New Blackfriars (2025), **106**, 428–438
doi:10.1017/nbf.2025.29

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

The Conversion of Grief in the *Confessions*

Gerald P. Boersma

Department of Theology, Ave Maria University, Ave Maria, FL, USA
Email: gerald.boersma@avemaria.edu

Abstract

Among the less considered 'conversions' of the *Confessions* is the conversion of grief. The *Confessions* traces how Augustine learns to grieve justly and with hope. Augustine's grief in book four is presented in stark contrast to his grief in book nine. In many ways, these two books serve as a counter image of each other. The striking narrative similarities that Augustine presents between the death of his boyhood friend in book four and that of his mother in book nine serve, however, to highlight the significant differences that Augustine wants to accent between these two experiences of death and grief. Holding these two scenes next to each other allows us to witness another profound conversion of the *Confessions*, namely, how Augustine learns to grieve profound loss in hope.

Keywords: Augustine; *Confessions*; conversion; grief; *uti* and *frui*

The *Confessions* is especially a book of conversion, or better, conversions. There is the youthful encounter with Cicero's *Hortentius* that effects Augustine's 'conversion to philosophy'. The result is a new desire for a life in the pursuit of truth and wisdom. Ambrose's preaching awakens a conversion to the truth about spiritual realities: God, the soul, and Scripture. Augustine's 'intellectual conversion' is occasioned by reading the books of the Platonists. This literature leads him to see that the possession of truth he desires is predicated on the ascent of the soul to share in God's unity, stability, and eternity. Finally, reading the Apostle Paul opens the spellbinding scene of Augustine's 'moral conversion' in book eight. Here Augustine comes to admit the centrality of Christ and the gift of grace required to live in communion with God.

Among the less considered 'conversions' of the *Confessions*, however, is the conversion of grief.[1] The *Confessions* traces how Augustine learns to grieve justly and with

This article is dedicated to a fellow student of Augustine, James Wasmuth, whose friendship I deeply cherish and in whose company I have long enjoyed Augustine's description of friendship: 'To make conversation, to share a joke, to perform mutual acts of kindness, to read together well-written books, to share in trifling and in serious matters, to disagree though without animosity—just as a person debates with himself—and in the very rarity of disagreement to find the salt of normal harmony, to teach each other something or to learn from one another, to long with impatience for those absent, to welcome them with gladness on their arrival. (*conf.* 4.8.13).

[1]Helpful scholarly literature on grief in the *Confessions* includes Michael Cholbi, 'Finding the good in grief: What Augustine knew that Meursault could not', *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 3

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hope. Augustine's grief in book four is presented in stark contrast to his grief in book nine. In many ways, these two books serve as a counter image of each other. In both cases, we are presented with a gripping deathbed scene. Augustine stands next to the bed of a person whom he dearly loves, one whose life is netted together into his own. In each case, fever overcomes his loved one and he sees the life before him quickly expiring. Both books recall passionate final conversations had before death. And, in both cases, Augustine recollects the overwhelming sadness rushing over him at the experience of loss.

The striking narrative similarities that Augustine presents between the death of his boyhood friend in book four and that of his mother in book nine serve, however, to highlight the significant differences that Augustine wants to accent between these two experiences of death and grief. Holding these two scenes next to each other allows us to witness another profound conversion of the *Confessions*, namely, how Augustine learns to grieve profound loss in hope.

1. Grief in *Confessions* IV

In book four, Augustine tells us of the intimate friendship he had with (an unnamed) boy in his hometown of Thagaste. There was no one closer (*nimis carum*), he tells us. The two shared the same age and the same interests. Growing up together they were continually at each other's side at school and at play. Their friendship, recalls Augustine, 'had been sweet to me beyond all the sweetness of life that I had experienced'.[2] As they grew older, they began to explore new intellectual terrain together. Augustine, who seems to have been the leader of the pair, led his friend into the recondite teachings of the Manicheans.

Unexpectedly, Augustine's friend fell ill. As the fever overcame the young man, he lost consciousness. With his life quickly ebbing away, his concerned relatives rushed in to baptize the comatose man. Augustine looked on at their efforts with bemusement. He put no stock in the baptism. Some water and pious invocations seemed to him wholly inconsequential: 'To me this was a matter of no interest. I assumed that his soul would retain what it had received from me, not what had happened to his body while he was unconscious'.[3] However, things turned out quite different. The young man began to convalesce. When he came to, Augustine began to regale him with all that had transpired while he was unconscious. He imagined his friend would shake his head and chuckle with him at the benighted efforts of his relatives who imagined that the baptism of an unconscious man could have any effect. Instead, Augustine's friend looked up at him in horror as if he were an enemy. He had fallen ill a Manichean and awoke a Catholic. Although shocked, Augustine remains unrepentant. With ominous

(2017): 91–105. Catherine Conybeare, 'Feeling for Augustine', *Classical Antiquity* 43 (2024): 1–18. Joseph Grabau, 'The Limits of Grief in Augustine of Hippo's Sermones 172-173 and Sermo 396', *Vox Patrum* 78 (2021): 293–310. Kim Paffenroth, 'The young Augustine: Lover of sorrow', *The Downside Review* 118 (2000): 221–230. William Werpehowski, 'Weeping at The Death of Dido: Sorrow, Virtue, and Augustine's *Confessions*', *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 19 (1991): 175–191. James Wetzel, 'Book Four: The Trappings of Woe and Confession of God', in *A Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, ed. Kim Paffenroth and Robert P. Kennedy (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 53–69.

[2] *conf.* 4.4.7. I have followed the translation by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[3] *conf.* 4.4.8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

malice, he describes his intention to woo his friend back after he was fully recovered: 'Then I would be able to do what I wished with him'.[4]

But God had other plans. A few days later the young man's fever returned and he died. 'He was snatched away from my lunacy, so that he might be preserved with you for my consolation'.[5] The next paragraphs contain some of literature's most heart wrenching descriptions of grief. Augustine writes,

> 'Grief darkened my heart' (Lam. 5:17). Everything on which I set my gaze was death. My hometown became a torture to me; my father's house a strange world of unhappiness; all that I had shared with him was without him transformed into a cruel torment. My eyes looked for him everywhere, and he was not there. I hated everything (*oderam omnia*) because they did not have him.... Only tears were sweet to me and in my soul's delight weeping had replaced my friend.[6]

Nothing gives consolation, peace, or light. Places where heretofore he experienced belonging and rest now haunt him. Death, darkness, and hate flood over Augustine. Blindness is his preferred metaphor. Like the blind poet, Milton, he might say, 'ever-during dark/Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men/Cut off'. Augustine comes to live the reproach of the Beatitudes: 'If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!' The interior darkness of his grief turns the world around him dark.

Augustine's grief in book four is marked by two qualities: *melancholia* and *acedia*. Augustine says that his soul took 'delight in weeping' and that grief 'replaced' his friend. The cathartic importance of grieving after the experience of serious loss is recognized as an important part of the mourning process and critical for subsequent healing. But here Augustine comes to delight in his grief; unwilling to part from his pain, he seems, rather, to revel in it: 'I wept very bitterly and took my rest in bitterness (*requiescebam in amaritudine*). I was so wretched that I felt a greater attachment to my life of misery than to my dead friend.... I was more unwilling to lose my misery than him'.[7] Augustine describes a grief that goes beyond mourning, one that is self-absorbed and narcissistic. He comes to cling to his grief more ardently than he did his friend. Whereas before he could not bear to lose his friend, now he cannot bear to lose his grief.

The father of modern clinical psychology, Sigmund Freud, might diagnose Augustine's condition as 'melancholia'. Freud famously contrasts 'melancholia' and 'mourning'.[8] Although they exhibit similar traits, the one suffering 'melancholia' turns against himself with vicious self-loathing and hate. 'Melancholia' is unable to extricate itself from grief and pain, which comes to serve as a *replacement* of the person loved. Freud explains,

[4]*conf.* 4.4.8.
[5]*conf.* 4.4.8.
[6]*conf.* 4.4.9.
[7]*conf.* 4.6.11.
[8]Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and melancholia' (1917) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth, 1953), 237–258.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> If the love for the object—a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up—takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation on this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering. The self-tormenting in melancholia, which is without doubt enjoyable, signifies … a satisfaction of trends of sadism and hate which relate to an object, and which have been turned round upon the subject's own self.[9]

There is a striking correspondence between Augustine's description of his irrational, selfish, and hateful grief and Freud's account of 'melancholia'. Only much later could Augustine thank God for cleansing him 'from these flawed emotions'.[10]

Acedia is the second key feature of the 'flawed emotions' at work in Augustine's grief in book four. *Acedia* is one of the eight 'evil thoughts' identified by the Desert Monks as toxic to the spiritual life. Indeed, according to the monk Evagrius, this 'noonday demon' is the most oppressive of all demons. *Acedia* is a moping restlessness that comes upon the soul when the tedium of a long and laborious vocation has set in. Once the initial gleam of say, monastic life, a marriage, or a scholarly endeavor has worn off, this 'noonday demon' slurks in and incites the imagination to think on all the other more scintillating, interesting, or supposedly fulfilling things that one could be doing instead of persevering in one's calling. And, if not quickly checked, *acedia* can make shipwreck of one's vocation.

According to Aquinas, *acedia* is a spiritual sadness that drains the soul of vitality; it is directly contrary to the joy and energy that spring from love for one's duty. For Aquinas, *acedia* is 'an oppressive sorrow, which, so weighs upon man's mind, that he wants to do nothing'.[11] *Acedia* often attacks those grieving. The soul's experience of great pain is allowed to extinguish all joy, even hope itself is crushed. The soul is left rudderless and distracted, unable to focus on anything of significance. Such world-weariness or *ennui*—what the German Romantics called *Weltschmerz*—is, thus, both restless and sad.

And, such is how Augustine recalls his grief:

> I boiled with anger, sighed, wept, and was at my wits end. I found no calmness (*requies*), no capacity for deliberation. I carried my lacerated and bloodied soul when it was unwilling to be carried by me. I found no place where I could put it down. There was no rest in pleasant groves, nor in games or songs, nor in sweet-scented places, nor in exquisite feasts, nor in the pleasures of the bedroom and bed, nor, finally, in books and poetry. Everything was an object of horror, even light itself; all that was not he made me feel sick and was repulsive except for groaning in tears. In them alone there was some slight relief (*requies*) but when my weeping stopped, my soul felt burdened by a vast load of misery. I had become to myself a place of unhappiness in which I could not bear to be; but I could not

[9]Freud, 'Mourning and melancholia', 251.
[10]*conf.* 4.6.11.
[11]*ST* II-II q. 35 a. 1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> escape from myself. Where should my heart flee to in escaping from my heart? Where should I go to escape from myself?[12]

Augustine's description of his grief is a variation on the dominant theme of the *Confessions*, namely, restlessness. From the first paragraph of the *Confessions*, the *cor inquietum* is the symptomatic expression of fallen man. In describing his grief in the above paragraph, Augustine refers to 'restlessness' three times. The image he develops is of an exhausted and frenzied man dragging his lacerated soul behind him, desperate to find a place to put it down. But there is no place to rest. He inquires at the home of each of the five senses. But they provide no relief. Sight ('pleasant groves'), sound ('songs'), smell ('sweet-scented places'), taste ('feasts'), and touch—both physical ('bedroom and bed') and intellectual ('books and poetry')—all fail to offer tranquility and peace. In short, the hateful darkness of *melancholia* and the sad restlessness of *acedia* mark Augustine's grief in book four.

2. Grief in *Confessions* IX

In book nine, Augustine comes to great grief again. His mother, who, of course, looms large over the entirety of the *Confessions*, passes away. Her death at the end of book nine is the culmination of a catalogue of Augustine's dying friends and family recorded in this book. Book nine tells of the death of Augustine's patron, Verecundus, his dear friend Nebridius, his father, Patricius, and his son, Adeodatus. In each case, Augustine tells of their conversion to the Catholic faith, their baptism, and then their death. Death and baptism are inextricably linked in book nine. Both definitively close one door to open another. Baptism is a death to self, to the world, and to the Devil. In baptism one's former life passes and one comes, already now, to possess the beginnings of eternal life. One must pass through the portals of both deaths to enter eternal life. It is for this reason that, while the theme of death suffuses book nine, there is no book in the *Confessions* (and few outside of it) that are as indomitably hopeful and joyful. The aura of loving eternity pervades book nine. Augustine expresses a deep hope and an inexpungeable joy while mourning Monica.

Monica lies sick with fever and loses consciousness. When Augustine and his brother, Navigius, rush to her bedside she briefly regains consciousness. The conversion turns to the question of where to bury her body. She tells her sons, 'Bury my body anywhere you like. Let no anxiety about that disturb you. I have only one request to make of you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord, wherever you may be'.[13]

At the death of his mother, Augustine also grieves and grieves deeply: 'I closed her eyes and an overwhelming grief welled into my heart'.[14] The subsequent paragraphs detail Augustine's profound effort to control the flood of emotions surging over him. His immense struggle to forestall a flow of tears and his insistence that the company mourning alongside with him do so with moderation, has led many to misunderstand Augustine. Some take Augustine as advancing an inhuman censure of all emotion. They

[12] *conf.* 4.7.12.
[13] *conf.* 9.11.27.
[14] *conf.* 9.12.29.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contend that the last chapters of *Confessions* 9 advance a type of theologically informed Stoicism.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, points to these paragraphs as evidence of a broader problem with Augustine's theology of love. Inasmuch as Augustine councils a 'detached love' for passing things, he degrades the possibility of deep emotional investment in people, places, and things. According to Wolterstorff, Augustine believes that the only thing we ought to grieve is our own sins and those of others. All other grief exposes a heart still insufficiently detached from worldly things. Such grief indicts a heart still clinging to that which passes. Wolterstorff writes,

> In the presence of all those griefs which ensue from the destruction of that which we love, Augustine pronounces a 'No' to the attachments rather than a 'No' to the destruction—not a 'No' to death but a 'No' to love of which is subject to death. Thereby he also pronounces a 'Not much' concerning the worth of the things loved. Nothing in this world has worth enough to merit an attachment which carries the potential of grief.[15]

For Augustine, maintains Wolterstorff, 'even to feel grief upon the death of a friend or one's mother is to have been guilty of too much worldly affection'.[16]

Such an account fundamentally misconstrues what Augustine means by loving with a 'detached love'. It also runs completely contrary to the theology of emotion that Augustine advances elsewhere. In a lengthy foray against the Stoics in Book 14 of the *City of God*, Augustine chastises them for an inhumane philosophy of *apathia*.[17] Christian psychology, contends Augustine, recognizes the passions as an inextricable part of our earthly sojourn—ones that we experience without fault or sin. Augustine points to the Apostle Paul—a man bristling with passion—as a model. We discover the Apostle Paul

> rejoicing with them that rejoice, and weeping with them that weep (Romans 12:15) though hampered by fightings without and fears within; (2 Corinthians 7:5) desiring to depart and to be with Christ; (Philippians 1:23) longing to see the Romans, ... being jealous over the Corinthians, ... having great heaviness and

[15]Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Suffering Love', 228 in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. T.V. Morris (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1988).

[16]Wolterstorff continues, 'The mentality expressed in this attitude to grief not only shapes Augustine's view of the proper place of sorrow and suffering in human life; it also contributes to his conviction that in God there is no sorrow or suffering. God's life is a life free of sorrow—indeed, life free of upsetting emotions in general, a life free of passions, a life of apathy, untouched by suffering, characterized only by steady bliss'. Wolterstorff, 'Suffering Love', 197–198.

[17]Admittedly there is a historical liability in retrospectively applying to the *Confessions* the strenuous criticism against Stoic *apathia* that Augustine levies in the *City of God* (written more than a decade after the completion of *Confessions*). Nevertheless, it seems a sufficiently acceptable scholarly hazard as Augustine's censure of Stoicism remains fairly constant from the time of his baptism. See Sarah Byers, *Perception, Sensibility, and Moral Motivation in Augustine: A Stoic-Platonic Synthesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 55–99.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> continual sorrow of heart for the Israelites (Romans 9:2) … and expressing not only his sorrow, but bitter lamentation over some who had formally sinned.[18]

This full panoply of passion exhibited by the great athlete of Christ, illustrates that affections, emotions, and passions are not, as the Stoics contend, vicious diseases, but the fitting vesture of a human soul traversing the evils of this life. In his assumed humanity, even Christ himself 'displayed these emotions…. He was grieved and angry at the Jews' hardness of heart…. He wept when He was about to raise Lazarus…. He desired to eat the Passover with his disciples and … as His passion drew neigh, His soul was grieved'.[19] Only an inhuman soul, utterly bereft of charity, would, in the midst of so many sorrows of life, aim to remain unaffected, unmoved, content in perfect *apathia*. 'For to be quite free from pain while we are in this place of misery is only purchased … at the price of blunted sensibilities both of mind and body'.[20] *Apathia*, insists Augustine, is neither attainable nor desirable in this life.

The experience of emotions and passions—including profound grief—are a wholly appropriate response to life's perturbations, which can be expressed justly under the rule of reason. And it is this Christian vision of emotional life laid out in *City of God* 14 that Augustine attempts to emulate when grieving the loss of his mother in *conf.* 9. He does not censure his pain; rather, he admits to being 'inwardly oppressed with sadness'.[21] He is grieved not only by his loss, but also by grief itself that cannot be escaped: 'It caused me such sharp displeasure to see how much power these human frailties had over me, though they are a necessary part of the order we have to endure and are the lot of the human condition'.[22] The passions—including grief—are a necessary response to the reality of life in a fallen order that can (and sometimes should) be exhibited without detriment to the demands of virtue.

The fallen order, however, also includes the reality of hope. The Christian lives with the substratal conviction that pain, suffering, and loss do not have the final word. As such, in mourning his mother's death, Augustine also expresses concern that grief not degenerate into unbridled vaunting and wailing. He urges restraint on himself and those around him—including his son, the young Adeodatus, who initially 'cried out in sorrow'.[23] Augustine gives instructions that Monica's funeral be celebrated solemnly, sorrowfully, and hopefully: 'We do not think it right to celebrate the funeral with tearful dirges and lamentations'.[24] Confident that Monica was neither extinct nor unhappy, Augustine councils himself and those around him to grieve with hope.

3. Grief's conversion

Both book four and book nine present the loss of a *friend*. Asking why he suffered 'sharp pains of inward grief' at Monica's passing, Augustine answers,

[18] *civ.* 14.9. I have followed the translation by R.W. Dyson (Cambridge University Press, 1998).
[19] *civ.* 14.9.
[20] *civ.* 14.9.
[21] *conf.* 9.12.32.
[22] *conf.* 9.12.31.
[23] *conf.* 9.12.29.
[24] *conf.* 9.12.29.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> It must have been the fresh wound caused by the break in the habit formed by our living together, a very affectionate and precious bond suddenly torn apart.... Now that I had lost the immense support she gave, my soul was wounded, and my life as it were torn to pieces, since my life and hers had become a single thing.[25]

Augustine gives an almost identical description of the friendship he shared with the young man in book four. In both cases, Augustine deploys the classical articulation of a friend as 'another self', such that the grief of loss entails the disintegration of self. Augustine recounts, 'He was "my other self". Someone has well said of his friend, "He was half my soul". I had felt that my soul and his soul were "one soul in two bodies". So my life was to me a horror. I did not wish to live with only half of myself'.[26] Both book four and book nine describe the loss of a friend whose life had been woven deeply into Augustine's own. As his/her life expires from fever, each briefly regains consciousness. In hoarse, halting words they share final words of wisdom with Augustine. In both cases, Augustine writes at length about the searing pain of loss—of his soul being torn in two.[27] The similarities between Augustine's grief in book four and nine serve, however, to emphasize the profound spiritual difference between these two experiences. The tears that follow Monia's burial are not accompanied by the brooding *acedia* of book four. Nor does Augustine's mourning degenerate into the darkness and hate of *melancholia*.

It is precisely Augustine's theology of love that Wolterstorff and many others consider cold, callous, and utilitarian that accounts for the conversion of grief that allows Augustine to mourn with hope in book nine. This theology finds its clearest exposition in Augustine's short treatise, *On Christian Teaching*. There Augustine lays out the fundamental demarcation that animates his entire ethical framework, namely the distinction between two types of love. He calls these two loves *frui* and *uti. Frui* means 'to enjoy'. It is the love that enjoys or, to use Augustine's term, 'rests' in a good; it seeks nothing else beyond the object of its love. *Frui* is the love of arrival, of finality. What one enjoys is loved for its own sake, with all other loves ordered to it. Of course, for Augustine, only the Triune God is a fitting subject of *frui*. The second love, *uti*, literally means 'to use'. It is a love that 'uses' finite, passing things well. *Uti* respects, cares, and treasures the objects of its affections, but guards against investing one's whole being—all one's identity, hope, and joy—in them. Augustine tells us that by *uti* he means 'love less' or love with a sense of detachment. The love of *uti* is the appropriate response of the heart to the goods of the finite order, which are to be loved in a manner suited to their finite condition. We ought to 'use' created goods, maintains Augustine, as a road or vehicle so that we might arrive at that which we love for its own sake.

We might balk at Augustine's contention that the love we ought to have for the world around us is one of 'use'. Is that really love? And, are other people to be *used*?

[25] *conf.* 9.12.30.

[26] *conf.* 4.6.11.

[27] Augustine uses similar language of rending and tearing to describe the pain of being separated from his concubine (*conf.* 6.15.25): 'The woman with whom I habitually slept was torn away from my side because she was a hindrance to my marriage. My heart which was deeply attached was cut and wounded, and left a trail of blood.... My wound, inflicted by the earlier parting, was not healed. After inflammation and sharp pain, it festered. The pain made me as it were frigid but desperate'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Our instinctive discomfort with Augustine's distinction between *uti* and *frui* might lie in the fact that our contemporary ethical landscape is deeply imbued by the philosophy of two modern intellectual giants: Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill. Even if scant few have studied Kant, his philosophy animates our collective moral framework. Kantian ethics is summed up in his aphoristic 'categorical imperative': 'Never treat a person merely as a means, but always also as an end in himself'. And, after the English philosopher, John Stuart Mill, the word 'use' has become a dirty word, laden with the philosophy of 'utilitarianism'. To use something—especially a person!—seems to us degrading, transactional, equivalent with *abuse*.

But Augustine thinks differently about 'use'. There is a 'use'—that is to say, a love—that befits each created thing. A house is to be loved as a house, a dog as a dog, and a person as a person—a unique bearer of the divine image.[28] To love each of these with the detached love of *uti* is simply to say that each created thing is not God, but should lead us to God, according to its distinctive created character. To treat anything—including another human being—as an end in itself is to make an idol of it. And, as Augustine's grief in book four shows us, idols make us miserable.

Looking back at his spiritual state years earlier, the author of the *Confessions*, realizes that the intense darkness that marked his grief in Thagaste was calibrated to the misdirected character of his love. 'I was in misery, and my misery is the state of every soul overcome by friendship with mortal things and lacerated when they are lost. Then the soul becomes aware of the misery which is its actual condition even before it loses them'.[29] Augustine invested his entire being—all his joy, hope and love—in his friend. And, his friend, like all mortal things, was destined to die. As Augustine puts it, 'The reason why that grief had penetrated me so easily and deeply was that I had poured out my soul on the sand by loving a person sure to die as if he would never die'.[30]

The distinction between *uti* and *frui* is really nothing other than coming to terms with our contingency. 'Contingency' is a philosophical term to express the 'borrowed' character of existence. Contingency expresses the fact that the word around us—ourselves included—do not give ourselves existence, but *receive* existence as gift and only for a time. In word, contingency expresses that we are *created*; created 'out of nothing', a 'nothing' that remains a structural feature of our DNA. We never escape the 'nothingness' of out of which we are made. This 'nothingness' is why the being of a contingent creature is, actually, one of 'becoming'. It is effervescent, transient, lacking stability, forever given to change, flux, and decay. Augustine poetically articulates this Heraclitan character of creaturely being:

> Things rise and set: in their emerging they begin as it were to be, and grow to perfection; having reached perfection, they grow old and die. Not everything grows old, but everything dies. So when things rise and emerge into existence,

[28]Strikingly Augustine maintains that when another person is 'used' well—that is, loved *in* God—we can even be said to 'enjoy' them: 'But when you enjoy a human being in God, you are really enjoying God rather than the human being.... It is in this sense that Paul writes to Philemon. *In this way, brother*, he says, *let me enjoy you in the Lord* (Phlm 20). But if he had not added *in the Lord*, and had merely said *let me enjoy you*, he would have been placing his hopes of bliss in Philemon'. *DDC* I.33.37. I have followed the translation by Edmund Hill in *The Works of Saint Augustine Series* (New York: New City Press, 1996).

[29]*conf.* 4.6.11.

[30]*conf.* 4.8.13.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> the faster they grow to be, the quicker they rush towards non-being.... Let these transient things be the ground on which my soul praises you (Psalm 145:2), 'God creator of all'. But let it not become stuck in them and glued to them with love through the physical senses. For these things pass along the path of things that move towards non-existence. They rend the soul with pestilential desires; the soul loves to be in them and take its repose among the objects of its love. But in these things there is no point of rest: they lack permanence. They fly away and cannot be followed with the bodily senses. No one can fully grasp them even while they are present.[31]

It is foolish to endow finite things that 'rush' towards non-existence with our ultimate love (*frui*). If so, what does it mean to love fellow creatures with the love of *uti*? How should Augustine have loved his friend? Is such 'detached love' incapable of authentically extending love to another person as is often alleged? No, the love of *uti* is a genuine and authentic love, however, it is a love that knows its object of affection to be neither autonomous nor self-contained. The creature, because he is contingent, is always a sign pointing beyond himself to the Creator. Attempting to love a contingent being 'for its own sake' leads to misery because such love does not correspond to reality: the creature does not exist for its own sake. Rather, a creature is best loved as he most truly exits: *in God*. Augustine writes, "'Happy is the person who loves you" (Tobit 13:18) and his friend in you, and his enemy because of you (Matt. 5:44). Though left alone, he loses none dear to him; for all our dear in the one who cannot be lost'.[32]

The response to our contingency is neither an aloof and steely Stoicism that refuses to love what can be lost nor a desperate clawing after a specious eternity for what, in fact, invariably slips away. Rather, to love contingent things well is to love them as they truly exist: *in God*.[33] This is the effect of Monica's last recorded words in the *Confessions.* Asked about her lack of concern regarding where her body was to be buried, she answered, 'Nothing is distant from God'.[34] Monica knows that in God's eternity nothing is irretrievably lost.

Augustine's grief in book four degenerates into whirlpool of narcissistic darkness and distraction: 'I had no hope that he would come back to life.... I merely grieved and wept. I was in misery and had lost the source of my joy'.[35] By contrast, Christ is source of Augustine's joy in book nine. A joy that abides even as he 'rests' in the grief of losing Monica. Recalling Monica's piety, devotion, and love, Augustine (without a trace of self-reproach) states, 'I was glad to weep before you about her and for her, about myself and for myself. Now I let flow the tears which I had held back so that

[31] *conf.* 4.10.15.

[32] *conf.* 4.9.14.

[33] James Wetzel articulates this well: 'It is generally easy, when reading Augustine, to turn God and the created world into competing objects of desire... which is in fact a disastrous misreading of Augustine. [Augustine] failed to love his friend *in* God, and this left his friend to be the creature of Augustine's fears and desires.... The terrifying prospect of Augustine's confessional logic is that love is an all-or-nothing affair. Either we love something well and therefore in God, or we love a fiction of our interior poverty, a desperate projection of sin. Apart from God, in other words, we never get outside the fiction we take to be the self'. Wetzel, 'Book Four: The Trappings of Woe', 68–69.

[34] *conf.* 9.11.28.

[35] *conf.* 4.6.11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they ran as freely as they wished. My heart rested (*requievit*) upon them, and it reclined upon them because it was your ears that were there'.[36] Both in book four and in book nine, Augustine describes himself 'resting' in tears. In the first case his tears rests in self-absorbed *melancholia* and restless *acedia*, in the second case his tears rest in hope. The conversion of grief in the *Confessions* entails the discovery of a newfound hope that nothing loved in God (*uti*) is irretrievably lost. Indeed, *in God* we can continue to love those whom we have lost in this life. Such is Monica's parting hope-filled instruction for her Eucharistic commemoration: 'Remember me at the altar of the Lord, wherever you may be'.[37]

[36] *conf.* 9.12.33.
[37] *conf.* 9.11.27.

Cite this article: Gerald P. Boersma, 'The Conversion of Grief in the *Confessions*', *New Blackfriars*, 106 (2025), 428–438. https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.29

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2025.29 Published online by Cambridge University Press