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The 1992 Saint Augustine Lecture

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Saint Augustine as Philosopher: The Birth of Christian Metaphysics

A distinguished Augustine scholar, Goulven Madec, has said, "The history of patristic philosophy has only a precarious status. It lacks a principal object; for there is no 'patristic philosophy' . . . ." He immediately adds, "and the Fathers of the Church are not 'philosophers' in the commonly accepted sense."1 Certainly, he is correct in maintaining that the Fathers of the Church are not philosophers in the sense commonly accepted today. However, it is not nearly so clear that the Fathers of the Church were in no sense philosophers or that there is no philosophy to be found in the Fathers of the Church. Regardless of the claim about the Fathers of the Church in general, I shall argue that Augustine of Hippo was a philosopher in some sense and that there is an Augustinian philosophy, even in the sense of philosophy commonly accepted today. I shall first examine what Augustine understood by philosophy; then I shall ask whether there is in Augustine a philosophy in the contemporary sense. Finally, I shall suggest what I consider the principal features of Augustine's legacy to Western philosophy.
I. What Augustine Meant by Philosophy

Augustine provides a nominal definition of philosophy as “the love of wisdom” or “the pursuit of wisdom.” While a philosopher of the late twentieth century certainly recognizes and can probably accept such a definition, if one listens further to what Augustine says about philosophy, one finds the *philosophia* of which he speaks to be something both familiar and also something quite unfamiliar, something much the same and something quite different from what is today meant by philosophy. I will suggest one reason why at least some today find themselves at home with what Augustine meant by philosophy; then I want to point out two ways in which what Augustine meant by philosophy differs from what most of us take philosophy to be.

I suggest that we find the *philosophia* of which Augustine speaks something familiar, because he saw philosophy as a continuation of classical Greek philosophy, as something rooted in and carrying on the very best of Greek philosophy. Augustine began to burn with the love of wisdom from the time of his reading Cicero’s *Hortensius* which contained an exhortation to this love of wisdom. He tells us that he began to desire “the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardor of heart” and “began to rise up to return to” his God. This conversion to philosophy, begun with the reading of the *Hortensius*, reached a high point in the momentous encounter with the *libri platoniciorum* in 386 when the fire kindled by the *Hortensius* flamed out incredibly. But what was this *philosophia* that so aroused Augustine’s love? In the closing sections of *Contra academicos*, he presents a brief history of philosophy, beginning with Socrates and Plato, through the later Academy and Plotinus, and continuing down to his own time. Plato, he tells us, added to the moral teaching of Socrates a knowledge of natural and divine reality, derived from Pythagoras and other wise men, and crowned it with dialectic, which is either itself wisdom or its indispensable condition. Hence, Augustine adds that “Plato is said to have put together the complete discipline of philosophy.” Augustine singles out the features of the Platonic system that are for his purposes most significant:

that there are two worlds: one the intelligible world in which Truth dwells, and this sensible world, which, it is clear, we perceive by sight and touch. The former is the true world; this one is similar to it and made in its image. From the intelligible world the Truth, so to speak, shines forth and becomes, as it were, clear in the soul that knows itself. But of this world, not
knowledge, but only opinion can be generated in the minds of the foolish. . . .

Later in his history of philosophy, Augustine points out that “the doctrine of Plato, which is purest and brightest, has banished the clouds of error and has shone forth, especially in Plotinus.” Plotinus was so kindred a soul to Plato that he seemed to be Plato come back to life. By his own time Augustine claims that there has

been filtered out one teaching that is the true philosophy. It is not the philosophy of this world, which our sacred mysteries rightly detest, but of the other intelligible world. . . .

Furthermore, in De ordine Augustine makes it quite clear that Christ himself taught what was for Augustine the core of Platonic philosophy, namely, that there was another intelligible world besides this world known to the senses. He says, “Christ himself does not say, ‘My kingdom is not of the world,’ but ‘My kingdom is not of this world,’” thus indicating that “there is another world far removed from these eyes.”

Through his brief history of philosophy Augustine clearly indicated that what he calls the true philosophy, the philosophy of the intelligible world, is in continuity with the best in Greek thought, namely, that of Plato and Plotinus. Later in The City of God, Augustine’s appraisal of the achievements of the Platonic philosophers is no less laudatory. They recognized, he tells us, that “the true God is the author of reality, the source of the light of truth and the bestower of beatitude.” The Platonists “saw that God was not a body, and, therefore, transcended all bodies in their search for God.” They “saw that nothing subject to change is the highest God and, therefore, transcended every soul and all spirits subject to change in their search for the highest God.” Plato taught that the wise man imitates, knows and loves this God and becomes blessed by participating in him. There is no need to look at the position of any other philosophers; none of them have come closer to us than the Platonists. Most of us, I suspect, can agree with Augustine that Plato and Aristotle and Plotinus were philosophers and that we too mean by philosophy the sort of thing that Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus did.

But what we mean by philosophy also differs from what Augustine meant in at least two very important ways. First, philosophy for Augustine meant a whole way of life. When Augustine said that “a human being has no other reason for philosophizing except to be happy,” he meant by philosophari, not
the pursuit of a particular academic discipline, but a whole way of life dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom. With an exaggeration perhaps needed to prevent us from assuming that we know what the ancients meant by “philosophia,” one scholar has said that “philosophy means something entirely different in Graeco-Roman antiquity from what it does today.” Following what Pierre Hadot has written, A. H. Armstrong has put it this way with greater balance:

for most ancient philosophers, philosophy was a comprehensive and extremely demanding way of life, requiring, certainly, the intense study of the whole of reality, but designed to lead, not simply to what we should call an “intellectual” or “scientific” understanding of the nature of things, but to the attainment of that human goodness, including or consisting in wisdom, but a transforming wisdom, which can alone bring about human well-being.18

With such a view of philosophy in mind, Augustine reminds Romanianus of his frequent insistence that he “regarded no fortune as favorable save that which bestowed the leisure to philosophize (otium philosophandi), no life as happy save that which is lived in philosophy.”19

A life lived in philosophy required otium which we correctly, but very inadequately, translate as “leisure.” André Mandonue says that, besides leisure and the material resources needed to assure it, otium requires “above all the interior availability (disponibilité) without which there is neither tranquillity of soul nor peace of mind, two things indispensable for withdrawal into oneself and the recollection of God.”20 It was for the sake of such otium that Alypius kept steering Augustine away from marriage, warning that “we could by no means live together a life of secure leisure in the love of wisdom, as we had long desired,” if Augustine took a wife.21 Years later, in looking back on the time at Cassiciacum, Augustine described it as: Christianae vitae otium: the Christian life of leisure.22 And soon after his return to Africa, in writing to Nebridius, Augustine used the marvelous phrase: “deificari in otio: to become God-like in leisure”23 to describe his aim in withdrawing from the troubled journeys of this world in order to “think of that one last journey which is called death.”24 Georges Folliet claims,

Augustine speaks as a Christian convert, but the description of the asceticism he envisages and the expressions he uses make one suspect that his present ideal for life is much closer to that of the wise man presented by the Neoplatonic philosophers than to that of the Gospel.25
Folliet has perhaps overemphasized the Neoplatonic influence upon Augustine's ideal for the life he and his companions were beginning to lead at Thagaste, a life which others see as the cradle of Western monasticism.26

Later in his life Augustine said that "the true philosopher is a lover of God,"27 for the true philosopher loves that Wisdom which or, rather, who is God. We must remember that for Augustine what one loves necessarily transforms the lover into itself.28 Thus in loving God, one is transformed into or becomes God.29 Hence, Augustine's goal at Thagaste of "becoming God-like" is simply the goal of the life of philosophy. The life of philosophy is, after all, a life in love with wisdom, "but of a transforming wisdom"—to use Armstrong's words—of that Wisdom that transforms one into God, into children of the Most High.

Certainly, the otium of Thagaste is Christian and monastic, but it is also, I believe, clearly in continuity with the dedication to the life of philosophy envisioned at Cassiciacum. In any case, to dedicate oneself to philosophy, in order to become God-like in leisure, was far more like entering monastic life than selecting a major in college or even a program of graduate studies. This is the first respect in which the philosophia of Augustine is quite different from the contemporary meaning of philosophy.

The second way in which what Augustine called philosophy differs from what most moderns understand by philosophy has to do with the task and the content of philosophy. In one passage Augustine tells us that philosophy has a twofold question:

one about the soul, the other about God. The first makes us know ourselves; the other that we know our origin. The former is sweeter to us; the latter more precious. The former makes us worthy of happiness; the latter makes us happy.30

That is, as aiming at the happy life, philosophy has no concern with this world of bodily things, but only with God as our goal and ourselves as returning to him.31 Philosophy is not the path for everyone, but for the very few. Philosophy promises reason to these few, setting them free and teaching them, "not only not to hold those [i.e., the Christian] mysteries in contempt, but to understand them, and them alone, as they should be understood."32 Thus the content which philosophy brings the very few to understand is identical with the mysteries of the Christian faith. The true and genuine philosophy has, Augustine claims,
no other task than to teach what is the principle without principle of all things and how great an intellect remains in it and what has flowed forth from there for our salvation without any lessening of its being. . . .33

Augustine explicitly identifies these three with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which “the venerable mysteries . . . proclaim, neither confusing them, as some do, nor treating them unjustly, as many do.”34

Thus, the whole task of philosophy is to understand the Christian Trinity as the source of being, of truth, and of salvation. It does not take too much stretching to see in this early text the “rerum auctorem, veritatis illustratorem et beatitudinis largitorem” of The City of God. Thus the whole content of philosophy for Augustine is the triune God of Christianity.

Philosophy is the love of wisdom, and as early as the Contra academicos Augustine appeals to Cicero’s definition of wisdom as “the knowledge of things human and divine.”35 In the De trinitate, following St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:8, Augustine distinguishes wisdom and knowledge so that wisdom (sapientia) is the knowledge of things eternal and knowledge (scientia) is knowledge of things temporal. Scientia is not knowledge of just anything temporal, but only of that “by which the saving faith, which leads to true happiness, is born, nourished, defended and strengthened.”36 Madec has noted that this distinction between sapientia and scientia “is not without analogy with the double function that Cicero assigns to philosophy in the Hortensius: the practice of the virtues and contemplative wisdom.”37 Thus, in Contra academicos I,vi,20, the knowledge of things human is “that by which one knows the light of prudence, the beauty of temperance, the strength of courage, and the holiness of justice.”38

It is, I suggest, Augustinian wisdom in the proper sense, which is the content of philosophy, that is, knowledge of the eternal God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while knowledge in the proper sense embraces the means of the soul’s return to God, the temporal dispensation by which God has offered us salvation.39 Or, as Augustine has often expressed it, the great Neoplatonists have seen from afar the Fatherland to which we must return.40 They have come to know the eternal reality of God, but in their pride they have failed to know the way to attain the Fatherland.41 That way is the humanity of Christ, who as God is also the goal. As human, he is our knowledge, as divine he is our wisdom. What philosophy can attain, and what the great Platonists have attained is the knowledge of God’s eternal reality; what philosophy cannot
attain is the knowledge of the temporal dispensation and the humanity the
Word has assumed, which is also the way, indeed the only way of return.42
Thus from his earliest writings Augustine saw the need for the Incarnation of
the Word if souls, "blinded by the abundant darkness of error and stained with
the deepest filth of the body," were to be "able to return to themselves and see
again their fatherland."43

We have seen that *philosophia* for Augustine was a wisdom in continuity
with the best in classical Greek thought, but that it differed from what it means
for us in the twentieth century insofar as it involved a whole way of life aimed
at true happiness and embraced as its content only the Christian mysteries. On
the other hand, Augustine is quite clear that, if philosophy can know the eternal
God as the source of our being, knowledge and beatitude, philosophy cannot
provide the way of attaining God. For that we need faith in Christ, our
knowledge, who is also our wisdom.

II. *Can There Be An Augustinian Philosophy?*

The most serious objections to the claim that there is such philosophy in
Augustine stem from Augustine's clear claim that one must first believe in
order to understand.44 Etienne Gilson has made the strong claim that "we know
of no single instance where Augustine allowed reason to dispense with faith
as its starting point . . . . This is the reason why belief in God precedes even
proof of His existence . . . ."45

Augustine's insistence that one must first believe in order to understand
would seem to prejudice the case against anything like an autonomous
philosophy within his thought. "Faith seeking understanding" is, after all, the
classical description of the movement of theology rather than of philosophy.

Moreover, the case for an independent philosophy, is aggravated by an
important change in Augustine's thought. Scholars frequently speak of
Augustine's conversions in the plural.46 Besides the momentous events of
386-387 that led to his baptism and becoming a servant of God, there is
Augustine's conversion to Manichaeism in 373. But there is another turning
point in Augustine's life which has been described as his final conversion.47

In 396, while writing to Simplician, Augustine came to realize that faith is
a gift of God. Much later, in writing to the monks of Hadrumentum, Augustine
admits that he had "other thoughts on this question. . . ." and that God
“revealed to me the means of solving the problem, when . . . I was writing to bishop Simplician.”

Prior to the time of De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum, he thought “that the faith by which we believe in God is not a gift of God, but something that we have from ourselves. . . .” At that time he thought that we needed grace in the sense that we needed to have the Gospel preached to us, but “I thought that it was entirely up to us that we should consent to the Gospel preached to us, and that we had it from ourselves.” Hence, from 396 on Augustine regarded the assent of faith to the Gospel as a gift of God, while prior to that time he thought of the assent as merely a reasonable act of human practical reason. Prior to 396 Augustine had distinguished human authority and divine authority as grounds for belief, and he had distinguished divine and human objects of belief. But he had not distinguished the assent of belief that is a gift of God from the assent which is merely a reasonable human act.

What then is the relevance of this final conversion to my topic? Prior to 396 believing was, in Augustine’s eyes, a matter of reasonable human assent, whether one relied upon divine or human authority, whether what one believed was what God spoke or what another human spoke. Hence, believing in order to understand was a method open to every reasonable human being and, for that reason, a philosophical method. Masai describes Augustine’s pre-396 position as a philosophical fideism in the sense that one must begin with faith, albeit a philosophical faith. Masai sees in the revelation of 396 the birth of theology and refers to Augustine’s position after 396 as a theological fideism, because one begins with faith, but a faith that is a gift of God and not, therefore, something entirely up to us or that we have from ourselves as human beings. Masai concludes,

Beginning in 396, Augustine acknowledged in the act of faith as well as in its object a divine origin and nature. But ipso facto the philosophical character of Augustinian thought is found to be compromised. As it rests entirely upon the foundation of a light freely given by God, it cannot keep the pretense of addressing human reason as such; it becomes necessarily a knowledge reserved for the faithful alone. In brief, the philosophy of Augustine has from that time been transformed into theology.

Obviously the question of whether there can be an Augustinian philosophy becomes more difficult once the act of believing is seen to be a free gift of God and not something up to us so that we can believe if we want to do so. It is not merely that prior to 396 Augustine did not consider the question of our
beginning to believe as a grace; rather, he tells us that he had regarded beginning to believe as something within our power.

In a footnote Masai wonders whether it is conceivable to restore within the strictly Augustinian perspective a Christian philosophy along side theology. He dodges an answer, while noting that an answer to this question depends upon the solution of other problems raised by divine illumination and, more generally, the relation between nature and grace.

On the other hand, the existence of philosophy in Augustine has also had its defenders. In the second Bibliothèque Augustinienne edition of De magistro and De libero arbitrio, F. J. Thonnard, while admitting that Augustine did not formally create a philosophical system, holds that it is possible to make explicit Augustine’s philosophy. He points to three conditions of an Augustinian philosophy that were articulated by Fulbert Cayré:

1) if the philosophical questions that Saint Augustine has dealt with were studied by him in a rational manner and not merely from the perspective of faith; 2) if these questions include all the major problems posed by every philosophy worthy of the name; 3) if the solutions that he brings to them are tied together by common principles capable of giving to the whole a solid coherence. If these are fulfilled, there is in Saint Augustine a true philosophy that can be separated from his theology, even if he himself has not separated them.

I agree with F. Cayré that the three conditions for the existence of philosophy are sufficient and sufficiently met in the works of Augustine for one to speak of an Augustinian philosophy. But I think one can go further and say that there has to be within Augustine’s strictly theological thought an autonomous philosophy that is an indispensable condition of the possibility of his theology. Masai is surely correct that a proper solution to the question of whether there can be an Augustinian philosophy depends upon the wider questions of nature and grace, or of reason and faith.

There was a time in the not so distant past when in Catholic circles philosophy and theology were sharply distinguished, so much so that philosophical ethics, for example, was said to be the sort of moral guidance that would have been applicable, if we were living in a state of pure nature, that hypothetical state which has never existed, but would have existed if human beings were not destined for a supernatural end. Theologians, such as Karl Rahner and Henri de Lubac, have done much to correct the view that revelation
and grace are purely extrinsic additions to nature. Rahner has argued that the possibility of revelation requires that man, as the hearer of the word of God, have a natural self-understanding independent of special revelation in order to be able to hear and understand God's word. He claims that theology "necessarily implies philosophy, i.e., a previous... self-comprehension of the man who hears the historical revelation of God." Furthermore, he maintains that "that self-clarification of man's existence which we call philosophy can certainly be 'pure' philosophy in the sense that it does not take any of its material contents and norms from... revelation."

But even apart from such a transcendental deduction of the necessity of a philosophy for understanding the revealed word of God, one can, I believe, argue that in Augustine there are philosophical truths that human reason can know independently of accepting in faith God's revelation of those truths. These truths would be analogous to what Thomas Aquinas called the praeambula fidei. Let me briefly sketch my reasons for this claim. First, even after 396 when God revealed to Augustine that the act of believing is a gift of God and not something within human power, it does not seem to be the case that every act of believing is a gift of God. Indeed Augustine implies that faith need precede reason only "in certain things pertaining to the doctrine of salvation which we cannot yet perceive by reason." Second, Augustine groups the objects of belief (credibilia) into three classes. He speaks of things which must always be believed and can never be understood, of things that are understood as soon as they are believed, and of things which are first believed and later understood. The first class of objects of beliefs includes all historical events of which we were not ourselves witnesses. The second class includes "all human reasonings either in mathematics or in any of the disciplines." The third class of objects of belief includes truths about "the divine realities that can only be understood by the pure of heart." Augustine thought that one understood, for example, a theorem in geometry as soon as one accepted it as true. Certainly, the second class of credibilia are supernatural in terms neither of the object believed nor of the authority one believes nor of the act of believing as a special gift of God. Third, Augustine credited the great Greek philosophers with having come to a knowledge of God and of human destiny. Though he entertained the idea that Plato had come into contact with God's revelation to the Jewish people, he clearly stated that they came to a knowledge of the eternal reality of God from the things God had made.
Hence, I believe that one can maintain that there is in Augustine—and indeed there must be in Augustine—a philosophy, and a philosophy that can be recognized as philosophy even in the sense in which we speak of philosophy today. One could, of course, so define philosophy that Augustine's thought is automatically excluded. But any such definition could, I fear, banish from the realm of philosophy the works of Hegel and Aquinas, Kierkegaard and even Descartes as well.

III. Augustine's Legacy to Western Philosophy

Any attempt to sum up the core of Augustine's legacy to Western philosophy is bound to be incomplete and perspectival. I intend to touch upon three topics, one an attitude, the other two matters of doctrine.

The attitude that I want to single out is a deep appreciation for human intelligence. Prior to Augustine, at least in the African Church, the spirit of Tertullian was still regnant—Tertullian who asked what Athens has to do with Jerusalem, what the Academy has to do with the Church, Tertullian who claimed that we have no need for a curiosity going beyond Christ Jesus or for inquiry going beyond the Gospel. When Augustine warns of bishops and priests who "avoid unveiling the mysteries or, content with simple faith, have no care to know more profound truths," he indicates the anti-intellectual atmosphere within the Catholica that helped push him into the Manichaean fold. From his own conversion to Manichaeism Augustine learned how dangerous it could be to meet the human desire to know with ridicule instead of respect. In his Literal Commentary on Genesis he again and again indicates his respect for the inquiring mind by refusing rashly to claim knowledge or to give up on its pursuit.

Let me offer two examples of Augustine's respect for the human intellect's desire to know. First, years after Augustine's ordination to the episcopacy, Consentius wrote to Augustine that he thought "that the truth about God's reality ought to be grasped by faith rather than by reason." Otherwise, Consentius suggests, only the likes of philosophers would attain beatitude, and he argues that "we should not so much require a rational account of God as follow the authority of the saints." In response Augustine warns with regard to the Trinity against following the authority of the saints alone without making any effort to understand. "Correct your position," he says, "not so that you reject faith, but so that what you already hold by solid faith, you may also see
by the light of reason.” Augustine adds, “Heaven forbid that God should hate in us that by which he made us more excellent than the animals. Heaven forbid, I say, that we believe so that we do not accept or seek a rational account, since we could not believe unless we had rational souls.” He cites St. Peter’s warning that we should be ready to give an account of our faith and urges Consentius to “a love of intelligence” (ad amorem intelligentiae). His words, “Intellectum uero valde ama: Have a great love for the intellect,” echo down the centuries as a charter for Christian dedication to intellectual pursuits, first of all, in theology, but also in what we today identify as philosophy and the sciences.

Second, no one would claim that Augustine was a philosopher of science, but his care to interpret Scripture in such a way as to avoid a contradiction with what has been scientifically proven has been admired by a scientist as great as Galileo. In *The Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, while dealing with the shape of the heavens, Augustine manages to ask a question that cannot on the surface fail to strike us, who live in the age of space exploration, as naive. “What does it matter to me,” he asks, “whether the heaven encloses the earth like a sphere . . . or only covers it from above like a lid?” Yet he worries that someone might find in the Scripture what seems opposed to clearly seen rational arguments and, as a result, give up all belief in the Scriptures. He warns that “the Holy Spirit who spoke through the [authors of Scripture] did not intend to teach human beings matters of no use for their salvation.” He faces the Psalm text that God “has stretched out the heaven like a skin” (Ps. 103:2), which seems contrary to the view that the heaven is spherical. Augustine even envisages the case in which some are able to prove with indubitable arguments that the heaven is spherical and says,

Then we must prove that what our books say about the skin is not contrary to those rational truths; otherwise, there will be another contradiction between this text and the other passage of Scripture in which it says that the heaven was hung as a vault (Is 40:22).

In writing to Christine of Lorraine, Galileo cites the text from Augustine and adds,

From this text we see that we need no less care to show how a passage of Scripture is in agreement with a proposition demonstrated by natural reason than to show how one passage of Scripture agrees with another contrary to it . . . one must admire the circumspection of this saint who manifests such
great reserve in dealing with obscure conclusions or those of which one can have a demonstration by human means.\textsuperscript{75}

Let me, then, turn to two points of philosophical doctrine. In writing to Cælestinus in 390 or 391, Augustine offers a brief, but important summary of his world view.

Accept this priceless, but tiny gem (\textit{quiddam grande, sed breve}): There is a nature changeable in places and times, such as the body, and there is a nature not changeable in place at all, but changeable only in time, such as the soul, and there is a nature which cannot change either in place or in time. This is God.\textsuperscript{76}

Robert O’Connell has pointed to this three-tiered view of reality with the utterly immutable God at the top and souls mutable only in time in the middle and bodies mutable in both time and place at the bottom as the controlling idea in Vernon Bourke’s presentation of Augustine’s view of reality.\textsuperscript{77}

Contained in that “\textit{quiddam grande et breve}” that Augustine offered to Cælestinus are two doctrines that lie, I suggest, at the heart of Augustine’s philosophical legacy to the Western world: his concept of non-bodily realities, such as the soul and God, and his concept of non-temporal reality, such as, the utterly unchanging reality of God. As a nature that is immutable in place must be free from any spatial extension, so a nature that is immutable in time must be free from any temporal distension.

Prior to Augustine, at least in Western Christianity, there was no philosophical concept of incorporeal being, of being that is whole wherever it is (\textit{totus ubique}). Once again the philosophical views of Tertullian and the corporealism of the Stoics were the common philosophical patrimony of the West.\textsuperscript{78} In the West prior to Augustine, the term “spirit” was, of course, used in the Bible, in medicine and in philosophy. But when the meaning of spirit was spelled out, it seems to have meant a subtle kind of body, not something non-bodily. So too, we use “spirits” to refer to a beverage, and pneumatic tires are certainly bodily.\textsuperscript{79} In holding that God and the soul were bodily, the Manichees were not being singular, but rather were in full accord with the common philosophical view of the age.\textsuperscript{80} Even the Arians whom Augustine encountered seem to have thought of God as corporeal.\textsuperscript{81} From Consentius’ letter to Augustine already mentioned, we can see that even this budding theologian could not quite see how God was bodiless.\textsuperscript{82} We also know that Augustine encountered in the young layman, Vincentius Victor, a convert from Donatism, a thinker
who explicitly held that the soul was corporeal. Even after Augustine’s time the doctrine of the incorporeal nature of the soul was not universally accepted. Thomas Smith points to Faustus of Riez and Cassian as examples in fifth century Gaul of thinkers who held the corporeal position on the nature of the soul. Augustine’s spiritualist understanding of God and the soul, however, became the dominant view in the West for centuries to come. Indeed, the Augustinian revolution was so effective that many anachronistically suppose that the concept of spiritual reality is biblical and explicitly contained in the Christian revelation.

The second philosophical doctrine that Augustine bequeathed to the West is the concept of eternity as timelessness, as a mode of existence that is whole all at once (tota simul), without past and without future. Once again, as in the case of spirit, there is in the Bible the language of eternity in the sense of a duration that is everlasting, a duration without beginning or, at least, without end. So too, there was in earlier Greek philosophy the concept of a world without beginning or end. Only with Plotinus do we find a philosophically articulated concept of eternity as timeless duration. But prior to Augustine, at least in the West, there does not seem to have been a philosophically articulated concept of eternity as timeless presence in any Christian author. Even if Gregory of Nyssa did anticipate Augustine in adopting the Plotinian concept of eternity into Christian thought, Augustine certainly remains the source of the concept for the Christian West.

Just as Augustine needed the philosophical concept of incorporeal reality if he was going to be able to deal with the Manichaean questions about the ontological status of evil, so he needed the concept of timeless eternity to handle their questions about what God was doing before he created the world. Unless one has a concept of God as a reality not extended in length, breadth and depth, one cannot maintain that God is infinite and that evil is not in God, unless, of course, one takes the radical option of denying the reality of evil. So too, unless one can think of God’s eternity as a duration not extended beyond the present into past and future, one is faced the prospect of an idle or sleeping God who wakes up and in a burst of energy creates the world.

Peter Brown speaks of Augustine’s discovery of spiritual reality in reading the _libri Platoniciorum_ as “the evolution of a metaphysician.” Brown adds, “[A]nd his final ‘conversion’ to the idea of a purely spiritual reality, as held by the sophisticated Christians in Milan, is a decisive and fateful step in the
evolution of our ideas on spirit and matter.” It was certainly that, but I suggest that it was also the birth of Christian metaphysics in the West, if one may use such an Aristotelian term for so Platonic an offspring. It was the philosophical doctrine of Augustine on the spirituality of God and the soul and on the eternity of God that pervaded Western Christian thought for centuries to come. Both of these doctrines were found in Neoplatonism prior to being taught by any Christian thinker, and the Christian faith was proclaimed and taught for the better part of four centuries before there emerged clear concepts of God and the soul as non-bodily and of God as timeless. Hence, these doctrines cannot have been derived from the Christian revelation; they must rather be philosophical doctrines independent of revelation, however useful they may have come to appear as means for articulating the word of God. Just as the desire to know, or the love for intelligence, is part of the nature of human beings, so the doctrine of the incorporeal nature of the human soul and of God and the doctrine of the eternity of God are matters of philosophical, not revealed knowledge.

IV. Conclusion

I have tried to show what Augustine meant by philosophy and have argued that there is in Augustine philosophy even in the contemporary sense. Finally, I have tried to show that Augustine’s philosophical legacy to the West has been very rich, though there is, of course, much, much more in Augustine than philosophy and he is much more than a philosopher.

Notes


argues that Augustine may have derived his definition of wisdom as “rerum humanarum divinarumque scientia” (De trinitate XIV, i, 3: CC L/A, 423) from the Hortensius, though it is clearly found in other works by Cicero.


6. Contra academicos III, xvii, 37: CC XXIX, 57: “Igitur Plato adiciens lepori subtilitatiique Socraticeae, quam in moralibus habuit, naturalium diuinarumque rerum peritiam, quam ab eis quos memorai diligenter acceperat, subiungensque quasi formatricem illarum partium iudicemque dialecticam, quae aut ipsa esset aut sine qua omnino sapientia esse non posset, perfectam dicitur composuisse philosophiae disciplinam.” Cf. also De civitate dei VIII, 4: CC XLVII, 220, where he again sketches in outline the history of philosophy and gives the same central position to Plato. While Pythagoras excelled in the contemplative part of philosophy, Socrates excelled in the active part. “Proinde Plato utrumque iungendo philosophiam perfecisse laudatur, quam in tres partes distribuit: unam moralem, quae maxime in actione versatur; alteram naturalam, quae contemplationi deputata est; tertiam rationalem, qua uerum discernatur a falso.”

7. Contra academicos III, xvii, 37: CC XXIX, 57: “Sat est enim ad id, quod volo, Platonem sensisse duos esse mundos, unum intelligibilem, in quo ipsa ueritas habitaret, istum autem sensibilem, quem manifestum est nos uisui tactuque sentire; itaque illum uerum, hunc ueri similem et ad illius imaginem factum, et ideo de illo in ea quae se cognosceret anima uelut expoliri et quasi serenari ueritatem, de hoc autem in stultorum animis non scientiam sed opinionem posse generari. . . .”

8. Contra academicos III, xviii, 41: CC XXIX, 59-60: “Adeo post illa tempora non longo interualllo, omni peruicacia pertinentiique demortua os illud Platonis, quod in philosophia purgatissimum est et lucidissimum, dimotiis nubibus erroris emicuit maxime in Plotino, qui Platonicus philosophus ita eius similis iudicatus est, ut simul eos uixisse, tantum autem interest temporis, ut in hoc ille reuixisse putandus sit.”

10. *De ordine* I, xi, 32: *CC* XXIX, 106: “Esse autem alium mundum ab istis oculis remotissimum, quem paucorum sanorum intellectus intueitur, satis ipse Christus significat, qui non dicit: ‘regnum meum non est de mundo’, sed: ‘regnum meum non est de hoc mundo.’ Later in his *Retractiones* I, iii, 2: B4 12, 286, Augustine expresses his displeasure at this interpretation of Christ’s words and sees that it would have been better to understand him as referring to the new heaven and new earth. However, he adds: "Nec Plato quidem in hoc erravit, quia esse mundum intelligibilem dixit, si non vocabulum, quod ecclesiasticae consuetudini in re illa insitatum est, sed ipsam rem velimus attendere. Mundum quippe ille intelligibilem nuncupavit ipsam rationem sempiternam atque incommunicabilem, qua fecit Deus mundum."


13. *De c<em>civitate dei*</em> VIII, 5: *CC* XLVII, 221: “Si ergo Plato Dei huius imitatorem cognitorem amatem dixit esse sapientem, cuius participat<em>ione</em> sit beatus, quid opus est excitare ceteros?”


16. *De c<em>civitate dei*</em> XIX, i, 2: *CC* XLVIII, 659: “nulla est homini causa philosophandi, nisi ut sit beatus.”


21. Confessiones VI, xii, 21: CC XXVII, 87: “Prohibebat me sane Alypius uxore ducenda cantans nullo modo nos posse securc otio simul in amore sapientiae uiuere, sicut iam diu desideraremus, si id fecissem.”

22. Retractiones I, 1: RA 12, 274.


26. Cf. A. Mandouze, Saint Augustin. L’aventure de la raison et de la grâce (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1968), pp. 207-209, where the author emphasizes the advance represented by deificari in otio over the ideal of Cassiciacum and insists that the otium of Thasgaste includes the framework of religious life and communal sharing of goods. Cf. also George Lawless, Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 51, where Lawless says of the otium described in De vera religione XXXV, 65: CC XXXII, 229-230 that it “is a far cry from the leisure of the philosophers.”

27. De civitate dei VIII, 1: CC XLVII, 216: “uerus philosophus est amator dei.”

28. De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus XXXV, 2: CC XLIV/A, 52: “Et quoniam id quod amatur afficiat ex se amantem necesse est, fit ut sic amatum quod aeternum est aeternitate animum afficiat. Quocircum ea demum uita beata est quae aeterna est. Quid uero aeternum est quod aeternitate animum afficiat nisi Deus?”


31. Cf. Contra academicos I, i, 3: CC XXIX, 5: “Ipsa docet et uere docet nihil omnino colendum esse totumque contemni oportere, quidquid mortalibus oculis cernitur,
quidquid ullus sensus attingit. Ipsa uerissimum et secretissimum Deum perspicue se demonstraturum promittit et iam iamque quasi per lucidas nubes ostentare dignatur."


33. De ordine II, v, 16: CC XXIX, 116: "nullumque aliud habet negotium, quae uera et, ut ita dicam, germana philosophia est, quam ut doceat, quod sit omnium rerum principium sine principio quantusque in eo maneat intellectus quidue inde in nostram salutem sine ulla degeneratione manauerit . . . ."

34. De ordine II, v, 16: CSEL LXIII, 157: "quam unum deum omnipotentem, cum quo tripotentem patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum, ueneranda mysteria, quae fide sincera et inconcussa populos liberat, nec confuse, ut quidam, nec contumeliose, ut multi, praedicant.” Here I find Madec’s argument for following the edition of P. Knöll persuasive. I also agree with Madec’s claim that “confuse” and “contumeliose” refer to the doctrine of the Sabellians and of the Arians respectively; cf. G. Madec, “A propos d’une traduction,” 182-184. F. Van Fleteren, however, suggests that it is Porphyry whom Augustine has in mind; cf. F. Van Fleteren, “Authority and Reason, Faith and Understanding in the Thought of St. Augustine,” Augustinian Studies 4 (1973) 33-71, here 48-49.


39. Madec claims that the true philosophy included the Incarnation of the Word. In “Connaissance de Dieu et action de grâce. Essai sur les citations de l’Ep. aux Romains 1, 18-25 dans l’oeuvre de saint Augustin,” *Recherches Augustiniennes* 2 (1962) 273-309, here 283, he says, “Augustin a reconnu dans la doctrine du Verbe incarné la ‘seule doctrine philosophique parfaitement vraie’ et la philosophie véritable et authentique qui a pour tâche l’intelligence des mystères.” He refers to *Contra academicos* III, xix, 42: *CC* XXIX, 60, where Augustine says, referring to the intelligible world: “cui animas multiformibus erroris tenebris caecatas et alissimis a corpore sordibus oblitas numquam ista ratio subtilissima reuocaret, nisi summus deus populari quadam clementia diuini intellectus auctoritatem usque ad ipsum corpus humanum declinaret atque submitteret, cuius non solum praecipitis sed etiam factis excitatae animae redire in semet ipsas et resipiscere patriam etiam sine concertatione potuissent.” I am in complete agreement with Madec that without humble faith in the Incarnate Word, souls could never attain the fatherland, even if they saw it from afar. The Platonists certainly did not know or were too proud to take the way, but faith in the Incarnation belongs to scientia as opposed to sapientia, to the way as opposed to the goal. *Philosophia* concerns the aeternalia Dei, not the temporal dispensation. Cf. my “The Link between Faith and Time in St. Augustine,” *Collectanea Augustiniana* II, forthcoming.


41. *De trinitate* IV, xv, 20: *CC* L, 187: “Sed quid prodest superbienti et ob hoc erubescenti lignum conscendere de longinquu prospicere patriam transmarinam? Aut quid obest humili de tanto intuallo non eam uidere in illo ligno ad eam venienti quod designatur ille portari?”

42. Cf. *Confessiones* VII, ix, 13-14: *CC* XXVII, 101-102, where Augustine contrasts what he found in the *libri Platonicorum* and what he did not find there. What he found there were the aeternalia Dei; what he did not find there was the temporal dispensation by which we are saved. Cf. also *De consensu evangeliistarum* I, xxxv, 53: *CSEL* XLIII, 60: “Ipse est nobis fides in rebus ortis qui est ueritas in aeternis.” *De trinitate* XIII, xix, 24: *CC* L/A, 416-417: “Scientia ergo nostra Christus est, sapientia quoque nostra idem Christus est. Ipse nobis fidem de rebus temporalibus inserit; ipse de semipternis exhibet ueritatem. Per ipsum pergimus ad ipsum, tendimus per scientiam ad sapientiam; ab uno
tamen eodemque Christo non recedimus, 'in quo sunt omnes thesauri sapientiae et scientiae absconditi'" (Col 2:3).

43. *Contra academicos* III, xix, 42: *CC* XXIX, 60; cf. above note 39.

44. Augustine read in Isaiah 7:9, "Nisi credideritis, non intellegeatis." He cites the text for the first time in *De libero arbitrio* I, ii, 4 and then again in *De libero arbitrio* II, ii, 6 and *De magistro* XI, 37.

45. E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, p. 34. Gilson points to *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* I, ii, 3: *PL* XXXII, 1311-1312, where he claims Augustine uses the faulty method of beginning with reason—a method that Gilson oddly views as Manichaean. Gilson comments, "He only resigns himself to stoop to the madness of the Manichaeans by provisorily adopting their method, even as Jesus Christ submitted to death to save us." *The Christian Philosophy*, p. 265, n. 31.


48. *De praedestinatione sanctorum* IV, 8: *BA* 24, 488. Ferrari takes Augustine’s use of "revelare" in this passage in a strong sense. He speaks of the revelation as “a tremendous transformation in the very foundations of Augustine’s thought. Furthermore, it was no conclusion reached on the basis of mere human reasoning. Indeed, as Augustine tells us, it was a veritable revelation to him from God Himself, as he struggled to answer the question of Simplicianus . . .” (Ferrari, p. 77). However, Augustine uses “revelare” in the preceding paragraphs of *De praedestinatione sanctorum*, and he does so in dependence upon Paul’s words, “And if on some point you think otherwise, God will reveal this to you as well; only, let us walk in the truth that we have already attained” (Phil 3:15-16). Augustine applies this text to the monks of Hadrumentum, saying that, if they cling to the truths they already hold which separate them from the Pelagians, “if they think otherwise with regard to predestination, God will reveal this to them as well” (1.2) Surely Augustine is not promising these monks an exceptional revelation from God, but simply the intellectual clarification that comes from prayerful pursuit of the truth, which is always for Augustine a divine gift. Cf. as well Augustine’s use of this text in *Epistula* CXX, i, 4: *CSEL* XXXIV, 707, where Augustine can hardly be promising Consensus an exceptional revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity. On the other hand, Peter Brown’s statement, “when Augustine speaks of an idea having been ‘revealed’ to him, he means only that he has reached the inevitable
conclusion of a series of certainties . . . — an experience not unknown to speculative thinkers today,” (Augustine of Hippo: A Biography [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969], p. 280, n. 2) seems to offer a too naturalistic interpretation that overlooks the fact that for Augustine it is God “who gives understanding” (cf. De praedestinatione sanctorum 1.2).

49. De praedestinatione sanctorum III, 7: BA 24, 478: “errarem, putans fidem qua in Deum credimus, non esse donum Dei, sed a nobis esse in nobis . . . .”


52. The term “fideism” is, I believe, unfortunate; like the term “ontologism,” it carries misleading historical overtones and recalls the fideism of Huet (1630-1721) or the traditionalism of Bonald (1754-1840) and of Lamennais (1781-1854) in accord with which all knowledge had to begin with an act of faith.


54. F. Masai, p. 37.

55. Cf. the note complimentaire: “La philosophie augustinienne,” in the second edition of BA 6, 514-517, here 517. In the third edition by G. Madec, this note is omitted, perhaps because of Madec’s conviction that there is no patristic philosophy.


58. Ibid., p. 78.

59. Epistula CXX, i, 3: CSEL XXXIV, 706: “Ut ergo in quibusdam rebus ad doctrinam salutarem pertinentibus, quas ratione nondum percipere valemus, sed aliquando valebimus, fides praecedat rationem . . . .”

60. De diversis quaestionibus octaginta tribus, XLVIII: CC XLIV/A, 75: “alia quae mox ut creduntur intelleguntur, sicut sunt omnes rationes humanae uel de numeris uel de quibuslibet disciplinis; tertium quae primo creduntur et postea intelliguntur, qualia sunt ea quae de diuinis rebus non possunt intelligi nisi ab his qui mundo sunt corde. . . .”

61. Thus in Epistula CXX, i, 5: CSEL XXXIV, 708, Augustine seems to say that there are some truths which we know to be true and cannot believe once an account has been given. “Sunt autem quaedam, quae cum audierimus, non eis accommodamus fidem et ratione nobis reddita uera esse cognoscimus, quae credere non ualemus.”


64. *De moribus ecclesiae* I, i: BA 1, 136: “Nec, si ea discere cupiens, in aliquos forte inciderit vel episcopos vel presbyteros, vel cujuscemodi Ecclesiae catholicae antisistes et ministros, qui aut passim caveant nudare mysteria, aut contenti simplici fide, altiora cognoscere non curarint, desperet ibi scientiam esse veritatis, ubi neque omnes a quibus quaeritur docere possunt, neque omnes qui quaerunt discere digni sunt.” Cf. *De utilitate credendi* I, 2: CSEL XXV/1, 4, for Augustine’s claim that it was the demand for belief prior to understanding that lured him into Manichaeism.

65. We perhaps have a reflection of such ridicule in Augustine’s refusal to give the answer that someone gave to the question about what God was doing before he created the world, namely, that he was preparing hell for people who ask profound questions; cf. *Confessiones* XI, xii, 14: CC XXVII, 201: ‘Alta, ’ inquit, ‘scruptantibus gehennas parabat.’ Aliud est uidere, aliud ridere. Haec non respondeo.”


68. Ibid.: “si enim fides sanctae ecclesiae ex disputationis ratione, non ex credulitatis pietate adprehenderetur, nemo praeter philosophos atque oratores beatitudinem possideret.”


70. *Epistula CXX*, i, 3: CSEL XXXIV, 706: “Absit namque, ut hoc in nobis deus oderit, in qua nos reliquis animantibus excellentiores creauit. absit, inquam, ut ideo credamus, ne rationem accipiamus siue quaeramus, cum etiam credere non possemus, nisi rationales animas haberemus.”

71. *Epistula CXX*, i, 6 and iii, 13: CSEL XXXIV, 708 and 716. It is important to bear in mind that Consentius’ principal difficulty was purely philosophical, namely, to conceive of God as an incorporeal being, as we shall see shortly.

72. *De Genesi ad litteram* II, ix, 20: BA 48, 174: “Quid enim ad me pertinet, utrum caelum sicut sphaera undique concludat terram in media mundi mole libratam, an eam ex una parte desuper velut discus operiat?”
73. De Genesi ad litteram II, ix, 20: BA 48, 176: “sed spiritum Dei, qui per eos loquebatur, noluisse ista docere homines nulli saluti profutura.”

74. De Genesi ad litteram II, ix, 21: BA 48, 176: “démonstrandum est hoc, quod apud nos de pelle dictum est, ueris illis rationibus non esse contrarium; alioquin contrarium erit etiam ipsis in alio loco scripturis nostris, ubi caelum dicitur uelut camera esse suspensum.”


76. Epistula XVIII, 2: CSEL XXXIV, 45: “Sane quoniam te noui, accipe hoc quiddam grande et breve. est natura per locos et tempora mutabilis, ut corpus, et est natura per locos nullo modo, sed tantum per tempora etiam ipsa mutabilis, ut anima, et est natura, quae nec per locos nec per tempora mutari potest, hoc deus est.”


78. Cf. G. Verbeke, L’évolution de la doctrine du pneuma, du Stoïcisme à s. Augustin (Paris and Louvain, 1945). Verbeke attributes the concept of spirit as incorporeal to the influence of Scripture. F. Masai more correctly, I believe, recognizes the term as biblical, but attributes the concept to Neoplatonism. Cf. F. Masai, “Les conversions de saint Augustin et les débuts du spiritualisme en Occident,” Moyen Age 67 (1961) 1-40, here 17. For the Stoic view that whatever is is a body, cf. E. Weil, “Remarques sur le ‘matérialisme’ des Stoïciens,” in Mélanges Alexandre Koyré. II. L’aventure de l’esprit (Paris: Hermann, 1964), pp. 556-572. Weil argues that corporealism more accurately describes the Stoic position than materialism. With Augustine too, the term “materialism” should be used with care, since matter is present in everything changeable, such as souls, though souls are not bodily. Cf. Confessiones XII, vi, 6: CC 14, 219.

79. Cf. Masai, pp. 15-23, for his account of the spiritualization of spirit. Just as most of us who are believers do not require a philosophical concept of non-bodily reality when we pray to God, so the Christians of the first centuries had no need for such a concept of God or of the soul in their lives. So too, prior to the Arian controversy, there was no need for a concept such as the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, but once the question arose whether or not the Son was a creature, the technical term and concept were needed. In Augustine’s case, it was the problem of evil that necessitated a concept of God as non-bodily. After all, if all that is is bodily, then God is an infinite body and evil is in God, or God is finite and evil is another body. The former view means that God is not all good; the latter approximates the Manichaean position.
80. Masai says, "La vérité est qu’avant Augustin, il est vain de chercher dans l’Afrique chrétienne un spiritualisme au sens moderne du terme: le Stoïcisme de Zenon y régna sans contest..." (p. 19). For the Manichaean position, cf. Contra epistulam quam uocant Fundamenti XX, 22: CSEL XXV/1, 216, where Augustine calls the Manichees "carnal minds" "qui naturam incorpoream et spiritualem cogitando persequi uel non audent uel nondum ualent. ..." So too, he admits in Confessiones IV, xvi, 31: CC XXVII, 55, that he thought of God as a "bright and immense body" and that he was "a part of that body."


83. Cf. De anima et ejus origine IV, xii, 19-xiv, 10: BA 22, 612-622. Cf. the notes to the text which show the linkage to Tertullian's position, as well as the "note complémentaire": "Une théorie stoïcienne de l'âme," pp. 837-843.


85. Masai, for example, points to M. Testard who, in speaking of the young Augustine, mentions that he totally lacked certain beliefs fundamental to the Christian faith, such as the spiritual nature of God and the soul (M. Testard, Saint Augustin et Cicéron [Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1958], I, p. 101; Masai, art. cit, p. 13).

86. For the texts on eternity in Augustine, cf. my 'Vocans temporales, faciens aeternos': St. Augustine on Liberation from Time," Traditio 41 (1985) 29-47.

