness" into God. With more intimacy than most Christians are comfortable with, except early Greek Christianity with its conception of divinization of the human, Augustine speaks of us being changed into God. He hears God say within: "Grow and you shall feed upon me. And you will not, as with the food of the body, change me into yourself, but you will be changed into me" (Augustine 1963, 7.10).

This affirmation of the goodness of being does not mean, however, that from our own moral perspective all is right. There is much that is wrong with the world from the natural evils of flood, tornado, and disease to the human evils of injustice, war, and all the other actions that are destructive of the quality of human life and life itself. Sin names not only our contributions to this destructiveness but also our implacable defenses against opening to the Light that would draw us

more deeply into the world beyond our moral judgments to the acceptance, even if not the approval, of what is. In such a transcending of morality through creation talk, a religious foundation for life can be discovered which does not deny morality but involves its radical transformation.

In pursuit of effective creation language we might draw the images of our origins conjured up by modern science into our meditations upon the Light within; to see these images, as it were, "in the Light," so as to see the Light in our modern cosmos. This would be to allow the scientific images to sink into our depths for us to dwell within them. Out of such indwelling may begin to come our own language of creation; we may begin to find ways to express that kinship with the cosmos of which Eliade speaks, ways to enrich and enlarge ourselves by opening us to all aspects of the cosmos so as to discover the cosmic realities in our own being.

Meditating, for instance, upon the radiant cosmic light in relation to the Light, we can come to affirm with assurance—though without much comprehension—that our human world of love has come from that cosmic light, that our world of passion and suffering, quest and failure, injustice and joy, and our experience of Light, within and without, have in some way emerged from that light, for what is actual now must have been at least potential in its source.[10] Meditating upon cosmic origins in relation to the Light, we can discover that the big bang is part of our own story.

The physical world is turning out to be a very different place from which any of us imagined. The postcritical suggestiveness of Augustine is that, if we dare to face the primordial light in the abysm of time from within the Light in our interior, we can begin to find the same depth in the world and so begin to feel at home. We may start, like Augustine, with a sense of our own place as a "region of total unlikeness" (Augustine 1963, 7.10). In the midst of such a "Waste Land" we may find, with T. S. Eliot, "I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence" (Eliot 1952, 38). Nevertheless, from that nothing, as we gaze into the heart of light; from that silence which is a waiting and an opening; from holding that awesome and alien cosmic light in the Light; we may begin to find a language through which we can be transformed from unlikeness to "become light" (Augustine 1963, 13.2); we may begin to feel at home in the world.

NOTES

1. Wittgenstein begins his *Philosophical Investigations* with a passage from the *Confessions* (Wittgenstein 1953, para. 1) and Merleau-Ponty discusses him in his preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xi). Both are critical of him, yet each shows profound respect in considering him at the outset. While Wittgenstein disagrees

with Augustine's view of how we learn language, he nevertheless chose Augustine because, as he told Norman Malcolm, "he decided to begin his *Investigations* with a quotation from the latter's *Confessions*, not because he could not find the conception expressed in that quotation stated as well by other philosophers, but because the conception *must* be important if so great a mind held it" (Malcolm 1962, 71). While Merleau-Ponty rejects Augustine's talk of an "inner man," as if we were separate from the outer world, he nevertheless later articulates an essentially Augustinian view of time (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 411-12).

2. Polanyi cites the source of Augustine's words as *De Libero Arbitrio*, 1.4; see also *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2.12.

3. The author-date system has been adapted to utilize, instead of page numbers, the standard method of referring to books and chapters in *The Confessions*. The reader will then be able to locate these passages in other standard editions of Augustine's works.

4. Italics are of biblical passages in Warner's translation of the *Confessions* unless otherwise specified.

5. The newness of language is evident in Edward B. Pusey's translation in the *Confessions of garriebam tibi*. Other translators similarly pick up the nuance in "chatting with you" of a child's speech: "I spoke in childlike accents" (Augustine 1927, 9.1), and "I spoke like a child to Thee" (Augustine 1953, 9.1). Rex Warner, while not catching this nuance, does nevertheless indicate a change in speech toward freedom and familiarity: "now I was talking to you easily and simply" (Augustine 1963, 9.1).

6. I am grateful to Eugene M. Klaaren for pointing out in conversation both the cosmic context of Augustine's tears and the foetal position in the garden anticipating newbirth.

7. Wittgenstein is certainly right to criticize Augustine's view of language as learned by ostensive definition and as having meaning by words pointing at objects (Augustine 1963, 1.8; Wittgenstein 1953, para. 1-32); however, we can see in these affirmations of the richness of meaning and of the speaker's participating in meaning a counterbalance which brings Augustine closer to what Wittgenstein wants to affirm.

8. Augustine's movement from formlessness to form would be understood by Polanyi in terms of a development that releases a hierarchy of operational principles into functioning. *Formlessness* would be any lower level of particulars seen from the perspective of an ordering principle prior to being organized by it; *form* would be the pattern resulting from these particulars being ordered by the principle. Every system is therefore under dual control: the lower level of particulars exist according to their own principles while the higher level operational principle organizes these particulars into new patterns inexplicable in terms of the lower level.

In his work with DNA Polanyi sees the same dual control structure at work. DNA as a code initiating and controlling an organism's growth is a higher principle not reducible to an explanation on the lower level of physics and chemistry, even while dependent on this level. It is only because the linear arrangement of organic bases in the DNA molecule is independent of the physical chemical forces within it that it is able to convey meaningful information. DNA shapes the growing embryo through transmission of this information within a "field" or "epigenetic landscape" that is a "gradient of potential shapes." As the embryo grows, DNA evokes but does not determine the functioning of a hierarchy of biological principles, each of which organizes the particulars on the lower level into higher patterns inexplicable in terms of the lower. Polanyi speaks in ascending order of principles of vegetative functions, growth, behavior, intelligence, and in humans responsible choice.

The movement from formlessness to form would be understood, then, in Polanyi's terms as the movement from lower to higher levels. Lower patterns ordered by principles of physics and chemistry have boundary conditions imposed on them by a hierarchy of organic principles which organize physical-chemical realities into patterns inexplicable in the latter's terms. Patterns of human reality similarly function according to principles that organize organic life but are not explicable in its terms. The entire phenotypical development of a human being from embryo to adult is an emergence in which a hierarchy of principles is activated where the particulars of each lower level can be seen as

formless to the formative agency of the higher principle. For Polanyi on DNA and "epigenetic landscape" see his "Life's Irreducible Structure" (Polanyi 1969, 225-39). For his more extensive treatment of morphogenesis and ontogenesis and its implications for evolution see Polanyi (1958, 328-31, 354-59, and 381-405).

9. In order to clarify the nature of this first person singular world and to elucidate certain analogies between its existing and the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, William H. Poteat speaks of birth and suicide as moments in which a new world comes into being from nothing or passes out of being; see his excellent essay "Birth, Suicide and the Doctrine of Creation: An Exploration of Analogies" (Poteat 1969, 162-77).

10. Certain twentieth-century thinkers have sought to deal with this fact by reading personal characteristics back into the inanimate world—the "withinness" of matter for Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1961, 53-66), "prehension" for Alfred North Whitehead (1957, 28-29), and "subjectivity and self-relatedness" for Paul Tillich (1951, 98, 169; cf. Tillich 1963, 12, 16, 20-21). Tillich recognizes that his attribution of "life" to the inanimate is a conceptual generalization beyond the organic and explicitly rejects attributing "self-awareness" to the inanimate. Rather than the speculative conclusions of the other two, and in accord with Tillich's later thought, I would prefer to speak more simply of that which is having been "potential" in what was.

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