

AUGUSTINE'S ANTHROPOLOGY: *HOMO CAPAX DEI*¹

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Abstract

The basis of Augustine's anthropology is the fact that the human person is created in the image and likeness of God. Which is to say that man is always before God, and God is always present in man. This implies the absolute unity and the spiritual nature of the human soul, because the soul for Augustine is immortal with three basic functions: being, understanding, and loving. These correspond to the three human faculties: intellective memory, intelligence, and will. The will takes precedence because it signifies love in the human person, and it is free. However, even with free will, the human soul is restless. This restlessness prompts the soul to search for meaning, and ultimately God. This divine illumination in man is the source of a spiritual restlessness that remains with man until he is united with God after death. After his sojourn through various philosophies and theologies, Augustine came to a view of an anthropology that is thoroughly Christian as we see in the first lines of his Confessions: "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." This was meant to discern a way of using basic human nature most profitably in accord with what God intended.

Keywords: Augustine, Anthropology, Human Person, Man, Capax, Dei

Introduction

What we have today as anthropology is so much limited, and likewise limiting. As anthropology received from the era of Enlightenment and its reaction to the religious conflicts resulting from the turmoil surrounding the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. People killed in God's name and so Enlightenment thinkers decided to begin a process where we could put into bracket God and the transcendent, which will guarantee freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, and an understanding of human rights. When we bracket God and transcendent we can therefore no longer authentically speak of humanity made in "*the image and likeness*" of God. Philosophical anthropology is the study of the human person philosophically. What then does it mean to be human? How do we relate to our will and desire? What is our relationship to wisdom? What is the human nature? What is humanity's end? How, exactly, do humans attain happiness since happiness is humanity's end?

Augustine's concept of human beings therefore is a blend of these earlier traditions. This makes his ideas unique. That became very much influential in the history of philosophy in the

¹This means that man is capable of receiving God: it is an understanding of the divine illumination in the light of human

Western civilization. According to Augustine humans were only free and dignified beings until the first human beings sinned and lost their freedom and dignity. For him therefore sin was passed through all generations and so human beings are presently without freedom and dignity. Sin is inherited by all generation, so human freedom and dignity can only be restored through Christ's saving acts. This explains the fact that the anthropology found in his writings is much fuller and does not suffer from the limitations, as seen in the fullness of his anthropology in the office of readings in The Divine Office taken from *The Confessions*: “*Being admonished to return to myself, I entered into my own depths, with you as guide; and I was able to do it because you were my helper. I entered, and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw your unchangeable light shining over that same eye of my soul, over my mind. It was not the light of every day that the eye of flesh can see, nor some greater light of the same order, such as might be if the brightness of our daily light should be seen shining with a more intense brightness and filling all things with its greatness. Your light was not that, but other, altogether other, than all such lights. Nor was it above my mind as oil above the water it floats on, nor as the sky is above the earth; it was above because it made me, and I was below because made by it. He who knows the truth knows that light... So I set about finding a way to gain the strength that was necessary for enjoying you. And I could not find it until I embraced the mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who is over all things, God blessed forever, who was calling unto me and saying: I am the way, the truth, and the life; and who brought into union with our nature that food which I lacked the strength to take; for the Word was made flesh that your wisdom, by which you created all things, might give suck to our soul's infancy.*”²

Now, Augustine's main move was into the self to find the fullest reflection of God. Obviously, all creation reflects God and the work of His hands, and to witness the glory of God. But the human person is the fullest reflection of God's glory and therefore the best path to encounter God. When he turned inward, Augustine did not find an enclosed, a limited and a dark space with no real connection to the rest of reality; he found rather a space on which shone the very light of God. In this light, relationship with one another and Divine encounter always takes place.

The Teacher Within: Interiority and Encounter

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you! Lo, you were within, but I outside, seeking there for you, and upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong – I, misshapen. You were with me, but I was not with you. They held me back far from you, those things which would have no being, were they not in you. You called, shouted, broke through my deafness; you flared, blazed, banished my blindness; you lavished your fragrance, I gasped; and now I pant for you; I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst; you touched me, and I burned for your peace. (Confessions X.27)

If you read with minimum attention the Confessions of St. Augustine, you cannot deny that he is a “genius in himself”. His deep analysis, rich descriptions, succinct arguments, heartfelt prayers, are going on in this kind of landscape of human life, showing the ability (speculative and existential) of its author to come into contact with the human.

For Augustine it was a well-known fact that not everyone was already aware of the fact that every human being is capable of God (Capax Dei) and so can reach God. In order to overcome

²The Divine Office, Volume III, Dublin: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006, pp. 224*-225*

this ignorance, Augustine proposed the way of interiority, that is the turning away from the physical to the spiritual world, from the outer world to the inner self (Confessions X.6).

Attempting to examine and write about man has been and still remains of the most tasking yet very important fields in philosophy. It is so because, first, it proposes as an object a completely peculiar and complex reality: absolutely close – the inquirer is the object itself - and at the same time deeply mysterious; secondly because the results to which it arrives at depend largely on the personal and social approach of the human life.

This shows that at the same time these two traits of his thoughts i.e. his acute realism and his deep existential character. As Copleston rightly points out: *The Augustinian attitude has on its side the advantage that it always contemplates man just as he is, to man in particular, because de facto man has only one ultimate purpose, a supernatural purpose, and, as far as his present existence, it is not but fallen and redeemed man: it has never been, nor is, nor will be, a mere 'natural man,' without an end and a supernatural vocation.*³

There should be an emphasis on this socio-personal dimension of anthropology, because the question it seeks to answer always is posed with two faces: what is man and who am I? The answer it gives seeks to be valid for all men. This explains why every culture and social system has at its base a certain conception of man, though it is at the same time an answer for each man. Therefore, it must be given in “*the first person,*” because it is an expression of this search for the very identity present in every human heart and from which everyone raises the horizon of his very life.

In seeking to resolve this anthropological two-dimensional puzzle in philosophy, he uses a spiritual work: *The Confessions*. Though some hastily objected that the study of spiritual work is not the preoccupation of a philosopher. But we see that investigating this aspect of inner life as Augustine conceives; can give a contribution to the anthropology of our days, which seems to forget, with tragic consequences, the deepest identity of the human person. For him, “made in the image of God” [*imago Dei*] meant that human beings were made in love and for love, and made in reason and wisdom for reason and wisdom, and so it means that the fulfilment of desire comes with knowledge.

In explaining interiority Augustine opines that truth may be found through a self-exploration of the inner life of an individual person. That means interior life, a particular lived reality of a spiritual tradition. It is a spiritual retreat inwards in order to come to a better knowledge of both oneself and of God. This is our *resting in God*. As the opening paragraph of the Confessions acknowledges, “*for You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.*” (Confessions I.I). So only in God is found the final happiness of any person.

Augustine, following the thoughts of Plotinus, the second-century pagan Roman philosopher, in his *On True Religion* urged his readers, “Do not go outward; return within yourself. In the inward person dwells truth.” (*On True Religion* 39,72)

We can see clearly the influence of Plotinus and Aristotle upon Augustine. Just as Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics*, asserted that the nature of man always desired knowledge, Augustine maintains that in order to actually attain the happiness that we seek we must cultivate our minds, know ourselves and our wills, and come to know the source of happiness. Thus, wisdom plays that ordering or guiding role in leading desire to that which it seeks.

³Copleston, F, *A History of Philosophy: Augustine to Scotus*, Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1999, p. 13.

The Confessions of St Augustine makes him the first recorded Western writer to define the sense of personal identity as intimately interior, seeking and anxious. He describes his search for himself as a search for God. He became fascinated by the question of knowledge of oneself: A person must first be restored to himself, that making of himself as it were a stepping stone. He may then rise to God. (Augustine, Retractions I viii) In this case encounter with God becomes an interior process. It is a method of introversion that is preceded by a time of clearing the mind of all sensual images in order that it may see itself and know itself. This doesn't imply a brief examination of self, but that the whole self becomes the subject of reflection. This searching within one's self is not aimed at an interior exercise of the psychological examination of self. It is undertaken as a movement, which opens up the individual. Interiority we can see therefore entails a search of the heart, of the interior self, and of the very consciousness of a person. At this point one goes inward as a sure way of going where God can be met. Which leads to a deeper awareness of consciousness, a stronger consideration of the basic tenets of morality, and a more realistic understanding of the ignorance of an individual person in relation to the infinite realm of the mysteries of God and of all that God created. In order to hear and understand Him, we need to develop an atmosphere of attentive inner silence when we seek to go deeper into ourselves along the way of interior prayer. Augustine came to a deeper awareness or consciousness both of himself and the mystery of God through this retiring to self.

The crux of Augustine's anthropological philosophy is the contest between natural desire and natural reason, which, because of the Fall are not in harmony with each other. Reason informs a person that the fleeting happiness of bodily experience (hedonism) is nothing but materialism without the Form which the body seeks. So, reason informs us of the truth of ontological pluralism, but without reason understanding the nature of "the Forms" reason itself cannot help desire. This requires reason to understand that which the body seeks. Only when reason comes to the understanding of the nature of beauty, serenity, happiness, belonging, togetherness, friendship, etc., does desire finally become satisfied (content). This also requires, an understanding of oneself and one's desires. Failure to understand this would mean a person's intellectual endeavors would be in vain since they don't satisfy desire.

Let us remember, however, that Augustine rejects the pure rationalism of both Plato and Plotinus because of the dangerous implications of reason abandoning desire, which is to say the flight of the mind from the body. The body is good as well as the desire, but the dignified body and satisfied desire only come about with reason and desire, (flesh and spirit) working together. Desire without reason ends in perpetual alienation and dissatisfaction, and reason without desire without desire *misses the mark* of what it means to be human and to understand creation. Desire is good, but only when it has its end in sight and attains that which it desires through understanding. The problem, in Augustine's view, is that desire goes astray, when it is not ordered by reason. It is just pure desire without rationality which is the other half of our nature. And so, rationality and reason are ordering forces to desire and they are meant to guide desire to its ultimate end through the attainment of knowledge. We see this very evident in Plato's *Dialogues* and *The Republic*. He argues that pure desire cannot satisfy itself without being ordered to its end. This for him is what the *Logos* achieves. So being made in the image of God also ensures, necessarily, that there is dignity to the human being because human ontology reflects and embodies the being of God. At this point we can clearly see why most philosophers know that Augustine and Augustinian Christianity is the real foundation of the study of the human person.

The Immortality of the Soul

The human person is composed essentially of body and soul. None of the two can be recognized as a whole man when separated. This view already shows that Augustine was under the strong influence of Platonism, Neo-Platonist works of Plotinus and Porphyry. Fredrick C. Copleston claims that Augustine used much of the neo-Platonic ideas while formulating the Christian world and life view.⁴ For Augustine the soul is created but of immaterial substance which simultaneously bears the image of God. Augustine here goes to an extent with the Platonist that the soul existed eternally and is self-sustaining, but does not accept their view that the soul is not created. For Plato, the soul is the real person which has certain entities like inherent potentiality of independent existence and full functionality apart from the body. The body as a matter is also competent to have independent existence, but the functionality comes to a halt by virtue of being inert after death that is followed by decomposition. That is why Socrates defines death as the separation of the body and soul.⁵ In this case, it could be said that the death of a person does not mean an end to personal existence. It only provides the escape route for the soul to be liberated from the body that is impure and polluted as view by Platonic school.

Augustine in trying to resolve this age-long problem of the soul and body which he inherited from the Platonic tradition argues that the human person is the peak of God's creation, and he is created with both the soul and the body. However, he makes a distinction in the soul-body unity. He argues that the soul is a possession of the body, but does not constitute two persons but one. Both should be taken into account in relation to each other. The human soul is incorporeal, it now becomes the axiom which animates the body. So the living soul directs and guides the body. Augustine insists that if truth is immortal, the basing on Platonic ideas, the human soul must be immortal, since truth can only exist in the incorporeal soul.

Augustine considers science as eternal, which forms part of his main argument for the immortality of the soul. Science he argues exists everywhere and can never cease to exist in the human mind. Its nature and truth cannot be invalidated. He argues that the human soul contains knowledge which is directly connected to science.

Augustine also talks about reason as immutable. Reason he says originates from the mind. Here he shows that the exercise of analyzing the human mind surely does have preparatory value for our thinking about the Trinity but does not yield insight into the divine by being simply transferred to it (*De trinitate* 15.10-11). The three aspects Augustine suggests in all our cognitive acts from sense experience to theoretical reason or contemplation are: 1. An object that is either external to the mind (as in sense perception) or internal to it, in which case it is an image or a concept stored in our memory; 2. A cognitive faculty that must be activated or 'formed' by the object if cognition is to come about; 3. A voluntary or intentional element that makes the cognitive faculty turn to its object so as to be actually formed by it.

Conclusion

Augustine's anthropology has left great impact throughout the history of philosophy and theology till date. And so we can therefore summarize it thus:

⁴Copleston, F, *A History of Philosophy: Augustine to Scotus*, Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1999, p. 15.

⁵Cahn, M, S, *Classics of Western Philosophy: Phaedo (64c)*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 7th ed., 2006, p. 53.

- humans beings have innate desire for happiness,
- happiness is humanity's telos (end),
- human nature is a hylomorphic combination of desire (matter) and reason (logos),
- only through the harmony of desire with reason, whereby reason orders desire, do humans attain the happiness that they desire.

In all these, we discover the primacy of reason coming to know the self, the will, and that which (the transcendental I) desires. Because of the concept of the Fall, and the disunity of body and mind, humanity's dignity, as the neo-Platonists have maintained is the rationality that allows us to understand ourselves, our desires, and consummate our desire. Which logically requires the cultivation of the intellect. In contrast to those who criticize Christianity, St. Justin Martyr explained that Christianity is the religion of the *logos*. Beginning with Augustine and rooted in Augustine's anthropology, we see a portrait of anthropology that begins in the perfect harmony of desire and reason [the beatific vision of the *imago Dei*], the corruption of the *imago Dei* through the self's attempt to satisfy desire through desire [without reason], the newfound conflict between desire and reason, which exhausts itself in either desire reigning over reason ['sin'] or the re-harmonization of desire with reason [eros with logos], which allows humans to once again satisfy the desire for wisdom and happiness by consummating happiness through wisdom.

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