

CONVERSION: A REASSESSMENT OF INSIGHT

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I. Introduction

The increasing fragmentation of world population under the banner of one or the other religion or ideology today goes side by side with the homogenization of cultural patterns and life style under the auspices of globalization. At the threshold of the dawn of new horizons of ideas it is not easy to determine the exact source of current ideologies. The indisputable worship of reason in modernity and the rejection of the overarching narratives in postmodernity have been somewhat challenged by the renewed assertion of the fundamentalist claims of Hindutva forces in India and the Christian and Islamic fundamentalist forces around the world. The question we examine in this article is how the polarization of people on mutually opposing intellectual positions on religious, moral, and philosophical truths is possible and how they could undergo change from one position to another after having subscribed to them for a long time intellectually and religiously. This process is not, of course, similar to the discarding of a scientific hypothesis in favour of another, which is established more firmly on the basis of clear evidence from the field of science, and so this issue does not come in the field of our reflection.

From very ancient times onwards we have examples of people who have shifted their intellectual assent from one position to another. Buddha abandoned his belief in the Vedic religion and its ascetical practices in favour of his own personal enlightenment. Abraham, the first patriarch of the Israelites left his polytheistic belief in favour of one supreme Lord and such a mental conversion is manifest in the case of Prophet Mohammed as well. There are innumerable other mortals who have changed their earlier convictions in favour of a later one. St. Augustine replaced his Manichean theory by the Christian Logos. In the contemporary world of Philosophy we have the great thinkers like Albert Whitehead, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jean-Paul Sartre, and a host of others who have changed their earlier position to somewhat opposed, but, according to the

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authors themselves, to a newer and better position. If a religious and philosophical position can have no finality or absolute validity the old Kantian critical problem about the universality and necessity of *a priori* synthetic propositions of religious and philosophic convictions would once again become alive in our intellectual inquiry.

II. Non-absoluteness of Intellectual Insights

The internal dynamism of both philosophy and theology is understood to be the apprehension of the whole truth, even if this cannot be proved as the explicit goal or faith or intellectual concern of the individual authors. Bernard J. F. Lonergan (CE 1904-1984) in his masterpiece *Insight* makes a philosophical analysis of the movement of intelligent and rational consciousness from knowledge to its ultimate terminal point, which in his understanding is pure being. He also maintains the view that human being has a detached, unmotivated and pure desire to know. Pure being, in his way of thinking, is the objective of pure desire to know and consequently all epistemological awareness would be approximations of pure being. David Tracy summarily gives this position of Lonergan as follows: "The intrinsic relation of human knowing to reality is the intelligently and rationally conscious drive of all genuine intellectual activity as it moves beyond data to intelligibility, beyond intelligibility to truth and through truth to being as real; beyond every known truth and being to all the truth and being still to be known."¹

All genuine intellectual activities establish their intrinsic relation to reality through their intelligent and rational conscious drive. This drive moves beyond data to intelligibility. As the basic data changes the form of intelligibility also changes, and, consequently, the truth it generates and the being it reveals also get modified. This is inevitable because all epistemological truth has to be based on the fundamental sense data. It is taken for granted that there is continuity in scientific movement from descriptive experience of 'bodies' to the intelligible unity grasped as 'things' (concepts) in individual data. Formulations of this grasping yield concepts, definitions, and objects of thought suppositions and considerations.

¹David Tracy, *The Achievement of Bernard Lonergan*, New York: Herder and Herder, 1970, 149-150.

Man further asks whether what he affirms is true or false. It is at this level of reflection the notions of truth and falsity, certitude and the probability emerge as a quality of judgment. Once we are being conscious of this ever-operative vitality of intellectual dynamism in the affirmation of truth, it would not be difficult to accept the relative finality of any position – philosophical or otherwise – one has adopted at a particular moment of inquiry. Conversion from one position to another is a natural human possibility as long as man stands in need of constant self-reflection on the truth and being he has attained through his intellection based on his initial empirical data.

III. St. Augustine and His Conversion

St. Augustine (CE 354-430) was born in a small town in North Africa from a 'heathen' father and Monica, a Christian woman. He was a man of violent temper, who until his conversion to Christianity had no regard for religion and morality. Initially, he was influenced by a pseudo-Christian sect known as Manichaeans, and in 387 at the age of 33 St. Ambrose baptized him a Christian. In 396 he was consecrated Bishop of Hippo and he continued in the office till his death in 430.

The cultural climate, the personal factors, and the historical events that led to the conversion of Augustine, a brilliant intellectual of his time, from his early Manichaeism to Catholicism offer a classical case for us to examine the thread that bears the inner dynamism of conversion. The Manichean religion took its name from Mani, its founder, a Babylonian who lived from 215 to 277. Mani claimed among other revelations that he also learned that he was the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity. His religion was a form of Gnosticism, which claimed to have special knowledge that led to salvation. The extreme metaphysical and moral dualism of this gnostic sect postulated two principles for the reality and power of evil as well as good. It had its own sacred literature and it rejected Old Testament and subjected it to detailed attack. New Testament also was subjected to attack, although it was not completely rejected. It looked upon body as evil and advocated a superior asceticism. It had a rational solution to all problems of life, and held that it was universal providing salvation for all men. When Augustine subscribed himself to Manichaeism it was certainly a powerful ideology of his time.

Why Augustine fell victim to Manichaeism? His intellectual abilities and passionate personality, the deficiencies of his religious and moral formation, and the problems both moral and intellectual that beset him all contributed to turning him a Manichean. We have the story of his early training in his *Confessions*. As to the purpose of writing this autobiographical confessions he says that he "wished to stir others to the love and fear of God as they read what he had done for his soul, and to show us that 'God has made us for himself and that our heart is restless till it rests in him.'"

Though there have been attempts to compare Augustine's *Confessions* with the autobiography of Rousseau, except in the straightforwardness and honesty with which they narrated their past lives, in all other aspects they are in stark contrast. Rousseau ends his story telling that if anyone thinks of him as an unworthy man, then he himself would be a great smother. The confessions of Rousseau are the confessions of the natural, impenitent, unregenerate man; the confessions of Augustine are those of a repentant sinner and a forgiven saint.

Augustine tells us that his parents were intensely eager that he should learn much, and distinguish himself, and occupy the then admired position of teacher of rhetoric and pleader at bar. But, according Augustine's infant narrative, the thorns of lust grew higher than his head in that he neglected the garden of his soul, and there was no hand to pick them up. At the age of seventeen he was sent to Carthage, "the Muse of Africa" that he might receive the best education, which Africa could furnish. As he describes in the *Confessions*, Augustine's moral corruption was made complete as a student at Carthage. He took as concubine an unnamed woman and in 372 their son Adeodatus was born. It is during these years in Carthage that he became a member of Manichean sect, in which he remained for nine years.

A flame of higher aspiration was introduced into his heart by reading the *Hortensius* of Cicero. The book changed the current of his feelings, and awoke his desire for truth and for a better and worthier life. His intellectual vanity, however, had been greatly increased by his success in all his studies – geometry, music, poetry, and eloquence. Bible was yet a dead letter to him because he did not bring to the study of it the requisite faith. The Manicheans argued that "the Church demands faith before

reason, and terrifies you into submission by superstitious threats; we, on the other hand, only invite you to accept truths which we have first explained and which you can perfectly understand." Misinterpretation of scriptures, both Old and New, furnished them with their strongest weapons.

During his youth Augustine was so thoroughly entangled in the net of this heresy. For nine years Augustine continued to be a Manichean. Yet it never satisfied him. He found no real rest in it. He soon discovered that the Manicheans were far more successful in destructive than in constructive arguments. In formative years he excused his sins as caused by evil principle while aspiring for good. He gradually realized that Manichaeism did not, any more than the Catholic faith, base its system on reason alone, nor were Manicheans, lives always exemplary. At the age of thirty he resumed the religion of his earlier life. His conversion to the belief in an immaterial God and his understanding of the problem of evil in the world was made extremely difficult because he had subscribed to material dualism in his twenties.

He abandoned Carthage for Rome and took the charge of Master of Rhetoric at the Court of Milan and this led him to attend upon Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. Listening for rhetoric of his sermons, he began to realize that Ambrose was supplying him with the solution to Manichean and personal arguments against the Bible. He came to the understanding that scripture has to be understood not literally but allegorically, for "letter kills. But the spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6). Ambrose's sermons and the discourse of his intellectual friends in Milan enabled him to have an immaterial philosophy and to conceive of a spiritual God and have some explanation of the problem of evil as implying a privation of being and it seemed to fit with Catholic teaching. He became acquainted with *Enneads*, the masterpiece of Plotinus (CE 205-270), and other works of Neoplatonists. Plotinus' system of thought that "by rebellious pride the soul fell away from the divine and spread itself on the manifold lower things that exist and its true dignity and destiny is to turn away from the many and to return back to the one, from where it fell" was very much appealing to Augustine.

The two great intellectual influences upon Augustine prior to his conversion were Manichaeism and Greek Philosophy, especially as this latter found expression in the works of Plotinus and other Neoplatonists. The influence of Manichaeism was for evil; that of Neoplatonism was for good. Intellectually, and also morally, his conversion involved complete break with Manichean influences and an advance in and beyond Neoplatonism. Although this process of conversion had its beginnings in Africa, its full development took place in Italy.²

Every successive incident of his life in Milan was now hastening him to the conversion, which was only delayed by his sinful passion. The presbyter Simplicianus, the spiritual father of Bishop Ambrose and his ultimate successor, narrated the story of the conversion of Victorinus, a noble 'heathen' from Rome to Christian faith. Augustine longed to come in full communion with the Church. He could not make any decision because he was enchained by his besetting sin. Perverse will had brought forth lust; lust yielded to, had become habit; habit unresisted had developed into the linked fetters of a fatal and slavish, though imaginary, necessity. But habits also breakdown when contrary forces work on them. When Pontitianus, who held a high military rank in the palace, but a Christian in secret, told the story of the hermit St. Antony, the effect of this narration upon Augustine was overwhelming.

Augustine was at the threshold of an intellectual conversion. It may not, of course, be totally and purely intellectual, though the motivating force of a conversion to any practical way of life should be an intellectual insight or a series of insights. The fundamental principle of all conversion is that when the basic data of knowledge and belief change, the form of intelligibility also should change. This is what we have witnessed in the life of Augustine. We have a vivid description of the experience that Augustine had just a few hours before he was finalizing his conversion intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. "A violent storm raged within me," he says, "bringing with it a flood of tears." In the midst of his agitated prayer he heard the voice of a child singing again and again the

²John K. Ryan, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, New York: Image Books, 1960, 23.

words, "Tolle, lege;" "tolle, lege" – "Take, read; take, read." He had heard from Pontitianus how St. Antony's life had been practically decided by *sortes Biblicae* (selecting Biblical verses by lot, or random selection). He had with him the manuscript of St. Paul to rely on at the moment. We have a description of what he did in the following:

I seized it, opened, and read in silence the verse on which my eyes first fell: "Not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (Romans 13: 13-14). I wished to read no more. There was no need. For instantly, as though the light of salvation had been poured into my heart with the close of this sentence, all the darkness of my doubts had fled away.³

The Latin Church only celebrates two conversions – those of St. Paul (January 25), and St. Augustine (May 5). Augustine's conversion was an intellectual, spiritual, and emotional one from Manichaeism, the bedrock of his personality and from the moment of his conversion he vehemently attacked it in his sermons and works such as *Against Adeimantus the Manichean*, *On The Book of Genesis against the Manicheans*, *On the Morals of the Catholic Church and the Morals of the Manicheans*, and *Against Faustus the Manichean*.

Augustine was emotional and responsive, but his love from the beginning, however manifested itself, as a consuming love for God, the eternal beauty. He lamented: "Too late I have loved you; beauty old and new! Too late I have loved you. Yet you were within me, while I was outside! There I was searching for you – without any beauty in myself I poured myself out upon the beautiful things you made! Your were with me but I was not with you."⁴

IV. Wittgenstein an Unsettled Genius

It is often said that to be human is to possess a perspective that does

³F. W. Farrar, *The Life of St. Augustine*, London: Cox & Wyman Ltd., 1993, 48-49.

⁴*Confessions*, 10:27, 38.

not imprison you. True to this vision Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) in his many attempts at philosophizing “let people have their own language game” in their interpersonal communications.

Wittgenstein, a multi-dimensional man with his main interest in Philosophy, was also an amateur engineer (he designed and constructed a house for his sister in concrete, glass and steel in the Bauhaus style), aircraft designer (he designed a jet engine prototype as well as a propeller for planes), architect, gardener (he worked for a short while as a gardener at a monastery near Vienna, and at that time thought to become a monk) and a bird tamer (at his retirement), and tried a number of other occupations during his unsettled search.⁵

Wittgenstein could, in fact, never fit into the accepted image of a philosopher. He was critical of every philosophical finding as well as philosophy itself. According to him, “we feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched.”⁶ Again we read in *Tractatus*: “Most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical. Consequently, we cannot give any answer to questions of this kind but can only establish that they are nonsensical. Most of the propositions and questions of philosophers arise from our failure to understand the logic of our language” (4.003). We find his earlier theory of knowledge summarily stated in the following propositions: “A proposition is a picture of reality. A proposition is a model of reality as we imagine it” (4.01). Although he abandoned this picture theory of language later on, he did not reject his earlier view that all philosophy is a ‘critique of language’ (4.0031). By the proper linguistic analysis of the language “the solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem” (6.521).

He wrote to a colleague that ‘the business of being a professor of philosophy was an absurd job and a kind of living death.’ A. J. Ayer, the Oxford philosopher, states that lectures of Wittgenstein left him a nervous wreck and he rushed off to the cinema whenever possible, in the company of some students.

⁵J. S. Rao, “Haunting Genius,” *Deccan Herald*, March 9, 2003, Articulations, 2.

⁶*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922, 6.52.

Wittgenstein published only one book, namely, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which he later repudiated. After the publication of *Tractatus* he said farewell to philosophy, claiming that the book contained "unassailable and definitive" solutions to all philosophical problems. Later, he came to recognize some "grave mistakes" in this work, and this recognition brought him back to Cambridge to pursue philosophical research in 1929. During 1930-33 he lectured at Cambridge and wrote two sets of notes, published after his death as *The Blue Book* and *The Brown Book*. In these works he again dealt with words and meanings, which he calls 'word-games'.

Philosophical Investigations, published posthumously in 1953, represents the culmination and distillation of Wittgenstein's mature discourse on the nature of language since his return to philosophy in 1929. It is the fruit of the second period of philosophical career from 1929 to 1945. The thoughts expressed in this book crystallize around three main themes i.e., nature of language, nature of mind and nature of philosophy. *The Blue* and *Brown Books* were preliminary studies for this masterpiece. The term language-game, which appears in the *Investigations*, is the key to the understanding of Wittgenstein's new conception of language, which concedes the use of language at multiple levels. Though Wittgenstein studied philosophy with Russell for five terms, he criticized Russell's manuscript on the theory of knowledge, and Russell confessed that Wittgenstein's onslaught had driven him to despair and made him think that he could never again hope to do fundamental work in philosophy.

Wittgenstein was a man of many interests. When war broke out in 1914 he enlisted as a machine gunner in the Austrian army. He was captured by the Italians in 1918 and was a POW there for several months. His taste was frugal and under the influence of Tolstoy's writings, he divested himself of all money after the war. He constantly changed his pursuit. From 1920-1926 he taught in elementary schools in Schneeberg and Semmering in Lower Austria. He seemed to have gathered his inspiration more from writers in the borderland between philosophy and religion such as that of St. Augustine, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy than from the linguistic philosophers of his own brand. He loved music passionately. He disliked being a professor and twice left it to become a medical orderly at a London hospital. When he retired in 1947

from his professorship he resided at a farm at Galway in Ireland, and spent his last days taming birds.

In the profile of Wittgenstein we have the story of a brilliant philosopher who was constantly changing his interests and positions – i.e., subjecting himself to the process of conversion – as he allowed himself to be touched by new empirical situations. New information – sense data – always necessitates the adoption of a new position.

V. Sartre and His Journey to Marxism

We witness a protracted debate in France in the second half of the twentieth century between Existentialism and Marxism, two widely held philosophies of our time. Existentialism has found its most talented spokesman in Jean Paul Sartre and his associates. “Sartre worked out his original existentialist ideas under the influence of non-materialist thinkers like Husserl and Heidegger as a deliberate challenge to Marxism and presented them as a philosophical alternative to dialectical materialism.”⁷ It is interesting to note, however, how at the end of a prolonged debate Sartre became a votary of Marxism.

Sartre himself has assumed varying postures towards the communist movement from 1943 to 1965. The communist ideologists focused their fire upon Sartre because his prestige among radical intellectuals was regarded as a threat to the predominance of communist views. Though in the beginning he was an unattached partisan of its politics, he distanced himself from official Communism after the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian revolt in 1956. However, in the course of interaction with Marxism, he kept lowering the formal barriers between Existentialism and his interpretation of Marxism and at the end in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) he declared that Existentialism is a subordinate branch of Marxism aspiring to renew and enrich Marxism.

The liberal progressive forces of last century looked forward to an increasingly just, humane, free and peaceful future, which seemed guaranteed by the speed of western civilization. But this buoyant optimism

⁷George Novack ed., *Existentialism versus Marxism: Conflicting Views on Humanism*, New York: Delta Book, 1966, 3.

has given way in this century to widespread pessimism about the situation and prospectus of mankind. Mournful impression of a world that is fragmented, indifferent, meaningless lies at the core of Existentialism. The existentialist thinker feels solitary in the midst of today's society. This many-sided alienation weighs on him like an eternal fate that cannot be changed.

Though the "tragic sense of life" poignantly articulated by the Existentialists is in reality deeply embedded in the existing society, they are not inherent in the nature of man. They are, according to Marxism, historically created disorders characteristic of a sick bourgeois civilization. Communists believed that a proletarian regime could restore calm and stability to the postwar world.

Existentialism in giving priority to 'existence' – the immediate living experience of the individual – over 'essence' – rational abstractions reflecting the laws, properties, relations of objective reality – loses its right to insist on orderly thought and also on any truth anchored in a collectivity or a world beyond the individual. This theoretical situation produced wide variations, not only in the views of its members but also in the position any one of them held at different times.

Confluence of two distinct currents of thought are visible in Sartre's philosophy: one stemming from Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Heidegger supplying the main theme for his deliberations, and the other from Husserl as the source of his phenomenological method which rests up on the direct intuition of states of mind. This procedure turns its back upon the real social and natural environment in its concentration on the states of consciousness of the reflecting individual.

Sartre applied this method of descriptive psychology in all his early philosophical works. The most important of them, *Being and Nothingness*, is subtitled: *An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*. But, on the contrary, from an existentialist standpoint "he has lived up to his precept that sincere men demonstrate their freedom by refusing to submit to the status quo and by wholehearted involvement in a chosen way of life."⁸ He was of the Left, resolved to support the poor and oppressed.

⁸Novack ed., *Existentialism versus Marxism*, 16.

Thus Sartre passed through two distinctively different phases of philosophical evolution. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), he is an avowed follower of the German phenomenologists who wished to perfect their techniques and extend their researches into the consciousness of individual experience. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), he comes forward as an adherent of Marx with the aim of perfecting historical materialism through the addition of Existentialist procedures and insights.⁹

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre incidentally refers to Marxism as a specimen of "the serious attitude," which in his vocabulary is antithesis of sincerity because it attributes greater reality to the world than to oneself. It is an expression of "bad faith" for it hides from the consciousness his freedom, and allows him to take himself for an object. People who seek to escape the agony of conscious decisions are not "authentic ones," but 'stinkers' who elude the liabilities of liberty. The three-tire concept of reality as being-for-itself – the pure consciousness of the individual, being-in-itself – the rigid non-consciousness or materiality and being-for-others – the self-converted into an external object, has been designed to manipulate a most one-sided conception of freedom as release from all conditions. In this Ontology I assert and establish my authentic self in dissociating myself from all the objective circumstances. I alone have the power of creating the character and career I prefer. Though man is fated to be free even his dearest projects are foredoomed to fail. The constitution and development of Sartre's thought in *Being and Nothingness* is an unquenchable thirst for freedom that cannot find satisfaction. This dissatisfaction spurred him forward one stage to the next.

His sense of intensified social responsibility impelled him to keep on searching for an enlargement of liberty, even though no real and lasting freedom was attainable. It pressed him to come to grips with Marxism in politics and philosophy. This was first preceded by a severe indictment of all aspects of Marxism, namely, its claim to scientific truthfulness, its materialism, its rationalism, its dialectical view of nature, its conception of object-subject relations and its derivation of moral consciousness from social and economic conditions. In his essay on *Materialism and*

⁹Novack ed., *Existentialism versus Marxism*, 17.

Revolution he argued that Marxism should be replaced by a better philosophy that could be created by a true revolutionary.

The second phase of Sartre's philosophical development is apparently a negation of the first. In the first part of *Critique of Dialectical Reason* published in 1960 under the title "Search for a Method," he wrote: "What did begin to change me was the reality of Marxism, the heavy pressure on my horizon of the masses of workers, an enormous, somber body which lived Marxism, which practised it, and which at a distance exercised an irresistible attraction on petit bourgeois intellectuals."¹⁰ Sartre tries to solve this dilemma claiming that his brand of existentialism could rescue and renew the original ideas of Marx, which had been misinterpreted by his official disciples and institutionalized ideology as an instrument in the hands of the opportunistic Soviet bureaucracy. Sartre held the view that the inability of the later Marxists to grasp the absolute irreducible character of the particular historical happening make it "legitimate and necessary to resuscitate Existentialism" to rejuvenate Marxism. At this stage what Sartre tried was to virtually dissolve Marxism in Existentialism, instead of subordinating it to Marxism as he promised.

At first he believed that freedom could be guaranteed only through an uncompromising proclamation of the autonomy of the individual. When this metaphysic of the sovereign personality failed to square with his further experiences of social and political reality in the struggle for revolutionary change, he became persuaded that Marxism was the only effective doctrine that pointed the way to the liberation of man.¹¹

The fundamental project of Sartre was the theoretical affirmation of human freedom against all the obstacles by divorcing consciousness from material circumstances.

In the further quest for this unity, he has been impelled to move away from historical idealism toward historical materialism, from excessive subjectivity toward greater objectivity, from ultra-individualism toward collectivism, from solitude toward solidarity.¹²

¹⁰Novack ed., *Existentialism versus Marxism*, 21, 22.

¹¹Novack ed., *Existentialism versus Marxism*, 27.

¹²Novack ed., *Existentialism versus Marxism*, 27.

V. Conclusion

Conversion or changing of a religious or philosophical position takes place where the basic data of intelligibility change with an irresistible force of emotion and insight.