



A Reading Of St. Augustine's Confessions Through The Lens Of Psychoanalytic Criticism

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Abstract: St. Augustine's *Confessions*, the celebrated autobiography of a historical figure, has seldom been analysed for more than what it is - a classical autobiography. Rife with inner workings of the mind and secret actions of a well-known saint, '*Confessions*' is a rich resource for all those interested in Psychoanalytic criticism. Although applying psychoanalytic criticism to literary works is widely done, it is more often done to the novels of literary giants. Seldom is Psychoanalysis interpreted in historical works or biographies. Thus, this paper is an attempt to read a classical religious and historical text and to test its relation to the theories of Psychoanalysis. This paper limits its study to Books 1 and 2 of the *Confessions* and is divided in three parts - Applying Freud's theory of Infantile Development to St. Augustine's account of his growth, applying Kohlberg's theory of Moral Development to Augustine's Pre-conversion and post-conversion accounts and observing the life of St. Augustine as both an example and a critique of the Id, Ego, Super Ego. A Psychoanalytical approach to an autobiography of a historical figure - this paper seeks to trace a relatively modern theory in the life of a historic figure.

Keywords: Medieval literature, Id, Ego, Superego, psychoanalytic criticism, moral reasoning, infantile development

I. INTRODUCTION

Confessions by St Augustine, is not only considered his most important work, but also the first autobiographical writing in the western world, and thus, the first classic in an epoch-making genre. However, it is far from an autobiography in the true sense of the term: it only traces Augustine's life story from birth to age 40, and describes the profound impact his faith had on him. Though written in Latin between AD 397 and 400, St Augustine's life continues to be a testament of one of Christianity's unique claims: its power to transform lives. The word "confession" has several meanings, all of which may be applied to the book. In the Christian context, the word entails an admission of guilt, and a seeking of forgiveness. St. Augustine expresses regret not only for his ambition and lust but also for his intellectual pride, his faith in Manichaeism, and his ignorance of Christianity. "Confession" also means a proclamation of faith, and this Augustine provides with a detailed account of his journey—from a licentious and profligate lifestyle as an atheist, to an agnostic, and finally, to a devout Christian.

II. METHODOLOGY

Confessions gives us insights into the workings of the mind and innermost desire Augustine's heart. It is therefore a feast for the eyes for those that wish to analyse his psyche through the psychologists' favourite tool - psychoanalysis. Indeed, Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism may be applied to the *Confessions*, to understand what psychic mechanisms motivated Augustine's thoughts and actions. In the narration of his growth from childhood to adulthood, Freud's theory of the Phases of Infantile Development can be traced, while also contrasting it with Lawrence Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. Furthermore, since *Confessions* deals with Christian philosophy, it may be worthwhile to compare St Augustine's understanding and experience of religion with that of Freud and other psychologists. Thus, the primary methodology for the critical analysis of the selected text is comparative study through literature review.

III. TRACING OF FREUD'S THEORY OF INFANTILE DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONFESSIONS

Freud believed that three aspects—the dynamic, the topographical, and the economic—need to be factored into any study of human behaviour. The dynamic involves consideration of the Id, Ego and Superego¹; the topographical deals with conflicts may occur at three levels: the conscious, preconscious and unconscious; the economic asserts that resolution of any conflict occurs as the need demands.

Book 1 of the *Confessions* narrates Augustine's life as a child, from infancy to schooling in Thagaste. He reconstructs his infancy "as it was told me of myself, and I believed it; for we see the like in other infants, though of myself I remember it not." (Augustine 5). He repents before God for the tantrums he threw as a child. It is these behaviours that convinces him he was born a sinner..

"For then I knew but to suck; to repose in what pleased, and cry at what offended my flesh; nothing more...When I was not presently obeyed, (my wishes being hurtful and unintelligible,) then I was indignant with my elders for not submitting to me, with those owing me no service...and avenged myself on them by tears." (Augustine 5)

This chapter of Augustine's life serves as a textbook case of what Sigmund Freud calls the Oral Phase. This is the first stage of development, and begins at birth and continues through 8 to 10 months. The nursing of the child, Freud insisted, is more than just intake of food. It connotes "maternal affection, pleasure, warmth and security" When a child is lovingly nursed, he sucks vigorously, which, in turn, helps develop both his facial muscles and his brain cells.

Along with nursing, the second most important thing in the Oral Stage is weening. Peter Dempsey in his book *Freud, Psychoanalysis, Catholicism*, states:

The infant resents being weened: He is angry at the deprivations forced upon him. If, as often happens, he sees another child a little later at the maternal breast, his jealousy and rage can become acute. (Dempsey 22)

Interestingly, this phenomenon was observed by St Augustine long before Freud, when he stated:

Myself have seen and known even a baby envious; it could not speak, yet it turned pale and looked bitterly on its foster-brother... is that too innocence, when the fountain of milk is flowing in rich abundance, not to endure one to share it, though in extreme need, and whose very life depends upon thereon? (Augustine 12)

Thus, like other children, Augustine too was governed by the Id during his infancy. However, it is important to note that while the Id takes the front-seat in the psyche of an infant, the superego too has a role to play. Dempsey explains that when a weening child is overcome by jealousy, he might refuse to eat food. Moreover, if this behaviour is met by maternal intolerance, it could sow seeds of depression and guilt in the mind of the infant.

Thus, the superego commences to be an active force in personality structure even at the Oral Stage. No more of his infantile development is mentioned by Augustine. After having explained his Oral stage, he delves into his boyhood, thus making it impossible for the reader to apply Freud's theory of the Phallic and Genital stage in his life. Augustine's narrations of his boyhood at the School in Thagaste and his relationship with his peers enable us to instead apply the psychological theory of Moral Development in the autobiography.

IV. TRACING OF KOHLBERG'S THEORY OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONFESSIONS

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist who developed the Theory of the Stages of Moral Reasoning in a child, was of the opinion that there was a process (active rather than passive,) by which children conform to society's norms of what is good and bad. Later, in 1958, Lawrence Kohlberg extended Piaget's theory to include both adolescents and adults. The Pre-Conventional level (0-10 years) is the first and most basic stage of a child where he/she is concerned with meeting needs while avoiding punishment.

The first stage in this level is the punishment-obedience stage where a child obeys orders by a person in authority out of fear of being punished. This stage in Augustine's life can be seen in his account of his school days when he claimed to follow rules, not prompted by love or fear of God, but rather to gain the approval of his parents and to avoid being punished by his teachers.

Thus I exchanged with those about me these current signs of our wills...yet depending on parental authority and the beck of elders. O God my God, what miseries and mockeries did I now experience, when obedience to my teachers was proposed to me, as proper in a boy, in order that in this world I might prosper... (Augustine 9)

The level two of moral development is the Conventional level where the individual begins to internalise moral standards by observing adults or valued persons around him. Here, authority is merely accepted, rather than being questioned. The first stage in this level is called the stage of good interpersonal relationships. Children in this level are concerned about being accepted by others and living up to the expectations of the larger group. It begins around the age of 10, yet very few adults grow out of this stage. Here, the child understands the importance of trust and loyalty, but for them morality is whatever is accepted by their larger group of interest.

This need for acceptance and false idea of right and wrong is seen in Augustine's life when, as a 16-year-old, he engaged multiple times in the stealing of pears from trees in the neighbourhood.

What fruit had I then (wretched man!) in those things, of the remembrance whereof I am now ashamed?... Alone I had never done it. I loved then in it also the company of the accomplices with whom I did it...my pleasure was not in those pears, it was in the offence itself, which the company of fellow-sinners occasioned. (Augustine 3)

The third level of moral development according to Kohlberg is the Post-Conventional level where self-chosen principles, and moral reasoning based on individual rights and justice, help individuals make choices. According to Kohlberg this level of moral reasoning is as far as most people get. He argued that only 10-15% are capable of the kind of abstract thinking necessary for Stage 5 or 6—in other words, most people imbibe the moral views of those around them, while only a minority thinks through ethical principles for themselves. Individuals in the Social Contract and Individual Rights stage agree to obey laws and social rules of conduct that promote respect for individuals and value the few universal moral values that they recognize. This stage too, was a phase in the life of St Augustine spanning the ten years when he "went astray" towards the Manichean belief.² He joined the Manicheans as the solution to his questions and doubts regarding the way of life, the soul and the universe. At the age of 17, when living at Carthage, Augustine became a member of the large prominent group of Manicheans and was greatly pleased with himself for having formed an opinion and being well versed in philosophy and rhetoric, which he then became a professor of.

The social contract and individual rights stage was to last in the life of Augustine for 10 years before he could finally see shortcomings in the Manichean philosophy (particularly after his interaction with the Manichaean bishop Nebridius who failed to answer his questions satisfactorily). It was only after this that Augustine began to gradually move away from his previously accepted beliefs to question, and later on accept the Christian doctrine. This can be considered as Augustine's transition from the social contract and individual rights stage to the second and ultimate stage of moral development. The Universal Principles stage, according to Kohlberg is a stage where the individual develops his own moral guidelines or philosophies which may go contrary to most of the society. Adults here are motivated by individual conscience that transcends cultural, religious, or social convention rules.

Although Augustine never claimed to have developed his own moral guidelines, we can safely say that Augustine succeeded in reaching this final stage of moral development, which according to Kohlberg, are achieved only by a minority. The reason being that when Augustine accepted the Christian doctrine and accepted "God in his heart", he was met by severe criticism, not just by fellow Manicheans, but also by the larger society. It took a long, painful period for St Augustine to become the highly revered saint that he is now. The Christian doctrine of forgiveness of sins by believing in the Son of God and eternal life by accepting the Spirit of God in one's heart is met even today with a lot of criticism. Thus, readers may vary in viewing the Christian doctrine with acceptance or indifference. However, it is safe to say that Augustine had moved to the final stage of Moral development through his decision to convert and to become a saint, as he went against the accepted norms of the majority party and stood for what he believed to be true.

The practice of unconsciously moulding one's behaviour and character after another person is termed as the psychic mechanism of 'Identification'. Among children this role model is usually a member of the family, mainly the father or the mother. As children grow, it then extends to other authority figures in the community whom they meet in person or in fantasy. For Augustine post his conversion, this person was Jesus Christ, whom he claims to have met in a "personal encounter of the mind". It was following Christ's example then, that Augustine vows celibacy. Thus, in the mind of Augustine, Christ constituted his 'ego-ideal' who then influenced his every "thought, action, sleep and waking".

V. ST. AUGUSTINE: AN EXAMPLE AND A CRITIQUE OF THE ID, EGO, SUPER EGO

It is important to note that prior to his conversion, St Augustine was mainly governed by his Id and his superego. His raw, pleasure-seeking instincts governed him not only in his childhood and teenage, but into his early adulthood as well. The following passage is quoted from Book 1 of the text, where Augustine recalls his aggressive instincts during the years before he entered his teens.

In this play too I often sought unfair conquests, conquered myself meanwhile by vain desire of pre-eminence. And what could o so ill endure, or when I detected it (foul play by his peers in a game) upbraided I so fiercely as that I was doing to others? And for which, if detected, I chose rather to quarrel than to yield. (Augustine 19)

Through this excerpt, we see how, though Augustine had a very clear understanding of what in a game is foul play, ie- a sense of morality taught to him by his superego, his actions weren't a result of the same. Instead, he allowed his ego to control his actions and thus continued to play unfairly, even while demanding fair play from his peers. In Book 2, Augustine confesses explicitly about his sexual liaisons during the age of 16 and upwards, when he "dared to grow wild".

Out of the muddy concupiscence of the flesh... mists fumed up which beclouded and overcast my heart, that I could not discern the clear brightness of love, from the fog of lustfulness. Both did confusedly boil in me, and hurried my unstated youth over the precipice of unholy desires, and sunk me in a gulf of flagitiousness. (Augustine 21)

This clash between his id and ego continued to suppress his superego and "sunk" him, until his conversion when little by little he listened to his conscience and thus allowed himself to act based on his superego. Post his conversion, the very actions that at one time he performed without getting perturbed (his thefts, lies and lustfulness to name a few), now began to pierce him with a gnawing sense of guilt and remorse. This realisation of his superego and the regret he had over ignoring it all these years, led him to confess to God even the smallest of his

sins, such as those of jealousy and selfishness during his infancy. Thus, while the id and ego overpower Augustine pre conversion, in the years after his conversion however, the Superego gains prominence.

VI. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECT OF ST. AUGUSTINE'S LIFE OF CELIBACY

Let us now consider the psychological aspects that influenced the decision of St Augustine when he vowed for a life of celibacy and sainthood. On discussing human instincts in his book *Freud, Psychoanalysis, Catholicism*, Peter Dempsey compares the Christian act of self - denial as a form of masochism. Though Christianity regards pleasure in pain as a perversion, the idea of renunciation of sensual pleasures is not "an end in itself, but a means to an end." Thus, the practice of renunciation for the Christian, and Augustine for that matter, produced not pain, but joy. (Dempsey 83)

Dempsey explains asceticism of the saints in the following manner:

The saints naturally shrank from mortification and suffering...but for the sake of Christ they were willing to drain the chalice of suffering to the dregs. For them everything in life, play, prayer, suffering, renunciation, had one supreme end, the union of their spirit with God. To possess God they freely renounced property and wealth, marriage, and their will to power. They chose to live lives of voluntary poverty, chastity, and obedience. But by this threefold renunciation they attained to a marvellous freedom and joy of spirit. Devoid of egocentricity, they became filled with the love of God, and an eager purified oblate love of humanity. (Dempsey 83)

Interestingly, both Freud and Augustine were similar in many areas. A strong and ambivalent attachment to the maternal figure, a repressed aggression towards the father, firm views on various philosophies and a close familiarity with Catholicism mark both individuals. What did set them apart was largely the result of the single event of conversion and a personal encounter with God that one experienced and the other did not.

VII. CONCLUSION & FINDINGS

According to Freud, religion arises at an early stage of human development when man cannot yet use his reason to deal with these outer and inner forces and must repress or manage them. However, the totally opposite of this is seen in the life of Augustine. As explained earlier, we see that during the earlier stages of Augustine's development, he had no regard for God or religion, despite his mother's fervent pleas. As the biography progresses, we see a growth in his ability of critical thought and reason, particularly when he joined the Manicheans. However, rather than convincing him of the absence of God and falsity of religion, his reason provokes him more and more to explore the doctrine of Christianity. This eventually leads to his conversion when he is well into his thirties and well-versed in contemporary philosophy, contrary to Freud's notion of religion as an "infantile fixation".

Freud considers religion as an "illusion" and a "collective neurosis". This again is hard to believe, as, throughout the 12 books of the *Confessions*, Augustine praises God for His omnipotence and surrenders his painful past and unknown future into the hands of his sovereign creator. Augustine's faith seems more real, than it is illusory. Furthermore, Augustine's faith, post his conversion, had always been very personal and intimate. Though Augustine regularly attended church, it wasn't in public gatherings that he most strongly felt the power of God. Rather, it was in his personal musings that Augustine felt "led by the Spirit".

Robert Coals, a psychologist from Harvard, in his book *Spiritual Life of Children*, provides evidence of a fundamental religious intuition inherent in kids. Mercea Eliade, a historian of religion and a philosopher among other titles, was of the opinion that it is our sense of mystery that provokes us to pursue God through religious rituals and rites. Consider John Henry Newman who came from backgrounds similar to Augustine's and those of other psychologists. He was a Catholic Cardinal and theologian, as well as a leader of the Oxford Movement and writer of *The Idea of University* (in which he suggests ways in which psychology and other subjects must be studied). Writing against the backdrop of European empiricism, we can take Newman's claims seriously when he says that conventional logical standards cannot validate faith, as the logical process is based on restrictive assumptions and therefore unable to quantify human peace and contentment derived through it. He goes on to

identify themes such as moral sense, fear, love and sense of duty that influence the psychology of individuals who are religiously inclined. Thus, calling St Augustine's daily walk with God a mere illusion seems like an unreasonable oversimplification, not only to the religiously inclined, but also to psychoanalysts.

Especially for those with a faith akin to Augustine's, *Confessions* is a tour de force—the honest account of the coming of age of a one-time prodigal, to the calling of the divine. To the psychoanalytically inclined, the novel is a storehouse of instances of how, by sheer trial and error, Augustine learns to overcome the instincts of the id and ego, so that his superego would have the upper hand and thereby equip him to lead a saintly life as he progresses from one stage of moral development to the other. Thus, the *Confessions*, an account of one man's struggle with sin, is an adaptable, honest and relatable piece of Literature for all kinds of readers, irrespective of their points of interests or areas of approach.

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NOTES:

¹ Id, Ego, superego: Freud saw the psyche structured in three parts: the id is the instinctive component of personality and consists of biological components present at birth. It is impulsive i.e., unconscious and responds immediately to instincts. The ego develops in order to mediate between the id and the super ego. It is the decision making component of personality. It works by reason according to the reality principle, and helps the individual in deciding how to behave based on social realities. The super ego incorporates the values and morals of society which are learned and develops around the age of 3-5 during the phallic stage. It controls the id's impulses such as sex and aggression, while also persuading the ego to turn to moralistic goals.

² Manichaeism: a dualistic religious system with Christian, Gnostic, and pagan elements, founded in Persia in the 3rd century by Manes (c. 216– c. 276) and based on a supposed primeval conflict between light and darkness. It was widespread in the Roman Empire and in Asia, and survived in eastern Turkestan (Xinjiang) until the 13th century.