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## ST. AUGUSTINE'S EPISTEMOLOGY : AN IGNORED ARISTOTELIAN THEME AND ITS INTRIGUING ANTICIPATIONS

Robert C. TRUNDLE

*RÉSUMÉ* : On pense habituellement que saint Thomas d'Aquin a initié une épistémologie aristotélicienne dans laquelle la raison immuable préside à la Création. Saint Augustin avait déjà adopté cette conception, et de plus il l'avait complétée par une autre dans laquelle une raison omnisciente est éclipsée de la raison humaine par une volonté toute-puissante. En plus de précéder l'épistémologie thomiste, cette conception comprend une anticipation intrigante de la thèse du « thinking-matter » de Locke, des faiblesses de la pensée critique de Hume et Kant, ainsi que de thèmes phénoménologiques contemporains.

*SUMMARY* : It is commonly held that St. Thomas Aquinas initiated an Aristotelian epistemology wherein the Creator's immutable reason permeates His creation. St. Augustine not only previously held this notion but complemented it by another in which an omniscient reason is eclipsed from human reason by an omnipotent will. Besides preceding Thomistic epistemology and reflecting Scripture, it comprised an intriguing anticipation of Locke's "thinking-matter" thesis, shortcomings of Humean-Kantian "critical thought," and contemporary phenomenological themes in which thought involves consciousness.

I shall argue that Augustine was faced with equally attractive and unattractive options in the metaphysics of both Plato and Aristotle. Tradition holds that Augustine was influenced by Cicero's *Hortensius*. Recent scholarship suggests that the *Hortensius* was almost a Latinized version of Aristotle's *Protrepticus*.<sup>1</sup> But the influence I seek to consider goes well beyond this.

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1. See Anton-Hermann CHROUST's *Aristotle: New Light on His Life and on Some of His Lost Works*, Volumes I and II, Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1973. Chroust says, in *Volume II* (p. 121): "As its title reflects the *Protrepticus* is both a personal address and a general appeal or exhortation, encouraging future generations to choose wisely when committing themselves to a definite way of life. The experiences of St. Augustine attest the efficacy of this appeal." In a footnote attaching to this passage, Chroust says that "Tradition has it that the *Protrepticus* provided the foundation, through the intermediary of Cicero's *Hortensius*, for the conversion of the young St. Augustine to the intellectual life and thus indirectly to his conversion to Christianity."

After discussing Aristotle's influence, I shall examine how Augustine had some intriguing anticipations. These concern various ideas as diverse as those of John Locke and Jean-Paul Sartre. A link between their ideas and those of Augustine may have been ignored because, among other things, Augustine is normally associated with Plato's essentialism rather than Aristotle's "organismic" empiricism. But again, both Aristotle and Plato presented paradigm metaphysical options. And an open-minded reading of Augustine's philosophical theology belies some mediation between them.

## I. PLATONIC AND ARISTOTELIAN OPTIONS

On the one hand Scripture distinguished between an unchanging spiritual reality and a changing corporeal reality. The distinction between two realities together with a soul that knew eternal ideas made Plato's metaphysics attractive. On the other hand its attractiveness was diminished by the revelation of the New Testament that all things — including knowledge — would pass away except Love (*agape*). Moreover, in addition to such Love being connected to humility and secular cognitive knowledge to pride, the sanctity and resurrection of the body were inconceivable on the Platonic paradigm. For this paradigm construed the body as a "dark" receptacle which obscured the cognitive "light" of the soul. This, in large measure, is what is meant when the New Testament holds that Christian doctrine was foolishness to the Greeks.

### 1. *On the One Hand... On the Other...*

On the one hand it was easier for the later Greeks as well as for Augustine to embrace an Aristotelian paradigm in which the *mind*, without recourse to a pre-existing soul, distinguished immutable universal ideas from mutable objects. For one thing, this was a simpler thesis. For another, this thesis would give an omniscient God some possible role in illuminating such objects. Further, these objects *qua* unities of form and matter implied a unity of body and soul. Though the latter implied the death of soul and body alike, it rendered a personal resurrection viable and significant. On the other hand the significance of resurrection was tainted by an Aristotelian view of a single reality that, while involving a cosmological principle of causation, proceeded *ad infinitum* into the past. Besides an infinite past conflicting with *creatio ex nihilo*, it further anchored an otherwise transcendent God in a single reality.

Faced with these inconsistent but equally attractive (and unattractive) metaphysical options, it is reasonable to suppose that Augustine limitedly embraced both. The Platonic ontology of two realities explained the transcendence of God as well as both an inferiority of corporeal reality and a sin-laden human condition. That is, such a condition reflected the relative impotence of human knowledge and the prideful (self-deceptive) tendency to exhaustively appeal to it for ameliorating moral squalor and for obtaining political utopias apart from God.

a) *Aristotelian Knowledge*

But an Aristotelian epistemology, notwithstanding fruitless pursuits of godless utopias, explained the merciful immanence of God. For God's goodness and intelligence were manifested in the world. The world would thereby be an ordered and rational realm whose rationality, though oriented to the empirical, could not be articulated *in toto* in terms of the bodily senses. Thus, for example, in *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine asserts that persons "are forced to admit that the order and truth of numbers have nothing to do with the bodily senses."<sup>2</sup> This passage is not intended to suggest that mathematical ideas, say of numbers, have really existing referents in another "really real world" of Ideas. Rather the passage draws attention to the fact that a mere materialist account of perception is inadequate *inter alia* for mathematical ideas.

An adequate account of such ideas, as explicated in the *City of God*, will involve an Aristotelian-like understanding of the material body of the human being as being "infused" with an inner light or intelligence.<sup>3</sup> This intelligence enables a person to numerically articulate the various *parts* of mutable bodies that "[...] we admit, must be *in* a body, however small it is."<sup>4</sup> Importantly, the universal concepts of "small" and "large" would lose their epistemic significance as what may relatively characterize bodies unless bodies were infused with volumetric universals that an inner light illuminates.

b) *Platonic Reality*

At the same time Augustine underscores the folly of human beings when they confuse such a rational inner light, used in natural science as well as mathematics, with Godly wisdom. Notwithstanding such wisdom being limitedly cognitive, it tacitly engenders a Platonic ontology of another unchanging (spiritual) realm. Hence in *On Free Choice of the Will*, he refers to the vain search for wisdom, by Solomon (Eccles. 7:26), when Solomon said "I and my heart have gone round to know and to consider and to search out wisdom and number."<sup>5</sup> The same or similar distinction between cognitive knowledge, e.g. of number, and wisdom is made in many passages in *On Christian Doctrine*.

Thus Augustine contrasts his spiritual doctrine to those who pridefully boast "when they have learned the rules of valid inference as if they had learned the truth

2. ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Free Choice of the Will*, tr. by A.S. Benjamin and L.H. Hackstaff, New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1985, p. 36. Interestingly, Professor Hackstaff refers to the *Hortensius* (noted above): "Some scholars have argued that the *Hortensius* was a 'close imitation' of Aristotle's *Protrepticus* [...] If the *Hortensius* was a Latinized version of Aristotle's work, and if the Chroust-During reconstruction approximates the original, it is now possible for the general reader to survey something like the work that so stimulated the intellect of the young Augustine" (p. xi).

3. ST. AUGUSTINE, *City of God*, tr. by G.G. Walsh, S.J., D.B. Zema, S.J., G. Monahan, O.S.U., and D.J. Honan, Garden City (NY), Doubleday & Company Inc., 1958, p. 516.

4. ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Free Choice of the Will*, p. 55. My emphasis.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

of propositions.”<sup>6</sup> It is better to know a proposition’s truth — especially a truth revealed by God — than to know the rules of inference. For, says Augustine, one “who knows that there is a resurrection of the dead is better than another who knows that it follows from the proposition that there is no resurrection of the dead that ‘then Christ is not risen’.”<sup>7</sup>

A significant point is that, according to Augustine, the inner light of secular human reason is a kind of lower wisdom that has its source in a higher wisdom. In a limited sense the higher wisdom is to the light of God (who illuminates our moral and scientific ideas) what a lower wisdom is to the sun that illuminates natural objects :

Just as the objects which men see in the sunlight and choose to enjoy are many and varied, yet the light in which the sight of each man watching sees and holds what he enjoys is one ; so even if the goods are many and varied from which each man may choose what he wishes [...] nevertheless it is possible that the very light of wisdom [...] is one wisdom common to all wise men.<sup>8</sup>

What distinguishes wise men — in the fullest sense of wisdom — from foolish ones is that foolish ones elevate a *cognitive* inner light to an absolute light in terms of which they deem themselves gods.

### c) *Wisdom and Aristotelian Illumination*

The conflation of themselves *qua* gods with God is easy to explain on an Aristotelian model. Though this model is correct or approximately correct in explicating cognitive human knowledge, there is — on this model — an infusion of light or intelligence in persons with no reference to a transcendent God. And though there is also an infusion of intelligence in matter, an immanent God akin to an Aristotelian Cause might not diminish human pride. For human beings would have an intelligence that would only differ in degree from “God’s” intelligence. I shall expand momentarily on why an Aristotelian contemplation of such a higher intelligence, which might be construed to render such humility, would tend to be ignored. It is important at this point to stress that God created the sun which illuminates the mutable objects by which foolish persons may nevertheless have minimal cognitive wisdom. The Scriptural notion that the sun shines on the wicked and good alike takes on a peculiar epistemic significance.

It is not only the radiant energy of natural light on which the good and wicked are equally dependent for observational truth, e.g. the truth of an observation, say, that a person stumbles under a heavy load. It is God’s light which gives them the wisdom to know how to use that truth for good, e.g. aiding the person who stumbles. Persons who rely on mere natural light will be unable to make sense of their own inner moral light. (Such a light is poignantly relevant to twentieth-century Logical

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6. ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Christian Doctrine*, tr. by D.W. Robertson, Jr., New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1988, p. 70.

7. *Ibid.*

8. ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Free Choice of the Will*, p. 59-60.

Positivists who morally opposed various things including violence but who disparaged moral sentences as senseless because they were observationally unverifiable.) But Augustine's notion of an inner moral light, being inexorably linked to observation as well as reason, is also strikingly relevant to and reminiscent of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1142a) in which there may be observational intuition (*ta eschata*) of moral as well as empirical facts.<sup>9</sup>

I will elaborate on the relation between Aristotelian "facts" and Augustinian "illumination" shortly. Before I do, let me distinguish Augustine's epistemology on observation from Plato's rejection of observational knowledge. The rejection of such knowledge reflects an increased epistemic distance between Plato and Augustine but a decreased one between Aristotle and Augustine.

## 2. *Platonic Limitations Concerning Observation and Logic*

Whereas Augustine allowed for observational knowledge, Plato's Theory of Ideas was formulated precisely in order to overcome an ostensive lack of such knowledge. For it was an Idea *per se*, as opposed to a mutable particular, of which we have knowledge. Plato's view of knowledge (*Republic* 477d and 478a), for instance, holds that only "scientific knowledge" of Ideas is strictly knowledge *qua* knowledge by virtue of being infallible. Infallibility was not a characteristic of observation because observation had mutable particulars as its epistemic object. Such particulars, though limitedly sharing in unchanging Ideas, admitted of limited change. And such change was epistemologically connected to erroneous observation. For one cannot strictly say that one *knows* what is the case if what is the case at one moment may not be entirely the case at another moment. Hence, for Plato, there could be no observational knowledge.

### a) *Logical and Contingent Truth*

A denial of such knowledge is defective since infallible truth, known *a priori* by a Platonic soul before union with the body, can only be logically infallible on pain of being logically (trivially) true. On the one hand Augustine had an epistemic advantage over Plato inasmuch as he was cognizant of Aristotelian logic. Clearly, for example, his frequent references to the "truth of propositions," "rules of inference," "valid processes of reasoning" etc., in *On Christian Doctrine* and elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> indicate this cognizance. Certainly, for instance, he was aware that the denial that an observational

9. See ARISTOTLE'S *Nicomachean Ethics* (1142a). This passage refers to a theoretical intuition wherein one may grasp universals in particulars in virtue of a comparison to practical intuition. There is, in the latter, a "perception akin to that by which we perceive that the particular figure before us is a triangle." The words *ta eschata* are linked with an ultimate intuition of particular "facts" in empirical and moral situations as noted in R.J. SULLIVAN'S *Morality and the Good Life* (Memphis, Tennessee, Memphis State University Press, 1977), p. 119-120, fn. #63.

10. ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 67-70.

event both did and did not occur, while true, was trivial in the sense that its truth was not a truth about whether the event did in fact occur.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand the Aristotelian laws of thought, such as the logically true principles of excluded middle and non-contradiction, were limited to cognitive discourse. For they were only limitedly applicable to discourse or thought about God from “whom [...] everything is derived.”<sup>12</sup> The laws of thought, as everything else, were derived from God who created them. This is why Augustine asserts that “immutable rules [were] not instituted by men but were discovered.”<sup>13</sup> How can men discover, through cognitive reason alone, an exhaustive truth about the God who created such truth? We cannot wholly articulate either necessary or contingent truth about a Trinity that is simultaneously a unity and a plurality and about the Son of God who was simultaneously historical and eternal.

#### b) *Unreasonable Faith and Reasonable Observation*

This point, made *inter alia* in the *Confessions* (which I will address shortly), underscored our inability to make faith entirely “reasonable” as well as the limitation of cognitive truth. Neither logically necessary truth nor contingent truth are ascribed of empirical *reality*, much less of questionable Platonic Ideas. Rather it is *propositions* about such Ideas or about reality that are said to be true or false. Negatively stated, cognitive truth cannot be ascribed of self-contradictory propositions. We demand of propositions about corporeal reality that they not be self-contradictory. If they are not self-contradictory, we further demand that they be observationally true.

This brings us back to Plato. There can be true propositions, at the discursive level of natural knowledge, that are based on observation. If there were no veritable observation, then there could be no truth by which to empirically corroborate the scientific knowledge to which Plato does himself appeal. Professor S.E. Stumpf, for example, implicitly contrasts Plato’s appeal to scientific knowledge to Augustine’s notion that “the senses are always accurate as such.”<sup>14</sup> There is nothing wrong with our senses, for instance, when the oar appears bent in the water. “Believers,” says Augustine: “[...] trust the report of their bodily senses which subserve the intelligence. If they are at times deceived, they are at least better off than those who maintain that the senses can never be trusted.”<sup>15</sup> The anticipation of Descartes is intriguing.

In any case, what cannot be trusted — with respect to the bent oar example — is the surreptitious judgment that the oar is really bent. The judgment that it is really bent is not strictly implied by the observation. An immutable idea might be the epistemic

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11. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

14. See S.E. STUMPF’S “St. Augustine’s Christian Philosophy,” *Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy*, fourth Edition, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1988, p. 138. Though this history aims at a popular audience, it admirably combines scholarliness with lucidness. While it does not adequately relate Augustine to Aristotle, it does — in an undeveloped way — relate his epistemology to consciousness.

15. ST. AUGUSTINE, *City of God*, p. 466.

distinction between the judgment about an observation and the theoretical judgment of science. The function of science is both to explain why the oar appears bent and to predict the appearance.

## II. ARISTOTELIAN INFLUENCE

This discussion of a veritable appearance brings us in turn back to Aristotle. For how could observational appearances, which beg for universal ideas of science, have a connection to observational truth (e.g. to true predictions that obtain) unless both observational and theoretical ideas had really existing referents? Since Augustine does not situate theoretical (universal) referents in a separate realm of Platonic Ideas, such referents are inescapably a part of observational (Aristotelian) entities. And this is a good thing because it is such universal entities, processes, or relations that would, whether in terms of Aristotelian or modern physics, render causal explanations intelligible (wherein, say, the intelligibility of predicting the appearance of an oar being bent in water relies on a causal connection between water and light as theoretically understood).

It is the *natural* sunlight, bathing mutable objects, that enables persons to observe such objects. But it is the *supernatural* light of God, which bathes the universals in these particular objects, that enables persons to have universal scientific knowledge. Such knowledge, which is observationally testable, should supersede the surreptitious untested judgments that normally accompany observation. Thus, says Augustine, "unless what we perceive by the bodily senses passes beyond the inner sense, we cannot arrive at knowledge (*scientia*)."<sup>16</sup> This construal of scientific knowledge begets more than a *prima facie* connection to Aristotle.

### 1. *Outer and Inner Forms*

A close connection to Aristotle is further evidenced by Augustine's stress on "outer" and "inner" form. Hence, in the *City of God*, Augustine says that "Every material body has an outer form shaped by a potter, or smith, or other artisan who can paint or fashion even forms that look like the shapes of animals."<sup>17</sup> But he adds that "there is also an inner form which is not a shape but a shaper, with an *efficient causality* deriving from the secret and hidden determination of some living and intelligent nature which can shape [...] the inner souls of living things."<sup>18</sup>

#### a) *Oversight of Historians of Philosophy*

In addition to living things and an efficient cause being inextricably linked to Aristotelian causation, the reference to such a causation did arguably anticipate St. Thomas Aquinas' cosmological argument based on efficient cause. Thus although an

16. ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Free Choice of the Will*, p. 42.

17. ST. AUGUSTINE, *City of God*, p. 264.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 264. My emphasis.



efficient cause endemic to Aquinas has been used to link Aquinas to Aristotle, the epistemological relation between Aristotle and Augustine has apparently eluded historians of philosophy: S.E. Stumpf, with no reference to Aristotle, says that “Neoplatonism had finally made Christianity reasonable to him [Augustine]”;<sup>19</sup> Frederick Copleston holds that Augustine’s theory of knowledge “is markedly Platonic in character”;<sup>20</sup> W.T. Jones asserts that Augustine “found in Neoplatonism a notion of the deity as a creative force, or energy, rather than as a crudely anthropocentric architect or a handicraft worker”;<sup>21</sup> and E.M. Albert, T.C. Denise, and S.P. Peterfreund say that Augustine “turned to Greek philosophy and in particular to Neoplatonism”<sup>22</sup> (wherein no mention is made whatsoever of Aristotle).

I suggest that the emphasis on Platonism or Neoplatonism stems from a misguided belief that Augustine is only concerned with spiritual and moral matters. This supposedly contrasts with Aristotle who, while concerned with moral matters, developed the more epistemologically rigorous disciplines of formal logic and physics. The furthest thing from physics and logic are suggested by the very titles of Augustine’s books — *On Christian Doctrine*, *Confessions*, *City of God* and so forth. Moreover his “confessions” and doctrine do draw attention to his Platonic division between an immutable spiritual realm in which an unchanging God resides and, as Professor Walter Kaufmann notes,<sup>23</sup> the changing and sin-laden condition of a mutable world.

#### b) *God’s Immanence and Aristotelian Causation*

We need not deny that Augustine distinguished a mutable world from an unchanging spiritual one to deny that he disregarded an Aristotelian role for an immanent God. Thus on the one hand an unchanging God is ultimate reality and a spiritual reality is more real than a changing mutable one. At the same time a mutable world per se (*pace* Kaufmann) is not depraved. This, if anything, is a thesis of Platonists who construed the sensible world and physical body as “warring” against the rational mind. What is depraved, according to Augustine, is not the mind or an appropriate embracement of reason. Rather it is, among other things, the *will* to value reason over faith and to love corporeal things more than God. God, not to mention human free will

19. S.E. STUMPF, “St. Augustine’s Christian Philosophy,” p. 135.

20. Frederick COPLESTON, S.J., *A History of Philosophy. Volume 2. Medieval Philosophy Part I: Augustine to Bonaventure*, Garden City (NY), Doubleday & Company Inc., 1962, p. 73.

21. W.T. JONES, *A History of Western Philosophy: The Medieval Mind, Volume II*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969, p. 79. Interestingly, Professor F. SUPPE’s renowned *The Structure of Scientific Theories* (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1977) says: “W.T. Jones, *History of Modern Philosophy*... also has the merit of stressing the connections between developments in science and the history of philosophy” (p. 717, fn. #258). This footnote attaches to Suppe’s remark (p. 717) that “to an overwhelming degree the history of epistemology (and metaphysics) is the history of the philosophy of science — although histories of philosophy tend to give scant attention to this fact.”

22. E.M. ALBERT, *et. al.*, *Great Traditions in Ethics*, New York, D. Van Nostrand Company, 1988, p. 84.

23. See Walter KAUFMANN’s *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, New York, NAL Penguin Inc., 1975, p. 13. Importantly, I think that Professor Kaufmann underplays the pejorative influence of Nietzsche’s thought on the contemporary social-political praxis (which minimizes a beneficial influence of Augustine). See my article “Nietzschean Politics and Marxian Science: From Political Science to Ideology in Kant’s Copernican Revolution,” *Review Journal of Philosophy & Social Science*, 17 (1992), n<sup>os</sup> 1 & 2.

(*liberum*) and Love (*agape*), is not strictly a part of Plato's Doctrine of Ideas. Thus, notwithstanding his "informal" remarks in the *Apology* (23a) that God alone has wisdom, the Ideas were perfectly intelligible and could be known by men in terms of true definitions. But such definitions would not be obtainable for God *qua* Love because He passed human understanding. Plato's understanding of something being real on condition of its being knowable would imply that the Judaeo-Christian God is not real. Limitedly real things, for Augustine, might nonetheless be loved in virtue of love reflecting a nature of persons who resemble God.

On the other hand God is also conceived as an immanent Being whose immanency, besides being spiritually understood in terms of God's Son, is epistemologically understood in terms of an Aristotelian Cause :

Thus, God is the Cause of all things — a cause that makes but is not made. Other causes make, but they are themselves made — for example, all created spirits and especially, rational spirits. *Material causes* which are rather passive than active are not to be included among *efficient causes*, for their power is limited to what the wills of spirits work through them.<sup>24</sup>

### c) *Objections to Aristotelian Influence*

It may be objected that Aristotle's efficient cause invokes a concept of life that is merely characterized by intelligence and predictability. The latter, it may be argued, are ultimately related to a rational — not mysterious — First Cause or Unmoved Mover. But, again, this objection obscures two points.

First, it obscures the point that there are both Aristotelian and Platonic elements in Augustine's thought : Insofar as God comprises an immanent and intelligent life force in things (coordinated, incidently, with his thesis of *rationes seminales* — seminal principles in evolving living things that anticipated modern theories of evolution), his thought elicits an Aristotelian interpretation ; inasmuch as God comprises an unchanging transcendent Being who resides in an immutable incorporeal realm, his thought invites a Platonic interpretation. These interpretations complement rather than conflict with a Judaeo-Christian notion of God.

Thus, secondly, it is true that God is ultimately engulfed in mystery. "Mystery" does not evoke the notion of a mere lack of cognitive knowledge that persons may someday obtain, say in heaven. Rather it evokes the notion of an ultimate ontological *source* of truth. The source of truth is a God who *is* Love : All things, including knowledge shall pass away except Love. But Love *qua* God manifests Itself (Himself) in the world, and one mode of such a manifestation is the world's intelligent and predictable behavior. For apart from such predictability, which persons naturally associate with a purposive intelligence resembling human intelligence, persons could not develop and apply the sciences for prolonging their life, enhancing their comfort, or "subduing" nature (per Genesis 1 :28).

24. ST. AUGUSTINE, *City of God*, p. 108. My emphasis.

Nature, from Heraclitus to Thomas, is infused with a mind (*nous* or *logos*) that, resembling a human mind, draws attention to a higher mind which governs the world and all the things comprising it. Thus, says Augustine, the wise man comes “to understand that it [the human mind] is placed between immutable things above it and other mutable things below it.”<sup>25</sup> And so, he adds, this man turns “all his knowledge towards the praise and love of one God from whom he knows that everything is derived.”<sup>26</sup>

## 2. Aristotelian Influence and Augustine's Pessimism

Why is it then that many persons, especially knowledgeable ones such as scientists (and secular philosophers), do not know that everything is derived from God? Let me discuss why God may be ignored in terms of an Aristotelian epistemology. I shall then reiterate why this epistemology gives way, or limitedly gives way, to a Platonic ontology for understanding a spiritual reality.

### a) *Persons Seeking to be God*

Thus, let me begin with the question of why knowledgeable persons may not believe in either a spiritual reality or God. Though they may know the sciences, which Augustine praises contrary to historians of philosophy who tend to disregard this fact,<sup>27</sup> such persons are not grateful to God for being able to “subdue” the world. It is the world or nature being responsive to scientific investigation that *inter alia* renders it good. It is confusing its goodness with the goodness of its Creator that may beget evil. Evil, however, is not merely intellectual confusion. For confusion as such has its source in the human will; the will, among other things, to have the power of gods. Persons may tend to view themselves as gods by virtue of their power to predict and manipulate their physical environment.

The nature of the environment or surroundings of persons, to be sure, is not the sole link to an evil will. But it is an important one. For Augustine distinguishes between “two kinds of things that can be seen”:

One originates in the will of a being who persuades — for example, the devil, through whose persuasion and man's consent, man sinned. The second arises out of the influence of his *surroundings*, the spirit's intention, or the bodily senses. Everything except the changeless Trinity is subject to the spirit's intention [...].<sup>28</sup>

If the spirit's intention is to “imitate God in a perverse way, so that it wills to delight in its own power — if the spirit takes this road, the more it desires to be greater, the less it becomes.”<sup>29</sup> The less it becomes, the more it is that persons believe that a

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25. ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 73.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

27. W.T. JONES, *A History of Philosophy*, p. 129.

28. ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Free Choice of the Will*, p. 174. My emphasis.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

mysterious God is embraced through an epistemic insecurity. Such insecurity is, of course, associated with any belief in the supernatural.

b) *Delusory Explanations of Science*

Belief in the supernatural, in a sin-laden human condition influenced by science, would be viewed as properly being superseded by natural knowledge. Since the development and application of this knowledge would be reliant on nature's order and continuity, metaphysical principles that express such continuity would be construed as rational (Aristotelian-like) first principles of knowledge. And though knowledge — according to Aristotle — ultimately rested on intuition, persons can empirically intuit the essences of things that enable them to inductively formulate (*epogoge*) the *archai* of scientific definitions or laws.

But this Aristotelian view of law-like definitions in science may fail to result in even the conception of an Efficient Cause *qua* God, much less the God of Judaeo-Christianity to which such a Cause is a metaphysical preamble. Thus neither the laws nor universal essences to which the laws appeal may evoke attention to anything more than a corporeal reality. For the universal essences in corporeal things beget the notion of *observable* unities (of form and matter) whose orderly motion is connected more to observable efficient causes — observable sculptor or statue *per se* — than to *unobservable* wills of created spirits in them. And hence while Augustine recognized the efficacy of an Aristotelian epistemology, the ease of distorting it explained his well known pessimism about the benefit of natural knowledge in itself. ("Thus it seems to me," says Augustine, "that studious and intelligent youths [...] might be helpfully admonished that they should not pursue those studies which are taught outside of the Church of Christ as though they might lead to the blessed life."<sup>30</sup>)

The diminished attention to created spirits in things would naturally lessen attention to the Creating Spirit (God). Augustine's *Confessions* does in fact acknowledge, if not disparage, this sort of secular knowledge in astronomy. Thus, in addition to the above admonishment to studious youths, Augustine says :

but the astronomers are flattered and claim the credit [for powers of calculation] for themselves. They lapse into pride without respect for you, my God, and fall into shadow away from your light, but although they can predict an eclipse of the sun so far ahead, they cannot see that they themselves are already in the shadow of eclipse.<sup>31</sup>

Importantly, Augustine adds that they are in the shadow of eclipse because "they ignore you [God] and do not inquire how they come to possess the *intelligence* to make these researches."<sup>32</sup>

30. ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 73.

31. ST. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, tr. by R.S. Pine-Coffin, Middlesex, England, Penguin Books Ltd., 1984, p. 93.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 93. My emphasis.

### 3. *Augustine's Pessimism and Modern Philosophy*

This reference to a disregarded "intelligence" in themselves is obviously linked to the failure to acknowledge an intelligence (rational spirit *qua* efficient cause) in the causally-related objects of scientific investigation. And it is a startling insight for several reasons. First, it underscores that the paradigm Aristotelian physics, which metaphysically appealed to efficient causes, may be articulated independently of an unobservable intelligence in things. Augustine's attention to the mere observed causes of things thereby anticipated a "shadow" of skepticism, stemming from causality, that was given critical expression by Hume and Kant. For Hume's idea of causality had appealed to the observation terms (ideas) of "priority," "constant conjunction," and "contiguity," and these had a mere empirical basis in the bodily senses (impressions).

#### a) *Humean-Kantian Illusion of "Critical Thought"*

Kant, though disregarding the skeptical distinction between sense impressions and an external reality that supposedly caused them, had underscored the Humean point that the causal principle was not *known a priori*. Thus its truth was not established empirically through science. Rather the *a priori* assumption of the principle was necessary for the intelligibility of scientific inquiry. Such inquiry was ostensibly rendered rational by transposing the Humean problem of causality not being *known a priori* into the thesis that persons have an *a priori* cognition that automatically (mechanically) interprets an empirical reality causally. But what of Augustine's remarkable notion, which rejected a mechanical model of self and causal theory of perception, that we are as *conscious* of our own intelligence as we are of one reflected by the orderly behavior of an external world?

I will elaborate on an external world in relation to consciousness shortly. I now note that Augustine's epistemology was wholly ignored by Kant. Notwithstanding the fact that Kant's thesis of an *a priori* cognition is no more logically or empirically true than the causal principle, the dogmatic appeal to this "first principle" of knowledge explains much modern antagonism to Augustine's admonishments about secular knowledge. For the ostensive Kantian resolution to the spurious epistemic status of causality, together with the emphasis in the Enlightenment on science as paradigm knowledge, resulted in religious skepticism and rational theology alike: rational theology insofar as theologico-scientific ideas were not based on an ordinary experience leading to God but rather on "rational" ideas of God and of an intelligent mind as mere regulative concepts for a coherent synthesis of sense experience; religious skepticism inasmuch as such experience was explicitly denied to imply the reality of an intelligent mind (much less an intelligence in things) or of God (much less a transcendent God of Judaeo-Christianity).

#### b) *The Philosopher's God*

Second, Augustine's reference to the significance of ignoring an intelligence in things draws attention to a problem of more open-minded scientists. For even if scientists

were to inquire about their mutable intelligence which resembles an immutable intelligence of God, the God that is conceived would tend to resemble the philosopher's "God" *qua* rational Aristotelian Cause. Such a Cause, far from constituting a Thomistic "preamble" to faith in a transcendent God of revelation, might equally well evoke the untenable demand that revelation be reasonable. This anticipates John Locke's "reasonable" empiricist view of religion. Professor John W. Yolton (John Locke Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University), for example, asserts: "Locke submits faith to reason; the principles he needs for his religion are few and simple. He makes Christianity a *reasonable* religion."<sup>33</sup>

What might seem reasonable is that, except for the greater contemplative rationality of persons, the efficient cause of (intelligence in) organic and inorganic things renders them normatively equal. This is a point of poignant significance in view of a twentieth-century New Age movement and movement of radical environmentalists who speak unqualifiedly of "god" in all things and of environmental or animal "chauvinism" (wherein persons think of themselves as rationally or spiritually distinctive).

#### 4. *The Role of Platonic Ontology*

Thus, for normative reasons, an Aristotelian or quasi-Aristotelian view begs for a normative ontological hierarchy of Platonism. Augustine asserts, in *City of God*, that "They [the Platonists] argued that whatever exists in either matter or life; that life is superior to matter; that the appearance of a body is sensible, whereas the form of life is intelligible."<sup>34</sup> It is the case *prima facie* that this normatively links a Platonic-Augustinian notion of intelligence to a spiritual distinctiveness of persons. Persons would be spiritually and intellectually superior to an Aristotelian "godliness" and intelligence in other organic and inorganic things. For it would *not* be such things that resembled the intelligent form of a transcendent Being but rather human beings. Moreover, besides Plato's tripartite Idea resembling the Trinity, God would be an individual Being as opposed to a mere amorphous Aristotelian intelligence in all things.

##### a) *Compatibility of Platonic Ontology and Aristotelian Epistemology*

Notwithstanding Augustine's assertion that "They [the Platonists] preferred intelligible form to sensible appearance,"<sup>35</sup> he underscores that an inferiority of such appearance does not fully support a Platonic ontology or erase the explanatory power of an Aristotelian epistemology. For again, this epistemology explains why pagan or secular persons may have natural knowledge without such knowledge (*scientia*) tending to result in a "knowledge" of God or Scripture. The Scripture lends itself to a Platonic conception of God, as Augustine says, insofar as the Platonists rightly conclude "that

33. John W. YOLTON, *Locke and French Materialism*, Oxford, England, Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 156. See my invited book review of this work in *The Modern Schoolman: A Quarterly Journal of Philosophy*, LXVII (1991), p. 75-78.

34. ST. AUGUSTINE, *City of God*, p. 153.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

only a reality unmade from which all other realities originate could be the ultimate principle of all things.”<sup>36</sup> The notion that all things have an ultimate source or origination may not be entirely satisfactory. But it is a theological step in the right direction. For an ultimate principle that embraced an unmade reality from which all other realities originate is not compatible with an Aristotelian Unmoved Mover. Thus, as S.E. Stumpf observes: “the Unmoved Mover did not mean the same thing as a *first* mover [...]. Nor was the Unmoved Mover considered by him [Aristotle] a *creator* in the sense of later theology.”<sup>37</sup>

Augustine, though acknowledging Plato’s ontological hierarchy as a step in the right direction, also stresses its limitations. These limitations are belied by the Platonic notion of the tripartite Idea of the One, Good, and Beautiful as the source of all other Ideas and of the corporeal things in which they limitedly share. For the notion of such things “sharing in” the Ideas is a notion that merely explains the limited intelligibility of mutable things. Thus while the ontological hierarchy of Ideas is important, the epistemological interpretation begets the idea of the One, Good, and Beautiful *qua* God as a perfectly intelligible *thing*! Such a *thing*, for the Platonists, would be the ultimate *object* of knowledge for a rational “mother” soul. An eternal soul might conceivably have life, but its ultimate epistemic object — being an Idea per se — would not be a living thing.

#### b) *Platonic Form of God*

The influence of Aristotle on Augustine’s appeal to a Platonic ontology is evident even here. Hence Augustine’s thought, following an Aristotelian tendency of unification (soul and body, universals and particulars etc.), suggests the unification of an eternally living Soul and an ultimate tripartite Idea. For the unity of such an Idea and living Soul generates the *philosophical* idea of a God who is simultaneously ultimate Reality and blessed Life; One who alone gives beatitude: “Since it is the nature of the soul that it cannot be without some sort of life, having been created immortal, it is the depth of death for it to be alienated from the life of God [...]. He is the Giver who gives genuine beatitude.”<sup>38</sup> Beatitude stems from God in virtue of God being both an absolutely blessed Life and ultimate Reality who, in His ultimateness *qua* self-sufficiency, is a sufficient condition for the blessedness of living beings (whose outer and inner “forms” resemble the “form” of God).

Again, the relation of an Aristotelian unification to a substantive Platonic “form” of God is suggested by other remarks as well: “The first kind of form [outer form] we may attribute to any artificer, but the second [inner form], only to the one Artificer, Creator, and Maker who is God.”<sup>39</sup> Does this imply that God has no revealed outer form? God, from a Platonic standpoint, is simultaneously an uncreated inner form (eternal Life who gives life) and outer form (revealed in terms of the tripartite Father.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

37. S.E. STUMPF, “St. Augustine’s Christian Philosophy,” p. 94.

38. ST. AUGUSTINE, *City of God*, p. 134.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

Son, and Holy Spirit). Were not the latter revealed by a transcendent God to be each a distinct personage who, from a philosophical standpoint, comprised an outer form of one Platonic-like "Person" ? This does not obviate the point that, from an ultimate theological perspective, God is beyond philosophical comprehension.

c) *God as Aristotelian Cause*

At the same time God, from an Aristotelian perspective, is tacitly acknowledged to be an Efficient, Material, and Final Cause whose immanence is reflected in the corporeal world (for those who *will* [to] see). Thus, besides appealing to an Aristotelian unification with respect to a tripartite (Platonic) conception of God, Augustine says :

[...] each of God's creatures speaks to us in a kind of mystical code [*secreto quodam loquendi modo*] [...] to intimate an image of the Trinity every time we ask : Who made it ? [What is its Efficient Cause ?] How ? [What is its Material Cause ?] Why ? [What is its Final Cause ?]<sup>40</sup>

That God is also understood as a Formal Cause, which determines *what* a thing is, is evidenced by Augustine's assertion that "It is the hidden and penetrating power of His irresistible presence which gives *being* to every creature that can be said to *be*, whatever its genus and species may be."<sup>41</sup>

God viewed as a form of the world's substance is associated with an Aristotelian epistemology wherein the Creator's immutable and omniscient reason permeates His creation. This notion is complemented, however, by the idea that, whereas "Right Reason" determines choices in an Aristotelian scheme, the omniscience of God is ultimately linked to God's omnipotent *will* in Augustine's scheme. The *will per se* is not an epistemic referent. Thus ultimate metaphysical questions, say why the world is one way as opposed to another, are questions beyond rational answers. This casts an important light on Augustine's statement that "We call Him omnipotent because He does whatever He wills to do and suffers nothing that He does not will to suffer."<sup>42</sup>

### III. AUGUSTINE'S ANTICIPATION OF LOCKE AND SARTRE

Interestingly, Augustine's reference to an infinite power of God's will once again anticipates thought-provoking insights of modern and contemporary philosophy. Let me, in closing, briefly expand on some of them in order to indicate the degree to which he goes beyond a Platonic Aristotelianism.

It might be noted, for example, that John Locke — in apparent inconsistency with his own empiricism — suggested that there is nothing inconsistent in the notion that

40. *Ibid.*, p. 233. My emphasis.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 109.



God could superadd to matter the power of thought.<sup>43</sup> Whereas Professor Yolton construes Locke's thinking-matter thesis to be an important influence on French materialism, Augustine had already suggested — in perfect consistency with his own position — that “God infused into it [bodies] a capacity for reasoning and intellection.”<sup>44</sup> Though he is primarily speaking of human bodies in this statement, we have seen that his notion of efficient cause employs a notion of intelligence in matter (nature) as well. Therefore, besides going beyond a thoroughgoing rationality of Plato and Aristotle, he provides a theologico-philosophical basis for Locke's suggestion.

### 1. *Locke's "Thinking-Matter Thesis"*

The question ensues concerning whether, or to what degree, Augustine may have directly or indirectly influenced Locke. It is beyond my scope to adequately respond to this question. But it is an important one. For Locke's suggestion of a single substance with dual properties of thought and matter, in addition to reflecting an Aristotelian-Augustinian thesis, may have modified French thought (the French “philosophes”) more than Yolton imagines. Hence, for example, if Augustine did anticipate — if not influence — Locke, he may have influenced or anticipated Jean-Paul Sartre's existential phenomenology as well. This phenomenology supersedes the thinking-matter thesis with the thesis that matter is infused with consciousness ; a philosophical supersession ignored by Yolton.<sup>45</sup>

#### a) *Thinking and Consciousness*

So, Augustine, besides anticipating Locke's thinking-matter thesis, anticipated central elements of a phenomenological epistemology. S.E. Stumpf, though ignoring an important Aristotelian aspect of Augustine's thought, implicitly links his thought to a phenomenological thesis of consciousness when he says “Any conscious person is certain that he exists, that he is alive, and that he can think, ‘for we *are*,’ says Augustine, ‘and we know we *are*, and we love our being and our knowledge of it [...]’.”<sup>46</sup> What is extraordinary about Augustine's connection of knowledge to consciousness is, as contemporary phenomenologists acknowledge, that there can be no intelligible notion of our knowing something apart from our consciousness (awareness) of our knowing it.

There are in fact a plethora of remarks, by Augustine, that anchor Stumpf's tacit connection of Augustine to the thesis that we are incontrovertibly aware of ourselves ;

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43. J.W. YOLTON, *Locke and French Materialism*, p. 1-2. Yolton refers to Professor Pierre Coste's translation in 1700 of the complete *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, by LOCKE, in which Coste noted the relevant passage between himself and Locke concerning the thinking-matter suggestion. Also see Charles TAYLOR's *Sources of the Self*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989. p. 127-142. Taylor discusses both Locke and the extraordinary modernity of Augustine's thought.

44. ST. AUGUSTINE. *City of God*, p. 526.

45. See this criticism of Yolton's book in my book review in *The Modern Schoolman* (referred to in footnote n° 33).

46. S.E. STUMPF, “St. Augustine's Christian Philosophy,” p. 137. My emphasis.

an ontological ground-being for our choices and knowledge. I will briefly address Sartre's linkage of knowledge to consciousness shortly. I now note that Augustine's remarks include the following: those in *On Free Choice of the Will* wherein even "a beast is aware that it does not see when it does not see [...] [and] also aware that it sees when it sees";<sup>47</sup> the *City of God* in which he holds that "we are certain that we possess these three things [concerning knowledge, love, and death], not by the testimony of others but by our own consciousness of their presence in our interior and unerring vision";<sup>48</sup> the *Confessions* wherein Augustine asserts that persons who count "are aware of what they count";<sup>49</sup> and *On Christian Doctrine* in which he says that those who apply the rules of rhetoric, while discussing things in the world, "cannot be aware of the fact that they are applying them while they are speaking unless they are discussing the rules themselves".<sup>50</sup>

#### b) *Consciousness and Freedom*

This last remark is particularly insightful. One cannot, in other words, be directly aware of things in the world about which one rhetorically speaks insofar as one is directly conscious of one's rhetoric. This is strikingly reminiscent of Sartre's notion that, inasmuch as one seeks to be directly conscious of one's "consciousness of this or that thing-in-the-world,"<sup>51</sup> one loses a conscious comprehension of it. A key Sartrean notion is that when we are directly conscious of things, we are indirectly or implicitly conscious of such consciousness. Such implicit consciousness is a necessary condition for the intelligibility of thought. This leads to the notion that the Being-in-itself (the body) of the human being has an infusion of consciousness that is ontologically prior to the capacity for thought: Though there can be no thought without a consciousness of it, there can be consciousness without thought. This echoes Augustine's notion that the free will, whether of God (*libertas*) or of persons (*liberum*) is more fundamental than thought or reason. For it is the self-consciousness (-awareness) of persons that comprises their freedom to think or not to think. And persons can be directly conscious of their thinking or of the world about which they think (but only limitedly at the same time). But in either case they are indirectly aware of their consciousness.

47. ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Free Choice of the Will*, p. 45. See my article "Business, Ethics, and Business Ethics," *Thought*, 66 (1991), p. 297-309, for a similar emphasis on the epistemic importance of Augustine's attention to human awareness and freedom.

48. ST. AUGUSTINE, *City of God*, p. 239.

49. ST. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, p. 219.

50. ST. AUGUSTINE, *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 120.

51. See J.-P. SARTRE'S *Being and Nothingness*, tr. by Hazel Barnes, New York, Philosophical Library Inc., 1956, p. 316. I am indebted to Professor Barnes, a former advisor and friend, for her reference to Sartre's notion of consciousness being "infused" in body. See my forthcoming article, "Physics and Existential Phenomenology," in *New Horizons in the Philosophy of Science*, David Lamb, ed., Eastleigh Hants, England, Sombourne Press, 1992. In this article I link Augustine's idea of observational veracity to a phenomenological notion of a non-cognitive element in observation by virtue of which observation is *not* exhaustively theory-dependent (per the relativistic theses of Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend and others). Moreover my discussion of Augustine's critical distinction between tested and untested observational "judgments" effectively refutes W.T. JONES' assertion that Augustine was "dominated by an extremely naive teleology that [...] made impossible the kind of patient and careful investigation that underlies any real scientific advance" (*A History of Western Philosophy*, p. 129).

## 2. *Thought and Sartre's Phenomenological Consciousness*

Notwithstanding Sartre's atheism, this indicates that persons — who for Augustine resemble God — are self-consciously free. It is not a matter of a Kantian concept or of a rational proof but rather of that of which we are immediately, incontrovertibly, and phenomenologically conscious. Significantly, Augustine's idea of matter being infused with intelligence or a capacity for thought, together with his emphasis on the infinite free will of the Creator who made man in His own image (with a finite free will), suggest an important anticipation of twentieth-century existentialism as well as phenomenological analyses of consciousness and Locke's suggestion.

It is beyond my purpose to elaborate on this anticipation. It certainly adds an ignored depth to Augustine's otherwise Platonic Aristotelianism. But it should be noted that his anticipations go well beyond the usual acknowledgments of his connection to existentialism. The latter, for instance, is only minimally addressed in Professor Kaufmann's *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre* :

If we look for anything remotely similar in the long past of European literature, we do not find it in [secular] philosophy but, most nearly, in such Christian writers as Augustine [...]. [It] is in Christianity [...] that we first find this wallowing in man's depravity and this uncompromising concentration on the dark side of man's inner life.<sup>52</sup>

My discussion of Augustine's references to freedom and consciousness, however, indicate that it is not his mere emphasis on man's inner life which links him to twentieth-century existentialism.

### a) *Consciousness of Good and Evil*

At the same time the existential link belies the normative value of Augustine's Platonism. For it is a Platonic element in his theology that philosophically relates it to an "essence" which precedes "existence." It is secular existentialism, in merely stressing a freely-chosen conscious existence, that results in despair and anguish. For if self-consciousness (consciousness of consciousness) is the unqualified fundamental fact of the human condition, then we are left *inter alia* with Dostoevsky's "unhappy consciousness," Sartre's "vertiginous freedom," and Heidegger's "angst" with no *a priori* norm as a basis for our choices.

But, for Augustine, the capacity of persons to freely choose has its origin in a freely choosing God. God provides a moral and normative certainty that "In Him our existence will know no death, our knowledge embrace no error, [and] our love meet no resistance."<sup>53</sup> That these certainties are intended to be based on an incontrovertible consciousness of the self is evidenced by Augustine's assertion that we are certain of them "by our own consciousness of their presence in our interior and unerring vision."<sup>54</sup> That such a vision provides an *a priori* moral basis for distinguishing good from evil

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52. Walter KAUFMANN, *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, p. 13.

53. ST. AUGUSTINE, *City of God*, p. 239.

54. *Ibid.*

is evidenced by his reference to our "unhesitating trust in these witnesses."<sup>55</sup> For they witness God's image in our very selves. God's absolute freedom from sin (*libertas*) informs an otherwise vertiginous human freedom (*liberum*) of what are correct choices for goodness and everlasting life.

b) *Augustine's Existential Essentialism*

Thus Augustine is often held to have embraced a Platonic essentialism that conflicts with an existential dictum "existence precedes essence." But it is perfectly clear that he embraces a freely chosen existence without relinquishing a consciousness of an essence that persons may freely affirm or reject. Moreover, the human capacity to freely affirm or reject what God wills, while philosophically involving an Aristotelian-like synthesis of Plato's Idea and soul, goes beyond the Platonic-Aristotelian concept of persons being caused to strive for certain ends (*entelechy*). Augustine articulates such ends, in part, in terms of an existential essentialism. He underscores that there is "free choice" but that this choice is "a condition of responsible living."<sup>56</sup> He draws attention to the living God as a Being whose will surpasses human knowledge.

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55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*, p. 110.