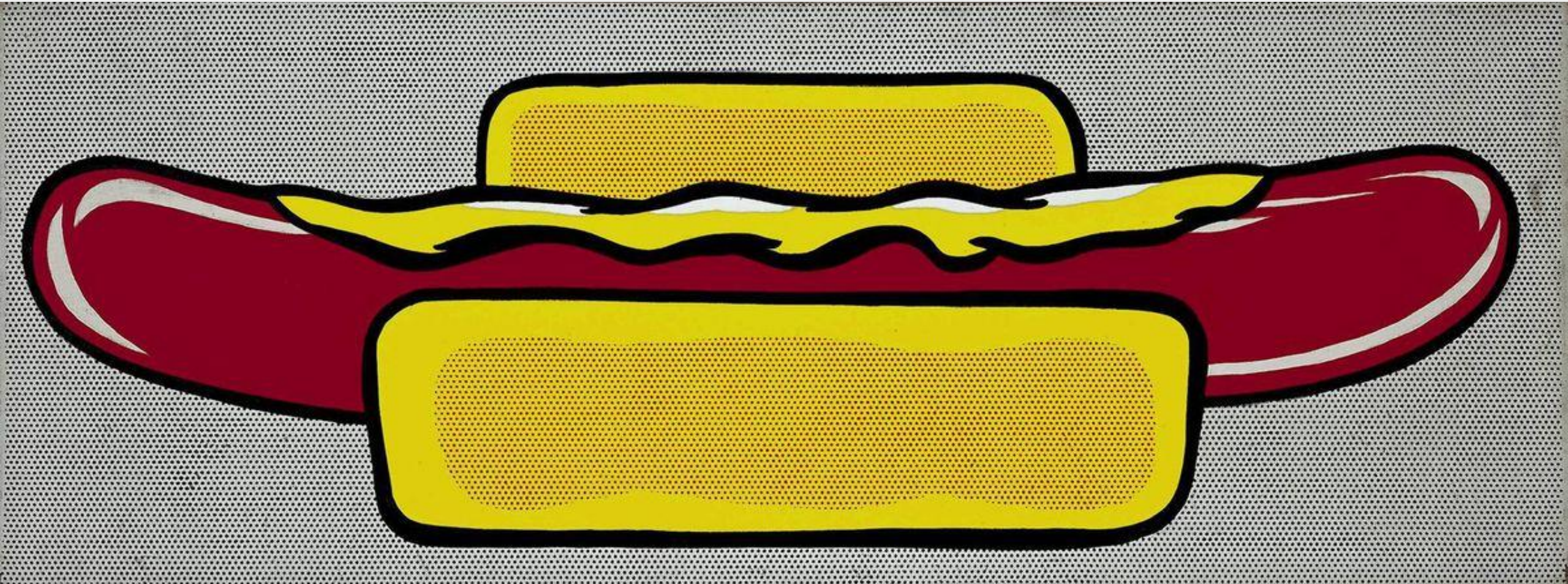




AUGUSTINE IN POSTMODERNITY

AUGUSTINE IN POSTMODERNITY

So far in this module, you will have become familiar with the life of St Augustine, the content of his work, and the key themes he uses within it.

In the last two sections, the module has turned to the reception of Augustine – how Augustine has been read in different times and different places by different people.

Situated at a point right at the beginning of the tradition of meta-physical theology, Augustine's search for God in his work is both philosophical and scriptural, neo-platonic and personal, meta-physical and deeply anchored in the reality of personal experience.

Within the *Confessions*, we have both Augustine's search for God and God's search for him, the desire to answer the question of "What do I love when I love you, my God?" that remains at the heart of the work.





WHAT IS POST-MODERNITY?

POST-MODERNITY

Jean-Francois Lyotard famously defines the postmodern as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives', where metanarratives are understood as totalising stories about history and the goals of the human race.

Postmodernity is the age in which metanarratives have become bankrupt.

Through his theory of the end of metanarratives, Lyotard develops his own version of what tends to be a consensus among theorists of the postmodern - postmodernity as an age of fragmentation and pluralism.

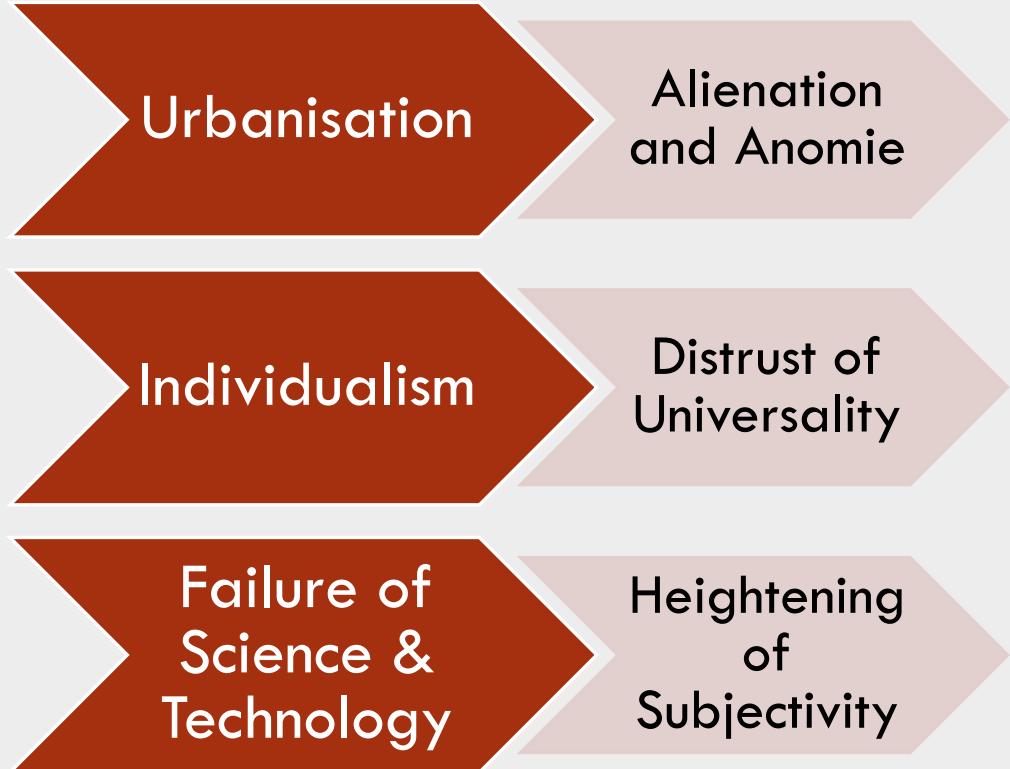


CHARACTERISTICS OF POST-MODERNITY

The era of post-modernity (1970's onwards) is often described as aspects of modernity taken to the extreme – the hyper-modernisation of our societies.

This acceleration of trends already present in the modern era (1790-1970's –ish) begins to break down the foundations of modernity itself.

For example, the urbanisation of society seen in modernity, when accelerated and taken to the extreme, begins to eat away at the very social foundations which have made it possible – by disconnected and atomising the individual within a swirling urban sprawl.



Urbanisation

Alienation
and Anomie

Individualism

Distrust of
Universality

Failure of
Science &
Technology

Heightening
of
Subjectivity



AUGUSTINE AND POST-MODERNITY

AUGUSTINE AND POST-MODERNITY

It is hard to over-state just how much influence the writings of St Augustine continue to have on contemporary philosophising about our lives and our world.

Consider this remarkable constellation of facts (Caputo & Scanlon, 2005):

In 1989, Jacques Derrida wrote *Circumfession* in which he explores the nature of confession as event.

Lyotard's last work in 1997 was his *Confession of St Augustine*.

Wittgenstein's 1952 magnum opus *Philosophical Investigations* begins with an extended interrogation of the nature of language, drawing on the work of Augustine.

Paul Ricoeur, in 1983, published *Time and Narrative*, which is largely concerned with Augustine's work

Albert Camus, yet another major post-modern philosophical figure, had written his doctoral dissertation on Neo-platonism and St Augustine.



AUGUSTINE AND POST-MODERNITY

All of these figures are towering giants of the philosophical stream of post-modernism and all have, in some way, engaged with and explored in their writings the works of St Augustine.

Why is this?

In this section of the course, I want to look at two examples which might perhaps give us some insight – Wittgenstein's use of Augustine in *Philosophical Investigations* and Derrida's engagement with Augustine in *Circumfessions*.





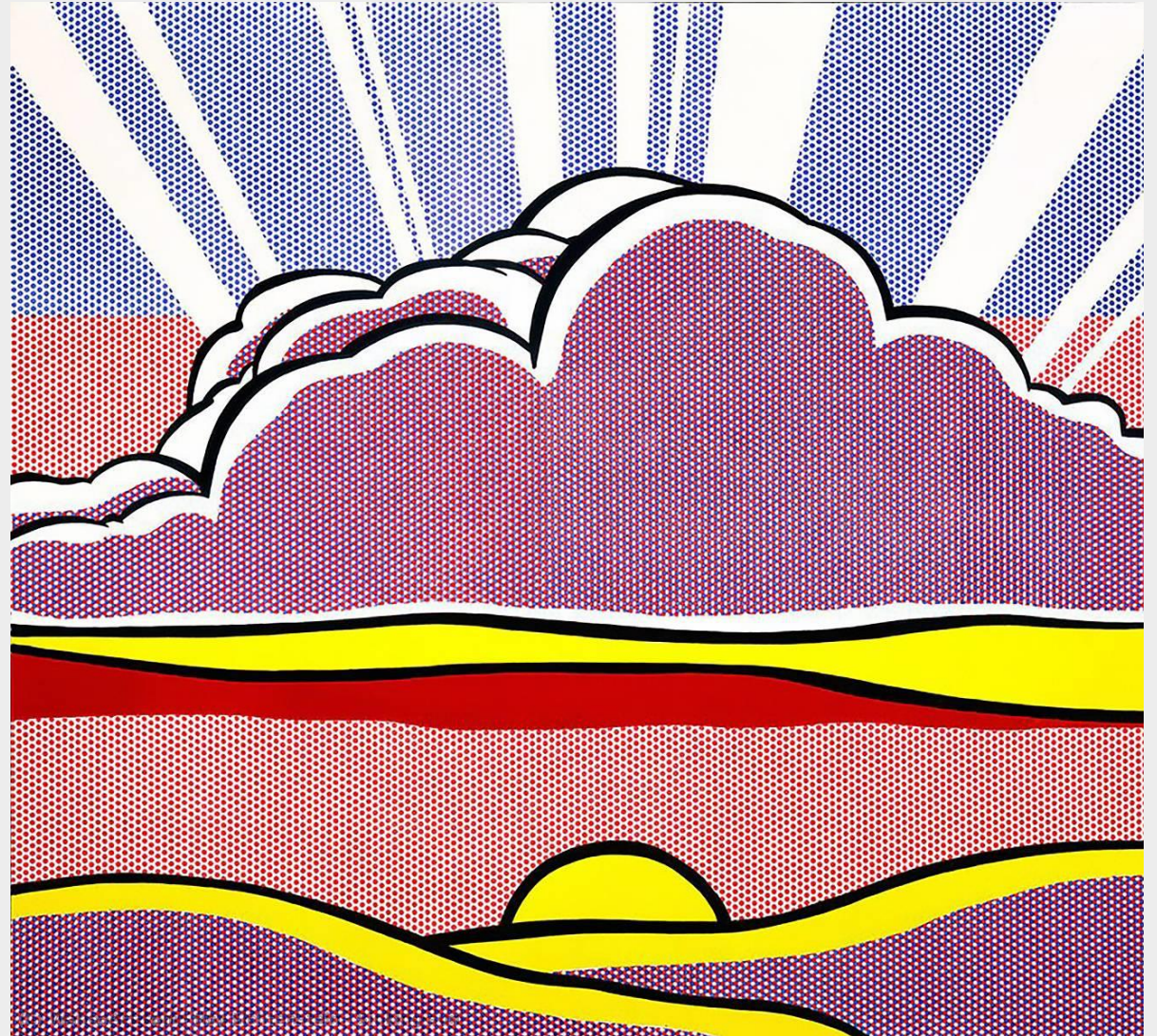
WITTGENSTEIN AND AUGUSTINE

WITTGENSTEIN AND AUGUSTINE

The modern form of philosophy made a number of assumptions about the nature of the person – who and what we are, how our minds work, how our societies are formed.

For Wittgenstein, the most important assumptions were that thought comes before language, and is solely the product of the individual – it is primary and isolated from the outside world. We think, and then we speak those thoughts.

The second connected assumption was that a person's individuality was similarly isolated – it was sacrosanct and represented the inviolate core of our identity, untouched by anything outside of ourselves.



WITTGENSTEIN AND AUGUSTINE

Wittgenstein disagrees with both these assumptions and uses the thought of St Augustine as the interlocutor to explore this disagreement.

He begins his *Philosophical Investigations*, with opposite quotation from Augustine's *Confessions* where Augustine is exploring the connections between his own development of language and the understanding of God.

For Wittgenstein, Augustine's vision of language is too simplistic – he disagrees and suggests that we do not have thoughts before we language, rather our thoughts are themselves an aspect of our language and require a language in order to make sense.

“This I remember; and have since observed how I learned to speak. It was not that my elders taught me words (as, soon after, other learning) in any set method; but I, longing by cries and broken accents and various motions of my limbs to express my thoughts, that so I might have my will, and yet unable to express all I willed, or to whom I willed, did myself, by the understanding which Thou, my God, gavest me, practise the sounds in my memory.

When they named any thing, and as they spoke turned towards it, I saw and remembered that they called what they would point out by the name they uttered. And that they meant this thing and no other was plain from the motion of their body, the natural language, as it were, of all nations, expressed by the countenance, glances of the eye, gestures of the limbs, and tones of the voice, indicating the affections of the mind, as it pursues, possesses, rejects, or shuns.

And thus by constantly hearing words, as they occurred in various sentences, I collected gradually for what they stood; and having broken in my mouth to these signs, I thereby gave utterance to my will.”

Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.8.13

WITTGENSTEIN AND AUGUSTINE

The point that Wittgenstein goes on to elaborate is that we cannot think thoughts without first having a language, and that thinking, as suggested by Augustine and assumed by most, 'is not an incorporeal process which lends life and sense to speaking' (*Philosophical Investigations*, I. 339).

We do not have thoughts and then somehow clothe them in language. Language is prior to the individual, and we learn to speak and make sense of the world by being born into a particular linguistic community.

This challenges the Cartesian notion of the priority of the thinking subject – our self-understanding or self-thinking is effected by our linguistic and cultural communities.

We are never just us, but always in relation with others.





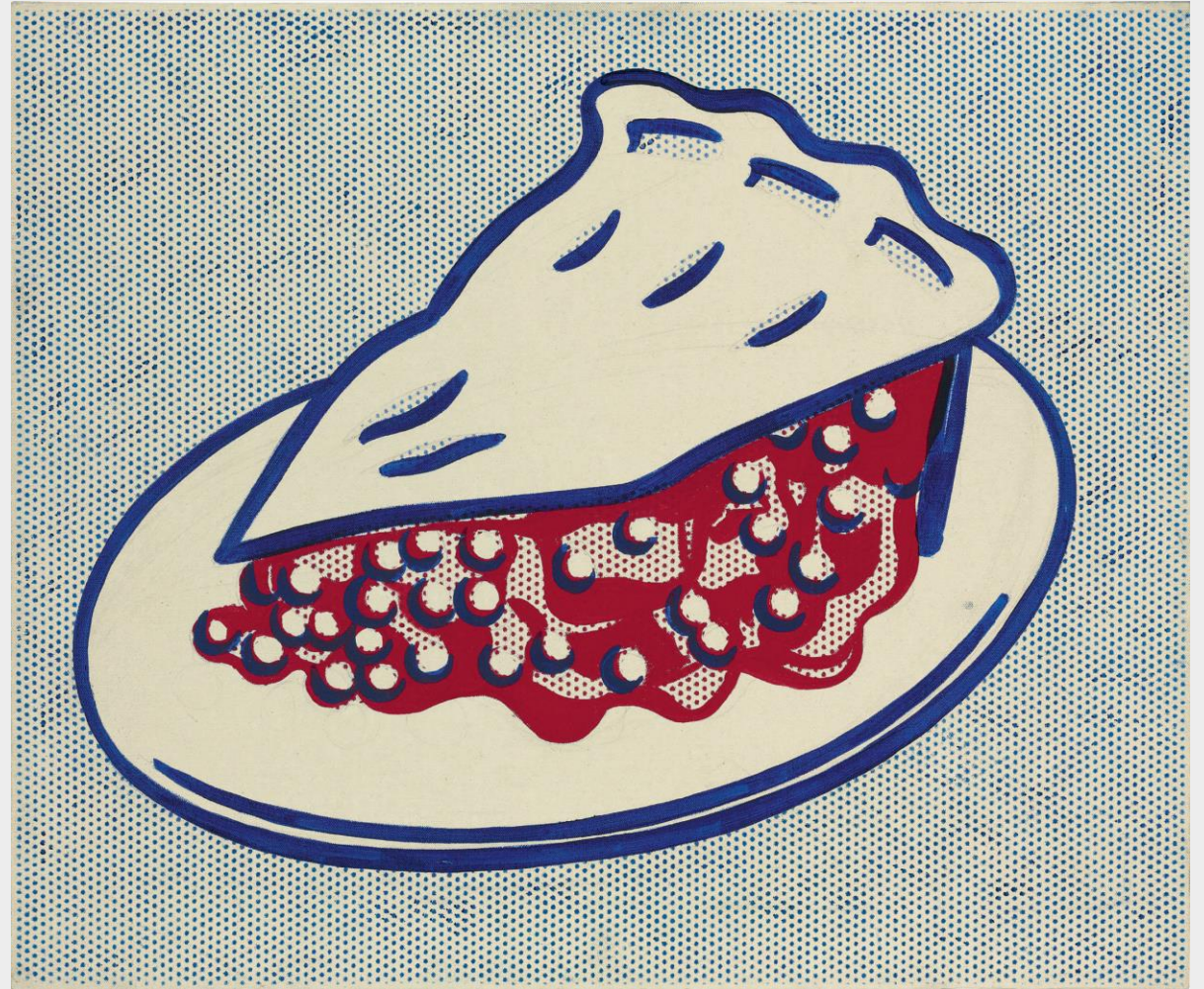
DERRIDA AND AUGUSTINE

DERRIDA AND AUGUSTINE

Another central figure within post-modernism is Jacques Derrida, whose work touches on issues of language and society.

He began writing his *Circumfession*, as his mother died in 1989, mirroring and engaging with similar themes of maternal death in Augustine's *Confessions*.

In doing so, Derrida seeks to expand his broader linguistic philosophy with an account of what he calls 'the event' – something that escapes the construction and instruction of language (re: Wittgenstein) – something he sees occurring in Augustine's recounting of his confession / *Confession*



DERRIDA AND AUGUSTINE

For Derrida, the importance of Augustine is not necessarily to be found in the words of his work, but rather in the example of his life and the act of his confession.

As he began to write his *Circumfession*, Derrida presumed that he would be able to produce a text that was itself free of pre-conceptions and expected norms, a performative event that spun itself solely out of his own reflection and transgressed expectations.

But Derrida is unsatisfied by this, realising that a conventional, or expected, performance is bound by the conventions that constitute it.

A performative requires conventions in order to make it possible – saying “I do” really makes someone married only within the conventions of the performance.



DERRIDA AND AUGUSTINE

In recognising this difficulty with producing an event (or truth), Derrida proposes that a true event can only occur when the event comes from outside the subject – when the event twists free of the expectations given to it by the self.

It is only when the event is visited upon the subject, and only in doing so, will the event, not the subject make the truth – *facere veritatem*.

The difference is as between the relative hospitality of invitation – where I invite a preselected group of guests – from the absolute hospitality of invitation – where the uninvited and unforeseen are welcome.



DERRIDA AND AUGUSTINE

If there is to be truth, then it is that unexpected visitation or revelation that is required.

This is the connection to Augustine – Derrida sees the *Confessions* as describing not just the confession of the event (Augustine stealing pears) but as an event of confession (the overtaking of Augustine's person by the absoluteness of God).

True confession, as Augustine, is not an autonomous act of the individual, something we choose to do or not do, but rather the action of a self aware of its own subjection, and a giving up of autonomy.



DERRIDA AND AUGUSTINE

Caputo and Scanlon (2005) summarise it well when they write:

“The more radical confession is never “mine” but the decision of the other in me who comes over me – of you in me – just as in the Confessions it is God who turns Augustine around and Augustine who is answering”

It is only by exceeding the subjective that we can access reality in a way that is not bound up already with our linguistic, cultural, and philosophical structures.

For Derrida, Augustine represents the power of God to turn us away from the purely worldly concerns of reality and to correct our constant distraction.



SOME QUESTIONS

What is the difference between post-modernity and post-modernism?

What is the aim of post-modernism and why does it seek this?

What is the attraction of Augustine for specifically post-modern forms of philosophy?

What is the core issue that Wittgenstein has with Augustine's vision of the self?

Why does Augustine think this way about the self?

What role does Augustine play for Derrida?

Why is this connection made – what is it about Augustine that is attractive for the kind of thing Derrida is seeking to do?

What do both Augustine and Derrida agree on?

What are the connections that can be developed between Augustine's vision of distractions from God and Derrida's vision of false objectivity?