

God in the philosophy of Augustine

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1.1 God is beyond description

Commenting **verse 8 of Psalm 85 (86)** which says: *There is no one like you among the gods, O Lord*, Augustine says that pagans even though they might admit that they do not worship golden or silver or other hand-made objects, they admit they adore ‘demons’ or angels. But these are not God since they adore God and are not willing to accept to be adored by humans. Augustine argues that ‘whatever else the human mind may think of, nothing that is made is like the Maker. Everything in the universe, except God himself, was made by God.’ (**En.in ps.85, 12 –Exposition of Psalm 85, III/18, the Works of St. Augustine a translation for the 21st Century, ed. J. Rotelle OSA, New City Press, New York, p. 232**).

Having said this, Augustine then asks this question: ‘who could conceive an adequate idea of the difference between him who made it, and what was made?’ And he concludes: ‘This is why the psalmist said, *There is no one like you among the gods, O Lord*, but did not attempt to state how different God is, because that cannot be expressed. Try to understand, beloved: God is beyond all utterance; we can more easily state what he is not than what he is. You think of the earth: God is not that; you think of the sea: God is not that; of all things on earth, humans and animals: God is not that; of all creatures in the sea or flying through the air: God is not that; of everything that shines in the heavens – stars, sun and moon: God is not that; of heaven itself: God is not that. Think of angels, virtues, powers, archangels, thrones, principalities and dominations: God is none of these’ (**Ibid.**).

Having established that none of the human concepts or realities could be truly and really applied to God, Augustine asks: ‘What is he?’ and he answers: ‘I have not been able to say; all I could say is what he is not. Do you ask what he is? He is what *eye has not seen, ear heard, nor human heart conceived* (1 Cor 2, 9). Do you suppose the tongue could utter it, when not even the heart can conceive it? *There is no one like you among the gods, O Lord, nor any work to compare with yours*’ (**Ibid.**).

In **Sermon 52**, Augustine goes so far in denying any real knowledge of God that he affirms that ‘a man deceives himself, therefore, if he thinks he has understood God’ (**S.52, 16**). He underlines the great distance that separates man from God: ‘He is too high, I am too low’ (**ibid.**) and concludes: ‘what, then, shall we say of God, brothers? If you understand what you say, it is not God. If you understand, you are understanding something else, not God. ...’ (**Ibid.**).

One has to ask how did Saint Augustine arrive to bar all human understanding of God? Was it only a pastoral strategy to teach his people to avoid all kinds of superstitious representations of God? How are we to reconcile his earlier perception of God and this sort of negative philosophical theology which was well presented in the works of the certain Greek Fathers, like Gregory of Nyssa, and greatly elaborated in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius in the late 5th Century. In other words, how and why did Augustine convinced himself that God transcends all negation and affirmation? In order to appreciate the position of the matured Augustine, it is important to go back to his early belief in God and examine how his theodicy evolved.

1.2 A materialist and corporeal perception of the essence of God

In a very moving description of the effect Manichaeism had on him, Augustine reveals to us what was his conception of God. He confesses that ‘Nor did I know that God was spirit, not a being with limbs stretching far and wide, and having a certain size. **(Conf. III, 7, 12)**. The Manichean myth of God was a materialistic and corporeal representation of God. It was such a conception that Augustine inherited from the Manicheans and which for a while he believed in. It was not until he met the Neo-platonic philosophy that Augustine was able to grasp the notion of **spiritual reality** whose understanding did necessary lead Augustine to the discovery of metaphysical Being.

He clearly expresses this ontological defiance in his understanding of God as a spiritual reality in the beginning of **book VII of the Confessions**. In this book he is about to narrate his encounter with Neo-Platonism. Augustine admits that before he met this philosophy he was sinking ‘ignobly into foolishness, for I was unable to grasp the idea of substance except as something we can see with our bodily eyes’ (Conf. VII, 1,1). It was only when he met the writings of Platonists translated by Marius Victorinus that ‘I was no longer representing you (God) to myself in shape of a human body’ (**Ibid.**).

It was not very easy to Augustine to pass from a materialistic ontology to a true metaphysical perception of Being. If he was able to acknowledge that God was an ‘imperishable, inviolable and unchangeable’ substance, and that he was no longer ‘hampered by the image of a human body’ –which he applied to God – yet ‘I was still forced to imagine something corporeal spread out in space, whether infused into the world or even diffused through the infinite outside it’ (**Ibid.**) At that stage of his inquiry and understanding he could not understand that something infinite big was not necessary corporeal, that is, something that occupies space, even though it was not necessary material. The reason is that ‘anything to which I must deny these spatial dimensions seemed to me to be nothing at all, absolutely nothing, not even a void such as might be left if every kind of body –earthly, watery, aerial or heavenly—were removed from it, for though such a place would be a nothingness, it would still have the quality of space.’ (**Ibid.**)

As Augustine remarks in the following paragraph, his imagination – the faculty that transformed the sensorial perception of the material object into the image of that object – was roaming among material images of the forms perceived by his senses: ‘for as my eyes were accustomed to roam among material forms, so did my mind among the images of them’ (**Conf.VII, 2**). He did not realise that ‘such images produced in the mind were not of the same kind as the material objects they represent and that ‘my mind would never have been able to form them (these images) unless it was itself a reality, and a great one’ (**Ibid.**).

It is the discovery of this twofold reality, i.e., that images produced by the mind and the mind itself are real though non-material that opened to Augustine the possibility of grasping that there could be something called God which is neither material nor corporeal and yet greatly real, for it is a spiritual substance. This is the first very truth Augustine will learn in studying the writings of the Neo-Platonists and to which he will be always grateful, even in **De Cit. Dei** where he underlines the great differences between Christiana faith and Neo-Platonism. This has been in a certain sense the greatest philosophical conversion of Augustine: from a materialist ontology to a spiritual metaphysics. This conversion happened while Ambrose was applying an allegoric exegesis to certain passages of the Old Testament which the Manicheans explained in a very materialistic way. All of this contributed to a holistic and a global re-situating of Augustine towards philosophy and Christianity. The debate whether at the time of his baptism, Augustine’s conversion was a conversion to Christian faith or a conversion to the Neo-platonic philosophy is a false debate, since the Neo-Platonism helped

conceived God in such a way that he was able to reconcile this philosophical conception with the biblical perception of God.

1.3 Neo-Platonism

It is not that so easy to sum up the Plotinus' metaphysics and yet it is very important to grasp how this philosophy helped Augustine to conceive spiritual reality.

Plotinus' metaphysics, as represented in the books of *Enneads*, is built on three fundamental principles: **the One (or to certain extent the Good), the Intellect and the Soul**. The One is absolutely simple first principle of all. It is both 'self-caused' and the cause of being for everything else in the universe. The One or the Good, owing to its simplicity, is directly indescribable and we can grasp it indirectly by deducing what it is not. The One is absolute simplicity or being in its entire simplicity. The One virtually contains in itself all the beings and this must be interpreted that all beings ontologically depend on the One.

The first derivation from the One is the Intellect where all Forms abide. It is the principle of essence or whiteness or intelligibility as the one is the principle of being. It is the eternal instrument of the One's causality. These forms are the eternal and immutable entities which ontologically speaking are the essences of the existing beings. These came to know as the innate ideas. According to Plotinus, these forms are necessary since they procure specific being to things without which one thing could be said to be different from another or something has a proper property another things does not have. It's the existence of such forms that permits us to answer the question: What is man? What is a dog? According to Plotinus these Forms postulate the existence of the Intellect since this is a principle of unity. It is the intellect that unites the various Forms and gives intelligibility to being. It is the intellect that combines in the definition of man the Form of 'rationality' and 'animality'.

The third derived principle is the Soul. Soul is not the principle of life, for it is the activity of the Intellect that is the principle of life. The Soul is the principle of desire for objects that are external to the agent of desire. The Soul is related to the Intellect in so far as it is the 'exteriorisation' of the Intellects' desires of intelligibility. The internal activity of the Soul includes the plethora of psychological activities that embodied livings things. The external activity of Soul is nature, which is just the intelligible structure of all that is other than soul in the sensible world, including both the bodies of things with soul and things without soul.

The end of this process of diminishing activities is matter which is entirely bereft of form and so of intelligibility, but whose existence is ultimately owing to the One, via the instrumentality of Intellect and Soul. Matter is to be identified with evil and privation of all form or intelligibility. But also, matter is the condition for the possibility of there being images of Forms in the sensible world. From this point of view, it is the receptacle or space in Plato's *Timaeus* and the phenomenal properties in the receptacle prior to the imposition of order by Demiurge. Another meaning that Plotinus attributes to matter is that matter is evil when it becomes an impediment to the return to the One.

We can go on seeing the other various elements of Plotinus doctrine that have had a real impact on Augustine's thought. For the present need, it suffices to say that Plotinus has helped Augustine to come to discover **Intelligibility as the ultimate foundation of being**. And this is first and foremost how Augustine interpreted the spiritual reality, this being the reality of intelligibility. Intelligibility is not only a cognitive process that leads to understanding and knowledge, but it is also and above all the all-founding principle of being which sees itself and understand itself as the ultimate explication of itself and of what exists. One can get a good taste of this discovery in reading the *Confessions* VII, 10, 16 – 17, 23.

There are other famous passages in the Confessions that underline the influence of Plotinus' philosophy on St. Augustine philosophical development.

NB. For further information, visit <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plotinus/>.

1.4 The early optimism of Augustine regarding the understanding of God

We have to give all its weight to the emotional surrounding of Augustine's mind and heart to the discovery of the true God. We will never get tired in reading his Confessions. But for us, it is also important to see how this primary enthusiasm turned to be a juvenile –not in age, but in comprehension – optimism to come to know God. Or, at least, the longing of that optimism.

Lying on his bed, at Cassiciacum, in intimate dialogue with his reason, Augustine confesses that the only things he wants to know are: God and Himself. The dialogue between Reason and Augustine, especially in Book I, is an evident confidence that God could be known, even though one might not know how to get to this knowledge. Such a trust in the power of Reason is also affirmed in *Contra Academicos*, 3,20,43. Though the subject matter treated in this paragraph is the attainment of human wisdom through its understanding, Augustine admits that 'such is my state of mind that I am impatient to grasp what truth is – to grasp it not only by belief, but also by comprehension' (C. Ac. 3,20,43). Such a desire and longing founded on the conviction that the end one is looking for is attainable are quite understandable at this stage. Augustine has been traumatised by Scepticism which taught him to despair of truth. But he succeeded, through Neo-Platonism, to escape from the trap and he is now convinced that truth could be attained.

Finding truth through reason means as well to find God in coming to know him. And yet, as Augustine advances in Christian faith, he gives the impression that his early optimism was the naïve conviction of a newly-convert. What has really happened? Very succinctly we can say that the more Augustine meditates the mystery of God, the more he is overwhelmed by its profound greatness and the more he becomes conscious that the human mind is incapable of thoroughly and fully grasping and understanding the divine reality. No one will deny that Neo-Platonism infused in Augustine an extraordinary trust in the almost unlimited power of Reason and understanding. It must also be affirmed that Plotinus' emphasis that the One cannot be defined in positive terms and that it can only be described in a negative manner has inevitably conditioned Augustine's way of considering God's incomprehensibility and ineffability. Though he will continue to believe in the power of human mind, little by little he is spurred to give more importance to the power of the heart in understanding mysteries and to privilege vision and contemplation in the place of intelligible discursive knowledge.

However, Augustine will never abandon the intellectual search of God. In **De Trinitate**, he writes: 'We have to go on searching into what cannot be fully comprehended, for when someone realizes that what he has been seeking is beyond adequate comprehension, he does not conclude that he has not found anything after all. Rather, when he realizes that what he is seeking is thus beyond his full comprehension, he continues to seek. There is no reason to stop seeking, for, in the quest for what cannot be fully comprehended, we advance and become more perfect by reason of our very search for a good so great. Such a good is sought so that it may be found, and found that it may be sought still more. It is sought so that it may be found with ever greater delight, and found so that it may be sought with ever greater eagerness' (**De Trinitate**, xv,2).

1.5 Coming to know God

Even though we never attain a full understanding of God, yet we can surely come to know Him and we can undoubtedly reach out to Him. In this sense God is not unknown. We can come to know God through the creatures and through man himself, especially through the deep desire of human heart. Surely we steadily come to know God through Revelation, which is the greatest source of knowledge concerning God. We will not discuss this latter aspect.

We come to know God through his creation. We can cite numerous Augustinian passages that illustrate this truth. We will cite only a couple of phrases. ‘Question all things and see whether they do not in their own way answer you: ‘God made us!’ Illustrious philosophers have asked the question and from the things that they have been made have come to know the maker’ (**Serm. 141,2**). ‘The more you move about in creation, the more your contemplation will arouse your praise of the creator. Look at the heavens; they are God’s mighty work. Look at the earth; it was God who gave it the vast variety of seeds, the different kinds of growth, the multitude of animals. Move from heaven to earth and omit nothing from your consideration; all things echo the creator’s name. The very beauty of creatures is the voice with which they praise their maker’ (**En. in Ps. 26, en.2,12**). All creation, when attentively scrutinised, affirms that it is the work of God. This is the conclusion of an attentive analysis that Augustine carried out in the **Confessions, X, 6, 9-10**. Yes, all creatures will cry out that they did not make themselves but they are the work of God.

The self itself will have the same answer; ‘There is in me a body and a soul at my disposition, the one exteriorly, the other interiorly. ... The interior element is best, for all the bodily messengers are responsible to it as the one who presides and passes judgement on the answer given by heaven and earth and all that is in them: ‘We are not God’ and ‘He made us’. The interior man gains knowledge of these beings with the help of exterior man. It is I, the interior man, who have come to know them; I, I, the spirit, through the bodily senses’ (**Conf.X, 6, 9**). (See also **Serm. Denis, 2**).

1.6 The desire for God

The famous inspiring words at the very beginning of the **Confessions**, ‘you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you’ (**Conf. 1,1**) are the evident witness that man is metaphysically desire of God. The personal history of Augustine as it unfolds itself in the Confession is the existential narration of man who living far away from God lives ‘in the region of dissent’, as a wretched creature. The history of the return of the prodigal son to his father is the existential narration of man’s ontological desire coming to its fullness and self-realisation. The **Confessions** are explanation in words of the architectural well-accomplished structure of human existence and being. Having laid down at their beginning the desire of God as the principle of man’s happiness –which in accordance with Greek metaphysical teleology is the foundation of true being – the **Confessions**, to achieve their ultimate end, at the end of the long meandered journey of agitated human existence could not but declare: ‘Because, I think, in your Gift we find rest, and there we enjoy you. Our true place is where we find rest. We are borne toward it by love, and it is your good Spirit who lifts up our sunken nature from the gates of death. ... Now my weight is my love, and wherever I am carried, it is this weight that carries me. Your Spirit sets us afire and we are borne upward; we catch his flame and up we go. In our hearts we climb those upward paths, singing the songs of ascent. By your fire, your beneficent fire, are we enflamed, because we are making our way up to *the peace of Jerusalem*. For I rejoiced when I was told, ‘We are going to the Lord’s house’. There shall a good will find us a place, that we may have no other desire but to abide there for ever’ (**Conf. XIII, 9,10**).

The human desire for God cannot be satisfied by any created creature, not even by the greatness of the self. Only God can be the real accomplishment of man's deepest desire for happiness. In Letter 140 Augustine says; 'The rational creature, be it an angelic spirit or a human soul, is such that it cannot itself be the good that makes happy. If the changeable self cleaves to the changeless good it becomes happy; if it departs from the good, it is unhappy' (**Epis., 140, 56**). In Sermon 158, Augustine sustains that only God can truly and thoroughly satisfy the heart of man: 'The world offers me many beautiful, strong, and varied things, but he who made them is still more beautiful, stronger, brighter and sweeter. 'I shall be satisfied when you glory is made manifest' (cf. Ps. 17,15) (**Serm. 158,7**).

Desiring God means to desire true happiness and this could not be attained unless one follows God, the real object of one's desire: 'Following God means desiring happiness; the attainment of God is this happiness itself. We follow him, however, by loving him, and we attain him, not in the sense that we become identical with him but in the sense that we draw close to him in a wonderful, intelligible contact, being enlightened by and enfolded in his truth and holiness. For he is the very light, and we may be enlightened by him' (**De mor. Eccl. Cath. I, 18**). In a very platonic language Augustine identifies true desire of human being with happiness which is the enjoyment of God as our light that enlightens our mind to attain true understanding of reality and enkindles our hearts to follow the right path that leads to happiness, the path of virtue and wisdom.

All this is beautifully said in his commentary to psalm 58: 'Brothers, consider the condition of the human soul. It has no light or strength from itself. The beauty to be found in the soul is virtue and wisdom; but the soul is not wise of itself nor strong of itself; light and virtue are not native to it; there is a source and fountain of virtue; there is a root of wisdom; there is, if I may so put it, a region of changeless truth. If the soul moves away from this, it is darkened; if it draws near, it is enlightened. Approach it then and be enlightened, for if you move away you grow dark' (**En. In Ps. 58, serm. 1,18**).