

interpretation

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Notes for a Reading of Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X

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*omni secreto interior, omni honore sublimior*¹

Aristotle's exclusion of action from the most primary sense of being, because of its excellence called "god," leaves a space for unsupported action, the space of human possibility: being able to be one way or the other and being within the power of the agent to originate by determining to be one way and not the other. In this space for choice and novelty, what we have decided and begun can never be undone, remaining perpetually unalterable.

For Augustine this space is taken up into a new sense of the divine: God does the unexpected and the unrepeatable; he is artificer and governor, craftsman and shepherd, lawgiver and caretaker, king and judge; he is partner to agreements; he promises and forgives, praises and blames, rewards and punishes; he is generous and avenging, merciful and just; he speaks in terms of passion and choice, construction ("the work of his hands") and convention ("the covenant with his people").

How is it that this is not a return to a mythology (stories of arbitrary intervention of the divine in human affairs: "give what you command and command what you will")² and a politics ("be our glory")³ of wisdom? The Socratic accommodation to piety and law is repeated with a difference.

Does divine self-sufficiency exclude making and ruling? Is God either niggardly and a recluse or diffusive and a busybody? Can he create, command, and provide for others—for the lesser and even for the lowly—without suffering from the neediness of what he benefits and without himself needing beneficiaries? Can there be freedom to choose without indeterminacy overcome and power to make without subordination to what is made, both being one with eternal and necessary self-sufficiency?

Augustine is paradigmatic for the theological form of mind in contrast to the Greek philosophical form. Here is a hiding and a revealing of human mind in the creator God, who is free of all creatures and who lets creatures be because he freely wills them to be. The being of creatures is given in noncreaturely freedom and knowledge,⁴ and human freedom and knowledge

1. *Confessions* IX.1.1.

2. *Confessions* X.29.40(twice); 31.45; 35.56; 37.60.

3. *Confessions* X.36.59.

4. *Confessions* XIII.38.53; *De Trinitate* XV.13.22; *De civitate Dei* XI.10, XXI.8; *De Genesi ad litteram* VI 15.26–16.27, PL 34.350.

are ordered toward this noncreaturely free letting be of creatures out of nothing.

“God is all there is,” although false, is meaningful for a sense of the being of creatures within the context of creation, which is free and out of nothing, that is, creatures are chosen by God as the alternative to there being only God. The plenitude of goodness would not be diminished, and goodness would not be impugned for lack of generosity, if creatures were not. Thus the goodness of creatures has a presupposition in relation to which it is questionable, although not denied. Questioning comes to rest in a freedom which could choose other than what it does choose.⁵ If God were to choose that creatures not be (because that creatures are is freely chosen, that is, chosen in fact although the alternative could be chosen, that creatures not be is possible, although contrary-to-fact), then all that “being” would mean would be God alone. On the other hand, for creatures to be is for them to be, without remainder or reserve, chosen by and manifest to another.

There is no longer any privacy: man is because he is manifest to another. But this publicity to God is as hidden as God himself, unless God’s eloquence manifests him as our public and as the friend who confirms us in our knowledge of ourselves and of one another. Outside this context public virtue or excelling in the eyes of others tends toward vainglory or pride of life, and private science or knowing for its own sake tends toward empty curiosity or lust of the eyes.

The *Confessions* are a dialogue between one man and God; they have the form of solitary prayer overheard, not of speech with others about being as it shows itself through city and cosmos. The Psalms are the origin of the rhetoric of the *Confessions*, a rhetoric whose form is *caritas: mutua redamatio cum quadam mutua communicatione et familiari conversatione*.⁶ “Thus the Lord spoke with Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend,” *garriebam tibi*.⁸ Mind is achieved through first listening and then speaking to God, not through speech in the world with others. God is spoken to with words first spoken to us (prayer as quotation of Scripture) and in the Word spoken in common with us (Christ, human and divine, Mediator).

What is best in the world is mind as abyss,⁹ first hidden to itself and to others and then given to itself and to others through a manifestation of its manifestness to God. Man is freely confessing abyss in the image and likeness of the freely revealing hidden God. The Greek shining forth and manifestness

5. Scotus, *Ordinato* 1.8.2.1. (Vatican ed. IV.324–326). Cajetan, *In quaestionem XIX primae partis*, in responsione ad quintum et quartum art. tertii (Leonine ed. IV.236; see Vatican ed. Scotus, VI.26*–30*). Bañes, *In quaestionem XIX primae partis*, art. 3, Tertio, Quarto; Ad tertium, Ad quartum; art. 10, Secundo, Tertio; Ad secundum, Ad tertium (Madrid–Valencia 1934) 414, 438, 441–442. John of St. Thomas, *In quaestionem XIX primae partis*, 24.2.35, 24.4.11ter, and 24.7.16 (Solesmes ed. III 76, 92–93, 132–133).

6. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1–II.65.5.

7. *Exodus* 33.

8. *Confessions* IX 1.1

9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.7.1141^a34–1141^b2; Psalm 41.8 Vulgate.

to others has become hidden in manifestness to the hidden God, who through free revelation of his free creative knowledge reveals us to ourselves and to one another; *Deus conscientiae testis maxima est gloria*.¹⁰ No longer Aristotle's "that which appears to all, that we call being,"¹¹ but rather "the hermitage of the hidden heart."¹²

We turn away from the speaking and the listening, the seeing and the being seen of citizenship and become strangers to each other in the hidden thoughts of the heart, being witnessed by the eyes of the Lord and moved in imitation of the Word to a new rhetoric: public witness or *confessio* before others.¹³

The rhetorician Augustine goes to Milan and sees the preacher Ambrose: "when he read, he drew his eyes along over the pages, and his heart searched the sense (*cor intellectum rimabatur*), but his voice and tongue were silent."¹⁴

For Aristotle, mind finds itself in speaking with others about city and cosmos, although this speaking is implicated in a silence beyond public virtue and ordered motion. But in the theological form of mind,¹⁵ the heart can search the sense while the voice is silent because it is God speaking who manifests the sense of things. *Confessio*, speaking out from silence and manifesting forth from hiddenness in imitation of the freely revealing Word, overrides the Greek philosophical sense of the silence and hiddenness of the eternal and necessary by showing as paradigmatic, indeed divine, the free action of speaking for the ears of others and manifesting for the eyes of others. God is addressed with "give what you command and command what you will" and as the Other who, more intimate to us than we are to ourselves, confirms the availability of mind to itself and to others.

The impotence of mind to bring itself exhaustively from latency to patency and from dissipation to recollection opens it, seeking itself as manifest unity, to the one clarity of its creative exemplar. Solitary mind seeks to manifest itself to itself by itself.¹⁶ But what mind is, is hidden in the hidden God. There is a cleavage between phenomenal and noumenal, between man in so far as he can show himself and be seen in the world by others and by himself and man as abyss, who is as being known of God, man who is whatever God knows him to be.¹⁷

Solitary mind, manifested to itself and to others as freely willed and willing in the sight of another, remains as a residue after the truncation and destruction of the theology which was the condition of the genesis of this form of mind.

10. *De civitate Dei* XIV 28.

11. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* x.2, 1172^b36–1173^a1.

12. *Enarrationes in psalmos* 41.13, 55.9, 100.12, 134.16. *Sermo* 47.14.23, PL 38.311–312.

13. *Confessions* x.2.2.

14. *Confessions* vi.3.3, x.6.9. Cf. *Regula S. Benedicti* 48.5.12.

15. Aquinas, *De potentia Dei* v.3, *In librum sententiarum* 1.38.1.5.

16. *De Trinitate* x.8.11.

17. Robert Grosseteste, *De veritate*, ed. Ludwig Maur, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, IX 1912.142.

Mind, still remembering gratuitous participation in gratuitous creating, tries to possess itself as enjoying the privilege of an Archimedean point exploited for mastery (the image is in Descartes's *Second Meditation*): mind offers itself the possibility of making itself in the world with others out of the solitude of its worldless freedom. Just as recollection of divine gratuity (the freedom to bring to be what would otherwise not be and what could be otherwise) is exploited in order to free freedom from the necessary, so recollection of divine exemplarity (the inexhaustible excess of unimitated imitability) is exploited in order to look down on being in the world with others as malleable.¹⁸ The world we did not make becomes nothing but material for work; we return from solitude to being in the world with others to make a public to whom we display the solitude we left behind.

Deo uti: Descartes hints that the model no longer has primacy. Once imitators of the model, we now arrogate to ourselves the primacy of the model. The presuppositions of providence (being cared for by God) and miracle (being malleable in God's hands) are transformed into the presuppositions of technology. Pride in mastery replaces both admiration of excellence and gratitude toward generosity.

But God neither creates himself nor needs creatures. Uprooted from eternal and necessary self-sufficient mind enjoying goodness, both freedom from natures and power over natures, which could be otherwise, and the glory befitting generosity and benevolence toward those who would be nothing without them, are monstrous fictions.¹⁹

18. *Jeremiah* 18.1–17.

19. *Studia Scholastico-Scotistica* v (Rome, 1972) 359–370.