


Mimetic desire in Augustine's *Confessiones* as a model for natural theology and virtue ethics



Author:

Godfrey T. Baleng¹ 

Affiliation:

¹The Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Godfrey Baleng,
gtbaleng@gmail.com

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This article examined the concept and notability of mimetic desire in Augustine's autobiographical work *Confessiones*. Mimetic desire is based primarily on the knowledge that there is a Perfect Being, viz. God, ideal forms (in Platonic idiom), which may be known and imitated by humans. Mimesis demonstrates that humans have a natural capacity and tendency to imitate and possess what others have. Despite this, in popular culture, mimesis has the connotation of feyness and is discouraged in place of inventiveness. The culture and spirit of our day promote originality and inventiveness without an understanding of the human nature and its inherent mimetic desires. The concept of mimetic desire is rooted in Rene Girard's theory of anthropology but can be traced back as far as Plato's *Republic*. Therefore, this interdisciplinary concept has been explored through Augustine's narratological composition of *Confessiones*. The introspective tone and cultural forming narratives that make up *Confessiones* were succinctly examined in the context of mimetic theory. The triangular structure of mimetic desire was further explored to gain a better understanding of how Augustine relied on mimesis in his conversion to Christianity. The choice of imitating authentic models led to Augustine's moral renewal, and likewise such implications are relevant to modern-day Christians. Moreover, this article aims to promote the concept of mimesis as an ideal practise concerning human nature and conditioning, towards a virtuous and morally acceptable society. The results of this article underline the importance of narrative theory and friendship in developing positive cultures through mimesis. Through contrasting Augustine's earlier Manichaean life and his later Christian life, an illustration of mimetic desire can be drawn, and for Augustine, this could only mean Christ.

Contribution: This article contributes to the ongoing interdisciplinary studies of ontology, anthropology, theology, and sociology. By interpreting or reading Augustine's *Confessiones* through the lens of mimetic desire, this article offers an alternative perspective on Augustine's natural theology and virtue ethics. It further presents the conceptual framework of mimesis on Christian and Platonist praxis of the ideal forms. Moreover, the article of the narratological composition of *Confessiones* expounds the importance of interpersonal relationships in our spiritual growth. The triangular structure of mimesis was further expounded in the context of interior life, viz. *interior homo* [inner man] as the ultimate model.

Keywords: mimetic desire; Augustine; Rene Girard; *Confessiones*; narrative theory; friendship; ethics; *interior homo*.

Introduction

This article is based on the preface to the series of mimetic readings of Augustine's corpus, starting with his *Confessiones*. Likewise, his earlier epistemological works will consequently be asserted as having a similar composition and methodology on existential inquiries. A similar chain of thought can also be found in his later development of the *Just War* theory in his *Civitate Dei*, which can be interpreted through Girard's (1962–2015) concept of scapegoating and rivalry, both found in his mimetic theory. It can be argued that Augustine wrote *Civitate Dei* as a defence for Christianity against the scapegoat mechanism and conflict desire of the pagans.¹ The proposed series reveals Augustine's indiscretions and wisdom based on mimesis. The mimetic reading of Augustine's theology brings an interdisciplinary understanding of the concept of 'two Augustines'.² Some side-by-side comparisons, based on the models he adopts, are necessary to answer this phenomenological paradox. Further, in his *Confessiones*, Augustine quotes the book of Psalms so

1. During the invasion of Rome, the pagans blamed Orthodox Christians.

2. For a detailed reading on this concept, see *Two Augustines* (Efroymsen 2009). This concept is argued from the perspective of his earlier philosophical thought, particularly in his earlier dialogues before his Christian conversion. His *Confessiones* and later works are classified as matured in contrast to the latter.

intensively that it is safe to say that he mimics the psalmist as a worshipper and author of God's message. Wilson (2019) likewise, notes that in the opening of Augustine's *Confessiones*, God is exalted as the first principle and the 'high' one. Moreover, the first words are taken from the book of Psalms instead of from the author, as is expected of a confession. Van Oort (2009:3) posits that '[n]early half of Augustine's sermons that have come down to us consist of Christological interpretations and applications of psalm texts'.

The power of mimetic desire lies in revealing our objects of desire and the models we imitate in the process. This fact presents us with an opportunity to develop a scientific method for studying Augustine's natural theology. The hypothesis of this article is that life is about making choices and, according to Girard, our choices and desires is externally influenced and not autonomous as are driven by imitating others – thus human desires naturally exhibit a triangular structure (model, disciple, object of desire), as a result of our surroundings and relationships with others. This is antithetical to the innate religious concept of Augustine's theory of original sin, found in his natural theology. For Girard, our daily exposure to different environments shapes the choices we make. These activities in the context of Augustine's narration of his early life, in his *Confessiones*, could nonetheless be read in line with Girard's theory of mimetic desire. Palaver (2013:88) once said that Augustine is Girard's 'great first predecessor', because of the similarities in their interpretation of literary works.

Even though, Augustine did not write a systematic treaty on the concept of mimetic desire. The *Confessiones*, nonetheless, depicts his indiscretions and interpersonal reliability on friends so vividly that it resonates with Girard's mimetic theory. For Augustine the Platonist, the only way to break free from a sinful and mischievous lifestyle is to mimic Christ as an ideal model of human desires. Furthermore, for Augustine the human mind is an image of divine trinity. Although Augustine understood human nature as inherently sinful, and thus that humanity is incapable of goodness on its own accord, he nonetheless found inspirational friendships, mentors, and models in the form of Simplicianus and Bishop Ambrose, who became the pull on Augustine's desire to fashion after him. Through his mentors' rhetoric and narratives about the heroes of old, such as Anthony of the Desert, Augustine was convinced to follow them and surrendered to Christ. Thus, the exploration of narrative theory played a pivotal role in aiding Augustine's spiritual journey.

A brief history of mimetic theory

What are the first principles that humans should live by? Moreover, how do we structure these principles and behave accordingly in contrast to other living beings? This article poses these perennial philosophical questions, as embedded in an all-encompassing theory that coined mimetic desire. Both are employed in ancient philosophical works of Plato (as found in his dialogical works, especially *The Republic*),

his pupil, Aristotle (in his work entitled *Poetics* 335 BCE) and in Rene Girard's general *Corpus*. In summary, the theory of mimesis studies ontology, anthropology, and the structure of human desires in developing both human behaviour and cultures.³ In Gerard's works on the topic, he innovates by making familiar ancient themes seem new through postulating interdisciplinary narratives on human thought and behaviour that ultimately inform our everyday choices and thus, cultures.

Plato's idea of imitation is profoundly embedded in his metaphysical outlook of the external world, as a second or shadow realm. Thus, imitation or mimesis, should be interpreted within his theory of the ideal forms, described in his allegory of the cave (around 380 BCE). Plato insisted on first principles, which are abstract concepts and thus original, in contrast to our world of appearances where entities, which is particles, can only exist and participate through mimicking the ideal forms that exist in the immaterial realm.

Consequently, Plato is known for opposing the nature and purpose of art or literary theory, as a true and accurate representation of aesthetics and reality. For Plato, art as a form is bad because it does not inspire virtue. He argues that an artist does not necessarily possess intimate knowledge of the particle being portrayed, to portray it. In this way, art becomes something of a copy of a copy recreated in ignorance. His analogy of the shadow world in his allegory of the cave, best demonstrates his pessimistic ontological perspective, juxtaposed with that of Aristotle. Aristotle's approach is more scientific, as he redefines his teacher's explanation of art and literary theory as a copy of a copy. He argues that mimesis is the creative process necessary for advancing human knowledge of the physical world.

As for Augustine, his *Confessiones* as a literary theory, exhibits originality in terms of style and genre. It is the first of its kind to be written. However, his theology in both his earlier dialogue, which is in *De Magistro* (AD 389) and later memoir, *Confessiones* (AD 397–400), is a mimetic interpretation of Christ as an ideal model to be emulated. The title of the former refers to Christ. In the opening verse of book 1 of his *Confessiones*, he praises God for his greatness and how we ought to praise him, as man desires God's attributes. Therefore, it could be argued, in contrast to the Girardian view, that for Augustine the immanence of mimesis is inevitably something innate within human nature.⁴ In other words, God created us to imitate him as we represent his divine will on earth. In *De Trinitate*, Augustine takes a similar view in studying human nature as a fundamental step toward the understanding of divine nature.

3. Mimetic theory can also be applied to the formation of Artificial Intelligence and its various transformative cultures. For an in-depth reading on the subject, see Freund (2023).

4. If one goes by his analogy of a jealous baby in book 1, a point of mimesis as inherently a human trait, can be argued. He advocated for infant baptism for such inherent human behaviour. A study on baptism and mimesis can be conducted to further Augustine's natural theology and anthropology.

Importance of narratology and friendship in *Confessiones*

The *Confessiones* adopts a phenomenological narrative theory in which Augustine explores both his lived experiences and those of the characters within his memoir. Most of these characters can be classified as friends or friendly towards him. Thus, *Confessiones* is a book about friendship on a journey to spiritual enlightenment. In *Confessiones*, there are two themes that are central to Augustine's Christian conversion in the garden of Milan. Firstly, Augustine had many positive and influential friendships that modelled and encouraged him to re-address the existential problems in his youth and adult life. In his biographical work on Augustine, Peter Brown (1967:61) rightly posits that 'Augustine will never be alone'.

In *Confessiones*, Augustine introduces us to some friends who followed the same journey into Christianity and episcopate. Nebridius, Alypius, Romanianus, Ambrose, and Simplicianus all played a part in his Christian journey. Some like Alypius, would join him in his later monastic community that he established. Augustine's mother, Monnica, was perhaps the best model of friendship Augustine had experienced. As a Christian woman, Monnica interceded on behalf of her son without ceasing. Such a level of love and devotion according to triangular mimetic theory, can help to develop a culture conducive to greatness. Monnica's many prayers lulled Augustine into finally embracing Orthodox Christianity. In this way, Monnica played a pivotal role in shaping Augustine into the man of honour we know him to have been. In summary, Monnica was a model, Augustine was a disciple, and Christ was the object of desire that the model wished upon the disciple.⁵

This triangular relationship between mother and Christ, mother and son, and son and Christ, would help Augustine to develop his theology of love at a later stage in his Christian life. In *Confessiones* (*Conf.* 2.1.2) he tells us that the one desire that dominated his search for delight, was simply to love and to be loved. Through his mother's practical love, Augustine was inspired to love and serve others. The love he had for his unnamed friend in *Conf.* (4.8.14), was like a mirror image of himself, as he tells us:

Sometimes when we argued with each other it was not a bitter argument but like the kind of argument you might have with yourself. In fact, sometimes the argument was the kind only friends can have when they have some disagreement – it sometimes made our usual harmony more meaningful.

In *Conf.* (4.4.7) he tells us that this unnamed friend 'had been sweet to [him] beyond all the sweetness of life that [he] had experienced'. Already at this adolescent stage in his life, Augustine understood friendship in terms of the reorientation of one's beliefs that he saw himself in another. The measure of real friendship is the positive that we can gain from a friend and vice versa. Thus, friendship was for Augustine an

⁵ However, Christ would be more than a desired object and an ideal model for Augustine to mimic, as explained in my last chapter.

empirical relationship that is beneficial to both individuals who gravitate towards a similar object of desire. In this light, even bad relationships require a type of homogenous principle with a common goal, which brings two people together, as evidenced by his pear stealing story. According to Kamimura (2005):

The study of Augustine's thought of friendship has focused on three pivotal problems, that is the influence of the Classical theory on his scheme, the characteristics of his views, and its evolution in his works. (p. 1)

In summarising Kamimura's views, Augustine, as an essentialist, imitates the forms necessary for his personal edification. According to the Aristotelian theory on friendship, this is based on mutual usefulness in contrast to pleasure-oriented friendship. Virtuous friends have similar beliefs; thus, it is crucial to consider their viewpoints on one another's life. Because friends are outside of your life, they can accurately assess one another (Annas 1993:25).

Augustine documents contrasting friendships that he shared throughout his life. Therefore, it becomes clear that his evolution as a theologian was not an isolated activity, but it was dependent on interpersonal phenomenological relationships of the right characteristics. Regarding Augustine's influence and legacy, Van Oort (2019) makes the following remarks:

Augustine's pupil Quodvultdeus, for one, admired his teacher so much that he adopted his manner of preaching. His sermons circulated under Augustine's name, especially in Italy. Most importantly, a hundred years later Caesarius, Bishop of Arles in the south of Gaul and filled with a great missionary fervour, would re-edit entire collections of Augustine's sermons ... Later preachers in turn used these editions.

Miller (1933) also showed that there were support of Augustine's influence and legacy:

[W]hen the famous Boniface preached the Gospel to the Frisian and German tribes, 'his' sermons contained many Augustinian ideas ... (pp. 23–24)

Newell (2012) further highlights this behaviour in the following words:

If we learn chiefly from others, we desire from them as well. What they value we learn to value whether we understand it or not or whether we can have it or not. (p. 20)

In this light, imitating those we look up, becomes second nature. This applies to negative imitation too as Fleming (2004) notes:

The most obvious paradox of negative imitation is that it is still thoroughly entangled with the Other – the acquisition of putative 'difference' demands a meticulous observation of others (and perhaps even their approval) so that the romantic subject can distinguish himself or herself from them. (p. 15)

Secondly, narratology was essential to Augustine's spiritual pilgrimage in *Confessiones*. The investigation of narrative theory in *Confessiones*, provides us an opportunity to

delve into the phenomenological and historical accounts of medieval anthropology. Moreover, it expands our knowledge of mimetic desire as an incontestable human behaviour. The mimetic function of narrative is central to *Confessiones* and beyond. By adopting phenomenological and historical narrations, the *Confessiones* depicts a phenomenology with great appreciation even to date. The antagonists and protagonists of the *Confessiones* resonate well with modern readers. His conversion narrative especially demonstrates our stubbornness to change as human beings.

Moreover, this conversion narrative takes on a climactic end from his personal struggle to redemption. Such redemption I assert as his Christian ethics and moral renewal. Through countless renditions of heroic historical narratives by his friends, Augustine, who was struggling with his worldly desires, was able to mimic others, and through that he was able to come to Christ. Through others' reports, his prayer to God changed, as he no longer prayed; 'Lord, give me chastity and continence, but not yet!' (*Conf.* 8.7). In fact, we may even attribute mimesis not only to his conversion, but also to learning. In (*Conf.* 1.13) he discovered that, as a toddler, to communicate with others, he needed to grasp and imitate signs (body language) in the following statement:

When people called something by name, and, in response to that word they turned their bodies toward it, I observed it. I noted that they were calling the thing a particular name, the sound they made when they wanted to draw attention to it. ... In this way, I communicated the signs of those wishes which I needed to express with the people around me. (p. 23–25)

The application of narrative and mimesis as a pair of critical categories were historically brought together for proto-narratological purposes in a passage from Plato's *Republic* (392c–398b), according to Halliwell (2009). Thus, ancient philosophers understood mimetic desire as something hidden and unconscious. However, humans are social and narrative driven beings. This becomes evident in our everyday choices. Augustine's Christian conversion was partially a result of fraternising and narratives about heroes of old, such as Ponticianus and Anthony of the Desert who, like Augustine, was similarly persuaded to give up his material riches through reading Scriptures. Halliwell (2009:15) posits that 'All narrative discourse, from the simplest to the most sophisticated, imposes a perspectival structure on temporal experience.'

Triangular structure of mimesis

The triangular structure of mimetic desire in *Confessiones*, offers a framework for analysing Augustine's existentialism through a Girardian lens. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* was Girard's earliest attempt at a triangular mimetic structure in a theological context. The structure of mimesis with the triangular components *imitation*, *rivalry*, and *scapegoating*, rivalry, and scapegoating are moreover evident in Augustine's theological praxis as it becomes obvious that he struggled to convert without imitating and scapegoating others. In *Confessiones*, imitation is central to the process of self-growth and discovery. More importantly, a model that

can be positively imitated is essential because humanity is inherently sinful and lacks the capacity to learn without imitating the *interior homo*, according to Augustine's theory of original sin.

In Girard's triangular desire, which Max Scheler (1915) calls *ressentiment*,⁶ the role assigned to the external model, in contrast to Augustine's presupposition, has the capacity to mentor and resolve concrete human experience. In this context, the article of mimetic desire is pivotal because it goes deeper than observing human behaviour. Mimetic desire has the capacity to read the intention of others; thus, the origins of personal growth can directly be linked to this triangular relationship between model, disciple, and object of desire. Moreover, Girard posits that desire is fundamentally object-oriented, involving what psychoanalysts call 'cathexis' (Fleming 2004:32). According to Newell (2012:15), 'The power of Girard's hypothesis lies in revealing triangular desire, the presence of the mediator and the fact that what is happening to the subject, is hidden from him.'

In *Confessiones*, Augustine the disciple, had a fair amount of authentic and negative objects he desired. His environment shaped these desires; hence, his personal development should be studied through the lens of his friendships and acquaintances. In the process of developing his theological thought, he lionised and feted different schools of thought that unconsciously modelled his mind one thought at a time. Through the teachings of the highly esteemed Manichaean Bishop, Faustus, Augustine, for example, had a corporeal perspective of God's nature. The opposite could be said later, after his encounter with Platonism, which taught him to view God as spirit.

The encounter he had with Bishop Faustus, discouraged him to keep following a materialistic presupposition about God. The Manichaean way as an ideal model to emulate, became a redundancy. Furthermore, Bishop Faustus' limited knowledge of the liberal arts, puts him off, as he desired knowledge that was much greater and transcendental. In this context, one may suggest that Augustine was an intellectual snob or, at this point in time, not knowing what he wanted. However, he most definitely knew what he did not want once he met with Bishop Faustus. Newell (2012) postulates a similar view found in Girard's work:

In Rene Girard's *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* we find a phenomenology of snobbism. To begin, the snob is involved with triangular desire where he desires the perfection of his model and where the model is the medium in which the perfection is not only found but which the subject will never have due to his impotence. (p. 24)

This proves Girard's assertion of desire as pre-eminently imitative. The logical step in the Girardian lens is rivalry. Such a rivalry is a result of seeking the same object of desire, albeit via a different epistemic praxis. According to Hodge, Cowdell and Fleming (eds. 2014):

⁶Scheler's corpus explores that which can be said is specific to human beings, through the interdisciplinary study of Philosophical Anthropology.

Girard also provides a description of a type of mimetic desire structured by 'internal mediation': a situation in which the subject's and the model's objects of desire overlap and become a matter of potential, and often actual, conflict. (p. 3)

In the biographical part of *Confessiones*, Augustine is involved with mimetic triangular desires that originated from his conflict with the Manichaeans, and proved useful in his moral renewal and spiritual growth. His personal struggles and existential crisis meant that he could not come to Christ on his own accord, and not through Manichaean Christianity. As he tells us, his mind was willing, but the body was unwilling to let go of worldly passions as practised in Manichaean Christianity. Thus, the roles of human desire and external models were two phenomena that Augustine learned to understand, in the process of developing a hierarchical structure of divine order.

In book 1 of *Confessiones*, he sets the tone for a mimetic interpretation of anthropology with his observation of a jealous baby. He writes: 'I have personally watched and studied a jealous baby. He could not yet speak and, pale with jealousy and bitterness, glared at his brother sharing his mother's milk.' As a Platonist, he structurally categorised physical models as disordered and discombobulated. Newell (2012), however, posits:

Structural thinking unhesitatingly assumes that human reality is intelligible, that it has a logic, and it will even degrade it pouring it into a logic so things can be systematised, and humanity will be 'revealed'. But for Girard, this cookie-cutter thinking can't grasp humanity since we are subjectivity not an objectivity. (p. 8)

In the tradition of the Platonists, Augustine understood the soul as an immaterial substance with an existence superior to that of the external material or body. However, the soul is inferior to the divine, to which it must imitate to gain knowledge. In other words, both the external material and the soul must, in that ordered structure, imitate the divine as superior to both. This triangular ordered structure was reflected in his entire systematic thought. Moreover, he posits that, as disciples, we are constantly in the process of becoming; thus, our nature gravitates towards change. Stirling (2004) posits:

Mimetic desire results from and reflects a general human mimetic capacity, namely, the ability to learn. We learn virtually everything, including language, from others. This powerful ability to learn from others is, of course, one of the fundamental differences between humans and animals. Mimetic capacity is a necessary prerequisite for *hominisation*. (p. 14)

Through Simplicianus' narratives, Augustine, as a disciple, desired 'according to another' in the process of learning. His own desire was insufficient to liberate him from erogenous desires. Therefore, choosing the right external models to imitate, liberated him from his immorality. According to Girard in Newell (2012):

[M]imetic desire'... is the surrender of one's power to choose the objects of one's desire. One surrenders power to another, meaning that in so doing one no longer chooses the objects of

one's desire. One chooses, instead, what the model has chosen and follows it. (p. 7)

As aforementioned, such confusion is natural and inherited from the original sin, according to Augustine's theology. According to Girard, there are two species of human desire that motivate us: physical desire (tangible and can be pointed at), and metaphysical desire (what we want objects to say about us). Consequently, we are dependent on different forms of idols as inspirational models. Likewise, in *Confessiones*, Augustine demonstrates that, as we come to God through Christ, we come to Christ through good human models. In *Confessiones*, Augustine desires Christ because his human models, viz. Simplicianus, Bishop Ambrose, and Monnica, followed Christ themselves. In the process, narratology becomes mediation by which Augustine finds Christ vicariously.

Augustine understood his spiritual journey existentially, which means that he, firstly, had to find good human models before imitating the metaphysical model. This is imperative, as Newell (2012:23) explains: 'Desire becomes obsessive when one is excluded from the society of those whom he admires, and thinks he is one of them.' The monastic life he would later follow, was through his realisation of the collective ascetic desires of his companions. Prior to his asceticism, Augustine needed encouragement through his friend's narratives, about heroes of the past and how they overcame similar personal struggles. What Anthony would do, Augustine, as a disciple, would also do. In fact, the conversion narrative of Desert Father Anthony, is mentioned in the same breath as Augustine's conversion. Such repetition and continuity of thought and practise are encouraged as infectious to moral choices and behaviour, as evident in Augustine's practice of ascetic and monastic life, as exemplified by the Desert Fathers.

O'Donnell (1992:xlix) categorised Augustine's *Confessiones* as a detailed and structured narrative on 'pattern of ascent' (see also Nino 2007:90). Thus, the abundance of external focalisation in his *Confessiones*, led him to his *tollelege*, *tollelege* moment, where he inevitably surrendered to Christ. This means that Christ is the epitome of our nature and metaphysical desires; what our choices say about us. Paul utters a similar theme when he says: '... imitate me, just as I imitate Christ' (1 Cor 11:1). This type of imitation is authentic, as it seeks after Christ; that is a metaphysical desire that speaks to one's moral compass. According to Girard, a metaphysical desire aims at an identity, and such an identity reaches far beyond the physical.

As for the scapegoat mechanism, Augustine's polemical corpus can be regarded as his texts of condemnation. Moreover, his rivals (viz., Manichaeans, Donatists, and Pelagians) all professed to be Christians, and those who did not like the Platonist, he himself classified as quasi-Christians. Thus, the contents of *Confessiones* reflects Girard's model of culture formation, scapegoating, and religious deification on

a similar praxis, that is, a similar object of desire. The scapegoating mechanism serves as a justification and unification element that further sustains such a union against one's rivals. Bubbio (2005) posits this Girardian view as follows:

[R]ivals tend to resemble each other more and more, as they are models for each other, and mutual violence grows proportionately: this is the critical moment of the birth of every culture. The resulting event is the choice – a substantially arbitrary choice – of a scapegoat: the victim is expelled and so the community finds itself united. (p. 17)

In Girard's view, there is an ordered structure that sustains itself through deifying objects that unite us because of the scapegoat mechanism. Thus, his theory of mimetic desire can be studied to understand other cultural and religious theories, such as Augustine's just war theory, found in his polemical work against the pagans.⁷

Mimesis and virtue ethics

In a constantly changing world, understanding how we can effectively change behaviour, is crucial for personal growth, social progress, and the sustainability of our cultures. Mimetic desire as a conceptual framework, is a scientific hypothesis with the ability to build coherent theories of virtue ethics. Augustine's *Confessiones*, highlights his theoretical reflections on how mimesis constitutes us as social beings. His desire to steal pears in *Conf.* (2.4.9), was a peer-reviewed exercise with an inclination to mimic for the sake of belonging. Such an inclination can help us understand the fundamentals of human psychology and its tendencies towards wrongdoing.

The pleasure he got from stealing, was a physical desire with the aim of establishing an identity, based on societal norms. Thus, our existential crises come as a desire to repeat mimicry not only peer behaviour, but also metaphysics to belong and be likeminded. Moreover, the act of stealing or theft in this context, serves as a capacity for collaboration and adventure. Augustine tells us that the stolen pears were not even appetising and ripe for human consumption. Consequently, they threw their stolen treasure at the pigs. Therefore, the justification for their theft was the thrill and opportunity to do bad things in the company of friends. Augustine believed that virtue is a responsibility of each individual, based on his or her own nature (Pratt 1903:11).

Throughout Augustine's life, we learn how he voluntarily modified his character to be convenient for specific friendships. He tells us that certain of these friendships were sinful because he was led astray from God. However, he admits the necessity of having friends with characteristics of obedience to God's will. He would later develop a monastic

⁷The pagans were other Christian sects that opposed Orthodoxy. Michael Moriarty, in chapter 3 (*Augustine on Pagan Virtue*) of his book, entitled *Disguised vices: theories of virtue in early French thought* (2011), examines Augustine's criticism of pagan virtue. Augustine argued against the idea that humans are capable of good without divine grace. Thus, his theory of divine illumination was the means of countering the pagan notion of human goodness.

community, with a small circle of good friends. Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1.7–8), describes good as something final and self-sufficient. He defines happiness among friends, as reached through being mindful of the characteristic function of man.

Augustine's later desire for a virtuous and transcendent devotion to God, was likewise a well-thought-out attempt to reform his character and identity, by emulating virtuous characters. In this instance, Simplicianus played a pivotal role of mentorship by encouraging Augustine to study the books of the Platonist, and more importantly by deploying narratives as a catalyst for guidance and change in virtue.

Simplicianus' personal experience and narratives embodied the desired characters and virtues that Augustine lacked. Augustine could self-reflect and transform into what he ought to be as a man. Book 8 of his *Confessiones* documents his conversion to Christianity, and his admission of failing to take responsibility for his moral renewal. In *Conf.* (8.8.19) he writes: 'I knew that this was what I ought to do ... to want to go there ... but to want it valiantly and with all my heart.' Wilson (2019) describes Augustine's conversion as a journey of his descent into the lower orders, before he ascends through imitating Christ.

According to Rene Girard (1987):

Man is the creature who does not know what to desire. He turns up to others to make up his mind. We desire what others desire because we imitate their desires. (p. 122)

Augustine demonstrates that knowing what to do and doing it, are two different things. He had to rely on others to eventually do what he knew all along. Wilson (2019) makes a similar assertion in the introductory part of her article, when she pays tribute to a number of saints as friends of God and models who imitate Christ. Consequently, these saints serve as authentic human models we may imitate. She further asserts Christianity as an attempt by humans to be like Christ. Throughout his *Confessiones* to God, Augustine highlights his weakness for change without the intervention of such models because his *interior homo* could distinguish right from wrong.

Thus, as social beings, humans are conditioned to mimic their surroundings, because we are divine copies fashioned in God's image and likeness. This makes mimetic desire a fundamental concept of anthropology and Christian development. To be like Christ, literally means to imitate Christ both in nature and works, as the apostle Paul teaches us in Ephesians 5:1–3.

The *interior homo* as the ideal model

Augustine's theology articulates a hierarchal structure in accord with the Platonist's ontological perspective of the

ideal form. For Augustine, the concept of *interior homo* is what is true about us.⁸ According to Reid (2010:18), 'Augustine's concept of the inner man in his *Confessiones*, may indicate an emergent consensus on the workings of the *psyche*, or soul, and its literary expression.' Even long before his Christian conversion in *Confessiones*, Augustine developed a protreptic predisposition of divine illumination that enlightens the intelligible *interior homo*. Thus, in his epistemology, the *interior homo* serves as the intelligent part of the human soul, as averred in Plato's teachings.

This concept of *interior homo* is what is called consciousness in contemporary psycho-analytic theory. For Augustine, the external things are of lower value, because of their dependence on the senses. In his earlier epistemological dialogues, he argued for the *interior homo* as the true model of knowledge and truth. Augustine's interior phrases are deployed to concepts that relates to knowledge and other areas of his philosophy (Kayikci 2015:138). Although he also recognised the roles of external models as important in facilitating knowledge, knowledge was for him something that comes from within oneself. The Platonist taught Augustine the value of *sapiential*, which is the unchanging truth that pertains to inner-being. For Plato, the exterior is unstable, and anything that changes is not worth pursuing.

In this article, the idea of mimesis as a method of learning, is contrasted between the sensible and intelligible. In this regard, Augustine recognised the limitation of the senses in the process of learning and teaching. He therefore argued against the external teacher as the true teacher.⁹ Cary (2011:193) posits: 'The inner is higher, better, more intelligible, and closer to God than are external, sensible, and bodily things, including the sounding words of human language.' Thus, the *interior homo* is the ideal model for a disciple to mimic in the process of learning anything of value. The triangular structure of mimetic desire could better be understood when argued from this Augustinian perspective. In this light, imitation becomes a positive human attribute, because it brings us closer to Christ through imitating the unchanging nature.

The basic argument in Girard's theory, is the natural instinct of humans to imitate others, and how this behaviour form cultures. The biblical revelation is central not only in Girard's view, but also in Augustine's. For Augustine, 'other' signifies the sensible, and therefore requires a divine intervention to find transcendental truth beyond the immediate, which is in a constant state of becoming or changing. According to Reid (2010):

8. In *Soliloquia* (2:32), he perceives the sensible things as never truly true, but only 'true by a sort of imitation'. For an in-depth study, see Cary (2008).

9. The concept of the true teacher is explored in *De Magistro* (AD 389), a dialogue between Augustine (model), his son Adeodatus (disciple), and the inner teacher, viz. the Logos, Christ (object of desire). The title is reference to Christ as the only true teacher. Augustine, prior to his *Confessiones*, had already exhibited the knack for applying mimetic theory in his earlier philosophical writings.

The inner man registers such [*transcendental*] contact as experientially 'real', and demonstrates the ability of God to 'pierce', or touch, the individual physically, spiritually, and emotionally ... The creation of the *interior homo* as a literary convention allowed the experience of divine resonance in the body to be recorded and re-enacted as a visualisation of an immaterial reality. (p. 17)

One of the criticisms of Girard's theory is its value chain of external things, which are homogeneously reprobate in Augustinian and Platonist view. Conversely, the transcendental state, as an ideal form, is not abstract and intangible, but something achievable and can be materialised, as Reid cogently states. From this notion, the Platonist advocated for a metaphysical reality as an ideal form to be imitated. The Gospel of John refers to it as the Logos, which is the divine reason incarnate in the second person of the Holy Trinity. Setting out to prove this, Augustine developed the concept of the *interior homo* as a precursor to natural theology.

The obscure desires which humans copiously imitated, can be corrected through a conscious effort to find one's inner-being. His divine illumination in the process was the jigsaw puzzle, necessary to bridge this ontological gap. The divine intervention demonstrates not only our capacity to learn, but to mimic and manifest the divine nature within us. Thus, the triangular mimetic desire illustrates two overlapping human natures. Schumacher¹⁰ (2010:375) observes Augustine's treatment of divine illumination in his corpus, as though it were the condition of possibility of all human knowledge. She points to *De Magistro* (AD 389) and *Soliloquia* (AD 386–387) as his earlier philosophical works that address divine illumination as more than a theory.

Conclusion

This article presents Augustine's use of mimetic theory to reach a higher state of consciousness in his *Confessiones*. The triangular structure of mimesis was explained twofold: (1) considering Augustine's phenomenological experience as documented in his memoir; and (2) through his *interior homo* concept. Furthermore, the roles of friendship and narrative were examined in the process of Augustine's spiritual journey prior to his Christian conversion. Mimetic desire, a concept rooted in Rene Girard's interdisciplinary theories, was explored through reading Augustine's *Confessiones* to God, where he mimics Christ as the one true model for human salvation. Through this context, mimetic desire was used as the lens through which we can examine human nature, considering Augustine's natural theology and his Platonist idealism. For Augustine, the only way to break free from a life of sin, was to mimic Christ as the ideal model of our desire. This desire for Christ, was explained as metaphysical, in contrast to physical desire,

10. Lydia Schumacher's book, '*Theo-logic*' of Augustine's *Theory of Knowledge by divine illumination* (2010) explores the theological context and practicality of divine illumination in Augustine's theory of knowledge. This article is a continuation of her PhD thesis, entitled *Divine illumination in an Augustinian and Franciscan thought*, where she further explores the decline of Augustine's divine illumination theory. My PhD thesis (*Augustine and educational themes*), investigated the same topic albeit from a Platonist synthesis prior to its 13th-century decline. The theme of my current research, likewise, interprets the logical aspect of Augustine's divine illumination theory in his natural theology.

which seek to be like the external other. The metaphysical desire was moreover explained in the context of Augustine's notion of *interior homo*, where Christ is the ideal model to be imitated. This article focused on the theory's positive aspects, such as cultural formation, rather than the criticisms made against it, namely that it is considered as a theory of theories.

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