



Introduction to the Thought of St. Augustine

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The philosophy of Augustine, whatever its origins for it would not be difficult to find traces of most of his arguments and beliefs in more ancient statements was to determine the problems, and in part even the conclusions, of a thousand years of philosophers. In his work there emerges, for the first time, from the attempt to express an understanding of the tenets of faith, a system of Christian philosophy, and whereas it is conceivable that an understanding of the faith might have taken any of a variety of directions in the early centuries of Christianity, by the time of Augustine most of the major outlines have been fixed. The testimony of frequent citation of Augustine in the works of his medieval successors is indication of the part he played in the determination of doctrines.

That a faith should find its intellectual statement in a platonizing tendency seems in the retrospect of western religious history, with its broad repetitions in mohammedan, Jewish, and Christian developments, inevitable and proper. The most persistent problem of Augustine yields nicely to a modified platonism. The resolution recurs in many forms, though the question is never posed in the abstract. If one is to find, it is necessary to have searched; God intended the soul to have fallen into the error of pride before it should find grace and salvation; therefore the life even of the saint shall be interrupted in spiritual luxury and spiritual fornication. Yet when grace is granted intelligence shall find only those things which have been revealed in the illumination of God or by faith. Truth, as a philosophic consequence, must be a thing which is received, recognized by intimations of it to be present to the mind, but arrived at, for all that, only after moral and logical preparations.

The orientation of Augustine's philosophy is, for the excellent reason of this preoccupation, toward eternal things: the soul must be turned to God who is the source of illumination and who must be known if anything is to be intelligible. God is considered first in philosophy, since he is before all things and all ideas. Whereas pagans fell into error in the ordering of their knowledge because they assigned to each science and subject of inquiry an independent domain, the Christian can recognize the affinity of the sciences to each other, for he is aware that they would be unintelligible save in view of their source. God is known in everything as he created all things. There is, therefore, little need for a proof of the existence of God, since anyone who understands himself or things recognizes God in them. Yet the discovery of God is constant and central in the works of Augustine; only the detail of the way to that discovery can be, and usually is, abbreviated. Whenever it need be specified, the existence of God can be shown in any of a number of indications: in the movements of the world whose arrangements, order, and beauty are signs of him; in the existence of finite, contingent things, since their existence needs an infinite, necessary artificer; but most important, in the nature and structure of human thought. All three types of proof, however, serve the purpose only of revealing a truth that any man can find in himself. God is present and to be recognized in the workings of the world and the soul. Proof of him is a way of intimating the presence of a structure in the universe and of displaying to the mind a truth from which it has fallen.

The need, consequently, for a demonstration of God's existence is a comparatively rare one, since knowledge of God is at the bottom of all knowledge. But there is always the fool, brought by the Psalms into philosophy, who says in his heart there is no God; and since he exemplifies at least the possibility of fundamental ignorance, Augustine must pause frequently to insist that the case is extreme and rare; to protest that even the fool says this only in his heart; and to show that even in his case demonstration can do much to resolve the ignorance. Such demonstration, nevertheless, is always introduced preliminary to some doctrine which could not be understood without the divine principles on which all knowledge is grounded: the passage presented in the following selection is from the middle book of the three devoted to the Free Will, and it can be supplemented and explained best by passages in the treatises on Music, on the Master, and on the Trinity. Significantly the demonstration of the existence of God is used to adumbrate or definitely to state a theory of knowledge; it would serve the same necessary function as foundation to physics or ethics.

By creatures we can raise ourselves to a knowledge of God, and reason can convince us of his existence as clearly as the sun displays itself before our eyes. Intelligence always has need of the light of God, its sun, for truth. Yet, the mysterious divine influence without which our soul cannot attain intellectual truth does not consist in the revelation of God to us objective, but in the production in us effective of an image, as it were, of those truths which determine our knowledge. Knowledge is not innate in us as it is in angels, but requires a process which scholastics assigned to the activity of the active intellect producing species impresses. All the figures in which Augustine writes of it are designed to bring out this effective role of the divine light: knowledge is a transcription; it is the impression of an image; it is a seal ring which marks its signet in the mind; it is a sun,, a master speaking within, an angel illuminating man. Emphatically however this light *sui generis* is not God, but produced by God; it is the light by which the mind sees, much as the senses see by the external light.

By the divine light the soul perceives the unchangeable things of truth. That knowledge differs wholly from knowledge by sensation, for sensation has to do with particular, multiple, changing objects, whereas thought moves among indivisible, eternal things. Moreover, no knowledge properly so called is derived from sensation, for no movement of the body could exercise a causal action on the soul; the lower cannot be cause of the higher. The alterations of the body therefore are not the causes of the soul's perception, but the soul draws from itself an image of the body; its action, as is particularly clear in the case of the dolorous sentiments, is usually its response to a need of the body. It is not the body which acts on the soul, but the soul which acts on the body. This can be illustrated from the interrelations of body and soul in teaching, where words may seem to be the causes and the means of conveying ideas, for, if one consider, there is a complete independence, not a parallelism, of words and ideas. Conversation consists of two crossed monologues, and even when there is no misunderstanding, it is not the word which furnishes the idea, but rather the memory of things already known. Either one is ignorant of the thing represented by the symbol, in which case it means nothing; or else its meaning is known, then it teaches nothing. To learn means to understand and to be able to react to an external experience; but the pupil does not undergo or receive an idea: an idea is aroused in him which had been dormant. No one ever learns, precisely because a thought is never made of a body; the soul always draws its truth out of itself even when it seems to discover it. The truth of each person is his own proper truth. No other can be substituted for it. Nothing penetrates from without into the soul, but individuals who are hermetically sealed against each other, have a sort of agreement among themselves through the possession of the truth. The presence of God to thought invisibly is the truth itself.

The fact of thought, therefore, is indication of the existence of God. One cannot see without

light, and though the light is not seen, there is no doubt, while one sees, that there is light. So too if one knows, God must exist whether one know God or not. But even while I doubt, Augustine insists, I know that I am, and in that knowledge are involved the further certainties that I live and that I understand. The reiterated insistence on this self-knowledge of the soul, which is the beginning of the knowledge of God, anticipates the cartesian proof in all the solidity of its thought, and possibly misses only the severity of its method. That God is present in all knowledge is particularly relevant to the knowledge of the soul, since of all knowledge that of the existence of thought is the most certain; and it can in turn be made the basis of other certainties. Therefore Augustine's gift of exquisite self-analysis and introspection, by which he is enabled to describe with precision the most delicate phenomena of intimate life, is turned wholly to the intimation of God. The axis of life and philosophy must be God, since any study is in part the study of God; the analysis of the mind becomes a religious science inspired by the desire to know the ways of God in our soul and the ways of our soul toward God. Throughout his philosophy the world is of less interest to Augustine than the actions of God in the world and particularly in us. He says, in fact, in the Soliloquies that he wishes to know only God and soul, and it is clear there as elsewhere that he says *Noverim me* only after he has prayed *Noverim te*.

It is not surprising, in view of this, that philosophy should take its rationale from the nature of God. Following the Trinity, the divisions of philosophy are three. Even in ignorance of the Trinity, pagan philosophers had found that triple division into physics, logic, and ethics; God, however, is the cause of all being, all truth, all good the *causa subsistendi, ratio intelligendi, et ordo vivendi*. In the order of things and in the ways of morals the workings of God are evident as they have been seen to be in discovery of truth. All things were created by God in the beginning as in a contexture of elements, and they are to develop and appear only when suitable circumstances occur (*acceptis opportunitatibus prodeunt*). Everything which will later become this or that particular thing is contained invisibly in the seminal reasons implanted at creation; the world blooms out of its primitive elements as a tree develops from its seed. And, to complete the trinity, as the movement of bodies is the growth of the seminal reasons formed by God, as knowledge of truth is knowledge in the light of God, so the pursuit of the good is a state of will which stands in need of the grace of God. The supreme good is as necessary to virtue as the supreme truth to wisdom. The ethical problem is the problem of what the soul seeks in seeking God and how it comes to seek that.

The happy life, obviously on these grounds, is nothing other than the enjoyment of the truth, that is, the enjoyment of God who is truth and the illumination. The soul seeks not only a knowledge which is true if it were not true it would not satisfy the soul but it must be so true that it sets an end to all research. The soul seeks, by way of incomplete doctrines, truth, that after movement it may have repose. The cause of all the movement of the soul is a truth which is present to our memory but superior to it. It is present without being part because we are variable and truth is immutable. The movement therefore of thought from things to God is possible only through the presence of a confused idea of God in the soul. The problems of morality are problems of guidance in the practical use of the faculty of knowing, and follow therefore from the nature of thought. As there is the distinction between wisdom and knowledge, between what the mind may learn of eternal things and what it may learn of temporal things, so there are the two cities, the city of God and the terrestrial city, for the will of men may become entangled in corporeal changing things as well as inspired to the search for God. Salvation must come with the love of God; he can be loved only if the mind is turned to him; but if he is known he cannot but be loved; all knowledge must lead to God and therefore to the love of God. The intellect in wisdom and the soul in virtue travel the same road to salvation.

That there is a philosophy in Augustine, therefore, is the result of an error and an accident;

if Adam had not fallen, man would have been like the angels in his knowledge and love. Philosophy is love and the search for wisdom; love is the desire for that which is perceived to be good. All revolves about the love of God, but love depends on knowledge, because one loves only that which one knows. It is important to faith that there be at least a limited certitude for the understanding. This indeed is faith not a vague sentiment of the soul adhering to a doctrine without rational motivation, nor a mysticism without sure proofs, nor yet an intellectualist certainty imposed necessarily by the evidence of irresistible proofs but an intellectual adherence to truths which are guaranteed in testimony worthy of credence and illustrated, once believed, in all the facts of the universe. All faith is placed in God; in the true philosophy the mind grasps him as truth, after him the soul, after the soul the body, after the body other bodies. Philosophy must, if this is so, consist in an inversion of perspective toward things. The mind must be prepared for it as for an initiation; the work of philosophy is first a work of conversion. It is to accomplish this preliminary task that Augustine most usually undertakes his excursions into spiritual biography. The knowledge of the world is so related to the knowledge of God that the mind passes immediately from the world to God. There is, consequently, no purely speculative curiosity in Augustine. The statement of his philosophy involves the selection from an infinity of possible truths of some few, useful to introduce tranquillity into the soul. The joy of knowing is sensed in truths, not that more truths may be added to the sum of knowledge, but rather that in truths may be achieved the happiness for which truth is sought. It is enough for philosophy to have discovered a profound tie between religion and intelligence and to have justified religion dialectically.

Richard McKeon. *Selections from the Medieval Philosophers*. Vol. 1. Augustine to Albert the Great. London: Charles Scribners Sons, 1929.

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