

The notion and importance of Wisdom

Dr. Lucien Borg OSA

1.1 Wisdom in the Greek philosophy

The word ‘σοφία’ enjoyed a varied usage before being given its primary overtones by Aristotle. Earlier to Socratic and Platonic philosophy, Wisdom was considered as the *savoir-faire*, whether it was artistic or religious. Plato, perfecting the Socratic tradition, defines wisdom as the knowledge of self and one’s ignorance. It also was identified with the ordering of one’s conduct and with the whole complex movement towards contemplation of the beautiful.

Aristotle in his first writings continues the Platonic tradition and perpetuates the Platonic heritage in considering Wisdom as ‘σοφία’ (wisdom) and ‘φρόνησις’ (prudence). Later on, especially in defining Metaphysics, Aristotle attributes ‘wisdom’ to the knowledge of the first causes.

NB. For further information, visit <http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/2p.htm>.

1.2 Summary of the Augustinian notion of ‘Wisdom’

Augustine has remained very platonic though we cannot exclude the Aristotelian influence on him. A very short summary of the Augustinian conception of Wisdom is found in New Catholic Encyclopaedia, second edition, vol.14, 2003. ‘Ultimately, for Augustine there is very little that wisdom is not. It embraces all the Christian values, intellectual as well as moral, and implies a state of perfection in which the soul is anchored in love, enjoying interior peace and habitual joy in God. Although Augustine does make much of a distinction between science and wisdom based upon their respective objects – science is of human things, wisdom of divine (**De Trinitate, XIV, 1,3**)—wisdom remains for him deeply affective in character, conditioned throughout by the influence of happiness and love’ (p. 785)

1.3 From Hortensius to De Trinitate passing by Soliloquia

In **book III of his Confessions** Augustine tells us that reading the *Hortensius* he was invited to embrace philosophy, i.e., the love of wisdom. It is here, at the age of nineteen that Augustine met for the first time with the notion of Wisdom. At this age, Augustine surely did not identify Wisdom with God, even though he says in the narration: ‘Wisdom resides with you (meaning God), but love for wisdom is called by the Greek name, ‘philosophy’, and this love it was that the book enkindled in me’ (**Conf. III, 4.8**). He goes on to confess: ‘... there was one thing an one only that brought me joy in the exhortation of wisdom: that by its call I was aroused and kindled and set on fire to love and seek and capture and hold fast and strongly cling not to this or that school, but to wisdom itself, whatever it might’ (**Conf. ibid**).

The book changed the feelings of Augustine and the discovery of wisdom began to given a new direction to Augustine’s perception of life and his way of life. Little by little wisdom became the centre of his reflection and living. It acquired more and more importance as Augustine advanced in ‘philosophy’. Through the meanders of his life and his intellectual setbacks due to Manichaeism and Scepticism, he came to experience around 286 the influence

of two beneficial influences that remoulded his idea of God. At the age of 32, Augustine met Ambrose and his exegesis on one side, and the neo-platonic conception of spiritual reality on the other side. If we can rightly speak of a first Augustinian conversion at the age of 19, when Augustine read the Hortensius, undoubtedly, the meeting with Ambrose and his allegoric explanation of the Scriptures and with Neo-Platonism helped Augustine to turn to the true God, the spiritual God of the Christians.

Wisdom which was sought with such enthusiasm but which was jeopardised by the materialistic and rationalist Manichean perspective of God and life, was now able –at Milan, on the eve of Augustine’s final unwavering positive response to become Christian – to identify itself with the true God, source and fountain of Truth and true Happiness. In such an identification the ideal of ancient Greek philosophy was much more than Christianised; it was logically and with great simplicity fused into the Christian conception of God.

At Cassiciacum, in his famous Soliloquia Augustine cries out; ‘O God, the Father of Truth, the Father of Wisdom, Father of true and Supreme life, Father of Happiness, Father of the Good and the Beautiful, Father of Intelligible light, Father of our watching and our enlightenment, Father of covenant by which we are admonished to return to Thee O God, Wisdom, in whom and by whom and through whom all those are wise who are wise’ (**Sol. I, 1, 2-3**),

This highly mystical text denotes the clearly established identification of Wisdom with God and one is entirely captured by its beauty and its profound philosophical tenor. As a matter of fact, all that makes philosophy –truth, wisdom, happiness, intelligible light etc, is admirable transferred to the sublime reality of God. This is the reason that Augustine could no more conceive philosophy as a pure atheist regard on reality. Only God’s reality explains philosophy and consequently the love of wisdom and wisdom itself.

Commenting **Sol. I. 13, 22**, Carol Harrison in her book, **Augustine, Christian Truth and fractured humanity** argues that Augustine ‘depicts wisdom as female, indeed, she (wisdom) is described in rather erotic terms: she is the sole object of Augustine’s love, he desires ‘to see her, to possess her without any covering, naked, to see and hold her in perfect chastity’ (well, almost erotic) (**Carol Harrison, op.cit., p. 5**). She goes on to remark however that ‘reason warns Augustine that chaste wisdom, like any beautiful woman, will only grant this favour if she is sure that Augustine loves no one else. Augustine assures reason that he loves nothing – life, rest, friends- more than her, his love is without limits and knows no jealousy. He wishes to possess and enjoy her company with as many friends as possible. Reason approves –such chaste, pure love is exactly how wisdom ought to be loved’. (**Ibid.**)

Harrison’s way of representing Augustine’s relationship to wisdom, depicted in somewhat erotic language recalls minding the Song of Songs. It is not only a tender language but also a language of ‘intimacy’. Such will be the relationship of Augustine with Wisdom, ever more it becomes identified with the Holy Trinity and particularly with Jesus Christ.

When Augustine finished writing *De Trinitate*, he was an aged person who has gone through the various vicissitudes of his episcopal life. More than any other work, *De Trinitate* is a theological exposition of true Wisdom. Throughout the whole work, wisdom appears in its sublime essence as being the Trinity itself which having created man as ‘our image’ has endowed man with the power of contemplating this wisdom, which contemplation draws man to truth and to happiness (**cf books XIII and XIV**).

To resume we can say with S.J. Grabowski that: ‘... the term ‘wisdom’ contains a complexity of elements in the writings of the Bishop of Hippo. For he names God Himself and every single person of the Trinity ‘Wisdom’; besides, he predicates this term as an attribute of the divine Being. Now wisdom in man is a participation in the wisdom of God. It consists in a

condition of the soul that possesses truth, and indeed that truth which constitutes the beatifying object of man, which lies in the contemplation of God. Wisdom is, no doubt, knowledge and a consequent joy flowing spontaneously from the possession of truth, which solves existing difficulties and problems, and even here approaches to the highest Truth; but the consummation of wisdom lies in 'the vision and contemplation of truth' (*Sapientia id est contemplation veritatis, pacificans totum hominem et suscipiens similitudinem Dei*) (**De Ser. Dom. In monte, I, 3, 10**) ... In the strict sense, therefore, wisdom cannot be attained in this life, i.e., in its fullness; in a wider sense, it is already possessed here below according to the degree of perfection of the individual" (**S.J.Grabowski, The All-present God. A Study in St. Augustine, Herder book CO, London, 1953, pp. 273-274**).