



## Patristic Philosophy Maurice de Wulf

The advent of Christianity gave a new direction to speculative studies. The Fathers of the Church had to indicate what were the dogmas of the Christian Religion and to preserve them from the heretical alloy of Jewish and Pagan doctrines; just as in another department they had to protect from schism the unity of discipline and ecclesiastical government. Bearing in mind that this was the chief aim of all Patristic speculation, we can understand at once that philosophy held only an incidental and secondary place in it, and that the choice of the questions discussed was usually determined by the exigencies of polemics.

Hence it is that Patristic philosophy is a religious philosophy, — subservient to dogma: not only in the sense that dogma excels philosophy as revelation excels reason, but also in the sense that philosophy is considered to have no other general function than that of assisting dogma with its own proper teaching. This attitude merely continued the tradition of the contemporary Neo-Platonic schools, which in like manner confounded philosophy with religion.

The Fathers study preferably the problems connected with Christian dogma. Although Christ is not regarded as the head of a school of philosophy, still the religion He founded offers us solutions on quite a number of the questions which philosophy proposes and solves by other methods. We may note, for example: God's supremacy over the world; creation; providence; the essential dependence of man on God; the individuality of things; the finality of the universe; the distinction of soul and body; personal immortality.

Owing to the very fact that their philosophic labours were fragmentary and incidental, the Fathers of the Church never succeeded in building up a harmonious system of organically connected doctrines. We have no *Patristic synthesis* to compare with the later *Scholastic synthesis*. Of course the new teachings of Christianity on a few of the problems discussed by philosophy found credence with all, and so far constituted a unifying element. But those few points were unable to effect a general synthesis moreover, in the interpretation even of them we can perceive a wide diversity of thought.

Patristic Philosophy was propagated in a civilization permeated with Grecian ideas, and was influenced by them. In this way it became attached to a waning world-view ; it fostered and perpetuated an old-time mentality. Its writers were influenced, in varying degrees, by the then prevalent doctrines of the Neo-Platonists. Through the medium of these latter they inherited more or less of Plato's spiritualism, which they endeavoured to interpret consistently with Catholic doctrine. They took isolated tenets from Aristotle, but, in the main, distrusted or repudiated his theodicy, physics and psychology. They also borrowed theories from Pythagoras and Socrates, from Seneca, Cicero and Philo Judaeus.

### Division.

We may divide Patristic philosophy on the basis of the religious controversies which produced it. The history of those struggles naturally falls into two periods, following the doctrinal questions which originated them and the results to which they led.

The first period comprises the controversies of the first three centuries, from the foundation

of the Church to the Council of Nice (325): the period of fixation of the fundamental dogmas. The second embraces the struggles of the fourth to the seventh centuries, from the Council of Nice to that of Trullo (692) : the period of the development of Christian dogma.

## § 1. PATRISTIC PHILOSOPHY DURING THE FIRST THREE CENTURIES.

### Gnosticism.

Gnosticism, which is the principal heresy of the early Christian centuries, presents many points of contact with the declining Grecian philosophy, and, like the latter, offers us a syncretic alloy of all the then existing theories. The origin of evil and of the world in which it reigns is the fundamental problem of all the Gnostic systems. To solve this problem they have recourse to a pretended science higher than even revealed faith, a special religious knowledge which they called *gnôsis*. The essential dualism of God, the principle of all being and of all good, and Matter, the principle of evil (Philo); the evolution of the Divine Being producing by emanation (*probolê*); a series of aeons less and less perfect (Plotinus); the mixture of Divine and material elements giving birth to the world: such are the fundamental ideas of Gnostic metaphysics and cosmology. Creation and Christian redemption are, accordingly, natural and necessary phenomena, mere episodes in the struggle of the Divine element with matter from which it tries to set itself free. Redemption will be completed by the cosmic return of everything to its proper place (*apokatastasis pantôn*). To reconcile these tenets with the teaching of Scripture, the Gnostics interpret the latter in an allegorical sense (Philo), so as to bend the text to their preconceived ideas. Gnosticism assumed many forms. In the third century it was strenuously opposed by the Christian school of Alexandria.

### Christian School of Alexandria.

Founded by PANTAENUS (fl. 200), the Christian school of Alexandria was made famous by two great men, CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (fl. prior to 216) and ORIGEN (185-254). We have extant a tripartite work of Clement's containing the *Logos protreptikos pros Ellênas*, the *Paidagôgos*, and the *Strômateis*. Origen, in his principal work, the *Peri archôn*, attempts the first systematic exposition of dogma. Of all the Alexandrian Fathers he was the most deeply influenced by the dominant theories of his time: first by the Graeco-Judaic philosophy, especially of Philo, from which he borrowed his theory of the allegorical interpretation of the Bible; then, through the medium of Neo-Platonism by the Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic philosophies, and even by the Gnostic systems. There is reason for what has been said of Origen that he was a Christian in his practical life and social intercourse, but a Greek in his conceptions of the world and of God. When refuting Gnosticism he subscribed to many theories repudiated afterwards by his successors. Their theories in theodicy, anthropology and morals are the most remarkable portions of the *philosophies* of Clement and Origen.

(1) *Divine Transcendence* is energetically asserted in opposition to the monists. On the other hand, God is not relegated to an absolutely inaccessible region, nor is He such an indeterminate being as Philo and the Gnostics make Him. He is accessible to the human intelligence, which recognizes Him in His creatures.

(2) The *Theory of Creation*, which the predecessors of Clement and Origen had already interpreted in a Biblical sense, is eloquently defended by these two masters. And so the hesitating conjectures of Grecian philosophy, unable to explain the mutual relations of God and the universe, were at last replaced by a definite and decided teaching. Plato and Aristotle had subscribed to the dualism of God and matter without explaining the origin and independence

of the latter; the Stoics and Neo-Platonists had advocated a fatalistic emanation of the Divine substance or of the Divine activity into finite being; but monistic pantheism could not explain why God communicates Himself to the contingent, whilst dualistic individualism was discredited by its arbitrary juxtaposition of God and matter. The doctrine of *creation* or *the production of the world ex nihilo by an act of the free will of the All-Powerful* offered a far more perfect philosophical solution; it maintained with Aristotle the substantial distinction between the Pure Act and the act mixed with potentiality, and it maintained with Plotinus the absolute dependence of the world on God. The creationist theory was bound to be taken up and developed by all the writers of the patristic and medieval epochs.

(3) *The soul is spiritual* and is of a nature superior to that of the body (against Epicurus), — though certain passages from Origen seem to contradict this thesis; the existence of *moral liberty* is asserted against Gnostic determinism; a *natural moral order* is the standard or rule of human conduct.

## § 2. PATRISTIC PHILOSOPHY FROM THE FOURTH TO THE SEVENTH CENTURY.

### Patristic Philosophy In the Fourth and Fifth Centuries.

The Edict of Milan (313) had given practical expression to the zeal of Constantine the Great for the Christian Religion by establishing the latter throughout the Empire. The Council of Nice (325) had defined its principal dogmas. It could now convoke solemn assemblies to promulgate its teaching. The schools of Antioch, of Alexandria and of Cappadocia were the principal seats of theological learning in the East. The energy of all the ablest men of this time was engaged in the exposition and defence of Christian doctrine. According to their objects we may distinguish three chief controversies: the Trinitarian, the Christological and the Anthropological.

The *Trinitarian controversies* were the result of Arianism. The most formidable adversaries of Arianism were ST. ATHANASIUS, Bishop of Alexandria (fl. 373), and the “Three Lights of Cappadocia,” ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA (331-394), his brother ST. BASIL THE GREAT (fl. 379) and ST. GREGORY NAZIANZEN (329-390). In the West, Arianism was combated by ST. HILARY OF POITIERS (fl. 366) and ST. AMBROSE (about 340-397). The writings of St. Ambrose reveal the practical bent of their author’s mind: the learned Bishop of Milan considered the man of knowledge as at the service of the man of action. Of all the writings of the Fathers, the *Hexaemeron* of St. Ambrose was perhaps the most widely read in the Middle Ages. The *De Officiis Ministrorum*, in which he recasts the *De Officiis* of Cicero in a Christian sense, has won him a high place amongst writers on morals.

The *Christological controversies* commenced with NESTORIUS (428) and Nestorianism, which found an able opponent in ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA (fl. 444).

The *Anthropological controversies* appeared with Pelagianism, which encountered an adversary of extraordinary genius in the person of St. Augustine.

## § 3. ST. AUGUSTINE

### St. Augustine: 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-pantheism, 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-verities 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 centuries of 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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Maurice de Wulf. *History of Medieval Philosophy*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907.

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