



## The Philosophy of St. Augustine

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After a youth of dissipation, the rhetorician Aurelius Augustinus of Thagaste, Africa, (354-430), embraced the religion of his mother. He united in his soul a deep love of Christ and an ardent zeal for philosophy, although, after becoming Bishop of Hippo, he gradually favored an absolute submission to the religious authority represented by him. His writings, the most important of which are the *Confessions* and the *City of God* have left a deep impress upon the doctrines and the entire literature of the Roman Church.

For him as for Plato, science means a purer, clearer, more exalted life, the life of the thinker. Reason is

*capable* of comprehending God (*capabilis*); for God has given it to us in order that we may know all things and consequently God. To philosophize is to see truth directly and without the intervention of the eyes of the body. Reason is the eye of the soul. Wisdom is the highest truth after which we should strive. Now, what is wisdom but God? To have wisdom means to have God. True philosophy is therefore identical with true religion: both have the same strivings for the eternal. Why should God despise Reason, his first-born Son, — Reason, which is God himself! He gave it to us in order to make us more perfect than other beings. Nay, faith, which some oppose to reason, is possible only to a being endowed with reason. Chronologically, faith precedes intelligence: in order to understand a thing we must first believe it, — *credo ut intelligam*. However, though faith is a condition of knowledge, it is nevertheless a provisional state, inferior to knowledge, and ultimately resolves itself into it.

The theodicy of St. Augustine is essentially Platonic, and at times even approaches the boldest conceptions of the school of Alexandria. God is the being beyond whom, outside of whom, and without whom, nothing exists; he is the being below whom, in and through whom, everything exists that has reality; he is the beginning, the middle, and the end of all things. Goodness, justice, and wisdom are not accidental attributes of God, but his innermost essence. The same is true of his metaphysical attributes.

Omnipotence, omnipresence, and eternity are not mere accidents of the Divine Being, but his divine essence. God is substantially omnipresent, without, however, being everything; everything is in him, though he is not the All. He is good and yet without quality; he is great, without being a quantity; he is the creator of intelligence and yet superior to it; he is present everywhere, without being bound to any place; he exists and yet is nowhere; he lives eternally and yet is not in time; he is the principle of all change and yet immutable. In 'speculating about God, reason is necessarily involved in a series of antinomies; it states what he is not, without arriving at any definite conclusion as to his nature; it conceives him, — in this sense it is capable of him (*capabilis*) — but it cannot comprehend him in the fullness of his perfection. The important point is to distinguish carefully between God and the world. St. Augustine, whose conceptions closely border upon pantheism, as

the preceding shows, escapes it by his doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. If the universe has emanated from God, then it is itself of divine essence and identical with God. Hence, it is not an *emanation* but was *created* by an act of divine freedom. God is not the soul of the world; the world is not the body of God, as the Stoics held. The immanency of God in the world would be contrary to the divine majesty.

Some falsely interpret the doctrine of the Trinity in the tritheistic or polytheistic sense. Here lies another danger. The three hypostases, although distinct, constitute but one and the same God, just as reason, will, and the emotions form but one and the same human being. St. Augustine's criticisms on Arianism are very profound. What do you mean, he demands of the Arians, by assuming that the Son created the world at the command of the Father? Do you not thereby assert that God the Father did not create the world, but simply ordered a demiurge to create it? What is the Son if not the *word* of God, and what is a command if not an act of speech? Hence, God commanded *the Son through the Son* to create the world. What a strange and absurd conclusion! Arianism errs in that it desires to *picture* the Trinity to itself; it imagines two beings placed very near to each other; each one, however, occupying his particular place; and one of them commands, while the other obeys. Arianism should have seen that the command by means of which God created the world out of nothing simply means the creative Word itself. God is a spirit, and we should not and cannot form an image of the immaterial.

Inasmuch as God created the world by an act of freedom, we must assume that the world had a beginning; for eternal creation, the conception of Origen and the Neo-Platonists, is synonymous with emanation. Philosophers raise the objection that creation in time would imply an eternity of inaction on part of the Creator; but they are wrong. Their error consists in considering the eternity which *preceded* creation as an infinitely-long duration. Duration is time. Now, outside of creation there is neither space, nor time, nor, consequently, duration. Time or duration is the measure of motion; where there is no movement there is no duration. Since there is no movement in eternity and in God, there is no duration in him, and time, as Plato aptly remarks, begins only with movement, that is, with the existence of finite things. Hence, it is incorrect to say that the God of the Christians did not create things until after an infinite series of infinitely-long periods of absolute inaction. Moreover, St. Augustine recognizes the difficulty of conceiving God without the universe. On this point, as well as on many others, Augustine the philosopher conflicts with Augustine the Christian. This constant discord between his faith and his reason leads to numerous inconsistencies and contradictions. God, for example, created the world by an act of his free-will, and yet creation is not the result of caprice but of an eternal and immutable decree. It is immaterial whether the immutable will of God compels him to create the world at a fixed period of time or whether it eternally compels him to do it; in either case we have absolute determination. St. Augustine realizes this, and eventually unreservedly declares that divine freedom is the principle and supreme norm of things. Since the divine will is the ultimate principle, than which there is nothing higher, it is useless and absurd to inquire into the final cause of creation. God called other beings than himself into existence, because he willed to do so. Human reason has no right to go farther than that. All it may do is to ask itself the question: Why did God make things so different from each other and so unequal? St. Augustine answers, with Plato, that the diversity of the parts is the condition of the unity of the whole.

The existence of the soul is proved by thought, consciousness, and memory. You are in

doubt about your existence, are you? But to doubt means to think, does it not? and to think is to exist, is it not? It is more difficult to say what the soul is. According to some, it is fire or fine air or the fifth element, possessing the property of thought, understanding, and memory; others identify it with the brain or the blood, and make thought an effect of the organization of the body. But these are mere hypotheses, disproved by the simple fact that we are not conscious of any of these substances constituting the soul. If we were made of fire or of air or of any other material, we should know it by an immediate perception which would be inseparable from our self-consciousness. The soul is a substance differing from all known matter as well as from matter in general; for it contains notions of the point, the line, length, breadth, and other conceptions, all of which are absolutely incorporeal.

Granting this, what shall we say of the origin of the soul? There are thinkers, even among the Christians, who conceive it as emanating from God. That, however, does it too much honor. It is a creature of God, and has had a beginning, like every other creature. However, even among those who on principle assume that the soul is a creature, opinions differ as to the mode of its creation. Some hold that God directly created only the soul of Adam and that the souls of other men are produced *per traducem*.

This theory (which undoubtedly favors St. Augustine's doctrine concerning the transmission of Adam's sin to his descendants) is materialistic, for it considers the soul as capable of being communicated and divided. Others maintain that souls were created, but existed before bodies; they were not introduced into them until after the Fall; the object of their captivity being the expiation of the errors of a previous life. This doctrine, which Plato holds, is disproved by the fact that we have not the slightest recollection of any such state of pre-existence. Plato finds that even illiterate persons will, upon proper questioning, assert great mathematical truths, and concludes therefrom that such persons existed prior to the present, and that the ideas aroused in their minds by our inquiries are but reminiscences. But his hypothesis loses its force when we remember that such ideas may be developed by the Socratic method in all minds endowed with common sense. If they are reminiscences, it would have to be assumed that all men were geometricians and mathematicians in their pre-existent state; which, judging from the small number of transcendental mathematicians among the human race, seems very improbable. Plato's argument in favor of pre-existence would perhaps have more weight in case great mathematical truths could be extracted only from a few minds. Finally, there is a third conception, according to which souls are created as soon as bodies are created. This theory is more in line with spiritualistic principles, although it is not so good a support for the dogma of original sin as the others.

The immortality of the soul necessarily follows from its rational nature. Reason brings the soul into immediate communion with eternal truth; indeed, the soul and truth constitute but one and the same substance, as it were. The death of the soul would mean its utter separation from truth; but what finite being would be powerful enough to produce such a violent rupture? and why should God, who is truth personified, produce it? Are not thought, meditation, and the contemplation of divine things independent of the senses, independent of the body and of matter? Hence, when the body turns into dust, why should that which is independent of it perish with it? In rejecting the notion of pre-existence, St. Augustine also abandons the theory of innate ideas, or rather, he modifies it. He assumes, with Plato, that when God formed the human soul, he endowed it with eternal ideas, the principles and norms of reason and will. Thus interpreted, St. Augustine accepts the doctrine of innate ideas. He denies, however, that these ideas are reminiscences or survivals of a pre-existent

state, and he does so on the ground that if such a theory were true, we would not be creatures, but gods. He rejects the doctrine of pre-existence because it implies an existence that has no beginning. He also becomes more and more suspicious of the theory of innate ideas, because the theory might lead one to conclude that ideas existed *originally* in the human soul and were not implanted *a posteriori* by a being outside of the soul. St. Augustine's chief aim is to elevate God by debasing man; to represent the latter as a wholly passive being who owes nothing to himself and everything to God. In the words of the Apostle: "What hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now, if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it?" Man as such is the personification of impotence and nothingness. Whatever he possesses, he has received from others.

The human soul is passive, receptive, contemplative, and nothing more. It *receives* its knowledge of sensible things through the senses; it *receives* its moral and religious notions through the instrumentality of the Spirit. It owes its conception of the external world to the terrestrial light surrounding its body, and its knowledge of celestial things to the heavenly light which forms its spiritual environment. However, this interior light, which is nothing but God himself, is not outside of us; if it were, God would be an extended and material being; it is in us without being identical with us. In it and through it we perceive the eternal forms of things, or as Plato calls them, the Ideas, the immutable essences of passing realities. God himself is the form of all things, that is, the eternal law of their origin, development, and existence. He is the Idea of the ideas, and, consequently, the true reality, for reality dwells not in the visible but in the invisible; it is not found in matter but in the Idea.

St. Augustine's idealism, which comes from Plato and anticipates Malebranche's *vision in God* and Schelling's *intellectual intuition*, was, like his philosophy in general, subjected to the influence of the theological system championed by him during the latter part of his life. The inner light, which reveals to the thinker God and the eternal types of things, seems to him to grow dimmer and dimmer, the more convinced he becomes of the fall and radical corruption of human nature. Reason, which, before the Fall, was the organ of God and the infallible revealer of celestial things, is obscured by sin; the inner light changes into darkness. Had it remained pure, God would not have had to incarnate himself in Jesus Christ in order to reveal himself to humanity. Reason would have wholly sufficed to reclaim the lost human race. But the word was made flesh, and, the inner light being obscured, the Father of light appealed to our senses in order to transmit through them what reason was no longer able to give us. In this way, Augustine the theologian transforms the idealism of Augustine the philosopher into sensualism.

The moral ideas of St. Augustine suffer the same changes. His conceptions rise far beyond the general level of patristic ethics, when Plato inspires his thought. In his polemic against moral philosophy, Lactantius had declared in true Epicurean fashion: *Non est, ut aiunt, propter seipsam virtus expetenda, sed propter vitam beatam, quae virtutem necessario sequitur*, and Tertullian had written the words: *Bonum atque optimum est quod Deus praecepit. Audaciam existimo de bono divini praecepti disputare. Neque enim quia bonum est, idcirco auscultare debemus, sed quia Deus praecepit*. St. Augustine's reply to Lactantius is, that virtue and not happiness constitutes the highest goal of free activity, or the sovereign good. He opposes to eudaemonism ethical idealism. Against the indeterminism of Tertullian he raises the objection that the moral law does not depend on any one, but that it is itself the absolute. The divine will does not make goodness, beauty, and truth;

absolute goodness, absolute beauty, and absolute truth constitute the will of God. Is the moral law good because God is the highest lawgiver? No. We regard him who has given us the moral law as the highest lawgiver, because it is good. A thing is not bad because God forbids it; God forbids it because it is bad. St. Jerome and St. Chrysostom condoned and even authorized official falsehood. Permit falsehood, and you permit sin! answers the Bishop of Hippo.

St. Augustine is perfectly aware of the insoluble difficulties which the problem of human freedom considered in its relations to divine prescience, and the question of the origin of evil present. If God foresees our actions, these lose their fortuitous character and become necessary. Then how are we to explain free-will, responsibility, and sin? If God is the source of all things, must we not also assume that evil proceeds from his will? And even if evil were only privation, the absence of good, would not this lack of virtue be caused by the refusal of the divine will to enlighten the soul and to turn it in the direction of the good?

The philosophical reasons inclining St. Augustine towards determinism are supplemented by religious reasons. He feels that he is a sinner and incapable of being saved through his own efforts. The natural man is the *slave* of evil, and divine grace alone can make him free. Now, divine grace cannot be brought about by man; it is entirely dependent on God's freedom. God saves man because he desires it, but he does not save all men. He chooses among them, and destines a certain number for salvation. This election is an eternal act on his part, antecedent to the creation of man. That is, some men are *predestined* for salvation, others are not. St. Augustine ignores the question of predestination for damnation, as far as he can, but it is logically impossible for him to escape this necessary consequence of his premise.

However superior his teaching may be to that of Pelagius his adversary, it is plain that, as soon as his thought enters upon the path of theological fatalism, it gradually sinks to the level of the ethics of Lactantius and Tertullian. The determinism in which his metaphysical speculations culminate is absolute, embracing man and God in its scope; while the determinism postulated by his religious consciousness applies only to man and leaves God absolutely undetermined. For Augustine the thinker, absolute goodness constitutes the essence of the divine will; for Augustine the champion of predestination, good and evil are dependent on God's will. The God of the Platonic thinker manifests himself to the world in Jesus Christ by virtue of an inner necessity; according to the doctor of the Church, the incarnation is but one of the thousand means which God might have employed to realize his aims. The philosopher admires and respects the ancient virtues; the theologian sees in them nothing but vices in disguise, *splendida vitia*.

St. Augustine excellently exemplifies the intellectual and moral crisis that forms the boundary between the classical epoch and the Middle Ages.

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