

The Search for the Self in Augustine's *Confessions* and Its Relevance to Modern Morality

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ABSTRACT: Augustine of Hippo is not only a great thinker of the ancient and medieval world but also a landmark of self-search and inner reflection. Modern philosophers such as Charles Taylor recognize Augustine's contribution to the development of the understanding of personal identity in the contemporary context. Through his *Confessions*, the importance of the search for the Divine has been highlighted and the fact that this search is not only an act of self-discovery but also leads to deep reflections on human nature and on the way sin operates in our existence. The paper explores the moral norms that emerge from Augustine's concept of the "inner man" and their relevance to modern society. Augustine highlighted the paradigm shift in understanding the self in relation to God and divine love, and his vision is necessary in the contemporary context where we see an emphasis on individualism and inner searching.

KEYWORDS: morality, Augustine, inner man, modernity, soul

Introduction

The central concern of man has always been to define himself and to express himself in the light of his identity. The profound quest has been to understand oneself as a special being distinct from others. In his search as a fallen being he found countless means by which to express his individuality and power. Regardless of the historical time to which we refer, we see the sin-stricken man altering the quality of his life because he finds false means of self-expression.

By going back to antiquity, in Saint Augustine of Hippo, we find the necessary landmark and significant lessons for modern man to regain his lost morality. By evaluating his masterpiece *Confessions*, we will see how the search for the self lost in sin becomes the key to understanding his theological system, but also the starting point for living a new morality. Through his *Confessions*, Augustine leaves posterity a valuable legacy of soul searching, self-knowledge and its moral impact.

Augustine - landmark of the search for the formation of modern identity

Before delving into Augustine's conception of the nature of the soul, inner turmoil and the formation of human identity, it is worth making a few remarks about this dimension of Augustine's search. Speaking of the philosophers of antiquity and modernity, Anthony Kenny divides them into two categories: introverts and extroverts. In the extrovert category, he singles out Thomas Aquinas and Wittgenstein, and in the category of those who are followers of this school of thought, we speak of Descartes, Hume, and Augustine, who is par excellence the founding father of this orientation (Kenny II, 207). The British philosopher's observation is important because it creates a link between the perception of Augustine and the content of his theology, which comes from the act of reflexivity.

Another outstanding philosopher of modern times, Charles Taylor, said in *Sources of the Self*, referring to Augustine:

Augustine's turn to the self was a turn to radical reflexivity, and this made the language of interiority irresistible. The inner light is that which shines in our presence for ourselves; it is that which is inseparable from being our creatures with a first-person point of view. What distinguishes it from the outer light is precisely what makes the inner image so compelling that it illuminates that space in which I am present to myself... It is no exaggeration to say that it was Augustine who introduced the interiority of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the Western tradition of thought (Taylor 1992,131).

Frank Vander Valk comes to the same conclusion when he says in the introduction to his article *Friendship, Politics, and Augustine's Consolidation of the Self*,

St Augustine played a central role in the development of the modern understanding of personal identity. He is credited (and blamed) with facilitating a so-called turning inward, for inventing an inner space that has profound theological and philosophical implications... Augustine's focus on the inner life is reflected in his transformation, of friendship losing its inherently broad social character and political dimension (Vander Valk 2009, 125-146).

The sources of Augustine's thought on the inner man

The concern to understand the mentality related to the soul or the inner man is absolutely necessary in order to make use of the lessons Augustine can offer to modernity. For this we should allow ourselves to be captivated by the world in which Augustine lived and the Greek heritage he assimilated (Rotaru 2013, 104-108). Augustine's intellectual interest in discovering the inner man is rooted in the philosophical conceptions of Plato and Plotinus, and has to do with using cognitive

capacities to understand the self. For Augustine, the outer man is animated in life by the five senses, but also by certain features of the soul that belong to the outer man, such as memory, but the greatest faculty of the human being was for him the reason or intellectual soul (Kenny 2002, II, 207-212). We must therefore be concerned not to put Augustine into the categories with which we operate today when we speak of the inner man and the outer man, but we must be interested in the concepts with which he developed his theology.

In Plato's writings, we find the seeds of his thinking about the soul. For Plato, the body was an obstacle that had to be removed, because the senses and the body hinder the knowledge of true wisdom: truth (Kenny 2016, I, 233). Also, for Plato, "the soul reasons best when none of these senses troubles it" (Plato 2002, 102). Plato believed that the soul functions optimally when it is not disturbed by sensory influences. He believed that the solution to this ideal state lay in liberation, often understood as liberation through death. On the other hand, Augustine's thought presents a significant paradigm shift. In his writings, he emphasized that man can know God by searching the depths of his soul. Thus Augustine placed the possibility of divine knowledge in the inner sphere of the individual.

From this command center of the human being, Augustine develops a deeper understanding of human nature, highlighting its utter corruption and the necessity of divine grace to obtain redemption. In contrast to Plato's view of liberation, which often related to the afterlife through death, Augustine promotes the idea that liberation and divine knowledge can be attained through the internalization of spiritual seeking and the soul's direct relationship with God.

Another aspect that must be taken into account in the overall understanding of ancient thought is the dualistic conception of the Greeks that was also seen to some extent in Augustine and "which sees the soul imprisoned in the body" (Kenny 2016, 229, vol. I) an eminently negative conception that marked philosophical thought. However, through his deep inner exploration, Augustine departs from the usual philosophical approach and seeks ways in which the relationship between God and man can become a reality. His central concern is to find the divine presence and to establish a right connection with it. In his search, he observes that he inevitably faces a major dilemma: according to his conception, God cannot be dissociated from the corporeal sphere, and here the intervention of the imagination becomes crucial, since it is the factor that disrupts efforts to deepen the inner knowledge of the human being. For Augustine, the problem of limiting the divine presence to the bodily sphere was a crucial challenge in his search. He sought a solution to this problem. The solution he proposes involves a "turning away" from the bodily dimension in order to correct misunderstandings about God. In Augustine's view, focusing on the soul involved identifying a new perspective through which God could be perceived, one that was free from the constraints associated with the body and the external nature of man. Phillip Carey captures Augustine's profound quest when he says that his aim

... is to take us beyond evidence and words to see God with the eyes of the mind.... A crucial point in Augustine's interiorization, therefore, is that moment of insight that represents the culmination of his efforts from both subjective and objective perspectives. This moment represents both the experience he strives to attain and the peak of his inquiry into the nature of the soul. Clairvoyance represents that moment when his mind, with the mind's eye, perceives immutable Truth; it is the moment when Time reaches Eternity, offering a foretaste of eternal bliss, an experience of the Divine. Therefore, "insight" is perhaps the most appropriate modern category we can use to interpret Augustine's epistemology in his work (Carey 2003, 72).

The Search for the Inner Man in the *Confessions*

In the *Confessions*, Augustine's autobiographical book, we observe several features that define the language of interiority and the search for the inner man. One of the first characteristics is that this search for the self has an upward progression and rhythm and involves an immersion into the depths of the human soul. "This search passes in Augustine's vision through three stages, which are (1) the outer world here on earth, (2) the inner world of the soul, and finally (3) the transcendence into the world of divine realities. Therefore, for him, knowledge is not an immutable given of the knower, but an ever-increasing relationship with God" (Crişan 2015).

Here again, it should be noted that understanding God for Augustine takes place through the examination of cognitive powers and that it involves a journey that involves overcoming the stage of emotions and turning man towards the intellect.

And so, gradually, we have ascended from the knowledge of bodies to the soul which perceives things through the bodily senses and from there to the inner power of the soul to which the bodily senses communicate external facts; this step constitutes the limit of understanding of animals. Hence the next step is the reasoning power, to which the facts perceived by the bodily senses are submitted for judgment. This reasoning power, recognizing that in me it too is subject to change, has raised itself to the step of self-understanding and has removed my thinking from the bondage of habit. She thus escaped from the confused swarm of contradictory images, to discover in what light she had bathed herself when she proclaimed beyond all doubt that what is unchangeable is preferable to what is changeable, and how she came to understand that she herself is unchangeable; for, if she had known anything unchangeable, she would by no means have come to prefer with certainty what is unchangeable to what is changeable. And so, in the flash of a thrilled glance, my reasoning power rose up to Being as such (Augustine 2018, 327).

The second characteristic of soul-searching leads Augustine to deep reflections on the nature of man, conclusions about the nature of evil (Augustine 2018, 297-301-307), an understanding of the essential doctrines that have marked Christianity, and finally to the shaping of a theological system. Why the soul as the central concern of the quest? Frederick Copleston tells us that, for Augustine the soul was created by God and that original sin was also born there (Copleston vol. II, 2009, 76-77). Thus said, the fall and ascension find their source in the human soul. As for the method of understanding the human soul, Charles Taylor says that Augustine's theological system, in which good and evil are defined, is related to the act of reflexivity (Taylor 1992, 139). From man's descent into himself comes an understanding of the role of will power, the conflict between good and evil, and a comprehensive understanding of love in all aspects of life. Thus, God can be known through what he has created and through direct communication, but especially can be known "through ourselves" (Taylor 1992, 126). Thus, we see that for Augustine, good and evil are related to the soul and that understanding the soul is important. It should also be mentioned here that Augustine's dilemmas frequently concern the relationship between creation, man, and God. These three dimensions are found in his inner analysis, which seems at times to throw him into the path of despair (Augustine 2018, 311) because he cannot glimpse any solution to the problem of evil that gnaws at the human interior. The solution he identifies at such moments lies in the redemptive power of Christ, grace, which will become a fundamental truth in the theology of the Church, and the role of the Church (Augustine 2018, 307).

It should come as no surprise that in developing his doctrinal understanding of the Trinity, Augustine makes use of metaphors of the soul and its activities to put God in the clearest possible light (Augustine 2018, 667). What Augustine is really looking for is man as the image of God, which is found in inner presence and self-love, and this act of knowing, in which the knower and the known are one, occurs when love finds its place in the human heart and leads man to a reflection of the image of God (Taylor 1992, 136-137).

Moral norms deduced from Augustine's 'inner man' and their relevance to modern society

We cannot analyze Augustine's conceptions of the inner life without making a connection with the values and moral norms that emerge from this analysis. There can be no act of knowledge without speaking of certain ethical and moral consequences. The link between morality and man's self-image is closely linked.

It is captivating the perspective that Justo L. González proposes when he says that in Augustine we see the culmination of "the inner struggles of a person in whom two cultures, two heritages, two visions of the world have clashed and mingled - in short, of a mestizo". (Gonzalez 2016, 9). Augustine's search should be understood from the perspective of a traveler, a man who is in a constant search for inner peace and tranquility. Perhaps here we see a separation between the ancient/medieval man

with this perspective of interiority and the modern man who finds his inner turmoil but seeks external solutions. From a certain point of view, we all live between two cultures and the solutions we find to our inner turmoil are important because they define our morality. For Augustine, life meant more than ephemeral existence. Phillip Carey tells us that,

For Augustine, what human life means is the attainment of the blessing of wisdom, and therefore what morality means is the purification of the mind's eye, the healing of its defects and the endowment of the virtues it needs in order to see clearly the Truth and that in Augustine's vision of morality, the purpose of human life is defined epistemologically (wisdom and understanding), the way is defined in ethical terms (virtue and purification), and the whole process is to be understood psychologically (as a turning point and a journey of the soul) (Carey 2003, 72).

We understand from Augustine's concern for the interior of the human being that one of the ways in which a healthy theological system, with moral and ethical norms, comes into being is when we are concerned to find God. Knowing and deepening our knowledge of Him is man's primary endeavor. In these attempts at self-discovery and knowing God we are confronted with the two forces that shape man's conception of the world and life: good and evil. Augustine teaches us, through the conclusions he reaches, that evil is within the human heart. He understands this conflict even more concretely when he says that the struggle is at the level of the imagination (Augustine 2018, 247-297), and that we should overcome this barrier to see spiritual realities. Augustine seeks to remove the limiting view of evil that is seen outside the human being, in our fellow human beings, in circumstances, in creation, etc. Through his vision we see how man can rise by understanding himself as a fallen being. Inner evil is only the first stage of understanding oneself, as Augustine clings to the grace of Christ to find redemption and connects to God to be lifted out of his condition.

Analyzing modern times, Charles Taylor, speaking of the paradigm shift in the history of thought regarding the understanding of the self and the effects it has on the moral plane, points out what is essential and has been lost in the human quest.

We have traced an aspect of self-knowledge that has entered into the formation of modern identity. This has taken me from Plato, through Augustine's internalisation, to the new position of disengagement that Descartes inaugurates and Locke intensifies. To trace this development is to trace the constitution of a facet of the modern self. The adoption of the position of disengagement from the self defines a new understanding of humanity and its characteristic powers. And with it comes new conceptions of the good and new locations of moral sources: an ideal of self-responsibility, with its accompanying new definitions of freedom

and reason, and the related sense of dignity. To come to live by this definition - as we cannot fail to do, since it pervades and rationalizes so many of the ways and practices of modern life - is to be transformed: to the point where we see this way of being as normal, as grounded in perennial human nature, as are our physical organs. Thus, we come to believe that we "have" the self as we have the head. But the very idea that we have or are 'a self', that man is essentially defined as 'self', is a linguistic reflection of our modern understanding and the radical reflexivity it implies (Taylor 1992, 177).

In this new relation to the self, says Charles Taylor, "we go inward, but not necessarily to find God; we go inward to discover or to confer order, meaning, or justification on our lives" (Taylor 1992, 177).

In this comparison between Augustine's self and the self of modern man, we see a distinct difference in direction. Whereas in Augustine's case we see a deep concern for the knowledge of God and the search for happiness and fulfillment in relationship with Him, in the case of the contemporary individual we see a predominant orientation towards the self, characterized by an emphasis on personal egoism. In modern man's self, there is an intensification of the search and a deviation from the original goal. The morality that Augustine's descent into the self gives rise to leads to an ever deeper understanding of divine love with broad theological implications, of responsibility for the self and for one's fellow human beings. In the context of the new paradigm, obligations and responsibilities are thought of from the perspective of one's own self, which is autonomous, independent and has only oneself as a reference point. The natural consequence of the new identity is that everything is thought of through the prism of selfish happiness, a fundamental experience to which Augustine referred, but from a different point of view.

Far be it from me, Lord, far be it from the heart of your servant who confesses himself to you, far be it from me to think that any joy could make me count myself happy. For there is a joy that is not given to those without godliness, but only to those who serve you willingly, and this joy is you yourself. And this is the true happiness of life, to rejoice in you, for you and because of you; this is true happiness and there is no other happiness. Those who imagine that there is any other happiness are looking for another kind of joy, which is not true joy. Yet from a certain image of happiness their will cannot be detached (Augustine 2018, 483).

Tim Keller notes the uniqueness of Augustine's thought and highlights the warped understanding related to the morality of our time:

For the Greeks and Romans, the great human struggle was between the mind (which they believed had its place in the soul) and the passions (which they believed were to be found in the body.) If you wanted to gain

strength, courage, self-control, and wisdom, you learned to sublimate the emotions in the face of the dictates of reason.... For modern people, the great struggle is almost the reverse. We believe that our deepest feelings are "who we really are" and that we must not repress or deny them. The great human struggle is between emotions and a repressive society that so often gets in the way of self-expression and self-realisation...

When St Augustine wrote his *Confessions*, the ancient world had never seen anything like it. He explored his past, his history, and the internal motivations that moved him. The reason why the classical age never produced such a work was because, in his view, internal motives and feelings were unimportant, just things to be overcome. On the other hand, our contemporary culture has no way - as Augustine had - of sifting through the emotions, of discovering which of them are liberating, because they take us away from the misery of self-centeredness, and which are enslaving (Keller 2015).

Personal change occurs by transforming paradigms about the love we have (for details see Smith 2016). We should seek our identity in ourselves. From this point of view, Augustine's concern for introspection is useful to us as long as we seek God as our external landmark. It is important to note the main aspect of our inner search, which is highlighted by Carl R. Trueman when he says that

Augustine's inward reflective movement does not end there, but always ends by turning outward to God. Ultimately, his feelings are placed in context and corrected by the larger truth that is God and his revelation in Christ (Trueman 2022, 341).

Through the completion of this stage - the self seeking and finding God - we see the Christian virtues manifesting, at the level of life, as the fruit of Christian living (for details see Smith, 2019).

Conclusions

Following this assessment, some conclusions are in order regarding the search for the self in Augustine's *Confessions* and how it may mark the morality of modern man. Augustine's concern with the notion of the soul has its origins in Greek thought, but what he is doing is going further and finding God through the soul. Augustine picks up on these influences, but goes a step further by delving into the religious dimension of the soul. Augustine explores how the soul can become a path to knowing God. In *Confessions*, we find Augustine's act of inner reflection and how his spiritual experiences lead him to the conclusion that it is through the soul that a genuine connection with the divine can be achieved.

Given the historical period in which he wrote his work, Augustine's great merit is recognized in that he succeeds in offering a profound insight into the human heart

through introspection. The analysis of his own conscience leads him to discover a direct link between the soul and the existence of God. In this sense, he simply goes beyond philosophical approaches to the soul to a mystical-theological dimension (Rotaru 2005a, 147-156).

Significant in his search is the fact that through the search for the self, his concern is closely linked to the knowledge of God. For him, the knowledge of the inner man has as its goal the knowledge of God. From this interest his theology is born, in which we see the main values and dogmas that will mark the history of the Christian Church, but also proposes an introspective understanding of the conflict between good and evil. We note that the distinctive feature of his theology, which creates an impact on morality, is the love that exists between man and God. Through it, man finds his identity and expresses it in accordance with the biblical philosophy of love described by God.

In the context of modern times, in which man's self-conceptions are distorted and perverted, in which understandings of the self are narrowed by a materialistic vision, we learn from Augustine of Hippo how important it is that the personal self is reflected in God and his values (Rotaru 2005b, 231).

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