

Love of love, and
thus of pain:
misguided reasoning
in 'the confessions'



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The Confessions illustrates many times through which Saint Augustine appears to desire and pursue pain throughout his life, made especially clear in the beginning of Book III. His apparent desire for pain is a surprising concept for a man who so blatantly writes in *On Teaching Christianity* that one cannot hate himself. Both Augustine in his *Confessions* and Breyfogle in *A Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions* give insights on the nature of this complex and counterintuitive pursuit of pain, giving three reasons: the attempt to satisfy internal hunger with external joys, personal guilt, and a love of self. All three of these reasons are misguided and focused on the sin of *curiositas*, further illuminating his true desire for Wisdom, Goodness, and thus for God.

In the second paragraph of *Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, Breyfogle summarizes his first answer to the grand question of why Augustine appears to seek out pain: "The 'restless heart' of *Confessions*' opening lines (Conf. 1. 1. 1) takes pleasure in pain because it mistakenly conceives its inward hunger as an external hunger to be satisfied externally". Augustine can be seen throughout the first half of *The Confessions* attempting to satisfy his inward hunger for Wisdom and Truth and thus God through the temporary satisfaction of the flesh in three parts: concupiscence of the flesh, concupiscence of the eyes, and pride. Chapter three is closely linked to the second of these, or *curiositas*. This intellectual curiosity and restlessness pulls one away from God so that they must seek out satisfaction in other means. For Augustine, he searched for peace of heart within the theater and fell in love with love itself, enjoying the pain it inflicted upon his heart and relishing in the tears it brought.

In love with loving, I was casting about for something to love; the security of a way of life free from pitfalls seemed abhorrent to me because I was inwardly starved of that food which is yourself, O my God. Yet this inward famine created no pangs of hunger in me. I had no desire for the food that does not perish, not because I had my fill of it, but because the more empty I was, the more I turned from it in revulsion.

Augustine acted out of this desire to fill the hole left in his heart which could only be satisfied by God. In some parts of the text, it appears that he desires relief from these pains. In 3. 1. 1, he compares the pains of his soul to sores and writes that it is “longing to sooth its misery by rubbing up against sensible things,” (Conf. 3. 1. 1) but then later writes of his desire for sadness. In 4. 5. 10, he writes of how he would rather feel the pain of the loss of his dear friend than to see him again as he has grown too close to the pain. In chapter 3. 2. 2, he writes of the theater. Even Augustine asks himself why he enjoys the ensuing pain, writing that “the sadness itself is the pleasure” (Conf. 3. 1. 1) It appears that Augustine desires a wholeness and healing from the pains caused by his lack of communion with God, and that curiositas had blinded him to this pure desire of his own heart.

Secondly, Augustine appears to enjoy the sadness in part out of a foul sort of guilt. He admits that he “had no desire to undergo [himself] the woes [he] liked to watch” (Conf. 3. 1. 1). Instead, he writes that “it was simply when I listened to such doleful tales being told they enabled me superficially to scrape away at my itching self, with the result that these raking nails raised an enflamed swelling, and drew stinking discharge from a festering wound” (Conf. 3. 1. 1). The tears he cries for the fictitious people onstage are the <https://assignbuster.com/love-of-love-and-thus-of-pain-misguided-reasoning-in-the-confessions/>

puss from his true wounds and spiritual destitution. Despite his lack of current participation in the Catholic faith, Augustine was raised Catholic by Monica, and thus knew of Catholic morality due to engrained habits and teachings from childhood. He would have known that his actions hurt his mother, and that they directed him further from the faith he grew up with. Engrained Catholic morality combined with his attempted return and eventual true return to the faith show that he still thinks of and considers Catholicism despite his not actively practicing it, even if it is only in the back of his mind. This could explain his sense of guilt and need to experience great pains such as his friend's death and the pains of the tragedy onstage, to release the built-up pains from his internal battles through tears. His return to things such as the theater instead of the root of his pains further shows the damage his curiositas contributes to his life, and that he has an intense feeling of unworthiness and awareness of his wounds.

The third reason for this desire for pain is a misguided desire for love from self. According to Breyfogle, "fiction produces a delight devoid of responsibility" (Paffenroth 39) in which the compassion one feels while watching a tragedy is directed only at "self-indulgence, not the love of another" (Paffenroth 39). Augustine brings up a similar point in *The Confessions* by writing, "No one wants to be miserable, but we do like to think ourselves merciful, and mercy must entail some sorrow" (Conf. 3. 2. 3). It appears, with the insight of both points, that part of why one would delight in the misery brought about from the theater is so that one may feel an empty sort of pity devoid of responsibility towards the one who is pitied, so that the pitier may feel without the obligation to get involved and to help,

and to feel the pride of knowing that he is one who can express sympathy for others. Restlessness again works through this as one cannot find peace of heart through self-love alone, but must know that they are loved by God. Their love of self cannot come through things expressed in theater such as their ability to sympathize, but through the fact that they are His beloved. Augustine's appreciation for the ability to sympathize and the ensuing delight he takes in this good quality shows that he values what is good, even if he is unaware of The Good due to his battle with curiositas.

Desires misguided by curiositas drive Augustine towards the love of love and of pain throughout Book III of The Confessions. The first shows his true desire for his internal pains left from his sins to be healed. The second shows his awareness of his wounds and unworthiness. The third shows a desire to be a good person and to love himself in his goodness, pursuing what is good. These three desires are misguided, but illuminate to the readers his good intentions beneath his curiositas, showing his desire for Wisdom, Goodness, and thus for God through his apparent love of pain.