

History of Philosophy

21 Augustine's Christian Philosophy

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Abstract:

This source examines **Augustine's Christian Philosophy**, specifically how he integrated **Platonic concepts** with **theological doctrines**. He reimagined the Theory of Forms by placing them within the **mind of God** as eternal truths and within creation as **seminal reasons** that guide natural development. Central to his epistemology is the theory of **divine illumination**, which asserts that human reason requires a "light" from the **Logos** to grasp universal truths. Augustine also redefined the **human soul** as an immaterial substance that governs the body through attention rather than physical diffusion. His unique psychological analysis of **time** describes it as a phenomenon of the soul, contrasting human changeability with the **timeless eternity** of God. Ultimately, the text highlights how Augustine used these philosophical frameworks to argue for **God's existence** and the soul's immortality.

Briefing Document:

Augustine's Christian Philosophy: Synthesis, Epistemology, and Metaphysics

Executive Summary

The philosophy of Saint Augustine represents a profound synthesis of Neoplatonic thought and Christian theology. At its core, Augustine's system utilizes a "Christianized Platonism" that centers on a dual theory of forms: those existing eternally in the mind of God (*rationes eterne*) and those implanted in the physical creation as "seminal reasons" (*rationes seminales*).

The critical takeaways of Augustine's framework include:

- **Divine Illumination:** Knowledge of eternal truths is not achieved through simple abstraction or innate memory, but through a "divine-human concursus" where the Divine Logos (Christ) illumines the human mind.
- **The Nature of the Soul:** The soul is an immaterial, immortal substance that constitutes the human person alongside the body. It is subject to change and time, distinguishing it from the divine essence.
- **Psychology of Time:** Augustine identifies time as a psychological phenomenon where the past (memory) and future (anticipation) are experienced as an "ever-present now" within the soul, contrasting with God's absolute timelessness.
- **Theistic Proof:** He develops an original argument for God's existence by moving from the existence of particular truths to the necessity of an immutable "Truth" (the Logos).

The Theory of Forms: Metaphysical Structure

Augustine adapts the Platonic theory of forms by situating them within the mind and creative activity of God. This structure explains both the order of the universe and the possibility of human knowledge.

The Two Dimensions of Forms

Type of Form	Latin Term	Location/Function
Eternal Truths	<i>Rationes eterne</i>	Transcendent archetypes or "eternal thoughts" in the mind of God; his eternal wisdom and counsels.
Seminal Reasons	<i>Rationes seminales</i>	Immanent "seeds" within the creation that give nature the capacity for development and define the essences of species.

Augustine's work on the literal interpretation of Genesis weaves these forms into the creation account, suggesting that all things develop according to these original seminal patterns.

Epistemology: The Doctrine of Divine Illumination

Augustine rejects both Plato's theory of innate recollection and Aristotle's theory of pure sensory abstraction. Instead, he proposes that human knowledge depends on **Divine Illumination**.

The Epistemological Function of the Logos

- **Universal Light:** Drawing on the Gospel of John, Augustine argues that the Logos is the "light that lighteth everyone." This is a general illumination available to all humans, including unbelievers, allowing them to grasp the natures of things.
- **Divine-Human Concursus:** Knowledge is a cooperative activity where divine activity (shedding light) concurs with human mental activity (seeing/recognizing).
- **The Teacher Within:** In his work *On the Teacher*, Augustine argues that external language and human teachers cannot truly "teach" new truths. Instead, Christ—the "Teacher Within"—illuminates the mind to recognize the truth of what is being said.

Response to Skepticism

In *Against the Academics*, Augustine counters the skeptics of the Academy by asserting that certain truths are undeniable:

- **Logical Truths:** The laws of identity and non-contradiction.
 - **Self-Existence:** The famous "Si fallor, sum" (*If I am mistaken, I exist*). Even the act of doubting or being deceived necessitates the existence of the self.
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The Human Soul and Immortality

Augustine defines a human being as a "rational soul with a body," moving away from the more Platonic "soul using a body" to emphasize the whole person, though he maintains the soul's separate identity as an immaterial substance.

Key Characteristics of the Soul

- **Substance:** It is immaterial and non-spatial, yet temporal and subject to change.
- **Origin:** Augustine rejected the Platonic/Origenist view of pre-existence. He remained undecided between "traducianism" (transmission through biological reproduction) and "creationism" (individual creation by God at conception).
- **Rule over the Body:** Because the soul is immaterial, it does not rule the body by being "diffused" through it like a liquid. Instead, it rules through **vital attention**, focusing its mental energy on different parts of the physical frame.

Arguments for Immortality

Augustine utilizes Greek philosophical arguments to defend the soul's survival after death:

1. **Indivisibility:** Being immaterial and non-spatial, the soul is indivisible. What is indivisible is indestructible.
2. **The Life-Giver:** The soul is the principle that gives life to the body; as the source of life, it cannot participate in its opposite (death).

Time and Eternity: An Introspective Analysis

Augustine's exploration of time in the *Confessions* is an exercise in introspective psychology, contrasting human "time-consciousness" with divine "timelessness."

The Psychology of Time

Augustine argues that only the **present** is real. However, the soul possesses a unique capacity to make all times present:

- **Past:** Exists in the soul as **memory**.
- **Future:** Exists in the soul as **anticipation**.
- **The Ever-Present Now:** Human experience is a "tangled" reality where the past and future are collapsed into a present psychological state.

Divine Timelessness

In contrast to the realm of "change and decay," God is viewed as eternal and unchanging:

- **Timelessness:** For God, there is no "past" that has ceased to be or "future" that has not yet occurred. He possesses a direct, intuitive, and perfect knowledge of all things simultaneously.
- **Metaphysical Implications:** This view (derived from Plato and Plotinus) suggests that God does not work through logical steps (syllogisms) but sees the "end of the line" intuitively.
- **Scholarly Tension:** Modern philosophical theology notes a conflict here: if God is strictly timeless and unchanging, it becomes difficult to interpret biblical language regarding God "acting" at a point in time or having "purposes" that unfold.

Religious Experience and the Knowledge of God

Augustine identifies two paths to knowing God: natural knowledge and the intimacy of religious experience.

The Path to the Divine

- **Natural Knowledge:** The heavens and the creation declare God's glory. By reflecting on the beauty, order, and forms of the world, one can logically conceive of the source of these goods.
- **The Argument from Truth:** Augustine argues from "truths" (plural) to "Truth" (singular). Particular truths are only true because they participate in the immutable nature of Truth, which is the Logos/God.
- **Mystical Ambiguity:** In the *Confessions*, Augustine describes seeking God by reaching "beyond" sense perception, memory, and even liberal learning. He speaks of God as "Beauty ever ancient, ever new." While this mirrors Neoplatonic mysticism, Augustine grounds it in the **Gospel**. He asserts that the soul must be cleansed by God's forgiveness in Christ to reach beyond changing things toward the unchanging God.

Study Guide:

Augustine's Christian Philosophy: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide provides a detailed synthesis of Saint Augustine's philosophical framework, specifically focusing on his integration of Platonic thought with Christian doctrine. It covers his theories on the forms, epistemology, the nature of the soul, and the concept of time and eternity.

Part I: Short Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences based on the provided text.

1. How does Augustine distinguish between *rationes eterne* and *rationes seminales*?
2. In what way does Augustine's theory of divine illumination differ from the epistemological views of Plato and Aristotle?
3. What are the two primary functions of the Logos in Augustine's philosophy?
4. How does Augustine utilize the concept of *si fallor, sum* to counter the skepticism of the Academics?
5. Explain the logic behind Augustine's theistic argument from "truths to Truth."
6. According to the work *On the Teacher*, why is human language insufficient for teaching, and who is the true "Teacher Within"?
7. Why does Augustine reject the Platonic idea that the soul is pre-existent?
8. How does an immaterial soul rule a material body without being spatially diffused throughout it?
9. Describe Augustine's "introspective psychological description" of time.

10. What is the primary difference between viewing God's eternity as "timelessness" versus "everlastingness"?

Part II: Answer Key

1. **Distinction of Forms:** *Rationes eterne* are the eternal truths or archetypes existing as thoughts within the mind of God. In contrast, *rationes seminales* are "seminal reasons" or seeds implanted within the creation that give nature the capacity for development and order according to their species.
2. **Divine Illumination:** Unlike Plato, who believed knowledge comes from recollecting innate ideas, or Aristotle, who argued for abstracting forms from sensory experience, Augustine posits that humans require divine illumination. This is a process where God sheds light on the human mind to enable the recognition of the essences of things within the world of particulars.
3. **Functions of the Logos:** The Logos serves both a metaphysical and an epistemological function. Metaphysically, the Logos orders and creates the world; epistemologically, the Logos acts as the light that enlightens the human mind, making the pursuit of truth possible.
4. **Si Fallor, Sum:** To combat skeptics who deny the possibility of certain truth, Augustine argues that even the act of being mistaken requires existence. His phrase *si fallor, sum* ("If I am mistaken, I am") establishes the knowledge of self-existence as an indubitable truth that even a skeptic must accept.
5. **Truths to Truth:** Augustine argues that particular, immutable truths (such as logical or mathematical laws) are only true because they participate in an ultimate, essence of Truth. Since this immutable essence of Truth is the source of all other truths, he identifies this "Capital T" Truth as God, specifically the Logos.
6. **The Teacher Within:** Augustine argues that language cannot truly teach because if a student already knows a word's meaning, they aren't learning, and if they don't know it, the word explains nothing. He concludes that the

true teacher is Christ, the "Teacher Within," who illumines the mind to recognize the truth behind the words.

7. **Rejection of Pre-existence:** While Plato and Origen believed the soul was eternal and pre-existent, Augustine argues the soul is a temporal thing subject to change. Because it is subject to change, it cannot be an eternal, pre-existent substance in the same sense as the unchanging forms.
8. **Vital Attention:** Because the soul is immaterial, it cannot be spread through the body like a gas; instead, it rules the body by "giving attention." It exercises influence by focusing mental or vital attention on specific parts of the body, such as focusing on a sensation in a limb.
9. **Time Consciousness:** Augustine asserts that only the "present" is real, but the soul encompasses the past through memory and the future through anticipation. Therefore, time is experienced as an "ever-present now" within the soul, where all three temporal states exist simultaneously in the mind.
10. **Timelessness vs. Everlastingness:** Timelessness, the Platonic view adopted by Augustine, suggests God exists entirely outside of time with no past or future. Everlastingness, often associated with the Hebrew or modern view, suggests God exists through a succession of all times, continuing forever without end.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the following prompts to develop long-form arguments. Ensure you reference Augustine's specific terminologies and his synthesis of Greek and Christian thought.

1. **The Synthesis of Platonism and Genesis:** Analyze how Augustine integrates the Platonic theory of forms with the biblical account of creation. How do *rationes eterne* and *rationes seminales* bridge the gap between a transcendent God and a developing natural world?
2. **The Epistemology of Dependence:** Discuss Augustine's concept of the *divine-human concursus*. How does his view of "epistemological

dependence" reflect his broader theistic worldview regarding the relationship between the Creator and the creature?

3. **The Nature and Immortality of the Soul:** Compare Augustine's arguments for the soul's immortality with his Greek predecessors. Specifically, address his use of the soul's indivisibility and its role as the "life-giver" to the body.
4. **The Problem of Time and God's Nature:** Evaluate the philosophical challenges posed by Augustine's view of God as "timeless." Consider the difficulties this creates for biblical language regarding God's actions, purposes, and emotional responses (such as "repenting" or "remembering").
5. **Individuation and the Forms:** Explore the tension in Augustine's thought between the primacy of universal forms and the value of the individual. How does a philosophy rooted in universal archetypes account for the specific "this-ness" of a single human being?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Concursus	A divine-human cooperation where God's activity concurs with human activity to make knowledge of truth possible.
Divine Illumination	The theory that God sheds light on the human mind, enabling it to see and recognize the eternal forms or natures of things.
Everlastingness	The view of eternity as a continuous succession of time that never ends, as opposed to being outside of time.
Immaterial Substance	A non-physical, non-spatial entity; Augustine defines the soul as an immaterial substance that is indivisible and therefore indestructible.
Individuation	The philosophical problem or process of how a specific individual is distinguished from a universal species or a collection of forms.

Logos	The divine Word or Christ, serving as the ordering principle of creation and the internal teacher who enlightens the mind.
Rationes Eterne	"Eternal thoughts" or truths; the archetypal patterns existing in the mind of God according to which he created the world.
Rationes Seminales	"Seminal reasons" or "seed thoughts"; forms implanted in nature that allow for the orderly development of species over time.
Si Fallor, Sum	Latin for "If I am mistaken, I am"; Augustine's argument that the very act of being deceived proves the existence of the self.
Timelessness	The Platonic-Augustinian view of eternity as an unchanging state that exists outside the realm of past, present, and future.

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