



## Saint Augustine Maurice de Wulf

### Life and Works.

St. Augustine is not only one of the most famous of the Fathers of the Church, he is also the greatest philosopher of the Patristic period. He was born at Tagaste in Numidia in 354, of a Christian mother, Monica, who contributed very much to the formation of his character. While yet young he abandoned the teaching of rhetoric, which he had practised in different towns of Asia Minor and Italy, to devote himself to theological studies. He adhered for a time to Manichaeism, and also for some time favoured the scepticism of the New Academy. He was converted to Catholicism by St. Ambrose of Milan, who baptised him in 387. Later on he became Bishop of Hippo (395). Up to his death in 430 he wrote and worked to propagate Catholicism and to refute contemporary heresies, particularly Pelagianism and the Manichaeism whose errors he had himself previously professed.

His principal philosophical works are: (1) *Confessionum Libri XIII.*, an autobiography written about 400, in which he gives a history of his intellectual and moral development down to his mother's death in 387; (2) *Retractationum Libri Duo*, written about 427, containing a critical *résumé* of the works he had written since his conversion; (3) *Contra Academicos*, directed against those Neo-Sceptics whose doubts he had for a short time shared; (4) *Soliloquiorum Libri II.*; (5) *Liber de Immortalitate Animae*; (6) *De Quantitate Animae*; (7) *De Magistro*; (8) *De Libero Arbitrio*; (9) *De Anima et Ejus Origine*; (10) and (11) the celebrated works *De Civitate Dei* and *De Trinitate*, whose scope is primarily dogmatic and apologetic, but which are also rich in philosophical teaching.

### General Features of the Philosophy of St. Augustine.

St. Augustine was familiar with a great number of the doctrines of antiquity and transmitted them to the Middle Ages in his writings. He was acquainted especially with the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus and Porphyry; but he read these in the versions of Marius Victorinus. Plato, on whom he heaps the highest eulogiums, was probably known to him only through Neo-Platonic sources. He makes mention of Aristotle only three times (*vir excellentis ingenii et eloquii, Platoni quidem impar, De Civit. Dei, viii., 12*), and seems not to have known his system. But the importance he attached to dialectic, for the explanation of the Scriptures, contributed not a little to the veneration with which the logic of Aristotle was regarded in the Middle Ages. Then again, he gathered his knowledge of Pythagoras, the Stoics, the Epicureans and the Academicians, in the main from what Cicero had written of them.

With St. Augustine, all the Neo-Platonic theories, though sufficiently marked, lose their specific character, and are adapted to the genius of a new philosophy. Polytheism with its inferior deities, the world-soul and its eternity, metempsychosis, and, above all, emanation-panteism, are expressly set aside. Several theories, especially amongst those attributed by him to Plato, are bent to serve the needs of the Augustinian theodicy.

The philosophy of St. Augustine has God as its centre. His metaphysics, his ethics, and above all his psychology, converge steadily to the study of God....And his study of God is permeated through and through by the closest blending of intellectualism and mysticism. We must seek the truth, not only to know it, but to love it. Philosophy is the love of wisdom, that is to say, the love of God....And this God, whom philosophy teaches us to love, is the Holy Trinity as taught in the Christian faith (*De Ordine*, II., v., 16).

Finally, St. Augustine's philosophy follows, step by step, the development of his dogmatic teaching according as the various phases of his polemics demand its gradual unfolding. Faith renders service to reason, just as reason does to faith. The *intellige ut credas* and the *crede ut intelligas* are the first faint outlines of that system of relations which the Middle Ages were to mould into scientific form. Reason furnishes us with the concepts that are at the root of what we are to believe: it establishes the existence and infallibility of revelation. But on the other hand, there are truths that reason would not even suspect if God had not proposed them for our belief.

From the facts themselves of his life, it is apparent that the Doctor of Hippo had to pass through many stages before he reached the full and complete development of his philosophical ideas. We will pass over these stages here, but they must be taken into account in a special study of the life-work of St. Augustine.

### **Theodicy and Metaphysics.**

St. Augustine proves the *existence* of God *a posteriori* from the contingency of the world, from the order of the universe, from the voice of conscience and from the common consent of mankind. His favourite proof is that derived from an interpretation of the characters of necessity and immutability to be found in our intellectual representations and in those root-verified which serve as criterions for our knowledge and conduct. The objects of those judgments and principles can be necessary and immutable only because they are adumbrations of the necessary and immutable essence of God. Therefore God exists (*De Lib. Arbitrio*, ii., 12 and 15).

Against the Manichaeans he upholds the primordial oneness of an infinitely good and perfect God; against the Neo-Platonists he defends the theory of creation: and creation must have taken place in time, not *ab aeterno*. Various Alexandrian doctrines are incorporated into St. Augustine's theodicy, — with, of course, the modifications demanded by his anti-patheistic attitude. Such, for example, are the inability of man to comprehend God; the transcendence of God above and beyond all categories; His simplicity, eternity, goodness. From the unity of God St. Augustine does not infer Divine unconsciousness (Plotinus). On the contrary, the Divine knowledge is one of the favourite themes of his philosophy. It is here we meet the theory of Exemplarism, so intimately associated with the name of St. Augustine.

Before building an arch, the architect must first conceive a plan or model of it. In the same way, before creating the universe, God must have conceived its vast design. He knows all possible essences in their relation to His own Divine essence, of which they are the far off. There is a Divine idea corresponding to each individual contingent thing, the standard or *norma* of its reality.

As being the primary source of all contingent reality, the Divine ideas are also the ultimate foundation of the intelligibility of all essences, and therefore it is on them finally that the certitude of human knowledge reposes, since our ideas are in conformity with the things around us: neither in these things around us, nor in ourselves, can we discover any sufficient reason for the immutable and necessary truths we possess concerning them.

This Augustinian Exemplarism makes a vital change in the Platonic theory of the Isolated Ideas, — no matter how much St. Augustine may have claimed to be inspired by the Chief of the

Academy. Nor does the Augustinian differ any less from the Neo-Platonic theory, wherein the Ideas are a sort of product or inferior emanation of the One Supreme Essence (85, i, b).

### Physics.

To explain *the constitution of corporeal substances*, St. Augustine admits the matter and form theory. Though in some places his idea of matter seems to be that of a chaotic mass brought forth from nothingness by an act of the Creator, still in several passages of his *Confessions* he refers to matter as to an undetermined something, incapable of existing without a form, — in language that recalls the doctrine of Aristotle. Mindful of the matter and form starting-point he speaks of a *quasi materia* in referring to the angels. The relation of matter to the quantitative state of being is not referred to in St. Augustine's cosmology.

God has deposited in matter a hidden treasure of active forces, constituted according to the exemplars which correspond, in the eternal knowledge, with material essences. These are the seminal principles or *rationes seminales*, whose successive germination, in the womb of matter, when circumstances are favourable, — *acceptis opportunitatibus* (*De Gen. ad litt.*, vii., 28), — produces the different species of corporeal beings. There is a distinct germ corresponding to each natural kind or species of body.

St. Augustine frankly subscribes to an *esthetic and metaphysical optimism* regarding the world, and assigns as a reason for such optimism the perfection of the Divine thought, which must necessarily have conceived harmonious relations between the various created essences.

### Psychology.

St. Augustine is a psychologist in the fullest sense of the word. His analysis of psychical states testifies to his extraordinary power of introspection.

(1) *Nature of Man.* — The soul is spiritual. St. Augustine proves its *spirituality* from the peculiar abstract, universal, necessary character of our intellectual representations, and from the knowledge which the soul has of itself; its *immortality* he proves from its spirituality and from its possession of those same immutable and necessary truths. But about the problem of the soul's origin the African philosopher is evidently agitated by embarrassing doubts, — which were transmitted from his time down to the earlier epochs of the Middle Ages. On the one hand, the doctrine of the propagation of original sin inclines him towards *traducianism* or *generationism*, in which the soul of the child is supposed to be sprung from the souls of its parents. On the other hand, he does not explicitly reject *creationism*, which teaches that human souls are created by God *ex nihilo* at the moment of their union with the body. Man has only *one soul*, single and simple (against Plato), present throughout the whole body. United with the body it constitutes the human being.

The soul and the body preserve each its own substantiality. The soul makes use of the body and governs it. These statements clearly reveal their Platonic inspiration. St. Augustine never fully freed himself from Platonic influences, though here and there he makes use of formulas which are apparently inspired from other sources.

(2) The soul reveals itself in *numerous activities* which are not really distinct from its substance. Three faculties especially he recognizes, the memory, the understanding and the will, — one of the numerous trichotomies in his psychology, and one in which he readily sees an image of the Holy Trinity. Let us consider a little more fully his teaching on intelligence and will.

(3) *Intelligence.* — A certain dogmatic postulate lies at the basis of his theory of intellectual

cognition. Against the scepticism of the Academy, which he had at one time professed, he lays down the thesis that certitude exists and is necessary for happiness. A primordial certitude is that of our own consciousness and of the reality of a thinking self. We are also certain of the first principles of the logical, metaphysical and ethical orders, and of our intellectual representations of the external world (*ratio, intellectus*). If we repose in these latter a confidence which we refuse to our *sense*-perceptions with their fugitive and ever-varying data (Plato), it is because we know the rule or standard of their truth. This *norma* is the resemblance of our ideas to the Divine ideas, and, consequently, to objective reality. Our intellects were made to know the truth, because they are finite participations of the infinite intelligence. So that St Augustine solves the criteriological problem by connecting it deductively with his theodicy.

*The role of Divine illumination in intellectual knowledge* deserves very special notice. St. Augustine is fond of calling God the sun of the soul, the light of the intellect, in which we see the immutable truth of things. The *De Magistro* represents God as the secret tutor of the soul. In the *De Trinitate* (xii., c. 1-7) he distinguishes the *ratio inferior* from the *ratio superior*.

These expressions and others like them had an important influence — historically — in the Middle Ages: the difficulty of interpreting them explains why advocates of opposing systems quoted them in turn, each in support of himself. It is certain that St. Augustine did not use them in an *ontologistic* sense, — as if our intellects directly contemplated immutable truths in the Divine essence. It is no less certain that in several passages the illuminative action of God has reference to the creative act, to which the soul and intellect owe their reality (*e.g.*, *De Civit. Dei*, x., 2). But it is a far more delicate point to decide whether St. Augustine meant to solve the question of the *origin* of our ideas, or whether those formulas of his are only so many paraphrases of his favourite doctrine on the *nature* of intellectual knowledge and the ultimate foundation of its certitude. Is God the *efficient cause of our ideas*, impressing them on our intellects as the seal leaves its impress on the wax (*De Trinit.*, xiv., 15), — or does he simply mean that the necessity and immutability of those objective concepts and judgments spring from the fact that the essences of all things are necessarily and immutably conformable with their uncreated exemplar, the foundation of all truth (*incommutabilia vera*)? The latter explanation — commonly accepted, and demanded by a certain number of passages, — is more in keeping with the general spirit of the Augustinian theory of Ideas, which is manifestly borrowed from Plato. But this perhaps does not exclude the former interpretation, which is likewise supported by other passages, and harmonizes quite as well with the data of the Augustinian ideogeny, and with the saint's proofs of the existence of God.

*What is the origin of our ideas?* — The Bishop of Hippo at first pronounced in favour of the Platonic theory of reminiscence (*De Quantitate Animae*, 20); and afterwards when he retracted this ideology, it was only because he rejected the Platonic theory of the pre-existence of souls. He substituted the view that the soul by virtue of its rational nature, can discover its knowledge by reflection on itself.

The function attributed by St. Augustine to the bodily senses in the production of sensation fits in with this innatist ideogeny. The psychic phenomenon is accomplished in the soul: the body does not act on the soul at all, for what is inferior cannot act on what is superior.<sup>[4]</sup> It is not the body that by its causal action impresses its image on the soul, but the soul that engenders in itself an image of the body. Our ideas then are innate (Plato). And this being so, their actual presence in consciousness is explained by the repeated intervention of God, according as our intellects develop; as well as by one single act of His when, at the instant of its union with the body, He deposited in the soul a hidden treasure of knowledge.

(4) *The Will plays a preponderating role in our psychic life.* — St. Augustine declares himself for its primacy of honour over the intellect. Not only do the inner senses and the intellect act at

its command, but purity of the will and its desires is a condition of knowledge. Only the soul that is pure and holy can aspire to a knowledge of truth by the *ratio superior*. Truth is a good that every one must *love* with all the energy of his soul. Further, the adherence of the mind to certain difficult truths — like that of the union of soul and body — is secured only by the intervention of the will. Lastly, the will enjoys this other prerogative: it is psychologically and morally free.

### **Moral Philosophy.**

Every being is good in so far as it *is*, or *has being* (Plato). God, or the Supreme Goodness, is the ultimate end of man, and the union of the soul with God is its supreme happiness (Eudemonism). The justice of God, and the necessary relations of essences are the basis of the absolute distinction between good and evil. The polemics in which St. Augustine was successively engaged with the Manichaeans, the Pelagians and the Semi-Pelagians, led him to the study of the problems of evil, liberty, grace and predestination. Evil does not share the metaphysical Empyrean with Good (Manichaeism). It is nothing positive; if it were, the scorpion would die of its own poison. It is a privation of good, and, in consequence, affects only contingent things which are endowed with a certain degree of goodness. As to the conciliation of human liberty with grace and predestination, the passages of St. Augustine's writings bearing on these points have given rise to centuried controversies, principally theological; and the most widely diverging systems quote the Doctor of Hippo each in its own favour.

St. Augustine has exercised an immense influence on the destinies of theology (speculative and mystical), and of scholastic philosophy.

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