The Wisdom of Love Versus the Wisdom of Apatheia:  

The Contrast of St. Augustine and the Stoics Over Emotions and the Knowledge of God

I. Thesis

I want to show that Augustine’s recognition of the necessity and rightful place of certain emotions, especially grief, explains why he developed his understanding of wisdom in a different direction than the Stoics. I’ll call Augustine’s sense the wisdom of love and the Stoic’s the wisdom of apathy. For Augustine, wisdom is a way of loving realities whose ontology is eternal and value is infinitely important. A proper use of emotions is essential in the development of love. A person must rely upon a living Community of like minded individuals to learn to use emotions for the purpose of wisdom.

II. The Setting of the Issue

There is not a contradiction, though at first sight it appears to be, between two rather famous sections in the Confessions ---III, iv, 7; and X, xxxv, 54. The first passage goes this way ---“That book of [Cicero’s] contains an exhortation to study philosophy and is entitle Hortensius. The book changed my Feelings. It altered my prayers, Lord, to be towards you yourself. It gave me different values and priorities. Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom, with an incredible ard our in my heart . . .I was impressed not by the book’s refining effect on my style and literary expression but by the content.”

The second passage is---“Besides the lust of the flesh which inheres in the delight given by all pictures of the senses (those who are enslaved to it perish by putting themselves far from you), there exists pleasure but in perceptions acquired through the flesh. It is a vain inquisitiveness dignified with the title of knowledge and science. As this is rooted in the appetite for knowing, and as among the senses they eyes play a leading role in acquiring knowledge, the divine word calls it the ‘lust of the eyes’ (I John 2:16).”

It seems that Augustine has switched from the love of the immortality of wisdom to a despairing ebullient about what he can know of God through wisdom, and the second is defeatist about what he Realized of his own fundamentally flawed knowing process. The change can be accounted for by knowing more of what Augustine learned from and also rejected from the Stoical view of wisdom.
III. Stoical Wisdom

Throughout the Augustinian corpus, one sees his appreciation and reliance upon the Stoics. It was in reading and digesting Cicero’s Hortensius that Augustine began an important change in his thinking and life’s orientation towards God. Cicero (106-43 BCE) was a complex thinker and held some notions perhaps a little closer to Epicureanism than classical Stoicism (ala Zeno to Seneca), but the book is thoroughly Stoical. Augustine said it put in focus his intellectual quest away from contingent and vain desires to the pursuit of what is really important –true happiness.

A. Human Happiness

Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE) provides a representative definition of happiness –“What is the happy life? Peacefulness and constant tranquility. Loftiness of mind will bestow this, and consistency which holds fast to good judgement. To put it in a nutshell for you, the wise man’s mind should be such a befits god (Letters 92.3).”¹

Augustine was drawn to this view of the happy life. The Stoics pursued a way of living which converged the best way of thinking with the deepest satisfactions of the soul. When the most profound and formative movements of the mind and heart meet, one gains a sense of being in contact with a reality of greater importance than the contingent movements and things. Augustine searched for the deeply fulfilling experiences which were authentic, permanent, and genuinely human. Happiness is not an impossible task. It can be attained, even within a tumultuous historical time in which the glory of Greece had degenerated into warring successors to Alexander the Great. One can find a way by rightly ordering one’s values of looking at the world which is not merely a reflection of the destructive tendencies of ordinary biological life and of fortuitous, idiosyncratic political conflicts.

B. Reason and Virtue

Again from Seneca – “What is best in man? Reason: with this he preceded the animals and
follows the gods . . . What is the peculiar characteristic of a man? Reason ---which when right and perfect
makes the full sum of human happiness . . . [I]f he has perfected reason, he is praiseworthy and has
attained the end of his nature. This perfect reason is called virtue and it is identical to rectitude (Letters
76:9-10).” Augustine was desirous of such a rectitude. His quest for happiness led him towards metaphysical
considerations. He concern was for more than true representations. Skepticism jaded him to any ultimate
confidence in true knowledge based upon an absolute correspondence between ideas and objective reality.
He desired a rectitude of the inner, mental world with eternally truths.

The Stoical claim that one could live in harmony with nature through virtuous thinking and living
gave promise to Augustine to fulfill this desire. A life in accordance with nature is not derived from a set
of particular ideas, intended accurately to illuminate or picture nature, but rather such a life is found in right
thinking about right living, which provides a way of living successfully in the world.

A metaphysic undergirds this approach of right living. The Stoics felt all of reality consisted of
corporeal bodies and the four incorporeal forces, meaning, void, place, and time. A corporal body acts
upon another corporal body to do an incorporeal result. For example, a knife slices flesh and cutting
results. Consequently, the Stoics maintained an omnipresent efficient causality at work throughout all
occurrences---a causal determinism. The Stoic Chrysippus (280-206 BCE) argued, as recorded by Cicero,
that we can make true and false propositions---“for whatever does not have efficient causes is neither true
nor false. Everything then happens by antecedent causes. And if this is so, then everything happens by fate.
Therefore, whatever happens, happens by fate.”2 The virtuous person lives like the dog which runs along
side the cart, not feeling the force of the moving cart (the famous illustration of Zeno of Citium). Reason
hence is not speculative but ethical and practical. It’s about how to find harmony with what is the case in
the corporeal world. It’s not about the proper logical relationships between truth claims but about a certain
moral disposition that does not over or under react to what happens. Hence, the rational life is a superior
life because it has arranged life to be unflappable about the vicissitudes of daily affairs. The virtuous
person is hence self-sufficient to herself because she or he lives consistently with nature.

The Stoics envisioned the ideal person to be what Cicero called the kosmou politeis (De Officiis, 44
BCE). This is a citizen of the world who not only respects the dignity and rationality of everyone,
regardless of local conventions and politics, but who can function with the same inner control and self-sufficiency in any context. This kind of person has learned the world is the way one makes it, and if one has learned to live in accordance with nature in Athens then could just a swell live the same composed, virtuous life in Tory. Ultimate loyalties are not determined by the idiosyncratic ways of place of birth or cultural legacy. Rather they come from the inner stability that one is a world citizen, sharing a bond with all people as rational beings. (The Stoical goal of the “world citizen” is a strong attraction for Martha Nussbaum thesis of how to cultivate humanity in the true liberal art pedagogy; see Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education, Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 59-66).

C. Emotions

The emotions are problematic to the life of wisdom. Stobaeus says –“They [the Stoics] say that passion is impulse which is excessive and disobedient to the dictates of reason, or a movement of soul which is irrational and contrary to nature; and that all passions belong to the soul’s commanding-faculty . . But when people are in states of passion, even if they realize or are taught to realize that one should not feel distress or fear or have their souls, quite generally, in states of passion, they still do not give these up, but are brought by them to a position of being controlled by their tyranny” (Stobaeus 2.88-89,6).

The Stoics were therapists; they consoled others with rational arguments as a way of combating perturbing emotions. If fact, Cicero wrote Consolatio as a means to handle his daughter’s death, Tullia.4 Chrysippus representatively says “the consoler’s only task is to convince the person afflicted with grief that the alleged ‘evil’ is not an evil at all” and that grief is therefore unwarranted. This is the Stoic ideal of Apatheia applied to the pathos of grief.

Three suppositions underlie the Stoic theory of the passions in general: 1) that the soul is unitary and is therefore wholly rational; 2) that the only real good is virtue, the only real evil is vice, and that everything else is morally indifferent, adiaphoron; and 3) that the passions, deriving as they do from conventional judgments of good and evil, are always irrational and excessive and thus have not place in the rational soul. On this account grief originates in a false judgment about reality. And according to Chrysippus grief occurs when one thinks it is the right response, and the sage’s therapeutic business is to convince the sufferer that grief is the foolish way to react. Grief is useless, causes us to act irresponsibly,
and is actually beneath human dignity.5

Some emotions are legitimate – joy, watchfulness, and wishing. They reflect a controlled, rational life. With these rational emotions, one is not tyrannized by a mistaken view of fate. But other passions pervert the knowledge of reality and leads to great unhappiness. They are impulses not obedient to reason and hence vices to the soul. They force the person to resist the inevitable omnipresent efficient casuality, like the dog pulling against the moving cart. Such a life lacks inner harmony because it is contrary to nature.

The wise life puts one in harmony with the efficient principle of all of life. The sage is at home in Athens and Jerusalem. Her or his lasting home is not determined by contingent happenings but inner tranquility. The sage is in control of the world of beliefs and values. To the sage, one’s past history of unmeasured passion and imperfect virtue may as well belong to someone else. The past exerts no limiting fear of reality, the sage is the quintessential cosmopolitan citizen, able to function, thrive, and make educational, political, and moral contributions in any situation.

It’s at this estimation of the passions that the Stoics made one of their most famous (or infamous as the case may be) ethical teachings –rational suicide. Cicero records the Stoic Cato—“When a man has a preponderance of the things in accordance with nature, it is this proper function to remain alive; when he has or foresees a preponderance of their opposites, it is his proper function to depart from life (On Ends, 3.60-1). Yet, suicide would be wrong if it were done out of passion, a vice of irrationality. A sage shows wisdom by taking his life when there is too much vice in her life. Grief is one such perturbation. It’s a torture of the soul. It overly invests feelings, wishes, and hopes into what is lost. Reality moves on, but the passion of grief wants to hold onto what is no longer possible. Grief then is a willful perversion of the nature of the soul. Instead of giving herself to an inordinate attachment to others and possessions which cause perturbations, the safe would rather commit suicide than loose the inner tranquility of living in accordance with nature.

IV. Augustine’s View of Wisdom

Augustine was attracted to the Stoical idea of steadfast character stemming from a disciplined
mind. Yet, because of their view of the emotions, he eventually rejected their approach to wisdom. He gave more importance than the Stoics to the irrational passions of the passions of perturbations. In Book X of the Confessions, where he builds an epistemology on the role of memory, Augustine explained the importance of these emotions.

A. Memory—the Basis of Knowledge

Though Book Y is interlaced with prayers and personal reflections, it presents a psychological epistemology, starting with the most simple of sense experiences and then working up to the knowledge of God. Augustine saw a lot of significance to the words used to describe the knowing process—cogenda, colligenda, cogo, cogito. Each implies a gathering and collecting activity. The mind brings together images stored in memory. There is no knowledge at all without Moreover, in reflection there are several obvious evaluations—the incorruptible is better and superior than the corruptible thing, because the latter is more likely to be confused than the former. One might get wrong the representation of the corruptible reality. It then follows that if one can think of an imageless reality, then it would be a superior knowledge, because thinking about images or a collection of images is more likely to be confused. To think of an imageless reality would not suffer the same potential problem of misrepresenting what the mind remembers in images. If it is possible to think of imageless realities, then one can think if a nonrepresentational way. Such knowledge is sapiential, knowledge of eternal things.

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Just as all knowledge does, the knowledge of God occurs through memory. But there is a double problem with this knowledge. Though we know everything through the mind’s retention of images into memory, God is not an image. All knowledge starts with the collecting of images, and if God is not an image, then how can we know God through the mental work of memory. Also, our ability for memory includes that we forget what we remember. We can remember forgetfulness which means we remember enough of what we have forgotten to know that we’ve forgotten it. The problem then is how can we trust our knowledge of God if God is not an image and may be forgetting too much about such an imageless reality to be confident that we actually know it?

Augustine’s answer deals with the nature of happiness. It’s common sense and prima facie obvious that happy is joy in accordance with truth. It’s contrary to the clear understanding of what is
better to think that believing a falsehood is better than a truth, and, for the same reason, wanting a destructive and sad life to one of joy. This notion of happiness is right because we remember it to be the case that we are happy when we live in accordance to what is true. We have images of such happiness. The more we reflect on what makes us happy, the more we begin to understand happiness itself as that which fulfills our intellectual and emotional drives greater than any other particular image of happiness. When we think about happiness is this way, we are thinking of an imageless reality. We begin to think of God. This knowledge is also found in our memory. The images of happiness can lead one to contemplate upon the imageless source of them. This is the work of God in our memoires, who loved us, according to Augustine, through these images of happiness.

Furthermore, every person loves happiness. Again, it sounds too contradictory to say “I hate happiness”. One loves it because happiness indicates the fulfillment of one’s basic drives for well-being and the knowledge of things outside of oneself. For Augustine, since the desire for happiness compels our actions, then we gain it by our lives and the power of our loving them. The more we love, the potentially happier we can become. Our lives then are determined by our loves. Hence, as he said, “My weight is my love. Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me” (XIII, ix, 10). The pattern of relationships, beliefs, and values (that is, one’s destiny) is lines up by what e loves. If one loves corruptible things, then one’s life begins to bear and manifests the characteristics of them; if one loves incorruptible things, then their features become obvious to the lover of them.

There is an irony to the knowledge of God. One starts by knowing and loving what the mind can remember through its work of understanding, collecting of images into coherent ideas. In this activity, one experiences the greatest happiness when one knows what is actually the case and in a way what correctly represents it. The more one searches for greater happiness, the more one looks for the superior realities, but those cannot be remembered in images. The search for happiness leads one away from corruptible images to incorruptible, imageless realities. But these cannot be found outside the mind; only in the mind. How? In seeking the superior happiness, one begins to glimpse the ground of happiness in the images in which we find happiness. This glimpse is of the imageless, superior reality; the truth of truth. “Where I discovered the truth there I found my God, truth itself, which from the time I learnt it, I have not forgotten “ (X, xxiv, 35). Though it seems that we reached the knowledge of God through a process of discovery, it is more like a recollection of what has all along
been the unconditional truth appearing through the conditional truths of one’s experience. By realizing more about how one gains knowledge, one comes to know how God as the basis of knowledge.

B. The Passions of the Soul and the Knowledge of God

Wisdom requires knowing how to follow correctly the move from images of happiness to the source of all happiness. But the transition to the imageless source of happiness is not easy. In paying attention to his own drives to find God, Augustine admitted that he exhibited counterproductive drives, which caused him to experience a depraved and tormented conscience. These drives are the “sickness of the soul” and are associated with the kinds of pleasure ranging from the love of bodily pleasure and music to the pride of knowledge itself. For Augustine, there seems to be a built in contradicting principle to the very principle which drives us to know God. This acknowledgement leads to grief.

But instead of rejecting grief, Augustine believed it a necessary aspect of the knowledge of God. “The heart is aroused in the love of your mercy and the sweetness of your grace (X, iii, 4). Though we tend to obstruct the mind’s effort to know god with the overestimation of the lower images of the world, God continues to love us through them. By feeling grief for our perverting ways, we come more to realize God’s mercy and grace. The recognition of mercy is no more than remembrance of God’s mercy shown to us throughout all of our lives. The deep pain of past sins and present corrupting tendencies equips the mind to remember more of what God has been doing all along. Instead of our knowledge becoming weakened by such a powerful emotion as grief, it actually becomes a powerful component of knowing God. The rightful use of grief contributes to the integration of the mind and emotions by enabling the person to learn more of what has stimulated one to seek God in the first place. It alerts the mind to the mercies of God experienced tacitly in the images of happiness experienced throughout one’s life. Hence the more one is contrite with grief over one’s sins and mistakes, the more one can experience the true source of all happiness.

Though the last fourth of Book X seems abruptly to break from the preceding discussion on the knowledge of God through the mental activity of memory, there is actually a unity to the book. Augustine knew the perturbations of the passions had to be accounted for in the knowledge of God. The book’s unity is found in his attempt to explain a form of wisdom which incorporates the passions guided by a love for God rather than as the Stoics who denied their value because they weaken one’s control and self-sufficiency.
D. Wisdom and the Community of Faith

For Augustine, since one becomes what one loves, then it is important to know what to love. There must be the right ordering of loves. Augustine used several distinctions to help sort out what loves one should have—the difference between charitas and cupiditas, and use and enjoyment (these discussions are fully laid out in On Christian Doctrine, The Trinity, and The City of God). One who loves incorrectly will love bad things, and one who loves correctly will love good things. One learns to love correctly by knowing the difference between things which should be used and which should be enjoyed. God and people who bear the image of God should be enjoyed for the value of their innate being, but not used for ulterior purposes.

Yet, if one has inherently the counterproductive emotions, like grief and remorse, which cause the “torment of conscience”, then how can one be certain of whether one exercises cupiditas towards what should be enjoyed or charitas towards what should be used? Augustine knew this was not an easy problem to solve. Because all knowledge comes from memories, and within our mental activities are the perturbing emotions, then to rely only on the mental process to determine what we should love is not complete enough to help properly order one’s loves. There must be a certain kind of memories, the memories of how others have successfully ordered their loves in a way which brings happiness to the soul. These memories instill in the working of the mind patterns, images, and beliefs of human virtue. When one must choose between what is to be enjoyed, one does not rely merely on a transcendental grid of understanding through which one sorts out the most promising images to use. Rather, one recalls the models and mentors of happy people. It is these people who have been able to transform grief and the other perturbing emotions into stimuli for greater charitas towards God and others that one recalls in learning how to know when to enjoy what is of eternal importance and use what is of only temporal significance. The converse is true as well- by exercising greater charitas towards God and others, one is able to transmute the debilitating passions, like grief, into greater appreciation and realization of the mercies of God, which is the source of one’s eventual knowledge of God in the first place. (According to Peter Brown, the reason Augustine favored the forced conversion of the Donatist is that they needed a better set of memories to know what to believe about the Church, society, and the grace of God.)

What Augustine realized was that for there to be a true knowledge of God there needed to be a community of people who had materialized that knowledge, that integration of reason and passions. He saw this primarily in the
way the Church read, interpreted, and applied the scriptures. Perhaps this is why the last three books of the Confessions are about a particular way of interpreting Genesis. He is showing that without this engagement with a tradition of self understanding born out of the love and happiness found in the truth of all truth, one cannot know really where to start one’s search for God. Dialogue, participation, action and reaction with others are needed to learn how to reach happiness. One must be part of a living tradition of like-minded person who not only look for God but look for God in particular way. By enmeshing oneself in such a tradition, one develops a critical mass of memories from which one can begin to understand oneself. Though Augustine did not use this term, one could call the kind of person he envisioned, in contrast to the Stoical view of the kosmou polites, theo or ecclesiopolitanian.

The wisdom learned by transforming grief in the realization of the mercies of God equips the person to continue the particular legacy of wise people who have also actualized the integration of passions into the knowledge of God. By knowing God through one’s more participatory loves, one preserves a narrative for the memories of others who are also seeking God.

V. Conclusion

When Robert C. Solomon tries to explain in his book The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life, the essential complementarity of emotions and reasons in the quest for a meaningful life, he observes about the emotions that they usually have evaluative purposes. “The heart of every emotion is its value judgments, its appraisals of gain and loss, its indictments of offenses and its praise of virtue. . . . Many emotions may be partially distinguished by their differences in evaluative scope and focus- sadness, sorrow, and grief, for example, the first confined to a particular loss, the last more central to the personality and accordingly more traumatic.” In his analysis of the emotions, Solomon sees that they are not only powerful motives for actions but reflections of powerful commitments to valuable relationships, hopes, and beliefs. Even the emotion of grief or regret indicates a strong belief about the importance of what is lost as with the death of a friend or not gained as with the lapse of moral behavior. Though the emotion may become excessive, it by itself is not a destructive force but in fact reflective of a person who can make commitments and form moral relationship and expectations about her or himself or others.

The reason the Stoics shunned grief and other perturbing emotions is that they tended to discombobulate the individual. To give a place for grief in one’s life is to lose some self-sufficiency because one’s sense of worth is then dependent upon the moral value of another person or one’s own character formation. If one’s goal is control of
one’s inner life, then Stoicism may be the right way to reach it. But the question is control for what purpose. For the Stoic, to become a kosmou polites, one has to be involved with one’s local relationships and political necessities only to the extent that one can live a calm and comfortable life. But ultimately one’s citizenship is with all people, and to attain a state of mind which enables one to live just as well in Athens as well as Milan, one cannot become so entangled with the immediacies of Athens that one’s passions are shaped by the idiosyncrasies of the local affairs. But the result is that relationships to others, local situations, and ultimately God have a limit, and that limit is the emotional investments we have in them. If the goal is self-sufficiency, then the world has to be kept at enough of a distance that it does not engender emotional entanglements.

But Augustine’s view of wisdom takes one into greater love relationships in which the person is transformed by people and God with whom he or she engages. This wisdom is limited only by the vices, because they misuse what should be enjoyed about the people and God. This drive for greater charitas is powerful enough to incorporate regret of one’s failures and grief over costly losses into a deepening of one’s ability to love God and others. This deepening occurs by the experiencing of divine forces which accepts and loves the person in spite of her or his grief and regret. Though Augustine’s person is at home in a moral and spiritual tradition in which she or he finds and contributes to a certain narrative about where love takes a person, such a wise person actually lives in a bigger world than the Stoic because the Augustinian person is not bounded by the inevitable perturbing emotions as is the Stoical person.

Endnotes
3Long and Sedley, pp. 410-411.
4It is an eclectic work, now lost with perhaps books 1 and 3 found in Tusulan Disputations, which containing five different views on consolation, with two coming from famous representatives of Stoicism –Cleanthes (331-232 BCE) and his successor Chrysippus.

7He worked out this implied distinction in *The Trinity* as the difference between *sapientia* – knowledge of eternal things, and *scientia* – knowledge of temporal things, Book XII, 4, 22-25.

8He works out his difference with the Stoics on the place of grief in more detail in *The City of God*. Book XIV, chs. 8-9. Early in Book X (para.4.
