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AUGUSTINE

On the Trinity
Books 8–15

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Introduction

Although unknown to many Western philosophers today, Augustine's *De Trinitate* is a strikingly original and highly important philosophical treatise. As a whole, the work is an account of the perplexing Christian doctrine that God is both three and one. But, quite surprisingly, the last half is also a treatise on the philosophy of mind; it is, in fact, the first such treatise on mind in the modern sense of "mind." How Augustine came to write a theological work on the Divine Trinity which is also a treatise on the human mind is an interesting story in itself.

Augustine begins his work by trying to establish the biblical credentials of the Doctrine of the Trinity. Thus Books 1 through 4 are primarily an exercise in biblical exegesis aimed at showing that this doctrine is indeed to be found in the Bible. The next three books, 5 through 7, develop the metaphysical and epistemological distinctions Augustine thinks he needs to discuss the Divine Trinity. Then comes what is philosophically the most exciting part of the work, the last half. It is in that part, Books 8 through 15, that Augustine develops his remarkably original thoughts on the human mind.

To be sure, there are also other works in which Augustine develops thoughts about the mind. One of the most interesting of these, Book 10 of the *Confessions*, might easily be overlooked as a source for Augustine's philosophy of mind because the explicit topic for discussion there is *memoria*, memory. Although that book is indeed devoted to what Augustine there calls "memory," it soon becomes clear to the reader that what Augustine is thinking of in this work as *memoria* is actually very close to what we today call "mind" and what Augustine also, in his *De Trinitate* calls "mind" (*mens*).

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Augustine's *Confessions* is certainly important as a precursor to *De Trinitate* 8–15, but not only because *Confessions* 10 is also, in effect, a discussion of mind; it is important because in *Confessions* 13 Augustine offers us a preview of the overall project that occupies him in *De Trinitate* 8–15 (hereafter “DT 8–15”). Here is the *Confessions* passage:

Who can understand the omnipotent Trinity? Yet who does not speak about it, if indeed it can be spoken about? It is a rare soul who knows what he is talking about when he speaks of it. People debate and quarrel, and without peace no one sees that vision. I wish human disputants would reflect on a certain three things in their very own selves. These three things are very different from the Trinity, but I say that people could well exercise themselves and test and sense how far distant they are from it. I am talking about these three things: being, knowing, and willing. For I am and I know and I will. In that I know and will, I am. And I know myself to be and to will. And I will to be and to know. Let him who can, see in these three things how inseparable a life is: one life, one mind, and one essence, how there is, finally, an inseparable distinction, and yet a distinction. Surely this is obvious to each one himself. Let him look within himself and see and report to me. (*Confessions* 13.11.12)

The idea is a brilliant one. For a conscious human self, that self's being, knowing, and willing are so closely related to each other that, although they are distinct, they cannot be pried apart. Where there is no more knowing or willing, the conscious self simply ceases to exist. Nor is there willing apart from knowing, at least in some general way, what one wills; or, in general, knowing apart from willing to know, nor, of course, willing or knowing apart from a being that wills and knows.

Could one use the complexities of this mental three-in-oneness to illuminate the three-in-oneness of God? Augustine suggests this possibility in the *Confessions* passage above, and he undertakes to make the possibility an actuality in the last half of his great *De Trinitate*, which is the part translated here.

Augustine's idea, although certainly very imaginative, is not without biblical foundation. In the creation story, at *Genesis* 1:26, God says, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Two features of this Divine utterance are especially important to Augustine's Trinity project. One is the surprisingly plural nature of God's syntax. Augustine quite naturally

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takes “let us” and “our” to indicate that it is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who are speaking here.

The second especially significant feature of the *Genesis* passage is the idea that Adam, and later, Eve, are made in the *image* of God. The idea that the human self, and especially that part of the human self that sets human beings apart from the lower animals, namely, the mind, is an image of God, *imago Dei*, gives Augustine both the incentive and the license to find in the human mind significant similarities to God, the more the better. He can do this without having to suggest in any way that human beings might come to rival God in perfection. The idea of the human mind as an *imago Dei* also gives him the idea of admonishing his readers to burnish the Divine image within them, again, without needing to fear the sin of perfectionism. After all, an image, no matter how well it images what it is the image of, will necessarily remain derivative from its original.

Not surprisingly, by the time Augustine actually completes DT 8–15, his Trinity project has become much more complex than what is suggested in *Confessions* 13. For one thing, he thinks of many more mental or psychological triads besides being, knowing, and willing that might help illuminate the three-in-oneness of God. And there are now many, many auxiliary projects to attend to, such as saying how we know what a mind is, explaining how it is we know there are other minds and how the mind can even think of itself at all, and so on. These auxiliary projects, plus the constant need to provide biblical support for his project, lead Augustine to write fifteen substantial books just to develop fully the project he had outlined so succinctly in *Confessions* 13.

Philosophers today are likely to know that Augustine said something quite like Descartes’ famous *cogito, ergo sum*. (One of the more interesting such passages is to be found in DT 15.) However, they may not know that he anticipated Descartes’ critics by posing the Problem of Other Minds (“How do I know that there is a mind in addition to my own?”), let alone that he anticipated defenders of Descartes by proposing the Argument from Analogy for Other Minds. Yet fascinating discussions of these and all the other topics listed above await the reader of this volume.

If Descartes and his philosophy of mind were of only historical interest to philosophers today, it might still be worthwhile to call Augustine’s philosophy of mind to their attention. I am not thinking of how we might want to know who got which idea first, or who was influenced by whom,

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and in what way. I am thinking of the way an earlier expression of an idea sometimes helps us understand better the later expression of that same idea.

In fact, however, Descartes' philosophy of mind is of much more than merely historical interest today. The ghost of Descartes lives on in even the most materialistic accounts of mind on offer in recent philosophy. Successfully laying the ghost of Descartes is still the standard by which even the most anti-Cartesian philosophies of mind are judged. And so for this reason, too, studying Augustine's nearly Cartesian philosophy of mind is of philosophical, as well as historical, interest today.

I have insisted that DT 8–15 is a strikingly original work. It certainly is that. But it is not totally without precedent. For one thing, there are obviously earlier attempts to interpret the Doctrine of the Trinity, which was a topic of consuming debate in the fourth century. Augustine himself refers to and quotes Hilary of Poitiers at DT 6.10.11 and at 15.3.5; he also uses Hilary's trinitarian formula elsewhere in his own work. In fact, Augustine is not even the first person to suggest analogies for interpreting the Trinity, or even the first to suggest a human triad as a help in understanding the three-in-oneness of God. Perhaps the neo-Platonist, Marius Victorinus, who seems to have been about sixty years older than Augustine and who suggests being, living, and understanding as a helpful parallel, deserves that distinction.¹ But certainly Victorinus's suggestion, however exactly it is to be understood, did not lead him to develop a philosophy of mind to support his suggestion. So the claim of originality for Augustine's Trinity project is not under serious threat.

Faith in search of understanding

Augustine begins Book 8 with a Preface that sets forth the Christian Doctrine of the Trinity. "Thus the Father is God," he writes,

the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; the Father is good, the Son is good, the Holy Spirit is good; and the Father is omnipotent, the Son is omnipotent, and the Holy Spirit is omnipotent; but yet there are not three gods, nor three goods, nor three omnipotents, but one God, one good, and one omnipotent, the Trinity itself. (DT 8, Preface)

¹ See Marius Victorinus, *Theological Treatises on the Trinity*, trans. M. T. Clark, The Fathers of the Church 69, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1978, esp. p. 192.

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This is the puzzling doctrine that Augustine wants to illuminate in the remaining eight books of the *De Trinitate*. In a characteristic expression of his idea that faith should seek understanding, Augustine ends the Preface to Book 8 with these words: “let us hold fast to this rule, that what has not yet become clear to our intellect may still be preserved by the firmness of our faith.”

The idea that faith should seek understanding raises, for Augustine, a characteristic philosophical puzzle. This puzzle is a close relative of the “Paradox of Inquiry” to be found in Plato’s *Meno* (at 80d). In Plato the puzzle is that one cannot, it seems, search for what virtue is, since, if one already knows, there is nothing to search for, and if one does not, one will not know how to aim one’s search properly, or how to recognize virtue, should one happen to stumble upon it.

At the beginning of his *Confessions* Augustine puzzles over a question closely related to the Paradox of Inquiry. Augustine’s question there is whether one can pray that one may come to know God. He assumes that one can. But how, he wants to know, can one know which being to address one’s prayer to, unless one already knows God, whom one wants to come to know?²

In Book 8 of the *De Trinitate* Augustine’s question is somewhat different again, yet also related to both Plato’s Paradox of Inquiry and the *Confessions* passage. “Unless we love [God] now,” he writes here, “we shall never see Him.” Then he adds: “But who loves that which he does not know?” (DT 8.4.6). The worry is, presumably, that we would not seek to know God, unless we already loved him, but we could not love him unless we already knew him.

In an effort to get this paradox out of the way, Augustine begins to reflect on the phenomenon of loving a human person one does not really know. Consider someone whom we have never met, perhaps someone who is now dead – for example, the Apostle Paul. How can we love the Apostle Paul, he asks, when we do not know him? Even to be able to think about him, Augustine reasons, we must be able to represent him to ourselves (DT 8.4.7).

After a brief consideration of how we might be able to represent to ourselves the Divine Trinity, Augustine returns to the Apostle Paul. How do we picture Paul to ourselves? Whatever physical features we give Paul

² *Confessions* I.I.I.I.

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in our mental representation of him, Augustine reasons, it will not be because of those physical features that we love Paul, but rather because of the justice of his soul. Assuming for the moment that we somehow know what justice is, how do we know what a human soul or mind (*animus*) is. Each of us knows what a human soul is, Augustine answers, by virtue of the fact that each of us has a human soul. Augustine will return, in Book 10, to the issue of what this item of self-knowledge consists in. Here, in Book 8, he raises the question of how one moves from the recognition that one has, oneself, a mind or soul to the recognition that there are other minds or souls as well.

The problem of other minds

Augustine raises in Book 8 of the *De Trinitate*, apparently for the first time in Western philosophy, a problem central to modern, post-Cartesian philosophy, namely, the Problem of Other Minds. Remarkably, Augustine not only poses this now famous problem, he also offers what has been, in the Modern period, the most common response to it, namely, the Argument from Analogy for Other Minds. Here is the passage:

For we recognize, from a likeness to us, the motions of bodies by which we perceive that others besides us live. Just as we move [our] body in living, so, we notice, those bodies are moved. For when a living body is moved there is no way open to our eyes to see the mind [*animus*], a thing which cannot be seen by the eyes. But we perceive something present in that mass such as is present in us to move our mass in a similar way; it is life and soul [*anima*]. Nor is such perception something peculiar to, as it were, human prudence and reason. For indeed beasts perceive as living, not only themselves, but also each other and one another, and us as well. Nor do they see our soul [*animas*], except from the motions of the body, and they do that immediately and very simply by a sort of natural agreement. Therefore we know the mind of anyone at all from our own; and from our own case we believe in that which we do not know [*ex nostro credimus quem non novimus*]. For not only do we perceive a mind, but we even know what one is by considering our own; for we have a mind. (DT 8.6.9)³

³ For discussions of this passage, see Gareth B. Matthews, “Augustine on Reasoning from One’s Own Case,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 7 (1998), 115–28, and Matthews, *Thought’s Ego in*

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How does Augustine think we know, or come to know, what a mind is “from our own case”? For help in thinking about this we need to look to Book 9, where Augustine makes this comment:

For it is not by seeing many minds [*mentes*] with our bodily eyes that we gather, by their similarity [*per similitudinem*], a general or special knowledge of the human mind; but we contemplate the inviolable truth, whence we can as perfectly as possible define, not what each man’s mind is, but what it ought to be in the light of the eternal types. (DT 9.6.9)

Augustine’s idea seems to be that, whereas we might come to contemplate the inviolable truth concerning what a triangle is by first seeing several visible triangles with our eyes and gaining a knowledge of *triangle* through their observed similarity,⁴ we do not first see a number of minds with our eyes and through their observed similarity gain a knowledge of what a mind is. Rather we come to a knowledge of what a mind is simply by reflecting on what our own mind is.

Having come to know, from our own case, what a mind is, how is it that we come to see a mind in others? After all, a mind is “a thing which cannot be seen by the eyes.”

According to the Argument from Analogy, which Augustine presents here, perhaps for the first time in the history of philosophy, we notice the similarity between the movements of other living bodies and our own and through this perceived similarity come to “perceive something present” in other bodies “such as is present in us to move our mass in a similar way.” I direct my eyes toward a tree and, seeing a ripe-looking apple, move toward the tree, pick the apple and eat it. Later I observe another body, like mine, direct itself toward another apple, move toward the tree, pick the apple and eat it. I conclude that there is a mind in

Augustine and Descartes, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992, Chapter 9 (“The Problem of Other Minds”).

⁴ We must be careful here. Augustine is not an “abstractionist,” but rather an “illuminationist” about knowledge acquisition. Thus he worries in his dialogue, *De Magistro* (“Concerning the Teacher”) about “the ambiguity of ostension,” that is, about how we could ever learn what say, the color, red, or the figure, triangle, is by having instances pointed out to us. Thus pointing to red by pointing to a red ball will also be pointing to a ball, pointing to maroon, pointing to color, etc. Nevertheless, Augustine, with his Doctrine of Illumination, came to think that seeing examples of, say, triangularity or redness, may be the occasion for an inner “illumination” by which we will understand what redness and triangularity are. Minds, however, are different in that the only one we can “see” is our own.

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that other body with thoughts and desires similar to those in my own mind.

It is noteworthy that Augustine, in this passage, attributes to non-human animals an ability to do something similar to what we do when we deploy the Argument from Analogy for Other Minds. Perhaps his insistence that beasts do what they do “immediately and very simply by a sort of natural agreement” rules out the idea of a formal inference. Nevertheless, the idea that beasts with souls, but not minds, can do instinctively something similar to what we do by inference may seem to make them more like us than many philosophers have supposed.⁵

Mental trinities

At the very end of Book 8 Augustine introduces the first of what will eventually turn out to be a number of psychological or mental triads with which he hopes to illuminate the Divine Trinity. “Now love is [the love] of someone who loves”, he writes, “and something is loved with love. So then there are three: the lover, the beloved, and the love” (DT 8.10.14). Although this triad – lover, beloved, and love – does not present quite the unity Augustine seeks as an image of the Divine Trinity, it certainly does, he thinks, move us in the right direction.

Beginning in Book 9 Augustine focuses not just on the human soul (*animus*), the source of human or rational life, but specifically on the seat of human consciousness, the mind (*mens*). It is specifically the mind that Augustine regards as the image of God, the *imago Dei*. And it is mental or psychological trinities that Augustine will seek to use to illuminate the Divine Trinity.

The first of these mental or psychological trinities that Augustine discusses in Book 9 is the one mentioned at the very end of the last book – lover, beloved, and love – but it is applied now to the mind’s love of itself. “The mind cannot love itself unless it also knows itself,” Augustine writes (DT 9.3.3). “Therefore,” he goes on, “the mind itself, its love [of itself] and its knowledge [of itself] are a kind of trinity; these three are one, and when they are perfect they are equal” (DT 9.4.4). The lover and the beloved, the knower and the known, are all one; they are, in fact the mind. Yet they are three.

⁵ See Gary Matthews, “Augustine and Descartes on the Souls of Animals,” in *From Soul to Self*, ed. M. J. C. Crabbe, London: Routledge, 1999, 89–107.

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Augustine concludes Book 9 with this summary statement of the first psychological trinity that, as he supposes, helps us to understand the Divine Trinity:

And so there is a certain image of the Trinity: the mind itself, its knowledge, which is its offspring, and love as a third; these three are one and one substance. The offspring is not less, while the mind knows itself as much as it is; nor is the love less, while the mind loves itself as much as it knows and as much as it is. (DT 9.12.18)

One feature of this passage that may be especially striking to a post-Freudian reader is the assumption that no part or aspect of the mind is hidden to itself. If the mind were thought of as, in part, unavailable or inaccessible to itself, then the mind and what it knows or loves of itself would certainly not form a perfect unity.

It is somewhat puzzling that Augustine identifies the third item in this new triad as love, rather than what the mind loves, namely, itself. While it might be plausible to say that *what* the mind loves when it loves itself is just itself, the mind is certainly not identical with the love with which it loves itself.

What Augustine comes up with at the end of Book 10 is the triad, memory, understanding, and will. “Since these three, the memory, the understanding, and the will, are therefore, not three lives but one life, not three minds but one mind,” he writes, “it follows that they are certainly not three substances, but one substance” (DT 10.11.18). He goes on to write: “For not only is each one comprehended by each one, but all are also comprehended by each one” (DT 10.11.18). What we might otherwise have thought of as “faculties” of the mind Augustine understands to be the mind as remembering, as understanding, and as willing. And they have a real unity, he supposes, as well as a real distinctness.

Mental language

In Chapter 7 of Book 9 Augustine appeals to the idea of thinking as inner speech. This idea is as old as Plato,⁶ and as up-to-date as J. B. Watson,⁷ Peter Geach,⁸ and Jerry Fodor.⁹ Among the interesting things Augustine says about the language of thought is this:

⁶ *Theaetetus* 189e–190a and *Sophist* 263e.

⁷ J. B. Watson, *Behaviorism: An Introduction to Comparative Psychology*, New York: Holt, 1914.

⁸ Peter Geach, *Mental Acts*, New York: Humanities Press, 1957.

⁹ Jerry Fodor, *The Language of Thought*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.

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Thus there is nothing that we do through the members of our body, in our words and actions, by which the conduct of men is approved or disapproved, that is not preceded by the word that has been brought forth within us. For no one willingly does anything which he has not spoken previously in this heart. (DT 9.7.12)

In Book 15 Augustine returns to the idea of mental language. Augustine is at pains to distinguish: (a) the “words” of a thought not yet expressed in any natural language; (b) the inner rehearsal of words of a natural language that give expression to (a); (c) the spoken words that express (a); and (d) the written words that signify (c). As for (a), Augustine says this:

Whoever, then, can understand the word, not only before it sounds, but even before the images of its sound are contemplated in thought – such a word belongs to no language, that is, to none of the so-called national languages, of which ours is Latin – whoever, I say, can understand this, can already see through this mirror and in this enigma some likeness of that Word [viz., Jesus Christ] of whom it was said: “In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; and the Word was God” [*John* 1:1]. (15.10.19)

As for (b), he writes: “For all words, no matter in what language they may sound, are also thought in silence” (DT 15.11.20). As for (c) and (d), he writes that “letters have also been found by which we can also talk to those who are absent; but the letters are the signs of [spoken] words, while the words themselves in our speech are signs of the things of which we are thinking” (DT 15.10.19).

Mind–body dualism

If DT 8–15 is viewed, as I have suggested it should be, as Augustine’s treatise on the philosophy of mind, Book 10 must be seen as the centerpiece of that treatise. There is nothing else of comparable power or originality on this topic until Descartes’ *Meditations*.

Taking the classical command, “Know thyself!” as an admonition to the mind to know itself, Augustine first puzzles over how the mind can be motivated to seek to know itself. It needs to love itself already, he reasons, to motivate the search to know itself, yet it must already know itself to love itself. In the first sections of the book Augustine offers several models of inquiry that seem to allow for enough knowledge of what is being inquired

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into to motivate the inquiry without requiring complete knowledge, which would, of course, make further inquiry otiose.

The models of inquiry Augustine discusses include inquiry into what one knows (a) only indirectly or (b) only partially or (c) only by description. None of these will help if, as Augustine supposes, nothing is more present to itself than the mind is present to itself.

How does Augustine think something can be present to the mind? He thinks there are three ways. First, a physical object, say, a tree, may be present to the mind through the bodily senses – in this case, through sight and touch. Second, that same tree may be present to the mind through a memory image, and a generalized version of it through an image of the imagination. Finally, numbers and eternal truths may be present to the mind quite directly, according to Augustine. One can, it is true, represent numbers or eternal truths to the mind for its contemplation, but one need not. The mind has direct access to them.

The mind, Augustine insists, is present to itself, not through an image or through any other representation, but simply through itself. Thus the mind is present to itself *immediately* and *non-representationally*.

The idea that the mind is present to itself non-representationally gives Augustine an argument for saying that the mind is incorporeal. Suppose it were something corporeal, say, the brain. Then, for the mind to be able to think of itself, it would have to be possible for the *brain* to be present to the mind non-representationally. The mind would, as Augustine puts it,

think of this thing [that is, the brain] in a different way from [the way in which it thinks of] other [material] things, not, namely, through an image figment [*non scilicet per imaginale figmentum*], in the way that absent things touched by a sense of the body are brought to mind . . . not [just] by a mock-up [*simulata*] but rather by [its] inner presence. For there is nothing more present to [the mind] than itself.
(DT 10.10.16)

Yet, Augustine insists, neither the brain nor any other material thing can be present to the mind immediately and non-representationally, the way the mind can be present to itself. So the mind is not the brain, or anything material.¹⁰

¹⁰ Lynne Baker has suggested the following counter-argument to me:

- (1) I am present immediately and non-representationally to myself.
- (2) I am a person, who is essentially embodied.

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The model of inquiry that Augustine accepts as appropriate for the mind to use in following the admonition, “Know thyself!” is what we might call “the perfection model.” Nothing is already so present to the mind as itself, yet the mind may seek to know itself more perfectly by eliminating from its consideration of itself those bodily associations that may obscure its understanding of itself. As he puts the point in Book 14, the mind “does not always think itself to be distinct from those things that are not itself” (DT 14.7.9). For the mind to seek itself is for it to seek to eliminate the bodily dross that may obscure its vision of itself.

What can the mind hope to discover about itself, once it has directed its attention to itself and away from the physical objects that have distracted it and led it to suppose that it is something it is not? We might have expected Augustine to describe for us the contents of his own consciousness, or some introspected “innermost self.” Instead, Augustine invites us to think about the things the mind cannot doubt about itself. They include these: that it lives, remembers, understands, wills, thinks, knows, and judges (DT 10.10.14).

We moderns may have been persuaded by Descartes¹¹ that *living* does not belong in a list of mental functions that the mind cannot doubt that it has. But “life” and “living” in this Augustinian context have to be taken, I think, in the sense that is natural for understanding the question, “Is there life after death?” where the questioner may not even be interested in whether there is biological life after death. If we understand “living” that way, Augustine’s account of what a mind indubitably is makes a mind what Descartes calls a “thinking thing” (*res cogitans*).

(3) Persons essentially embodied are material objects.

Therefore,

(4) A material object can be present immediately and non-representationally to itself.

Since Augustine clearly rejects the conclusion of this argument, and since, with the addition of an innocuous premise, the conclusion does indeed follow from the premises, Augustine must reject one of the premises. He accepts (1). So he must reject (2) or (3), or both.

¹¹ “primitive man probably did not distinguish between, on the one hand, the principle by which we are nourished and grow and accomplish without any thought all the other operations which we have in common with the brutes, and, on the other hand, the principle in virtue of which we think. He therefore used the single term ‘soul’ to apply to both; and when he subsequently noticed that thought was distinct from nutrition, he called the element which thinks ‘mind,’ and believed it to be the principal part of the soul. I, by contrast, realizing that the principle by which we are nourished is wholly different – different in kind – from that in virtue of which we think, have said that the term ‘soul,’ when it is used to refer to both these principles is ambiguous” (Descartes, “Fifth Set of Replies,” *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, vol. II, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 246).

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Among the many other points of philosophical interest in Book 10 is the concept of body that Augustine seems to be working with. It seems to be almost as Cartesian as his concept of mind. A corporeal substance, he tells us, occupies “less extension of place with a less part of itself, and a greater with a greater part” (DT 10.7.10). Body is thus apparently what Descartes calls “extended thing” (*res extensa*).

Sense perception

In Book 11 Augustine turns to sense perception. In keeping with his trinitarian theme, he distinguishes:

first, the object which we see, whether a stone, or a flame, or anything that can be seen by the eyes, and this can naturally exist even before it was seen; secondly, the vision, which was not there before we perceived the object that was presented to the sense; thirdly, the power that fixes the sense of sight on the object that is seen as long as it is seen, namely, the attention of the mind. (DT 11.2.2)

The first object of this trinity is not anything mental. So this trinity is not purely mental or psychological in the way the ones in Books 9 and 10 were. Yet at the moment of perception there is, Augustine thinks, a unity of physical object perceived, sensory form received, and attention of the perceiving mind that is, in fact, a real unity. The connection between them, he writes, “is so close that there is no room for distinguishing them” (DT 11.2.3).

As evidence for there being in perception a form of the physical object perceived, distinct from the object itself, Augustine points to the image that is retained in memory, as well as to after-images and double-images (DT 11.2.4). Because Augustine thinks we must reflect on the phenomena of perception to distinguish the physical object perceived and the form of the object that arises in perception it seems clear that he is not a representationalist in perception. That is, he does not suppose that the sensory image is the direct or true object of sense perception. Rather, the sensory image is something that arises in perception and may be preserved in memory, or distorted as an after-image or as a double-image.

In the style of the British empiricists Augustine denies that we can know any sensory quality or shape that we have not previously perceived. “For it is impossible,” he writes,

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to form any concept at all of a color or of a bodily figure that one has never seen, or of a sound that one has never heard, or of a flavor that one has never tasted, or of an odor that one has never smelled, or of any touch of a corporeal object that one has never felt. (DT 11.8.14)

We can imagine sensible objects we have never seen and patterns of sound we have never heard, he supposes, by putting together mental images of elements – colors, shapes, sounds – we have perceived.

The doctrine of illumination

After asking in Book 8 how one knows what a mind is, Augustine moves on there to consider how it is we can know what justice is. We can know this, he insists, even if our own soul is not just. His idea seems to be that we have direct access to something like the Platonic Form of justice. “But the wonderful thing is,” he writes at DT 8.6.9, “that the soul should see within itself what it has not seen anywhere else, and should see truly, and should see the truly just soul itself, and that itself is indeed a soul, and yet not the just soul that it sees within itself.” (Augustine hardly ever misses an opportunity to clothe his insights in the language of paradox!)

In Book 12 Augustine describes what we might think of as the Platonic world of Forms, accessible, he tells us, to “wisdom” (*sapientia*). These things which, he writes,

neither have been nor shall be, but which are; and on account of that eternity in which they are, it is said of them that they have been, are, and shall be without any changeableness of times. For they have not been in such a way that they have ceased to be, nor shall they be in such a way as if they were not now, but they always had and always will have the self-same being. But they abide not as bodies fixed in space and place, but as intelligible things in their incorporeal nature they are so present to the gaze of the mind, as those visible and tangible things are present in their places to the senses of the body. (DT 12.14.23)

This book also includes an amusing reference to the “slave-boy” passage in Plato’s dialogue, *Meno* (at 82b–86c). Although Augustine may not have read the Platonic dialogue itself, he surely knew of it from his reading of Cicero.¹² In any case, he comments that, if coming to know through

¹² See Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations* 1.24.57.

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questioning how to construct a square with an area twice that of a given square were really a matter of recollecting what one knew in a previous life, few people would be able to do it. “For not all have been geometricians in their previous life,” Augustine writes, “since there are so few of them in the human race that one can hardly be found” (DT 12.15.24).

Augustine’s serious point is this: “But we ought rather to believe that the nature of the intellectual mind is so formed as to see those things which, according to the disposition of the Creator, are subjoined to intelligible things in the natural order, in a sort of incorporeal light of its own kind . . .” (DT 12.15.24). The thesis in Augustine that we can see intelligible things in the light of reason is called the *Doctrine of Illumination*.

Happiness

In Chapter 3 of Book 13 Augustine restates a claim that he makes in several different works, namely, the claim that everyone wants to be happy (*beati*). Speaking of an imaginary character he has been describing, he writes:

If he had said, “All of you want to be happy [*beati*] and you do not want to be miserable,” he would have said something that no one would have failed to acknowledge in his own will. For whatever else it is that anyone secretly wills, he does not withdraw from this want [*voluntas*], which is sufficiently known to all and is in everyone. (DT 13.3.6)

In the next chapter Augustine turns his attention to the fact that people have very different aims in life. His concern is that the obvious diversity in aims that people pursue casts doubt on the assumption that everyone knows what happiness is, and therefore on the claim that everyone wants to be happy. “For if all knew it [that is, happiness, *beatitudo*],” he writes,

it would not be considered by some to be in the goodness of soul, by others in the pleasure of the body, by others in both, by some in this thing, and by others in that thing. For as anything particularly pleased them, so they found in it the happy life [*beata vita*]. How, then, can all love so ardently what all do not know? (DT 13.4.7)

Augustine considers denying what, he says, not even the “Academician Cicero” doubted, namely, that everyone wants to be happy. But he rejects that move. In Chapter 5 he tries out the commonsensical suggestion that

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happiness is just pleasure and people have different aims in life because they find pleasure in different things. But he rejects that suggestion on the ground that, if I take pleasure in something that is bad for me, I am not made happy by taking pleasure in it.

Augustine's way out of his conundrum is to propose what we might call a "formal conception" of happiness. That person alone is happy, Augustine writes, "who has all that he wants and wants nothing wrongly" (DT 13.5.8). If we accept this concept of happiness, then it is reasonably plausible to say that (1) everyone wants to be happy and yet (2) people pursue widely different aims in life, and (3) people want things that, in fact, do not make them happy.

Does everyone accept this formal concept of happiness? It is unreasonable to suppose that everyone would give immediate expression to it, if asked what happiness is. But it is quite plausible to think that people might generally agree to it, if it were explained to them. If that is right, then even if it is something of an overstatement to say that everyone knows what happiness is, it will be plausible to think that people in general have enough of a common conception of happiness for it to be coherent to claim that everyone wants to be happy.

Language learning

Early on in Book 14 Augustine reflects on some of his conclusions from Book 10. Rehearsing his contention that "the mind knows nothing so well as that which is present to itself, and nothing is more present to the mind than it is to itself" (DT 14.5.7), Augustine now asks about the mind of an infant. "Are we also to believe," he asks, "that it knows itself, but is too intent on those things through which it begins to experience pleasure through the senses of the body . . . ?"

The discussion that follows is rather noncommittal, yet interesting for at least two reasons. First, it is one of the earliest excursions into the psychology of infants and young children. And, second, its agnosticism contrasts sharply with claims about language acquisition in young children to be found in Augustine's *Confessions* in this passage, with which Wittgenstein begins his *Philosophical Investigations*:

When they [my elders] named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called

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by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shown by their bodily movements, as it were, the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the fact, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires. (*Confessions* I.6.8)¹³

Perhaps also worthy of mention is the rather tentative suggestion of what later in philosophy came to be called “the doctrine of privileged access.” “For what do we know,” Augustine asks rhetorically, “if we do not know what is in our [own] mind, since all that we know, we cannot know except with our [own] mind” (DT 14.5.8).

Divine simplicity

Beginning in Chapter 3 of Book 15 Augustine presents a summary of the previous fourteen books. Then, beginning in Chapter 5, Augustine develops the doctrine of the Divine Simplicity, which he had already introduced in Book 7 (see above). “For one and the same thing is therefore said,” Augustine writes,

whether God is called eternal, or immortal, or incorruptible, or unchangeable; and similarly, when He is called living and understanding . . . one and the same thing is said. For He has not obtained the wisdom by which He is wise, but He Himself is wisdom. And this life is the same as this strength or this power, and the same as this beauty by which He is called powerful and beautiful . . . Or again are goodness and justice also different from each other in the nature of God, as they are different in their works, as if they were two different qualities of God, one His goodness and the other His justice? Certainly not! (DT 15.5.7)

In Chapter 7 Augustine moves on to the idea that God’s knowledge of everything past, present, and future is a knowledge in his Divine present. “What man, therefore, can comprehend,” he asks,

¹³ G. E. M. Anscombe’s translation in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1953, 2e.

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that wisdom by which God knows all things, and in such a way that what are called past things are not past for Him, nor does He await the coming of what are called future things as though they were absent, but both past and future things are all present together with present things? (DT 15.7.13)

God sees all things, past, present, and future, Augustine adds, not seriatim but “in a single glance” (DT 15.7.13).

Skepticism and the *cogito*

Chapter 12 of Book 15 is one of the most famous chapters in the whole work. It is a response to “academic” skepticism, that is, a response to “doubting everything.” There is a passage parallel to DT 15.12.21 in the *City of God* at 11.26. It begins with a very brief summary of the *De Trinitate*:

We do indeed recognize in ourselves an image of God, that is, of the Supreme Trinity. It is not an adequate image, but a very distant parallel. It is not co-eternal and, in brief, it is not of the same substance as God. For all that, there is nothing in the whole of God’s creation so near to him in nature . . . We resemble the Divine Trinity in that we exist, we know that we exist, and we are glad of this existence and this knowledge . . .

In respect of those truths I have no fear of the arguments of the Academics. They say, “Suppose you are mistaken?” I reply, “If I am mistaken, I exist” [*si fallor, sum*]. A non-existent being cannot be mistaken; therefore I must exist, if I am mistaken. Then since my being mistaken proves that I exist, how can I be mistaken in thinking that I exist, seeing that my mistake establishes my existence.

Although DT 15.12.21 is somewhat more expansive than this, it follows a similar line of thought—except that, whereas in the *City of God* Augustine talks about his knowledge that he *exists*, the comparable claim in the *De Trinitate* is a claim that he *lives*. As mentioned above, “lives” and “life” in the *De Trinitate* are often to be understood, not in a specifically biological sense, but rather in the sense in which one can ask, “Is there life after death?” and not be asking about whether one might survive death specifically as a biological organism. If “life” and “live” are understood this way, then the obvious discrepancy between *De Trinitate* 15.12.21 and *City of God* 11.26 disappears.

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Influence of *De Trinitate*

The *De Trinitate* was widely read by Christian philosophers from the early medieval period into the seventeenth century. In what follows I shall make a few connections between some of the ideas discussed above and the thought of several medieval and modern philosophers.

The influence of Augustine on St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) is difficult to overestimate. As Jasper Hopkins notes, “Augustine is the major source upon whom Anselm draws.” Hopkins adds:

Although mentioned by name only six times, [Augustine’s] influence is preponderant. Even where Anselm does not cite him directly, he appropriates examples, poses problems in exactly the same way, and borrows arguments without acknowledgment.¹⁴

Hopkins offers detailed comparisons between Augustine’s *De Trinitate* and Anselm’s treatment of the same subject, particularly in his *Monologion*.¹⁵ However, among the Augustinian ideas discussed above, it is clearly the notion of *Faith in Search of Understanding* that is most closely associated with Anselm’s thought. Indeed, “Faith in Search of Understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*) is a title sometimes given to Anselm’s most important work, the *Proslogion*, in which he presents his famous ontological argument. And the first chapter of that work ends with these unmistakably Augustinian words:

For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe, that unless I believed, I should not understand.

The idea of the *Divine Simplicity*, often with explicit reference to Augustine’s *De Trinitate*, is a staple of medieval philosophical theology. This idea is certainly prominent in Anselm; but it is also central to the conception of God we find in St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), who buttresses his appeal to this idea by appeal to the authority of Augustine. Thus, in Article 7 of Question 3 in the *prima pars* of his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas quotes Augustine as saying, “God is truly and absolutely simple,” which is apparently meant to be a summary of DT 6.6.8.

¹⁴ Jasper Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972, 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter IV, “Doctrine of the Trinity.”

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Among the important medieval philosophers one would not have expected to show much Augustinian influence is William of Ockham (1285–1347). Nevertheless, in the first chapter of book one of his *Summa totius logicae*, where Ockham introduces the important idea of conceptual or mental terms, he writes this:

These conceptual terms and the propositions formed by them are those mental words which Saint Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 15 do not belong to any language; they remain only in the mind and cannot be uttered outwardly. Nevertheless vocal words which are signs subordinated to these can be uttered outwardly.

Here Ockham considers himself to be appealing to the idea of *Mental Language* he finds in Augustine.

René Descartes (1596–1650) is obviously the philosopher one would naturally select as the one most deeply influenced by Augustine's *De Trinitate*. The concept of mind that emerges in DT, even the concept of body one finds there, strikes the modern reader as surprisingly Cartesian. The internalist argumentation to support *Mind-Body Dualism* seems quite Cartesian. And, of course, Descartes' *cogito*, as a response to skepticism, seems to echo the *cogito*-like passage in DT 15.

There is, however, a paradox here. Unlike Anselm, Aquinas, Ockham, and most other philosophers influenced by Augustine, Descartes never acknowledges any influence from him at all. In a letter to Colvius, 14 November 1640, Descartes writes this:

I am obliged to you for drawing my attention to the passage of St. Augustine relevant to my *I am thinking, therefore I exist*. I went today to the library of this town to read it, and I find that he does really use it to prove the certainty of our existence. He goes on to show that there is a certain likeness of the Trinity in us, in that we exist, we know that we exist, and we love the existence and the knowledge we have. I, on the other hand, use the argument to show that this I which is thinking is an immaterial substance with no bodily element. These are two very different things.¹⁶

It is hard to believe that Descartes was being candid in suggesting that he first read Augustine's *City of God* 11.26, or *De Trinitate* 15.12.21,

¹⁶ *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, S. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny, vol. III, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 83–84.

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in 1640, three years after he had published the *Discourse*, in which he formulated his *cogito*. But asking whether Descartes is candid in professing ignorance of Augustine is far less interesting than reflecting on the many significant similarities (and differences!) between his arguments for mind–body dualism and Augustine’s, or between his use of the *cogito* in response to skepticism and that of Augustine.¹⁷

Unlike Descartes, Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) readily acknowledges his debt to Augustine. Book II, Part 2, Chapter 6, of his *Search after Truth* includes a substantial quotation from DT 14 expressing the *Doctrine of Illumination*. Malebranche comments:

Saint Augustine has an infinity of such passages by which he proves that we already see God in this life through the knowledge we have of eternal truths. The truth is uncreated, immutable, immense, eternal, and above all things . . . Only God can have all these perfections. Therefore, truth is God. We see some of these immutable, eternal truths. Therefore, we see God. These are the arguments of Saint Augustine – ours are somewhat different, and we have no wish to make improper use of the authority of so great a man in order to support our own view. We are of the opinion, then, that truths, even those that are eternal, such as that twice two is four, are not absolute beings, much less that they are God Himself. For clearly, this truth consists only in the relation of equality between twice two and four. Thus we do not claim, as does Saint Augustine, that we see God in seeing truths, but in seeing the *ideas* of these truths . . . Thus, our view is that we see God when we see eternal truths, and not that these truths are God, because the ideas on which these truths depend are in God.¹⁸

With characteristic modesty Malebranche adds: “it might even be that this was Saint Augustine’s meaning.”

Descartes does not recognize the *Problem of Other Minds* in his writings, although other philosophers soon recognized that it was a genuine difficulty for his *Mind–Body Dualism*. Malebranche, however, does recognize the problem and offers a solution to it.¹⁹ In this respect, too, he is a close student of Augustine, and of Augustine’s *De Trinitate*.

¹⁷ See Matthews, *Thought’s Ego in Augustine and Descartes*, especially Chapter 2 (“The Cartesian Cogito”) and Chapter 3 (“The Augustinian Cogito”).

¹⁸ *The Search After Truth*, trans. T. M. Lennon and P. J. Olscamp, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 233–34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.7.5 (“How we know other men’s souls”).

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Chronology

354	birth in Thagaste, North Africa (modern Souk Ahras, Algeria)
366	school at Madauros
370	begins study at Carthage
372	birth of son, Adeodatus
373	teacher at Thagaste
376	teacher of rhetoric at Carthage
383	sailed to Rome
384	professor of rhetoric at Milan
386	conversion to Christianity
387/8	death of mother, Monica; return to Thagaste
389	Adeodatus's death
391	ordained priest at Hippo Regius
395/6	consecrated as bishop
397	begins <i>Confessions</i> (completed 401)
399	begins <i>De Trinitate</i> (completed between 422 and 426)
410	sack of Rome
413	begins <i>City of God</i> (completed 427)
430	death in Hippo