

## *AUGUSTINE: FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING*

- ❖ **Varieties of 'faith'** : uninformed belief, legalism, vibrant way of life and experience; **spectrum** from **rigid**, fanatical to **enlightened**, dynamic.
- ❖ **Theology / philosophy of religion** : main approaches
  - **Natural (Reason alone)**: Aristotle, Ibn-Tufayl, Aquinas...
  - **Revealed (Reason tied to Revelation)**: systematic, doctrinal): Mu'tazilite, Ash'arite, Aquinas, Calvin, Karl Barth...
  - **Existential**: Augustine, Kierkegaard...
  - **Mystical** : Orthodox theologians ( John, Gregory Nazienzen, Symeon the New Theologian)
- ❖ **Elements of an existential (phenomenological) approach**
  - **Descriptive, non-dogmatic**, open, flexible (quote F, p 4/4)
    - “to the things themselves”; “preconceived ideas” are the ‘devil’ in this methodology (Husserl, Heidegger)
    - “Inward Empiricism”: William James
  - **Facilitates ‘dialogue’** : the subject-matter is **human experience** and not **doctrinal positions**
  - **Enhances empathy** : not **agreement** or **adoption** of the **position**, but rather an attempt at **sympathetic understanding** of the **basis in experience** that underlies **the doctrinal formulation**
  - **Result** : areas of **commonality** more likely to be discovered than when the discussion is purely doctrinal / theoretical
  - **Examples (Augustine)** : knowledge of God, God’s love, original sin, the problem of evil, foreknowledge and free will, trinity, incarnation...

### **THE CONTEXT (353-430 CE)**

**A. The journey of a soul** : Manichaeans, Astrology, Skepticism, Platonists (Plotinus), **conversion** : bishop of Hippo (Algeria) : **tremendous literary output -Confessions** and **City of God** : **on-going influence-** theology, philosophy, philosophy of history , **philosophy of man - inner life-world of man as subject** ; Descartes, phenomenology and existential philosophy. . .

### **B. Intellectual ferment : socio-political impact**

1. **Manichaeans** : sex and marriage- sources of evil ; no free-will
2. **Donatists** : sectarianism vs. universalism - the elite, separateness of church and world, good and evil
3. **Pelagians** : divine grace not necessary for human fulfillment
4. **(later, Calvinists and Jansenists)** : no room for human merit

( Augustine attempts to avoid these and other extremes of his day . )

**C. Reason (Philosophy) and Revelation :** (two sources of truth and knowledge)

1. **Two views of man** - vitalist and rationalist : “man of faith” (**love, trust, history**) and “man of reason” ( **philosophical development** );
  - **two ways of life** - **covenant** and **cosmos**.
2. **Tertullian** (cf. Al-Ghazali , Luther ) : **Revelation (faith) alone**  
**Origen** (cf. Ibn-Rushd ) : **Reason (Philosophy necessary)**  
**Augustine** : harmonious **complementarity** , but  
Revelation is **beyond** Reason.
3. **Faith seeking Understanding** : “believe in order to understand” and  
“understand in order to believe” - (not **blind faith** but  
the dynamic of **experience and reason**)
  - a. **a way of life** must be **lived** , experienced (belief)
  - b. this provides **concrete** material for **thought** (understanding)
  - c. thus **true understanding** can only come **after** belief
  - d. **however**, true understanding is **superior** to **simple** belief
  - e. also, belief must be **reasonable** in the first place.
4. **A description of his own life-experience** with various **ways of life**.

**D. The development of Augustine's writings : “A man who progresses as he writes and writes as he progresses.”**

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**(SOURCE TEXTS)**

**Faith and Understanding**

- a. “... Unless he understand somewhat, no man can believe in God; nevertheless **by the very faith** whereby he **believes**, he is helped to the **understanding of greater things**. For there are some things which we do not believe unless we understand them, and there are other things which we do not understand unless we believe them.”  
(*In Ps. CXVIII*)
- b. “It is seen as **reasonable** that faith should **precede** reason.”  
(*Ep. CXX*)
- c. “Faith gives the understanding **access** to these things, unbelief **closes** the door to them.”  
(*Ep. CXXXVII*)
- d. “He who **by true reason arrives** at an understanding of what he had only believed is in a **better state** of advancement than he who still **only desires** to understand what he believes.”  
(*Ep. CXX*)

## EXPLORING THE LIFE-WORLD OF THE HUMAN SELF

- A. **New approach : inward empiricism** - reflecting on and describing **the immediate data of consciousness** . (C, 216,223)
- B. **Unity of the Self (Soul, Mind) : three holistic modes** - memory, understanding, will (existence, knowledge, love) ; I am, I know, I love ; **one substance** . (C, 318)
- C. **Myself as Understanding** : “believe in order to understand” **and** “understand in order to believe”; not **blind faith** but a description of the **actual interaction of experience and reason** ; authentic understanding is a **function of both faith and reason** .
- D. **Myself as Will** : new locus of the **core** of the human personality; **love** as our **essence** and concrete principle of movement; “well-directed” and “ill-directed” **love** as **fundamental determinant** of man, society and history; the true character of a **person** and of a **people**. (C, 317)
- E. **Myself as Memory** : **not** just my ability to recall specific details **but** my **capacity** to be aware of myself as a **historical** creature - the fluidity and continuity of my existence ; the whole **world** of my history is presented and preserved . (C, 215-216)
1. **Memory** as myself in its **ultimate** dimension - as channel of **access to God** . (C, X: 16, 17, 20, 24)
  2. **Encounter with God** as **living source** of existence **through** the self as Memory : **but** God is **not to be identified** with the self - **beyond** . (C, X: 25,26, 27)
  3. **God** experienced as **personal Providence not impersonal Fate** (Necessity) - dynamic source of connectedness and **meaning** for personal history : **linear** notion of history.
- F. Some **results** of this **existential** exploration of the human subject : **God** and **evil** are **realities** to be experienced , not **abstract concepts** to be argued about theoretically.
1. **Encounter with God (E.2 above)** : a real, dynamic relationship in which the human gets his **knowledge** (existential) of God - **origin; on-going** source of his existence; **personal Providence**; absolute, **ultimate**; experienced as **life-transforming** Love, Mercy, stimulus to excellence...
  2. **Immediate experience** (knowledge) of human existence as **Will** reveals the concrete **source of evil** (vs. **abstractions**: an evil God, the stars, no evil ; or **false accusations** : matter, the body, emotions, feelings, desire); **personal responsibility** : the phenomena of “loving evil for its own sake” and the “divided” will : the power to freely **receive** or **reject** God’s grace. (C, II, VII, VIII passim)

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Mysterium Caritatis / Mysterium Iniquitatis</b> <b>Mysterium</b> = a rich reality non-reducible to rationalist formulae <b>Caritas</b> = Agape transforming Eros = (the fulness of ) Love <b>Iniquitas</b> = Evil</p>
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## REFERENCES

- A. "...men go out and gaze in astonishment at high mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the broad reaches of rivers, the ocean that encircles the world, or the stars in their courses. But **they pay no attention to themselves.**" (p.216)
- "...**the field of my labors is my own self.** I have become a **problem** to myself...I am **investigating** myself, my memory, my mind. There is nothing strange in the fact that whatever is not myself is far from me. But what could be nearer to me than myself?" (p.223)
- B. "I knew that I had a **will** as surely as I knew that there was life in me. When I chose to do something or not to do it, I was quite certain that it was my own self, and not some other person, who made this **act of will...**"
- "...so that I was on the point of understanding that **herein lay the cause of my sin.**" (p.136)
- C. "**My inner self was a house divided against myself...** I was... overcome with violent anger with myself for not accepting your will and entering into your covenant. Yet in my bones I knew that this was what I ought to do. In my heart of hearts, I praised it to the skies. I need not even walk as far as I had come from the house... to reach this goal I needed no chariot or ship... no more was required than... **a resolute and wholehearted act of the will.**" (pp. 170-1)
- "The mind orders itself to make an act of the will, and it would not give this order unless it willed to do so ; **yet it does not carry out its own command.**" (p. 172)
- D. "... as I rise by stages towards the God who made me. The next stage is **memory**, which is like a great field or a spacious palace, a storehouse... (an) inner hiding place..." (p. 124)
- "**All this goes on inside me, in the vast cloisters of my memory.** In it are the sky, the earth, and the sea, ready at my summons, together with everything that I have ever perceived in them by my senses, except the things which I have forgotten. In it I **meet myself** as well. I remember myself and what I have done, when and where I did it, and the state of mind at the time. In my memory, too, are all the events that I remember, whether they are things that have happened to me or things that I have heard from others. From the same source I can picture to myself all kinds of different images based either upon my own experience, or upon what others have told me. **I can fit them into the general picture of the past; from them I can make a surmise of actions and events and hopes for the future; and I can contemplate them all over again as if they were actually present...** The power of the memory is prodigious, my God. It is a **vast, immeasurable sanctuary. Who can plumb its depths?**" (pp. 215-16)
- E. "See how I have explored the vast field of my **memory** in search of you, O Lord. And I have not found you outside it... **It is there that I find you** when I am reminded of you and find delight in you." (p. 230)
- F. "... these are **tentative** theories... not downright assertions." (p. 266)
- "Can any man say enough when he speaks of you? ...even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you." (p. 23)