

Augustine on pagan knowledge of God and the Trinity

Abstract: Augustine narrates in *Confessions*, VII, ix, 13-15 his encounter with the Platonist books, which permitted him to grasp the immateriality of God and surprisingly the Christian Trinity too, a thesis that seems confirmed in the psychological arguments he puts forward in *The Trinity*, among other texts. However, a more fine-grained analysis shows that Augustine sets strict limits to the pagan, non-revealed knowledge of God, meaning that he doesn't think the Neoplatonics professed the Trinity in the sense of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

Keywords: Augustine, Knowledge of God, Neoplatonism, Natural theology, Metaphysics.

Resumen: Agustín narra en las *Confesiones*, VII, ix, 13-15 su encuentro con los libros platónicos, que le permitió captar la inmaterialidad de Dios y sorpresivamente también la Trinidad cristiana, una tesis que parece confirmada por los argumentos psicológicos esgrimidos en su texto *La Trinidad*, entre otros. Sin embargo, un análisis más fino muestra que Agustín limita el conocimiento pagano –no revelado– de Dios, lo cual significa que no piensa que los neoplatónicos hayan profesado la Trinidad en el sentido del credo Niceno-Constantinopolitano.

Palabras claves: Agustín, conocimiento de Dios, neoplatonismo, teología natural, metafísica.

Introduction

In the seventh book of the *Confessions*, paragraphs 13-15, Augustine recounts what he discovered in the Platonic books given to him by “some man swollen with utterly tremendous pride”¹. Modern readers are surprised to find therein a long number of philosophical assertions showing deep resemblance (if not complete coincidence) with some of the most important Christian tenets. Accordingly, he read not with identical words, but signifying nonetheless the same, that the Word was in the beginning with God, for it was of the same nature as God, through Whom everything was made, but what was created by Him did not recognize Him².

¹ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Confessions*, VII, ix, 13 (*The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/1, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B., Hyde Park, New City Press, 2015²). When available, the original texts Latin texts were consulted, either from the CCSL or the maurine edition found in <www.augustinus.it>.

² AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Conf.*, VII, ix, 13-15.

The most obvious interpretation of this text sees in it an attempt to understand the Trinity starting from pagan philosophical concepts. Critics have adduced it, among other passages from Augustine's writings, to accuse him of Hellenizing the Judeo-Christian message and therefore distorting the mysterious and supernatural reality of Christianity³. The research spanning the last 30 years, however, has widely proved Augustine's Christological based theological reflections⁴. Thus, it's a gross misinterpretation to say that Augustine initiated a long line of thought of the erroneous "western" theology, which has tried from its origins to replace Theology with Philosophy.

It is not my intention here to dwell upon that discussion, for modern literature abounds on the topic. Instead, I wish to tackle a connected issue which, up to my knowledge, hasn't received enough treatment in the light of the aforementioned state-of-the-art: what does Augustine think of the

³ For a concise synthesis of this discussion, see Robert CROUSE, "Paucis Mutatis Verbis. St. Augustine's Platonism", in Robert Dodaro, George Lawless (eds.), *Augustine and His Critics*, London & New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 37-50. Crouse aptly notes that many of Augustine's critics rest upon the assumption that Christian belief and Neoplatonic thinking are opposite and totally irreconcilable ways of thinking. K. FLASCH, for instance, in his introduction to the translation of the various questions to Simplician, entitled *Logik Des Schreckens* (Frankfurt am Main, Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung Mainz, 2012), stresses time and again Augustine's negative account on human's will, contending that the notion of a saving grace is "an attack upon the dignity of man" (Angriff auf die Menschswürde). Hence, Augustine's synthesis ends up with insoluble contradictions or misinterpretations of the real Neoplatonic thinking. Recent investigations of late antiquity schools of philosophy have proved, however, the deep similarities of their goals and how Augustine didn't simply rehearse the Neoplatonic arguments, but innovated on his own creativity.

⁴ See Lewis AYRES, "The Fundamental Grammar of Augustine's Trinitarian Theology", in Robert Dodaro, George Lawless (eds.), *Augustine and His Critics*, pp. 51-76. The author contends that recent investigations have increasingly provided evidence that the "western" and "eastern" theological systems aren't fundamentally different while remaining within the same tradition of Nicea and Constantinople. Ayres corroborates his assertion by showing how Augustine develops a grammar that remains faithful to the biblical sources and the tenets of faith; recent texts that point to the same direction are the same author's monograph Lewis AYRES, *Augustine and the Trinity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010; Rowan WILLIAMS, *On Augustine*, London & New York, Bloomsbury, 2016, esp. pp. 131-190; Luigi GIOIA, O.S.B., *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's De Trinitate*, Oxford Theological Monographs, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010. Although Gioia's monograph suffers from a style that denotes the progressive way he came to his conclusions (proper to any doctoral thesis), he masterfully explains how does Augustine really expounds his Trinitarian doctrine under the logic of Incarnation and God's self Revelation, remaining so away from any suspicion of an overly-Neoplatonic disquisition of this faith tenet.

natural knowledge of God? What did Neoplatonics know of the divine substance and the Trinitarian being of God, according to Augustine? Indeed, the quoted passage seems to offer a downright refutation to the recent thesis we've alluded to, in other words, Augustine seems to say the Revelation coming from the Incarnation doesn't add any fundamentally new notice to our insight of God. Which means that recent authors, although conscious of Augustine's critiques on theurgy and polytheism, don't seem to note the limits set by Augustine on the natural knowledge of God, remembering only his positive remarks of their "human wisdom"⁵. Peter King, for example, argues that Augustine sincerely deemed that the Neoplatonics had discovered the Trinity, specially due to Augustine's probable ignorance at the time on the difference between hypostasis, person and substance (hence the three Neoplatonic hypostases could be read as three persons in a less serious translation) and that his reproach on the missing Mediator was of an ethical, non-epistemological kind⁶.

Our paper, therefore, wishes to articulate a brief account of Augustine's view on the possibility and limits of a "natural theology". To that end, we will approach our subject of study from two convergent ways. First, we will examine some texts where he defines the ascent to God and the divine attributes he therefrom deduces. Afterwards, we will check Augustine's own appraisals on such attempts, with a special emphasis on its limits. Finally, we'll draw some conclusions from the studied passages, attempting to connect them with the Augustine's theological epistemology.

Augustine's descriptions on ascents to God

Throughout his entire literary output, Augustine keeps a confident view on human reason's natural capacity for reaching truth, even though his view

⁵ See, John MARENBO, *Pagans and Philosophers*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2015, pp. 26-31; Wilma GUNDERSDORF VON JESS, "Reason as Propaedeutic to Faith in Augustine", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 5/4 (1974) 230-233. Although O'Daly notes that God's nature is "only available" to those who know him through faith, he acknowledges that Neoplatonics "have gained partial understanding of the divine", without explaining those limits. See also Gerard O'DALY, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1987, pp. 211-216.

⁶ See Peter KING, "Augustine's Encounter with Neoplatonism", *The Modern Schoolman* 82/3 (March 2005) 213-226; see as well the article found in the same volume: Michael GORMAN, "Augustine's Use of Neoplatonism in *Confessions* VII: A Response to Peter King", *The Modern Schoolman* 82/3 (March 2005) 227-233.

on what this faculty has actually discovered (*i. e.*, what have philosophers in fact discerned throughout history by virtue of pure reason) did change with time. Not long after his conversion, in 386, Augustine wrote *Contra Academicos*, whose third book refutes the New Academy's skepticism from a philosophical stance independent from Revelation⁷. First, he criticizes the skeptic's arguments (who thought that the wise man is he who abstains from all judgement) for their incoherence, because to state that no truth can be posited is already to defend a truth, and the wise would possess some kind of knowledge, wisdom. Afterwards, Augustine thinks that many absolutely certain truths may be reached by anyone, and "if you ask me where he will find wisdom itself, I shall reply: 'in himself'"⁸. So optimistic was he on the reach of reason and so deeply impregnated with Neoplatonic philosophy, that he affirms that Plato and Aristotle were masters of the "one school of the most genuine philosophy [which] has expressed, I believe, what pertains to knowledge, doctrine, and code of morals which have regard for the interests of the soul"⁹. The wisest Greeks formulated a *philosophia perennis*, in deep continuity with Christian Revelation¹⁰. Christ is authority, and Plato's doctrine represents reason, through which he wishes to understand, and not only know, faith.

Among the philosophers that tried to understand God, the Neoplatonics excelled in late antiquity. Augustine did not simply reproduce their arguments, but creatively assimilated their guiding propositions and formulated an original platonic system¹¹. With time, he grew conscious of the irreconcilable points driving apart pagan Platonism and Christianity, becoming so

⁷ It is valuable to note that he did not reject later this positive view on reaching truth. See also AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Revisions*, I, i, 1 (*The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/2, trans. William Babcock, Hyde Park, New City Press, 2010).

⁸ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Contra Academicos*, XIV, 30 (*Mediaeval Philosophical Texts in Translation 2*, trans. Mary Patricia Garvey, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1957). Similar thoughts may be found in AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *On True Religion*, cxxx, 55 (*The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/8, Hyde Park, New City Press, 2005); *Mag.*, xi, 38; xii, 40; *Letters [Ep.]*, XIX, 1 (*The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century*, II/1-4, td. by Boniface Ramsey, trans. by Roland J. Teske, S. J., Hyde Park, New City Press, 2001).

⁹ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Acad.*, III, xix, 42.

¹⁰ Augustine will openly moderate this approval of Platonism in *Retr.*, I, i, 3. But nowhere does he say there that reason should be disregarded. In any case, Augustine didn't think, even at that so Neoplatonic stage of his life, that the Revelation was superfluous for knowing truth, for he, in that selfsame place of *Contra Academicos* points out that we need the humble example of the Word made Flesh.

¹¹ See Peter BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo. A Biography (A New Edition with an Epilogue)*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000, pp. 503-504.

increasingly critical of their doctrines. For all that, his zeal did not impede him from acknowledging their merits. This is the case found in the *City of God*. Before starting his invective against those “who argue that the worship of many gods, which involves sacrificing to them, is useful in view of the life that will exist after death”¹², *i. e.* the pagan philosophers, he extensively eulogizes the Platonics and commends them as his only worthy adversaries, because they, in contrast to the rest of the philosophers, discovered both God’s transcendence and human happiness as the participation of this selfsame God¹³.

How could Platonism conquer this achievement, whereas the other philosophical Schools “were unable to conceive of anything beyond the fables that their hearts fabricated for them under the constraint of the bodily senses”¹⁴ (*i. e.* conceive immaterial beings)? Augustine points out that:

“All the while, of course, they [who only thought of corporeal being] had within themselves something which they did not see; that is, they represented to themselves inwardly objects which they had seen externally, even when they were not actually seeing those objects but only thinking of them. For the mental image that appears in thought of this kind is no longer a body but rather the likeness of a body; and the faculty by which this likeness of a body is seen in the mind is itself neither a body nor a likeness of a body; and the faculty by which the likeness is seen and is judged to be either beautiful or ugly is undoubtedly superior to the thing that is judged. This faculty is the human mind and is the nature of the rational soul; and if even the likeness of a body, when it is perceived and judged in the thinker’s mind, is not a body, then this faculty is definitely not a body. The soul, then, is neither earth, nor water, not air, nor fire – which are the four bodily materials, called the four elements, of which we see that the corporeal world is composed. And if our soul is not a body, how can God, the creator of the Soul, be a body?”¹⁵.

We may reconstruct the train of thought as it follows: when we feel a corporeal being, we form a “likeness of a body” (*similitudo corporis*). This

¹² AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Retr.*, II, 43 (70), 1.

¹³ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *The City of God* [*Civ.*], VIII, 1 (*The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century*, 1/6, trans. William Babcock, Hyde Park, New City Press, 2012).

¹⁴ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Civ.*, VIII, 5.

¹⁵ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Civ.*, VIII, 5.

inner representation lacks matter, as evident from its concealment to bodily senses. The faculty capable of this operation must also be immaterial, otherwise, it could not judge bodies with an universal standard of beauty. If our intellect were a body too, it would be a particular and limited beautiful thing, and every criterion must transcend the evaluated objects. As a conclusion, the soul cannot be a body, so neither God, creator of the Soul¹⁶.

This reasoning is openly attributed in the *Confessions* to the Platonics, when Augustine says that “by the Platonic books I was admonished to return into myself”¹⁷. In other words, the rise to the knowledge of non-corporeal existence is not exclusive to Christians in Augustine’s thought. In fact, as we can recollect from the *Confessions*, the reading of the Neoplatonic doctrine helped him convert back to Christianity, by teaching him how to appreciate the greatness of Sacred Scriptures and Christian Doctrine in general, with a special emphasis on St. Paul’s letters¹⁸.

Following similar trains of thought, Augustine describes many rational ascents to God¹⁹. Out of this risings to the divinity, several properties are deduced²⁰:

¹⁶ The rising described by Augustine does not disregard the importance of sensible knowledge, in fact, it is necessary in the wording just quoted of the ascent to form a mental image of any corporeal being, so as to reflect on it. The problem is not sensible knowledge, but to believe that every being is like it.

¹⁷ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Conf.*, VII, x, 16.

¹⁸ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Acad.*, II, 2, 5; *Conf.*, VII, 9, 13.

¹⁹ On the connection between the ascents described in *Conf.*, VII and those from Augustine’s early writings, see Frederick VAN FLETEREN, “Augustine’s Ascent of the Soul in Book VII of the *Confessions*: A Reconsideration”, *Augustinian Studies* 5 (1974) 29-72. Van Fleteren shows in this article that the ascents described in the *Confessions* guide Augustine’s investigations on Happiness and God found in his the texts from Cassiciacum. The author, however, doesn’t dwell upon our topic, if only to note Augustine’s early hope of overcoming the difficulties of seeing God during this life.

²⁰ It is not our wish here to reconstruct Augustine’s exposition on God’s properties, for many excellent studies of this topic are available; we only want to briefly recount them as a necessary step for our next section. It’s a matter of great weigh to correctly understand what Augustine intends with them. Kondoleon’s interpretation yields that Augustine’s argument is inconclusive. See also Theodore KONDOLEON, “Augustine’s Argument for God’s Existence. *De Libero Arbitrio*, Book II”, *Augustinian Studies* 14 (1983) 105-115. But we believe that Kondoleon misses the point of Augustine. Although dated, it is still a good point of reference to read Bartolomé XIBERTA, “El itinerario agustiniano para alcanzar el conocimiento de Dios”, *Convivium* 1 (1956) 139-179. The author explains that we should not read Augustine’s many ascents in the manner of the posterior scholastic and modern rational proofs of God’s existence. Instead, starting from the obvious and given knowledge of God’s existence, such risings provide a kind of vision of what is previously

- Source of truth: every science and discipline brings about the knowledge of certain truths, which nobody may sanely deny. However, the existence of such truths depend on the light that illuminates those truths, maintains their existence and makes them visible²¹. The light is not itself an object for our understanding, but instead it is the supreme norm for all our judgements. That nature, immutable and superior to our fragile minds, are the eternal ideas, found in Truth itself, God²².
- Source of the good and beauty: everybody wishes to be happy. When we find any kind of joy in temporal, material beings, it is because of their beauty. Yet, all beauty derives from the participation in the supreme Truth, thanks to which everything is in some way beautiful. Supreme happiness is found in the supreme good, where no limit is given to the beauty. Hence the complete beauty which we may enjoy is found in God²³. God is also, then, the good of the soul²⁴.

known. Teske reaches similar conclusions in Roland TESKE, *To Know God and the Soul. Essays on the Thought of Saint Augustine*, Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2008, pp. 26-48; O'DALY analytically describes the train of thought behind these arguments in *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind*, pp. 178-216; Gilson's work is still a classic point of reference, for this topic see Étienne GILSON, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L. E. M. Lynch. New York, Random House, 1960, pp. 38-55 and 66-105.

²¹ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *The Soliloquies*, I, vi, 12 (trans. Rose Elizabeth Cleveland, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1910): "disciplinarum autem quaeque certissima talia sunt, qualia illa quae sole illustrantur, ut videri possint, veluti terra est atque terrena omnia: Deus autem est ipse qui illustrat"; see also x, 17-xiii, 23.

²² See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Vera rel.*, xxx, 56 - xxxi, 58: "Nec iam illud ambigendum est, incommutabilem naturam, quae supra rationem animam sit, Deum esse; et ibi esse primam vitam et primam essentiam, ubi est prima sapientia. Nam haec est illa incommutabilis veritas, quae lex omnium artium recte dicitur et ars omnipotentis artificis".

²³ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *On the Free Choice of the Will*, II, xiii, 35-xvi, 42 (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, trans. Peter King, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010): "Beatus est quippe qui fruitur summo bono. Haec enim veritas ostendit omnia bona, quae vera sunt, quae sibi suo captu intellegentes homines, vel singula, vel plura eligunt, quibus fruuntur [...]. Quoquo enim te verteris, vestigiis quibusdam, quae operibus suis impressit, loquitur tibi, et te in exteriora relabentem, ipsis exteriorum formis intro revocat; ut quidquid te delectat in corpore, et per corporeis illicit sensus, videas esse numerosum, et quaeras unde sit".

²⁴ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, q. 54 (trans. David L. Mosher, Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1982): "Quod autem semper eodem modo est, melius profecto est quam id quod non ita est. Nec quidquam est melius rationali anima nisi Deus. Cum igitur intellegit aliquid quod semper eodem modo sese habet, ipsum sine dubio intellegit. Haec autem est ipsa veritas. Cui quia intellegendo rationalis anima iungitur, et hoc bonum est animae, recte accipitur id esse quod dictum est: Mihi autem adhaerere Deo bonum est"; see also AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO,

- Immovable: following a similar ascent from lower to more perfect beings, he describes a series of things, whose bottom are the inert bodies and ends up in the life that does not fade away, but remains forever and requires a prior purification of the soul to see it, God²⁵.
- Source of being: if the supreme source of good and truth is God itself, who eternally abides in total perfection, then He gives all beings their existence out of His pure free will²⁶.

In short, Augustine's rational explanations of God discovers that He is the supreme source of being, goodness, truth and beauty. Whatever exists derives its perfection from God, the source of creation and of the forms that define each individual thing. Thanks to the form, we may conceive under an eternal concept (found in God's mind) each being and hence formulate the disciplines and sciences²⁷. We should immediately note, however, that all these attributes are deduced in relation to created beings, not of God in Himself. That is to say, thanks to these rational ascents to God, we do not learn anything from His essence, but instead only what creatures tell us from Him as their creator. Hence, it is doubtful whether Augustine learns something genuinely new from these arguments or he is only making sense of the divine attributes mentioned in Scriptures (His power in creating the world, His immutability by keeping faithful to his oath to Israel...) It is important, then, to correctly grasp what does Augustine pretend with these ratiocinations.

Exposition on the Book of Psalms, LXXI, 7-10 (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. VIII, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. A. Cleveland Coxe, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1888).

²⁵ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *De Doctrina Christiana*, vii, 7-x, 10 (Oxford Early Christian Texts, trans. R. P. H. Green, Oxford, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1995): "Sapiens enim mens, id est, adepta sapientiam, antequam adipisceretur non erat sapiens; at vero ipsa Sapientia nec fuit umquam insipiens, nec esse umquam potest. Quam si non viderent, nullo modo plena fiducia vitam incommutabiliter sapientem commutabili vitae anteponerent. Ipsam quippe regulam veritatis, qua illam clamant esse meliorem, incommutabilem vident; nec uspian nisi supra suam naturam vident, quandoquidem se mutabiles vident".

²⁶ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Conf.*, XIII, ii, 2- iv, 5; xxxviii, 53: "ex plenitudine quippe bonitatis tuae creatura tua substitit, ut bonum quod tibi nihil prodesset nec de te aequale tibi esset, tamen quia ex te fieri potuit, non deesset". For a treatment of the freedom displayed by God in His creation, see R. TESKE, *To Know God and the Soul. Essays on the Thought of Saint Augustine*, pp. 155-164.

²⁷ Augustine synthetically rehearses once again similar arguments in AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Civ.*, VIII, 5-8; and *The Trinity*, VIII, 2-5 (*The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/5, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, Hyde Park, New City Press, 2012).

The limits of the ascent

How far did the Neoplatonic findings carry them? Augustine seems to attribute to the Neoplatonics the discovery of the Trinity, as we mentioned in our introduction, but this may in fact prove to be a rash conclusion²⁸. The fourth book of *Trin.* supports our interpretation. He concedes there that pagans have been “able to direct the keen gaze of their intellects beyond everything created and to attain, in however small a measure, the light of unchanging truth”²⁹. Neoplatonics would have observed the interior light that irradiates through their mind, in the sense of the argument we’ve reconstructed before. Yet, Augustine hurries to note that they haven’t therefore gained access to God’s inscrutable Wisdom, something reserved for the *visio Dei*:

“But just because they can show very truly by the most persuasive arguments and convincing proofs that all temporal things happen according to eternal ideas, does it follow that they have been able to inspect these ideas themselves, and deduce from them how many kinds of animals there are, what are the seminal origins of each, what the measure of their growth, what the cycles of their conceptions, births, life spans, and deaths, how they are moved to seek what suits their natures and shun what harms them? Surely they have not sought the truth about these matters via that unchanging wisdom, but by studying the natural history of times and places, and by believing what others have discovered and recorded”³⁰.

Plato’s school has demonstrated that all temporal beings depend on eternal ideas, but that doesn’t mean they know anything about God Himself. Augustine proves this on the basis of a counterfactual argumentation:

- 1) If somebody sees into the eternal ideas, then they can understand every instance derived from them.
- 2) Whoever complies with (1), does not need to learn from other sources.
- 3) Neoplatonists, although they claimed to reach God, could not dispense with sense-data.
- 4) Thus, they did not penetrate God’s ideas.

²⁸ For this train of thought, L. GIOIA, *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine’s De Trinitate*, pp. 47-67 was especially illuminating.

²⁹ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Trin.*, IV, 20.

³⁰ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Trin.*, IV, 21.

The promised end of our yearnings is to see God³¹, but for the whole of our life we cannot attain it³², given that the invisibility and immutability of divine nature³³. Augustine asserts that watching the ontological order of created things we may discern the splendor of God found in our mind, but to know Him surpasses all knowledge³⁴. Augustine actually stresses many times the ineffability of God's inner life. For example, after making a completely orthodox summary of the traditional doctrine on Trinity, Augustine stops short and exclaims: "Have I spoken something, have I uttered something, worthy of God? No, I feel that all I have done is to wish to speak; if I did say something, it is not what I wanted to say. How do I know this? Simply because God is unspeakable"³⁵. It is quite a baffling reflection when made at the start of his study for understanding God's Revelation expressed in human language, but he drives the point home: God is above every intelligible and spiritual being, as he notes just afterwards in the same section. We cannot understand God, except when he chooses to reveal Himself³⁶, what is in some way the entire deal of Incarnation³⁷.

³¹ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Ep.*, 147, 12.

³² See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Ep.*, 147, 13.

³³ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Ep.*, 147, 20.

³⁴ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Ep.*, 147, 45.

³⁵ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Doctr. Chr.*, I, 13. For similar ideas, see also AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Against Adversaries of the Law and the Prophets*, I, 40 (*The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/18, ed. by John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., trans. by Roland J. Teske, S. J., Hyde Park, New City Press, 1995); *Civ.*, XXII, 2; *Conf.*, I, iv, 4; *Against an Arian Sermon*, 21, 4 (*The Works of Saint Augustine*, 1995). Couenhoven examines how Augustine developed his assertions of God's ineffability as the only acceptable solution to the dilemma of God permitting evil in the World and, at the same time, choosing not to save everybody. See also Jesse COUENHOVEN, "Augustine's Rejection of the Free-Will Defence: An Overview of the Late Augustine's Theodicy", *Religious Studies* 43/3 (September 2007) 279-298.

³⁶ O'Donnell rightly points out that Augustine only comes to the understanding of the Trinity in books 11-13 of the *Confessions*, after recognizing the Incarnation in book 8. "For the incarnation is the one piece of knowledge that has the greatest power to lead on to full and sufficient knowledge of God". See James O'DONNELL, *The Confessions of Augustine: An Electronic Edition*, ed. Anne Mahone, Stoa Consortium & Perseus Project, 1992, in 7, ix, 13, <<http://www.stoa.org/hippo/>>. The same author reflects on the relationship between Augustine's life and how he found God in the historical events related to it in James O'DONNELL, "Augustine's Idea of God", *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994) 25-36. See also *Ep.*, 147, 22-24.

³⁷ L. GIOIA'S *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's De Trinitate* masterly expounds this underlying thesis found in *Trin.* A brief presentation of this idea is found in pp. 30-34.

What are we to make of Augustine's laudatory texts on the Neoplatonic Trinitarian doctrines? *Civ.*, X, a text from his already mature age, appears to attribute them a real knowledge of the Trinity, just like in *Conf.*, VII: "You [Porphyry] proclaim the Father and His Son, Whom you call the intellect or mind of the Father, and between these you place a third, by Whom we take it that that you mean the Holy Spirit; and, as is your custom, you call these three gods"³⁸. However, if we keep reading that text, Augustine discards that Neoplatonics did really know about the Trinity. They only achieved a "shadowy image", because they refused to believe in Incarnation, "by which we are saved and through which we are enabled to arrive at the realities in which we believe and which, in some small measure, we understand"³⁹. What Neoplatonics found, he explains in the following book, were the vestiges of Trinity disseminated throughout Creation. After briefly professing again the main tenets of the Catholic Trinitarian faith, and while that confession endures in the background⁴⁰, he asserts that:

"if the divine goodness is nothing other than holiness, then surely it is not rash presumption but careful reasoning to find this same Trinity intimated to us in God's works –in some obscure manner of speaking that exercises our acuity of insight– when we ask of anything created, Who made it? By what means did He make it? and Why did He make it?"⁴¹.

To correctly understand what he affirms here, we may take into consideration what Augustine states in another place: "as we direct our gaze to at the creator by *understanding the things that are made* (*Rm* 1, 20), we should understand him as triad, whose traces appear in creation in a way that is fitting"⁴². Augustine interprets Paul's natural theology thesis to refer not only to discovering the existence of one God, but even to His Trinitarian character. Although that's true for all Creation, God's image is preeminently found in

³⁸ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Civ.*, X, 29.

³⁹ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Civ.*, X, 29.

⁴⁰ We may remember that when Augustine read the Platonics for the first time, he already had received a catechetical instruction in the tenets of the Catholic Church. See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Conf.*, VI, iv, 5-v, 8 Perhaps it is not daring to affirm that he didn't discover a Trinity in Platonism, but rather found some doctrines very akin to it, since he constantly compares what he read with what he already knew.

⁴¹ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Civ.*, XI, 24. He reflects upon the topic in 24-28.

⁴² AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Trin.*, VI, 12.

man, according to *Genesis* 1, 26-27⁴³. The Neoplatonics would've followed a similar direction. The questions arisen from the careful observation of creation –“Who made it? By what means did He make it? and Why did He make it?”– pave the way for formulating the three branches of philosophy, physics, logic and ethics⁴⁴, which end up pointing to the inner image of God found in ourselves⁴⁵.

Thanks to these traces, Plato's school formulated their Trinitarian doctrine. The One is the source of all being, the Nous the light of every intelligence and the third, Porphyryan hypostasis mentioned by Augustin would be the acting love of divinity. In spite of their cleverness, the vestiges are only a “veiled mode of speech”, an exercitation “of our understanding”. That's why “it does not follow from this threefold division that these philosophers had any notion of a Trinity in God”⁴⁶. He returns to this topic in the closing book of *De Trinitate*. There, he explains that although some kind of Trinitarian knowledge is found in creation, thanks to it we may ascend only to *Deus Unus*, but not *Trinus*, except if we considered the Trinity as a kind of modality of awareness, wisdom and love found in the only Godhead, a heresy Augustine rejects in book 7 of that same work⁴⁷. For an authentic knowledge of God, the acceptance of the Incarnation is absolutely required⁴⁸.

To sum up what we've learned: a close reading of Augustine texts show that whatever we may label as his “natural theology” only yield limited knowledge of God. An epistemologically richer gain (which could produce the discovery of the Trinity) requires the visio Dei, something quite far away from the reach of Neoplatonics. Whenever they said something about the Trinity, it was not quite right. To correctly grasp Augustine's theory of knowledge, it is convenient now to turn to his theological premises.

⁴³ An investigation Augustine explores in AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Trin.*, VIII-XV.

⁴⁴ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Civ.*, VIII, 4-8.

⁴⁵ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Civ.*, XI, 26-28.

⁴⁶ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Civ.*, XI, 25.

⁴⁷ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Trin.*, XV, 6-13.

⁴⁸ Aside from the bibliography already mentioned in n. 4, which set out to prove the centrality of Incarnation for Augustine's investigations, a concise explanation of this topic may be found in Matthew DREVER, “The Self before God? Rethinking Augustine's Trinitarian Thought”, *The Harvard Theological Review* 100/2 (April 2007) 233-242.

Augustine's theological epistemology

In *De Trinitate* we find Augustine's mature exposition on faith, where a combined epistemological and moral notion is found⁴⁹. He explains that "the certitude of faith at least initiates knowledge, but the certitude of knowledge will not be completed until after this life when we see *face to face* (1 Cor 13, 12)"⁵⁰. Faith is a species of knowledge, subordinated to the *visio Dei* found in the afterlife. Its limited character, as well as its certainty, produce a highly positive effect. On the one hand, he clarifies in the present passage, thanks to faith we become aware of our ignorance regarding eternal realities, setting us consequently in the search for complete knowledge⁵¹. On the other, although limited, faith gives the most secure correct intent, so that we, seekers of truth, know where we should stretch out to. We could say that faith purifies the *memoria Dei* with its light, since it manifests the iniquity of all wrong paths that make us transgress and sustains the search of God's face⁵².

In what sense does faith direct us to God? Reflections found in books 4 and 14 of the same writing may guide our enquiry⁵³. Our fallen state disrupts any attempt to grasp the eternal, immutable beings, and fastens us to the temporal realm. Blind as we are to the immaterial, we can only contemplate God through changeable things (as long as we still need cleansing).

Not any temporal knowledge, though, suits the contemplation: "Useless temporal things just delude the sick and disappoint them"⁵⁴; "this includes a

⁴⁹ Although Augustine treatise on the Trinity has clearly developed many of the topics that are only inchoate in the *Confessions*, we believe that the fundamental guidelines of his Christology and hence of Christ's epistemological importance are already present in the earlier text. See also Karlheinz RUHSTORFER, "Der Mittler zwischen Gott und Mensch, der Mensch Jesus Christus", in Norbert Fischer, Dieter Hattrup (eds.), *Selbsterkenntnis Und Gottsuche. Augustinus: Confessiones 10*, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2007, pp. 117-136, who shows that the mediator role of the Incarnation is already present and how that affects our knowledge through faith.

⁵⁰ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Trin.*, IX, 1.

⁵¹ Fischer expands on the topic of man as a searching creature and its centrality for the *Confessions* in "Zu Ursprung und Sinn menschlichen Fragens und Suchens", in Norbert Fischer, Dieter Hattrup (eds.), *Selbsterkenntnis Und Gottsuche*, pp. 57-77.

⁵² See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Trin.*, IX, 1.

⁵³ See L. GIOIA, *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's De Trinitate*, pp. 68-83 for a more detailed exposition.

⁵⁴ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Trin.*, IV, 24.

great deal of superfluous frivolity and pernicious curiosity”⁵⁵. Augustine defines curiosity as the knowledge attained “not for any salutary purpose but simply because they rave experience”, including so various activities: to see morbid things like corpses, to watch shows at the theaters, to practice magic and even “to scrutinize the secrets of the natural world that lie beyond our sight”⁵⁶. On the contrary, faith is exactly that knowledge on temporal beneficial events: “we accord faith to the things done in time for our sakes, and are purified by it; in order that when we come to sight and truth succeeds to faith, eternity might likewise succeed to mortality”⁵⁷.

To learn and know is laudatory only if it’s useful for our salvation, that is to say, our purification for seeing God. The only knowledge that fully does this is our faith in Christ, he explains, and the events inserted within the *historia salutis* that point towards his Incarnation, because: “the Son of God came in order to become Son of man and to capture our faith and draw it to himself, and by means of it to lead us on to his truth; for he took on our mortality in such a way that he did not lose his own eternity”⁵⁸. In other words, the knowledge of faith in Christ is the way for humanity of having in some way a *visio Dei* here in earth, paving the way for the complete vision in the afterlife⁵⁹. He expresses the same idea when he recapitulates books XII and XIV:

“While discussing temporal things in that place and deferring eternal ones to this book, I showed that faith in eternal things is also necessary for gaining these eternal things, though faith itself is temporal and finds a temporal dwelling in the hearts of believers.

⁵⁵ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Trin.*, XIV, 3. On curiosity, see also Joseph TORCHIA, O. P., *Restless Mind. Curiositas & the Scope of Inquiry in St Augustine’s Psychology*, Marquette Studies in Philosophy 83, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 2013.

⁵⁶ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Conf.*, X, xxxv, 54-55.

⁵⁷ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Trin.*, IV, 24.

⁵⁸ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Trin.*, IV, 24.

⁵⁹ HILL’s note 74 to his translation of the fourth book of *Trin.* is illuminating: “How does faith purify our minds? Not by some quality inherent in the act of believing in itself, but in virtue of the temporal object to which we attach our faith –namely Christ. Because this object is identical with eternal truth, it acts as a vehicle to carry our minds up to contemplation. [...] What we are really believing in the strict sense, in Augustine’s perspective, is the whole series of temporal, material and ‘sacramental’ realities which confront us with the mystery; the mystery itself is properly an object of timeless contemplation, and the whole drive of our faith –and the whole effort of this work– is to achieve even some small measure of that contemplation, knowing full well that this will only be finally achieved when what is mortal has put on immortality”.

I also argued that faith in the temporal things, which the eternal one did and suffered in the man he wore in time and bore through to eternity, is equally valuable for gaining these eternal things"⁶⁰.

That's why faith is the only way to ascend to wisdom: both have the same object, the divine nature, although through faith only dimly, for it sees the eternal realities through the looking glass of the temporal events that point to the eternal. It is a temporal knowledge, he notes, both because it learns about historical events and because it takes place in the heart of the believers, who are also subject to time.

Under the light of the discussed texts, we may turn back to the ascents described in the *Confessions*. In both ascents described in book VII, before his conversion, he "attains to That Which Is, in the flash of one tremulous glance"⁶¹. The conclusions he takes therefrom are those proper to the negative and creation-oriented theology we've described in our first section – not a Trinitarian structure of God. *Pace* Peter King, by the time Augustine writes the *Confessions* he's already rather sceptic on the reaches of Neoplatonic knowledge⁶². On top of that, his silence in the *Revisions*, a book written after Augustine's dismissal of the Neoplatonic trinity in *the City of God* we've examined before leads me to believe that he did not read the Christian Trinity in the books he received. Instead, he found there some vestiges, which only appeared to be similar to the Trinity because he was already firmly believed the tenets of the Catholic Church⁶³, and the Neoplatonic philosophy gave him the rational tools for working out his theology.

Conclusion

In this article, we've attempted to draw a basic outline of Augustine's theory of natural theology. We've seen that just as he praises the Neoplatonics' discoveries, he carefully limits what we may learn from such rational ascents to God. This becomes clear in the light of the Christological importance he assigns to our access to God: Christ's mediatory effect does not only

⁶⁰ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Trin.*, XIV, 3.

⁶¹ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Conf.*, x, 16 and xvii, 23.

⁶² As evident from AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Conf.*, VII, xxi, 27.

⁶³ See AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Conf.*, VII, i, 1-iii, 4.

heal our distorted will through grace, but also gives us the immanent Trinity by way of the economic Trinity.

However, we should not disregard the weight of such ascents. Indeed, thanks to them, as Augustine himself tell us, we may understand the immateriality of God, a finding that turned out momentous for his conversion. Many of God's properties concerning His substance are also useful categories for interpreting biblical texts (for instance, divine immutability as a notion related to the loyalty of the God of Israel) and describing what is common to each of the divine persons, in opposition to what we may only predicate from each of them. Even more, it is not a bold daring to think that man's capacity for knowing God rationally is identical to the basic disposition for receiving faith: at least, I believe that is one of the corollaries we may draw from the *memoria Dei* concept he introduces in book X of the *Confessions* (a hypothesis deserving another article, of course).

It goes without saying that the examination of this topic deserves a longer and more detailed study, which should examine a wider range of Augustine's texts and how this natural/supernatural knowledge of God schema was understood in the scholastic tradition. Aquinas and modern authors have received intense study regarding this topic. I only wish that same goes in the near future for the Bishop of Hippo.

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