A History of Philosophy 21
Augustine's Christian Philosophy
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Last time, I tried to explain both his debt to Neoplatonism, which provided the catalyst for his seeing the truth of Christianity, and his criticism of the shortcomings of Neoplatonism. And so today, what I want to do is to see how he put the pieces together, and how this kind of Christianized Platonism then looks to Saint Augustine. Now, inasmuch as it is a Christianized Platonism, you would naturally expect that at the heart of it is a theory of forms.

And that's certainly the case. In fact, Augustine sees the forms as both transcendent in the mind of God and imminent in the creation. And of course, it's the Neoplatonic note, rather than Plato as such, that makes that so possible by virtue of the Platonic conception of emanation.

So that in the mind of God, the forms are thought of as eternal truths, rationes eterne, eternal thoughts, eternal truths. Yes, they are archetypes, patterns, in the mind of God. That notion was first introduced by the Middle Platonists.

In Augustine's language, this is the same thing as talking of the eternal wisdom of God, the foreknowledge of God, his eternal counsels according to which he created, and works in the creation. So, the rationes eterne. And in the creation itself, rationes seminales, that is to say, seminal reason, seminal thoughts, seminal truths.

As it were, the seeds that give capacity for development in nature. And in his long, long work on the literal interpretation of Genesis, an interesting work, he tries not only to comment on the Genesis creation account, but he weaves it together with this theory of forms. You see? So that all subsequent kinds of things in creation are in the seminal form of the original act of creation, and subsequently develop.

But these seminal forms, then, are the forms which give order, nature, to various species of things. So if you want to know the nature of a species, the essence of something, you have to know the forms. Well, that much we can see quite readily, because it is so much in the Platonic tradition.

But that immediately starts posing the epistemological questions. How can we know the forms? And of course, in the work of Plato, you get one answer by dialectic that enables us to recollect what's innate. But for Augustine, they're not innate within the human mind.

In Aristotle, you get another answer, inasmuch as the forms are imminent within things, within particulars, by abstracting the forms in thought from our experience of

whole classes of particulars. But, no, that's not Augustine either. He's too Platonic for that.

So the question, then, is still, how is this going to be? Actually, different interpreters of Augustine have come up with different theories. There is one who takes it that there is God-given innate knowledge. So that we come into this life with, sort of, what a friend of mine years ago called a pipeline to God, by virtue of which those ideas can be present in the mind.

That doesn't seem to be the way that Augustine talks. There's another view that somehow or other, the human mind is able to gain direct access into the mind of God. And know God's thoughts as they are in God's mind, by virtue of some amazing kind of illumination.

But, of course, this would mean that the soul directly beholds the very essence of God. And Augustine certainly doesn't say that. He sees a lot of mystery concerning the nature of God.

And in any case, since we're talking of a general human knowledge of forms, that would have to mean that the most pagan of unbelievers who have knowledge of forms know the essence of God. And that didn't seem right either for the Christian Augustine. So, what is the account? And, Stumpf presents it, although he makes it sound a little bit like Aristotle.

Coblestone does a good job of setting it forth. The point is not that we gain direct access to the mind of God. No, that's not it.

The point is rather that God illumines the human mind. God sheds light on the mind so as to enable us to see, to recognize, the forms, the natures of things in the world of particulars. They are imminent there.

The difference from Plato is that we do not grasp forms in their transcendent status. The difference from Aristotle is that we do not simply, by ordinary natural exercise of the human mind, abstract them from experience of particulars. It takes illumination, divine illumination, which Aristotle didn't see.

So, what Augustine is saying then is that all human beings have access to eternal truth concerning the nature of created things by virtue of a general kind of illumination of the human mind. And, uh, Augustine is apt to quote Bible texts to support his views. And he quotes John 1 about the Logos, the light that lighteth everyone that comes into the world.

A universal general illumination by the divine Logos. So notice then that the Logos doctrine becomes very important at that juncture. The epistemological function of

the Logos in enlightening the mind, as well as becoming important at this juncture, is that the Logos orders the creation.

The metaphysical functioning and the epistemological functioning of the Logos, both. So then, what you have in human knowledge is, if you like, a divine, divine-human concursus. The term concursus is often used subsequently by theologians to talk about the way in which divine activity, along with human activity, these two concurring, uh, divine activity cooperating with human activity, makes possible knowledge of the thoughts.

A divine-human concursus. What Augustine wants to say, of course, is like some of those church fathers said about the knowledge that some pagan writers had. Uh, that, uh, if they know these things, it is thanks to God.

And in that sense, all truth comes from God, without whom we could not know. Which strikes me as a thoroughly consistent kind of theism. If theism asserts the continued dependence of creatures on God, then that should surely include a continued epistemological dependence of creatures on God.

And so Augustine is talking about that epistemological dependence. The divine-human concursus. God is cooperating with human activity in making knowledge possible.

So, on epistemology, that's the way it comes out. And you can see it in a number of his writings. In a book of his called Against the Academicians.

Well, let's say against the academics. By the academics, he refers to the skeptics of the academy. Uh, you remember that, in the history of Hellenistic skepticism, there was the original Greek skepticism.

Then there was a stage in Plato's academy in its subsequent history that turned skeptical. Now, that's the skepticism that he's responding to in Against the Academics. People like Carnelius, and so forth.

And he argues against the skeptic's denial that we have truth. He argues that all men possess truth. And his examples of truth we possess include logical truths.

A logical truth is one that has the logical form of the law of identity, or the law of non-contradiction, A equals A. A is not non-A. Truths of that sort. It includes the knowledge of self-existence.

His famous claim that if I'm mistaken or deceived, I still must exist. See for lawsome. Even a skeptic knows that.

If he says he doesn't know, at least he must exist not to know. See for lawsome. He talks about the role of dialectic in bringing these kinds of truth to the light of understanding.

And he even develops in another of his works, let's see, on free choice of the will. In another of his works, he develops an argument for the existence of God on this basis. His argument is that truths, particular truths, are only true because they participate in truth.

Capital T. That is to say, they must participate in that which is the very essence and nature of truth. And by definition, the essence and nature of immutable truth, whence all other things that are true can be true, is none other than God the Logos. And so he argues from truths to truth.

From Logoi to Logos, his argument for the existence of God. It's perhaps the first original attempt of a Christian thinker to develop a theistic argument. And it is one which finds its echoes in later medieval writers.

Watch for it. Then in another of his writings on the teacher, on the teacher, he asks how it is that we learn. And what is the function of language in this? And he comes up with a question, a form of the question, which reminds us of Gorgias, the old sophist skeptic.

You remember Gorgias? Who had said, nothing exists, if anything exists, I couldn't know it, and if I could know it, I couldn't communicate it. Well, as Augustine poses the problem, it's this way. If you already know the meaning of my words, I'm not telling you anything you don't know.

If you don't know the meaning of my words, I cannot tell you anything you don't know. So how can I teach you? Now, admittedly, there's a terribly simplistic conception of language that implies that, and of how we learn language, and so forth. But he's posing that sort of dilemma.

His point is that it's not the teacher without that teaches us, but the teacher within that teaches us. Illumining the mind to the truth, and the teacher that teaches within is the logos, enlightening the mind. It is Christ who teaches within; he is the teacher.

So, the way in which Augustine develops his epistemology hinges on the epistemological function of the logos. And you cannot help but notice how he just unequivocally equates the logos with Christ, drawing on that prologue to John's Gospel. Any question, comment? Well, it's a fascinating kind of picture to see how he brings the pieces together.

Okay, what about the human soul? What about the human soul? Well, in the first place, the soul is not a material thing, as the Stoics and Tertullian had thought. It's, of course, an immaterial substance. Again, the soul is not some preexistent, eternal thing, as Plato had thought, and Origen had followed Plato.

And his reason for denying that is that the soul is subject to change. It may not be a spatial thing, a material thing, but it's a temporal thing, and is subject to change. Incidentally, he explores three views about the origin of the individual soul.

One is the theory of preexistence, which he rejects, and by and large, Christian thought has rejected through the centuries. A few exceptions. He considers the Tertullian view of the Stoics, that the soul is transmitted in physical reproduction, which Tertullian had accepted.

And he considers the creational view that the individual soul is separately created by God at some point following conception, and he fails to make up his mind between the last two. So he's not sure about the origin, but he is sure that it's not pre-existent. That is to say, a human person is a rational soul using a body.

And that's a phrase that he uses sometimes, a rational soul using a body. Later in his writings, he seems to think that it doesn't give the body its full place. And he tends to say a rational soul with a body.

So you are soul and body, not just soul using a body. That using a body sounds too platonic, but it's the whole person that is the rational soul and body. Yet at the same time, he wants to say that the soul alone must be thought of as an immaterial substance, therefore capable of separate existence.

And so the immortality of the soul is by virtue of the fact that it is an immaterial substance part of the composite substance, which is the whole person. And as a result, he's quite happy to use some of Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul. As, for instance, the argument that the soul being immaterial, non-spatial, is indivisible.

If it's indivisible, it's indestructible, therefore immortal. You remember that in Plato. He argues that one in his soliloquies.

But he also has a dialogue on immortality where he uses another Platonic argument that it's the soul that gives life to the body, and the life-giver, being the life-giver, cannot die. Because the body depends on the soul. The soul doesn't depend on the body.

And not depending on the body, the soul survives the death of the body. So his arguments for immortality, essentially, are Greek philosophical arguments. Similarly, his view of how the soul rules the body.

Those who, like the Stoics, had a materialist view of the soul would think of the soul as spatially diffused throughout the body. Energizing and enlivening the senses and functions of the body. But Augustine is clear-headed enough to see that if the soul is immaterial, it cannot be spatially diffused.

So, rather than ruling the body by diffusion, it rules it by giving attention. It exercises influence over the parts of the body by focusing attention on those parts. Now, actually, there's, I suspect, a degree of empirical evidence for that.

You know, if you want to know what it is that you vaguely feel in your leg, you examine your leg, do you not? You give your mind attention to the leg. You don't have to look at it. You just try to focus on the sensations in the leg.

Perhaps in addition to feeling it, looking at it. So, it's by virtue of that kind of vital attention, mental attention. Remember, I commented last time that one of the things that impresses him about the mind or the soul is that it's able to reach out in space and encompass things in its thought that are miles away.

You know, a lot of people's minds have been in Washington and the Senate hearings for several days. Interesting. Miles away.

Yet their minds have been where, as we say? Their minds have been elsewhere than in their own bodies in those regards. So, immortality of the soul and the way in which it rules the body. But the most interesting thing about the human soul, that, for me at least, in Augustine, is the way in which he probes the conceptions of time and eternity.

And this comes out in that segment that you have from the Confessions in the Kauffman Anthology, beginning 510 and running on to 520. This is another case where you have what seems like a platonic point of view that gets converted to Christianity. Time, for Plato, you remember in his Timaeus, time was spoken of as a changing image of the eternal.

Because in the world of time, granted the divided line, in the world of time, what you have is changing particulars. In the realm of the eternal, what you have is unchanging forms. And, of course, particulars then are changing copies of unchanging forms.

Time is the changing image of the eternal. That's the platonic way of talking about it. In contrast to Aristotle's way of saying that time is simply the measure of physical motion.

So many miles per hour, a way of measuring motion, travelled distance. Well, Augustine's own view takes off more from Plato. And he probes our time consciousness, time as it is in the soul.

In other words, it's an exercise in introspective psychological description. Examining the psychology of time consciousness, introspectively. And he points out that within the soul, it's only the present time that is real.

The past is not now except in the present memory of the past. But that's present and real. The memory is real.

The future is not yet, but it is present in one's present anticipation of the future. And so, in the present experience of the soul, at this juncture, you see, the past becomes present by virtue of memory. The future becomes present in anticipation.

But only that present is real. That sounds like a tangled sort of way of doing things. But it's true to our experience, isn't it? You can now enjoy anticipations of the future.

You can now enjoy memories of the past. But you enjoy them now, you see, in the present. So then, it follows that time, that time's past, time's come into existence and pass away.

Time is the realm of change, of becoming and passing out of existence. The realm of generation and disintegration. Time.

That's the Augustinian view of time. Do you catch that Augustinian note in the familiar hymn that goes, Change and decay in all around I see? Change and decay in all around I see? Okay, then. It's the present time that is real, yet by the same token, all times are present in the soul.

The past is present, the future is present. All of these times are present in the soul. And the soul experiences them as an ever-present now.

It's now that you experience the past and the future. In the now. So all times are present now in the soul.

Now, grasp that, and you can see what he means when he talks of God as eternal, unchanging, and timeless. God is eternal, unchanging, and timeless. Because if there is no change in God, following the Greek model, if there is no change in God, then there is no past that has ceased to be in God, or any future that hasn't yet come into being.

God is without change, therefore, without, in that sense, time. Nothing changes in God or in God's thought. Because all the time, he has perfect knowledge of all our past times and future times.

He is, in that sense, beyond time. Timeless himself. Yes, God's knowledge, then, is of timeless things, of timeless exemplars.

God's knowledge is knowledge of the forms of those timeless exemplars which do not come into being or pass out of being. And he knows particulars through knowing the forms. The forms that give them their being.

So, when God created the heaven and the earth, he created change and times that become and become past. Come and go. So, then, human life is distinct from the divine life.

Human knowledge is going to be different from divine knowledge. And even our knowing of eternal truths is going to be different from God's direct and intuitive knowledge of those eternal truths. The human soul, then, is in the realm of change.

Does that come together? You know, after reading Dr. Seuss at that hilarious evening last night, I'm wondering whether what you're hearing is the rattle of words or the ideas today. Talking of times that become and pass away could be just the rattling of rhymes in Dr. Seuss. Did you get the idea? I mean, the idea of Augustine, not Seuss.

Yes, Janelle. Say that again. How nature is influenced.

Oh, okay. God's thought consists of the rationes eterne, those eternal truths in the mind of God. What God thinks is unchanging forms.

Now, when God creates a world of change, you see, what he's doing, what he's doing is creating a world that participates in those archetypal forms. Yes. A world that is ordered with the presence of the seminal forms, the rationes seminales.

But, in a world of change, its embodiment of those particular forms is something which comes to be and passes away. Okay? Now, we do not know the forms as they are in the mind of God directly. We don't have that sort of insight into the divine essence.

God does. So he has perfect knowledge of them. But, search as we will in our own souls, we find time.

Coming to be. Passing away. Our experience of particulars.

But our experience of particulars is such that the mind enlightened by the logos, we're able to recognize the essences, the natures, the form of things in the world of particulars. Does that help? Yup. And that's, the, the obvious question that gets, uh, the medievals into trouble.

And, uh, it seems as if they want to have it both ways. because on the one hand, Augustine talks of God who loves me and knows me in and out. Yet on the other hand, he talks of God who knows the forms.

Yes. Now, can it be a knowledge of both? The question is, what is the relationship of, and here we'd better get over here, what's the relationship of the individual me to the forms, to the exemplars? And Augustine seems to be thinking that there are a variety of forms in which I participate. A variety of forms in which I participate.

The form of humanness. Uh, presumably the, uh, the form of boldness. This, that, and the other form of physical properties, other kinds of qualities.

And so, in knowing a particular combination of many forms, you see, he knows me as the particular combination of these many forms. Now, that reading of Augustine, it's a reading of Augustine, anticipates the way in which some of the later medievals see it. That individuation, and that's the term that's involved in this discussion, that individuation is secured by virtue of a peculiarly individual combination of many possible forms.

That's not going to satisfy everybody. So that when we come after Aquinas to Duns Scotus, we'll find Duns Scotus wants to say that in addition to all the various forms in which I participate, there is still the nature of me. The this-ness of me.

You see, hi-kay-a-tas, this-ness. And, a century later, half a century later, uh, William of Ockham is saying, forget the forms. All that exists is me, and the other me, and the other me, individuals.

Why do you need the forms? So, your question's crucial. You see, it's striking that one of the liabilities of a theory of forms, namely, that even if it can account for individuality, as distinct from the nature of the species, even if a theory of forms can account for individuality, it still seems to put the primacy on the universal. And, a lower value on individuality.

Get that? A lower value. And that's implicit in the hierarchy of being, where the individual who participates imperfectly in certain ideals is lower on the hierarchy than. So, real problems there.

Aquinas tries to do it by a theory of, well, what are called substantial forms. individual natures. that God knows my individual nature, in some way.

But that's the shape of things to come. What's the question, David? Well, he avoids Plato's problem, in a way, inasmuch as he has God as an active, efficient, powerful cause, which Plato didn't have. But he perhaps loses the advantage of Plotinus that individuality is generated by the process of emanation.

Yeah. I think one could respond that for Augustine, what God creates, however, is always individuals. God creates individuals.

With rationes seminales. With seminal forms. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah, I suppose it might be, though you don't find Augustine referring to Aristotle. Aristotle's writings seem to have been lost at that stage.

Weren't recovered until later. So any Aristotle that he knows would be via the Aristotelian, uh, elements in Plotinus. Yes, sir.

So you're right in sensing something there. Although the conception of eternity as timelessness, unchanging, goes back to Plato himself. Yes, sir.

You know, the debate continues in philosophical theology to this day as to whether God is timeless or not. You get basically two different views of eternity. One is that eternity is timelessness.

The other that eternity is everlastingness. Everlasting, yes, through the succession of times. By and large, the Platonic influence is towards timelessness.

And I think, in many cases, the Aristotelian influence. Whereas everlastingness seems to be a more, let's see, a more modern view. Although I think it's, uh, it's closer to the Hebrew view as well.

But there are volumes of literature on this subject. If you're interested, there's a book by Nelson Pike, P-I-K-E. teaches at, I think it's the University of California in Irvine.

a book called God and Timelessness, which makes the case against the timelessness view. Yeah, it does, doesn't it? I'm not sure that there is a difference, you see. And it's by virtue of buying into the theory of forms, which are unchanging and eternal, that Augustine also buys into the view that God, essentially the form of all forms, is unchanging and timeless.

So I'm not sure there's a difference. The difference is in the way in which it's spelled out. That is to say, this introspective psychology of time is Augustine's doing.

And of course, the way in which it's spelled out in a doctrine of creation, rather than emanation, is Augustine's doing. But basically, the view of God as timeless and without change is Plato's view. And I think it poses problems.

It poses problems in making sense of certain kinds of biblical language. You see? Because if a being is without change, in Aristotle's sense, that being cannot act at a point in time. Because then he would change from not acting in that way at that point to acting in that way at that point.

You see? Poses problems of what it would mean for there to be joy in heaven over sinners that repent. That is to say, the satisfaction of seeing what was anticipated actually occurring. It would be difficult to make sense out of God having purposes that he's working on.

You see? Because notions of purpose are time-oriented. And so what you have to do is to recast all of those concepts into a different conceptual framework than the ordinary English language seems to connote. Which creates the problem.

Which is precisely why some people argue for eternity as everlastingness, rather than timelessness. And I prefer that latter view. Everlastingness.

Um... Carl. Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Certainly, thinking in the sense of following a line of argument, or following a line of reflection which meanders from one focus to another, involves changing focus, changing attention to a step in the logical process. Okay? But I think, regardless of one's view of eternity, when we say that God thinks, we don't mean that God works through syllogisms to logical conclusions. You see? God doesn't have to go through that process.

If your mind is quick, you jump to conclusions. But God's there first, as it were. He sees the end of the line of thought intuitively.

Now, if you're thinking, however, of God being omniscient, all-knowing, does that mean that God has in his active, conscious focus of attention, and I'll add, at all times, for the sake of those who think of eternity as everlastingness, does that mean that God has all things at all times in the active, conscious focus of his attention so that there is no change in the focus of his thought? You see? Well, that's where the difficulty in making use of the ordinary language statements of Scripture, for instance, creates problems. Because what would it mean that, for instance, God says, their sins will I remember no more? Or what about the figure of speech, that it repented God that he had done such and such? You see? It seems to talk of a change

of mind. So I think the language of timelessness in God's thought, while it can handle very easily the notion that God doesn't have to work through syllogisms, it seems to create difficulty in the sense that God's attitude towards something changes.

That would have to become simply phenomenal language, the language of the way it appears to humans. You see? But in reality, well, what is it in reality? And, you get a kind of, uh, uh, stuck with a kind of metaphorical language in talking about God. And you can begin to wonder whether you're really doing theology or just anthropology when you talk about God.

You're talking about our experience, right? You're talking about God. You see the problem? It's the kind of problem that Kant, Kierkegaard, and others run into. Modern theology is very much aware of.

Is there an objective in Augustine, or is it only through No, there's very Oh, take it back. Is it only through illumination? Well, you see, there is no knowledge of anything apart from divine illumination. So it's a truism to say that knowledge of God is through illumination.

No, you see, if it's solely by illumination, the mind would be passive, and you wouldn't even be therefore knowing. That's an active verb. Illumination enlightens the mind so that you can see with the mind's eye.

But you have to see in the illumination. Yeah, okay. How do we know God? Yeah, that is to say, reflecting on the creation, its beauty, its order, its forms, yes, one comes to conceive of the source of beauty, goodness, order, form in which all the creation participates.

So in that sense, you'd say, yeah, the heavens declare the glory of God. Yes. And that argument for the existence of God from truths to truth, you see, could in that sense be paralleled by an argument from goods to good, beauties to beauty.

Get it? Forms to formness and so forth. So, yeah, there is some natural knowledge of God that's possible. And I think anybody would be very hard-pressed consistently to deny that, because it would mean that if there were no natural knowledge of God, there would be no concept of God outside of access to some special divine self-revelation.

You see, and that simply isn't the case. There are a lot of concepts of God, various sorts. But how do we get beyond that natural knowledge of God? And that's the question I'd like to pick up on, religious experience.

Okay? And that's the question because in the Platonic tradition, Neo-Platonic tradition, as we've noticed, there is a mystical approach to God. Well, what about Augustine? You see, that's the obvious question. All right.

In book ten of his Confessions, he asks, What do I love when I love God? What do I love when I love God? And his reflection on this goes through a series of steps. Step number one, it's not that I love physical beauty when I love God. And he's not putting physical beauty down.

It's just that love of God isn't just love of something that's physically beautiful. What I love is rather something in my soul. Now, why in my soul? Because there are glimpses of eternity in my soul.

In what way? That all times are present and ever present now in my soul. Past, future, and present. That's the glimpse of what eternity is like.

And ever present now. So, when I love God, what I love is something in my soul, and so I must reach him through my soul. Beyond the life that joins body and soul, beyond all of the sense perceptions that I have, behind even my memory of past sense perceptions, beyond my memory of past sense perceptions, beyond my memory of all the liberal learning that I have, mathematics, and everything else that introduces me to forms, beyond the knowledge that I have by dialectic that's independent of sense images, beyond my feelings.

Now, I don't find God in sense perception, I don't find God in feelings, I don't find God in my knowledge of forms, or in my memory. You see? But rather, when I look for God, he says, I'm looking for that good, that blessed delight in the good that rejoices in the truth, the good itself. Get the platonic note in that? I'm looking for the good, the source of all the forms.

And you find in the confessions, therefore, he speaks of God as his love, his life, as good, as beauty, as truth. And is there something of a mysticism? Well, I'm tempted to say yes and no. No, in the sense that it's only through what God has done, reaching down to us in Christ, that we really come to know God.

But yes, in the sense that there is a knowing God in the closeness of religious experience, which involves the discipline of the mind and soul turning away from sense images and reaching beyond knowledge even of unchanging truths. You see? And so at times he sounds as if he's appreciating the kind of mystical experience of which Plotinus speaks. Now I grant you that's ambiguous.

Yeah, because I think Augustine is very ambivalent about it. And sometimes he speaks Neoplatonic language about religious experience, sometimes confining himself to what's more biblical language. But the two, at least in the Confessions,

which is talking about religious experience, are so closely interwoven and blended that he doesn't seem to distinguish them.

So I guess the answer is it's ambiguous. Now, well, I think that's implicit in what we've been saying. There is a natural knowledge accessible to all by virtue of the light of the logos, a knowledge of the nature of things created.

There is a natural knowledge of the existence of God available. It's indicated, for instance, by his argument concerning the existence of God. But inasmuch as that knowledge of God in religious experience is made possible because of Christ's coming and the forgiveness we have.

And that's important for him. Because it's by virtue of God's forgiveness that the soul is cleansed from those things which would enslave and inhibit and, with a sense of guilt, prevent one from reaching beyond the things that change towards God. So you have to simply say that Augustine is very conscious of the role of the gospel in our knowledge of God.

Yeah, very conscious of it.