Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine: Problems for a Postmodern Retrieval


Philosophy lives selfishly in the present. Whatever of her past which she does not suppose herself to understand now is, of necessity, neglected. To comprehend her whole past she must needs be timeless. Whether there is a timeless or ahistorical or eternal present accessible to human thinking is the question before us yet once more in respect to Augustine. This is the Augustine who more than any other formed what distinguishes the Latin West and from whom we cannot escape. No scholastic tradition tames him. From out of his overwhelmingly vast, diverse and even contradictory opus, he assumes endless guises so as to haunt us always. His ever present, but ever changing, ghost forces us again to confront the relation between self-presence and an alterity which escapes us. This time he emerges with his claims for an eternal present in the conflict between an historicist, anti-metaphysical, postmodern retrieval and an ahistorical, metaphysical, modern reassertion.

Postmodern Historicist Refashionings of Augustine

Outlining postmodern theology, John Milbank begins with the <<phénoménologues français>>: Jean-Luc Marion, Paul Ricour and others.1 They follow Heidegger in admitting the <<fin de la métaphysique>>, but attempt to avoid <<le nihilisme de la différence>> associated pre-eminently with Derrida. Milbank concludes with English-speaking theologians, often inspired by the last work of Wittgenstein.2 Indeed, until the beginning of 1999, there was <<Cambridge school>> among which Milbank lists himself, Graham Ward and Rowan Williams <<qui intègre des thèmes empruntés aux nihilistes français>> with the work of the <<phénoménologues français>>.3 Milbank himself fashioned a <<Postmodern Critical Augustinianism>>,4 Ward <<tenter d’accorder théologie et christologie orthodoxes avec la différence derridéenne>>.5 Milbank, Ward and Catherine Pickstock, among others, now form an association devoted to <<Radical Orthodoxy>>.6 Milbank relies for the interpretation of the De trinitate of Augustine essential to his postmodern purposes upon Rowan Williams7 and Lewis Ayres. To William’s interpretation we must come, but we begin with Jacques Derrida.

Jacques Derrida’s postmodern Augustine

It is <<la différence>> generally, not his particular reading of Augustine or of the Confessions, which places Derrida with Heidegger as philosophically determining postmodern theology. Nonetheless, that reading involves most of the fundamentals. I will restrict myself to his Circumfession, which brings out these features.

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2 Cf. F. Kerr, Theology after Wittgenstein (London 1997), p. 186-190 with 74-6, 80, 206-211. Illumining, for the kind of understanding of the consequences of Wittgenstein for theology and religion moving here, is G. Guiver, Faith in Momentum. Distinctiveness of the Church (London 1990). The key to the future is ridding the Western soul of its interiority, the <<inner depths of personality>> (p. 17). In the need to overcome Augustine’s influence, Guiver locates a positive link with Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and nineteenth century atheistical Christianity.
3 Milbank, <<Postmodernité>>, p. 917.
5 Milbank, <<Postmodernité>>, p. 917.
As a quasi-autobiography involving a declaration of a kind of religious faith, an attempt at a reconciliation with his Jewish past in which that faith was received, the <<marginal notes>> which are *Circumfession* mimic the *Confessiones*. Like the *Confessiones*, they are part of a quest for <<the great pardon.>>. They also involve a personal interplay with the life of Augustine attesting <<a love story and a deconstruction between us>>.

The Augustinian theological tradition is the quintessence of the Logocentrism which makes Western culture. Derrida’s postmodern <<nothing outside text>> is a deconstruction of that Logocentrism, along with the self which was born in, and is at home with, that reason above history and text. Augustine’s fateful identification of God and being in his interpretation of Exodus 3.14 puts him at the origins of Western onto-theology. For postmodern theologians, the Augustinian self taken as secure intellectual substance is the root of all which is to be overcome in modernity. Constituted in relation to the divine as a mirror of the Trinitarian divine self-relation, the self is established in a pure thinking above and over the historical, the communal and the practical. A knowledge of self and the divine which establishes a normative grasp of the logic of reality in the Cartesian way must be read out of existence (and out of Augustine) in order to construct a postmodern Christianity.

By a reading of *De trinitate* which would prevent comparison with Descartes’ *Meditations*, Rowan Williams and his postmodern theological companions endeavour to defend Augustine against the accusation that he is a collaborator in <<the fundamental illusion of modernity, the notion that the private self is the arbiter and source of value in the world>>. Williams must distinguish <<Augustine’s discussion of the certitude of self-knowledge>> from the Cartesian use of the thinking subject’s thought of its own activity as an <<invulnerable epistemological datum>>. Derrida’s deconstruction of this center dictates what is necessary for this defence. The postmodern theological reading must exclude from Augustine: (1) the union of substance and subjectivity, (2) intellectual individualism independent of communitarian praxis, (3) self-presence as rational certainty simultaneously established against and constituting objectivity, (4) the unity of the normative and the rational which holds together knowledge and love and (5) the union of self-relation and the relation to God as other. Derrida has no interest in saving Augustine for Christian

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12 Williams, <<The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge>>, p. 121. Augustine’s refutation of Skepticism <<is better described as an analysis of the grammar of the <subject>>.>>.
theology, but the rest of the project is his own. The difference of interest is important, however. Crucial to the Christian postmodern purpose is preventing the use of Augustine's thinking in order to found an autonomous philosophical reason. So (6) it will be essential that nothing theoretical can be carried out of Augustine's conversio, his iterinariun in Deum. Derrida's love of Augustine, as are his loves generally, is simultaneously hate. A duality is essential. Derrida's thinking depends upon the texts it deconstructs; to make an absolute beginning with self or God in the Augustinian and Cartesian manner is impossible for him. He centralizes what he depends upon, but determinedly gets around it. This is the method of Circumfession, and the result is in the method.

The form, the method and the message of Circumfession are one.13 The work as a whole was written as a <<friendly bet>> or <<a contract>>14 between friends in which Geoffrey Bennington dared Derrida to let himself be exposed by an essay circumscribing his thought, an account so systematic that it would even anticipate whatever Derrida might write in the future. The wager called for Derrida to read what Bennington had written, and then to write <<something escaping the proposed systematization, surprising it>>.15 Bennington's Derridabase, circumscribing Derrida in this way, is published in large print on the upper part of the page, and occupies about two-thirds of it. Derrida's circumfessing attempt to talk around Derridabase is in smaller print below, the position of the humble penitent who makes his confession.

The relation with Bennington represents the relation between the self and God in the tradition to which Augustine is central. This relation is approached only through this temporal encounter. There is no treatment of the arguments at the heart of the Confessiones about the substance of God and the tight interconnection between Augustine's coming to a knowledge of himself, of the incorporeal divine substance and of the nature of good and evil – the arguments with which Stephen Menn will be concerned. Nor does Derrida pick up the necessity of Platonism for the knowledge of natures and substances without which Augustine's conversion is impossible. A relation to philosophy which would allow Augustine to understand his experience by what is not within the historical is excluded in Derrida's mimicking representation.

Outside the theological philosophical center of the Confessiones, Derrida moves back and forth between himself and Derridabase, mimicking the movement in the Confessiones between Augustine's own words and those of Scripture.16 So far as the Confessiones is used as a map on which to draw Derrida's own journey, this may not be surprising. It is more remarkable that, in this reduction to the historical, Derrida is drawn upon by the postmodern Christian Augustinians we are considering. With whatever falsifications it involves, the friendly bet with Bennington carries here the import of Augustine's engagement with God.

In escaping Bennington, Derrida is trying again to <<circumvent>> the <<circumference>>, <<the one that has always been running after me, turning in circles

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16 Caputo, The Prayers and Tears. p. 294, is clear about the difference of the <<partition>> in Derrida's self and Augustine's; but, ultimately, Caputo's Augustine is postmodern in the sense I am developing. Caputo, p. 326, writes: <<Derrida makes his own the Augustinian sentiment that truth is something you make or do, veritatem facere, not something in whose open clearing you stand, head bared, basking yourself in Truth's Er-dingen>>. This opposition to theory is the center of postmodern Augustinianism.
around me>>.17 As he says, <<Geoff remains very close to God, for he knows everything about the <logic> of what I might have written in the past but also of what I might think or write in the future ...>>.18 Thus, the capital <<G.>> in the English translation also stands for God, and for Georgette, his mother, whom he partly compares to Monica, just as the capital <<D.>> in Djef, the phoneme of <<Geoff>>, stands for <<Dieu>>.19 The D. must also stand for Derrida so far as his God is self-projection and the God in Derridabase evidently is Derrida’s self-creation through another. G. is also the predestinating God of <<SA>>, <<Savoir Absolut>> or Saint Augustine.20 Of this G., whom he is trying to circumvent, Derrida confesses, <<I love him and from the depths of my admiration without memory;>> it is he <<I prefer>>.21

This love is mutual. Crucially, Derrida depends for his identity and motive force on it. All of Derrida’s activity in Circumfession is related to the astonishing interest of G. in him, his desire to write about him, his circumcising or circumscribing him in an idea. Circumfession, with its relation to Geoff, is a metaphor for Derrida’s whole life. He has a G.-filled life. In Circumfession, he writes relative to <<what G. will have written up there, beside or above me, on me, but also for me, in my favor, toward me and in my place>>.22 This interest and love are presupposed, and also the need for them.

No philosophical justification is given for this presupposition. Either a contingency of his personal relation to Bennington and Georgette is transferred to reality absolutely; or Derrida assumes the religious revelation of God as good (in which case his theology is more than the <<nonknowledge>>,23 to which he limits it); or he even assumes the assimilation by Augustine of the Biblical revelation and the Platonic teaching about the Good.24 Derrida’s form of discourse, <<style as enactment>>, and endless assimilation of the given text to the free associations of its reader permits this assumption at the heart of his life and work to remain without philosophical or theological justification.

The strength and weakness of the Derridean approach to philosophy is seen in his relation to G. Derrida has a positive relation to its whole history because its metaphysical center is so deeply assumed that his philosophical activity is entirely dependent on it. However, exactly as assumption, Derrida’s thought is already always outside the reason which constitutes it in the same way as God ceases to be God when he is only an actor in a temporal interchange. This problematic haunts postmodernism generally.

The wager is serious. Derrida’s doing anything both depends on a self which is defined by G.’s knowledge and love and upon his escaping that. He does not, we may say, cannot, desire to break the machine in which G. inscribes his Derridabase. <<I love him too much>>.25 This serious play is the character of Derrida’s entire work. In that jeu, Derrida

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17 Derrida in Jacques Derrida, p. 3.
18 Derrida in Jacques Derrida, p. 16.
20 Derrida in Jacques Derrida, p. 54, cf. also 73.
23 Derrida in Jacques Derrida, p. 44 and 141-3.
24 Against which see the polemic of Caputo, The Prayers and Tears, p. 12 and 344, n. 13. For Caputo, Derrida is a Jewish Augustine, p. 283-286, 312, and Caputo wants to make Augustine’s Christianity Jewish, not Platonic. Partly this has to do with Caputo’s opposition to the Hellenic Heidegger (p. 311 with p. 326, n. 25). It would not be difficult to deconstruct this binary opposition.
25 Derrida in Jacques Derrida, p. 36.
moves back and forth, neither winning nor losing. On one hand, there is the theologic>, giving form to culture, on the other, theology is deconstructed because its pretensions to containing infinity are given the finitude of text.

In the end, and paradoxically, Derrida claims to produce the surprise by which G. is defeated. He is waiting for the great pardon which has not yet happened ... which is why I am addressing myself here to God ... and yet not only do I pray, as I have never stopped doing all my life, and pray to him>. By placing his life in the context of prayer and tears, a position by which he distinguishes himself from Heidegger whom he claims does not pray, Derrida gives the surprise that Bennington says he intended all along to provoke and welcome>. Derrida’s readers have not known about his relation to Judaism, his religious struggle, his coming to terms with his broken covenant, his without religion and without religion’s God>. By confessing his faith in this way, Derrida has made truth and demonstrated the inadequacy of attempts to imprison his life and thought within the confines of a predictable system or method, that is, within theory.

Augustine is, for Derrida, both the one from whom he must escape and the one with whom he associates his own enterprise. Augustine is even an exemplar in his circumvention of G. For Derrida, Augustine is genuine in his puzlelement as to Cur confitemur Deo scienti, why he confesses to someone who knows already. After all, confession has nothing to do with knowledge ... [i] in its structure it is totally foreign and heterogeneous to knowledge>. He supposes that, as an act of love, Augustine’s confession does what Derrida is undertaking, making something new, which will, so to speak, surprise God, and lead to that to which Derrida has also come, a learned ignorance>. However, recruiting Augustine in support of this circumvention is deeply problematic.

The Augustine Derrida assumes as text is what we may call the Hellenic Augustine of the gnatho swanton, whose confession and gathering of his dispersed self depend upon a movement inward and upward both in and toward God. Postmodern Christian theology is fleeing such a Platonic Augustine with the same energy as he is embraced by moderns like Charles Taylor and Stephen Menn.

In a Greek, philosophical reading of the Confessiones, Augustine came to know God, himself, good and evil, and, by way of this knowledge, was converted. The autobiographical books (1 to 9) are confession as praise because they show that the movement of his life is

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26 Derrida in Jacques Derrida, p. 44.
28 Derrida, <<How to avoid speaking>>, p. 60.
29 Bennington in Jacques Derrida, p. 1. Derrida commented in his “Response” to Dodaro, “Loose Cannons,” 98: <<I am not sure that I surprised him [Bennington]. Insofar as he wanted to provoke a surprise, he was anticipating a surprise, so he was not surprised at all. In that case, he was no doubt in the position of God.>>
30 Derrida in Jacques Derrida, p. 222, speaks of himself as capable of founding another religion. Its character is indicated in Derrida, <<How to avoid speaking>>. He explicitly does not speak about negativity or of apophatic movements in ... the Jewish or Islamic traditions>> (p. 31 and 53). In his criticism of negative theology, he considers after the Greek and the Christian without yet ceasing to be Greek> paradigms for apophasis Heidegger’s paradigm which is neither Greek nor Christian>> (p. 53). Derrida does not judge Heidegger to have succeeded in this theology without Greek philosophy, but he seems to look for religion in a Heideggerian direction, although his is a religion which prays.
contained within the patterns God in his Word imposes on the creation. In the confession as self-examination and repentance (Book 10), he judges himself by the Truth which turned him around. As the concluding books interpreting Genesis make evident, he understands his conversion in relation to the logic of the universal genesis, a logic which is before history and determinative of it.\(^{35}\)

Augustine places his becoming, and all becoming, within that universal logic, and, crucially, knows his relation to it. In the hermeneutical circle, this knowledge is, for him, the condition of his being able to interpret Genesis. Augustine is drawn back into the creative knowledge by which he is known, back to the Savoir Absolument. Rather than contractually excluding this return, the principle of his self-examination in Book 10 is a bold realized eschatology in which he now knows himself as he is known.\(^{36}\) This return, the conversion to origin, is everything. Augustine is not trying to circumvent the divine predestination and knowledge, but rather to demonstrate the divine logic which moves all things and to praise it, to confess it, to self-consciously place his life within it. The De trinitate works out the metaphysics underlying the relation between self-knowledge and the knowledge of God which the Confessions presuppose.\(^{37}\)

Derrida’s Circumfession begins outside that to which Augustine would return; and, it must remain there. G. has already written, his text is fixed above the page, Derrida writes on the margin below and outside. In that respect, Derrida’s circumfession goes nowhere and does nothing; it ends where it already began. It cannot return to the Savoir Absolument, which can never truly be for Augustine, any more than for Boethius or his other successors, a finite temporal before, or a spatial outside. The Derridean Augustine is in an external relation to a finite God. There he is condemned to a never-ending search in a never-ending examination of his experience.

Derridean subjectivity is endlessly in quest, a quest which depends upon and yet equally must escape the gaze of subsistent being, who is equally lover and enemy. The flight from knowledge—an endlessly active doing both positively and negatively dependent upon the interest of the one who would know, who as a finite Absolument remains forever also a rival other—prevents containing the practical within the theoretical. The good will of the Savoir Absolument as contingently assumed prevents good will being more than contingent fact. The Augustine deconstructed by Derrida’s circumfession fulfills most of the requirements of our postmodern Augustinian theologians. This is an Augustine for whom the exitus which conversion assumes cannot be taken into the divine self-differentiation any more than the divine can be known within a human self-relation; rather, the human and the divine have passed into the historical and practical in which they must become increasingly opposed.

Jean-Luc Marion’s Augustines

Marion describes himself as postmodern with a qualification. His philosophical decision concerning the names of God takes place within a postmodern framework. <<If

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\(^{36}\) I Corinthians 13.12; Augustinus, Confessiones (ed. L. Verheijen, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 27, Turnhout 1981), lib. X, cap. 1 1, p. 155, I begins with this text which governs it. In this context, it takes up the Hellenic "<Know thyself>" so that Augustine judges himself by the Truth by which he is judged and in relation to which he has always moved. Since he knows this, he discovers and so possesses, as well as being possessed by God.

\(^{37}\) This is the opposite of a postmodern view of the relation of the two works. For J. S. O’Leary, Questioning Back. The Overcoming of Metaphysics in Christian Tradition (Minneapolis 1985), p. 166 the problem with the De trinitate is that it is "<a secondary formation ... [ ] largely an intra-metaphysical one>".
we understand by modernity the completed and therefore terminal figure of metaphysics, such as it develops from Descartes to Nietzsche, then <postmodernity> begins when, among other things, the metaphysical determination of God is called into question>.38 In his studies of Descartes, Marion raises this question when he finds that the metaphysical names imposed by Descartes on God reflect purely metaphysical functions and hide the mystery of God.39 He writes, <<my enterprise remains <postmodern> in this sense, and, in this precise sense, I remain close to Derrida>>; however, Dieu sans l’être, is, as against what Derrida would allow, <bors-text>. God as charity is neither pre-, nor post- nor modern, and so Marion’s <<enterprise does not remain <postmodern> all the way through>>.40

Part of his postmodernity is his turning to the premodern to find what modernity has forgotten. Marion locates in Greek Patristic theology his most direct way forward. His first efforts <<to shoot for God according to his most theological name – charity>> are in his L’îdele et la distance, where, in Pseudo-Dionysius, he discovered a genuinely theological relation to the divine names which involves oppositions – not actually found in Dionysius – between the divine attributes as names for praise and concepts for thought, between theology and philosophy.42 While Pseudo-Dionysius persists as the norm of what Marion seeks in premodern theology, he increasingly assimilates others to that norm, recently Aquinas, and to a considerable degree also Augustine.43

As with the postmodern theologians generally, Marion’s reading of Augustine is best understood in the context of his understanding and judgment about the foundations of modernity, especially as those are Cartesian.44 For him, in the 17th century

the radical position of subjectivity is replaced by the impersonal recognition of transcendence as a point of departure of philosophical reflection – God is now a term in a demonstration, and no longer the assumed goal of a journey towards Him ...

[R]ationality [takes over] certain problems and concepts previously treated only by revealed theology ...

From Descartes on, the Dionysian divine names have become <<purely philosophical terms>>.46 In contrast, premodern philosophical theology, as authoritatively represented by Thomas Aquinas, preserves the analogical gap between the creature and God because <<our knowledge of God terminates in inadequate and relative names, names which only

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41 Marion, God without being, p. xxi.
44 Marion knows Menn’s treatment of the relations of Augustine and Descartes in the form in which it was presented as a doctoral thesis at the University of Chicago, cf. J. -L. Marion, Questions cartésiennes, II, Sur l’ego et sur Dieu (Paris 1997), p. 42, n. 52.
allow God to be known as unknown]].

Marion’s study of Descartes aims to show the ambiguities at the origins of modernity; thus, there is a choice for us in getting beyond the modern which equally involves staying with something present in it. What is made of Augustine is at the heart of this choosing.

First, and mostly, Augustine is placed with Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas and the premodern (i.e., pre-Duns Scotus, Suárez and Descartes) as maintaining a reason which is always transcendent toward God. Reason is always simultaneously religious and properly theological: for example, being is known in the analogia entis, there is no independent secular reasoning, indeed, really no reason apart from the itinerarium mentis in Deum. Augustine is set definitively against Suárez, often Scotus, and usually, but not always, Descartes. Descartes may be represented more as the victim of what the theologians did rather than as the worst of the moderns. Augustine, then, belongs to the postmodern cure.

Second, Augustine, is seen with Descartes on some matters. For example, they are treated together on voluntarism, but the Cartesian doctrine of the creation of eternal truths is used to distinguish his voluntarism as the more radical. This is a point on which Stephen Menn differs from Marion – judging that Marion makes the break with the scholastic and Augustinian traditions more sharp than it is. When, with Menn, the gap is diminished, Descartes <<is best understood as ... working out the consequences of the Augustinian conception of God>>. The Cartesian cogito is traced to Augustine. However, what Descartes is said to have done with it Marion maintains to be very different from what Augustine was about.

Crucially, Marion points to Descartes’ own recognition that Augustine is using the cogito as a way to the analogous knowledge of the divine Trinity, and that this is not at all his own purpose. Here he connects with Étienne Gilson’s rejection of an Augustinian foundation for Descartes’ philosophy. Because faith and reason, grace and nature were so indissolubly linked in Augustine, according to Gilson, his philosophy cannot be detached from religious itinerarium for the sake of an understanding and control of the world. In contrast, Menn’s interpretation is substantially directed against Gilson’s position.

Further, Marion makes a distinction which seems like that involved in Rowan Williams’ contrast between Augustine and Descartes; <<Augustine’s discussion of the certitude of self-knowledge is better described as an analysis of the grammar of the <subject>>. As opposed to Descartes’ ego which is established in <<l’interlocution d’un

47 Marion, <<The Idea of God>>, p. 266. Thomas is also represented as a master of apophaticism in Marion, Questions cartesiennes, II, p. 222-224.

48 Marion, and many others, learned important aspects of their history of philosophy from Gilson, including their suspicion of the Scotistic Thomism of Suárez as corrupting modern thought by tending to a univocity of being which lies at the origin of theology as metaphysics, and, thus, as onto-theology. Cf., for example, Marion, <<The Essential Incoherence>>, p. 303-304; idem, <<The Idea of God>>, p. 267-275; idem, <<Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology>>, in: Critical Inquiry 20 (1994), p. 576; G. Ward, <<Introducing Jean-Luc Marion>>, New Blackfriars 76:895 (July/August, 1995), <<Special Issue on Jean-Luc Marion’s God without Being>>, p. 318-321. This analysis is also picked up by Milbank and Pickstock.


51 Marion, Sur la théologie blanche, p. 384, n. 22 on the cogito and on the will and knowledge, p. 384; cf. also idem, Sur le prisme métaphysique, p. 138-41, 147.

52 Menn, Descartes, p. 6-17, 393 and 398-399.

53 Cf. n. 10 above.
trompeur ... Augustin déduit l'existence directement du fait de se tromper soi-même ... donc de se penser, par simple identité de soi à soi : se tromper présuppose d'être et y équivaut par tautologie; l'argument augustinien reste donc dans le cadre de l'identité de l'esprit à lui-même».

Standing behind the Cartesian ego, Augustine's cogito is placed, by Marion, at the origins of modernity. But because Augustine remains only with the self-identity of spirit, his ego is exempt from what would ground the modern turn to the world. In contrast, the Cartesian ego is founded in an alterité, which might allow it to be used as a certain foundation for universal control of what is other. However, since, for Marion, the Cartesian ego is distinct from the identity of thought and being, it is not directly onto-theological. The dreadful modern identity of subjectivity, thought and being is not completed. Descartes’ thought remains indécidée (blanche).

Third, Augustine is at the source of the Latin interpretation of Exodus 3.14 identifying God and being. Here, the evaluation of Augustine may, in principle, if his theology is found to be Neoplatonic, subordinating being, reflect that of Aquinas. In *L'idole et la distance* and in *Dieu sans l'être*, Aquinas was placed with the onto-theologians because he made being the first of God's names. But in the «Preface to the English Edition» of *God Without Being*, and in «Saint Thomas d'Aquin et l'onto-théo-logie» and later works, the teaching of Thomas has been Neoplatonised by Marion as a *theo-onto-logie*, for which God is before being which he gives even to himself. Aquinas is shifted toward Pseudo-Dionysius and Proclus. So far as Augustine is not also a theo-ontologist, he would be set against Pseudo-Dionysius, and would need to be overcome. Marion’s doctrine here resembles that of Plotinus in *Ennead VI 8*, where the One freely gives himself being. Moreover, Marion’s Cartesian ego, standing before the identity of thought and being, is close to the Plotinian One.

Finally, Augustine is placed with Béroule and Pascal (and thus against Descartes) in the Christian reaction within modernity for the mystery and infinity of God against its tendency to univocity. In contrast, it will be crucial to Menn’s argument that Descartes is inspired by Béroule.

With Marion, the transcendence toward God is crucial. Marion, and our postmodern theologians, are above all opposed to the «univocist drift» in the Scotistic transformation of scholasticism by Suárez which leads in Descartes to «a rationality not theologically assured by Christian Revelation, but metaphysically founded on the humanity

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54 Marion, *Questions cartesiennes, II*, p. 41; «Formulations augustinienes et cartesiennes» at p. 37-43 is Marion’s most extended treatment of differences between Descartes and Augustine on the *cogito*.


57 In Marion, *God without Being*, p. 73-74: Augustine is placed with Thomas, but the Greek Fathers are absolved because being, for them, «returns to the Son, it could not in any way determine the triune divinity which therefore exceeds Being».


of <men strictly men>.>60 Thus, philosophy is to be transcendentally oriented to theology (which is religious life rather than science) or separated altogether from theology. Theology's independence from philosophy is what they demand above all. Though their programmes resemble that of Karl Barth, they are derived from Heidegger.61

We can conclude, however, that, in common with Williams and his companions, Marion excises from Augustine any horizontal self-completeness of the interpenetration of being, thinking and loving in mens which might be exploited for philosophy independent of revealed theology.62 This excision is for the sake of the transcendent relations of a radical charity, relations which are simultaneously toward a communitarian praxis and toward God.63

Rowan Williams' reading of the De trinitate

This transcendence, established against knowledge, is the perspective determining Rowan Williams' interpretation of the De trinitate. For Williams, the limits of theory are set because the appropriate response to the irresolvable problems of theodicy is communitarian praxis.64 His position is radically worked out by John Milbank as <postmodern critical Augustinianism>, for which theory occurs as a necessarily incomplete moment within praxis.65 Milbank's theological writing is <composing a new theoretical music>.66 Theory belongs to composition and is not separable from it. The requirement that we join in the poiesis means that there can be no theoretical distance or objectivity. The event of reconciliation must be not merely believed in, but actively realized as the existence of a community in which mere self-immediacy is infinitely surpassed.67 With the surpassing of interiority and self-immediacy, we also pass beyond theology as theoros. Apart from the singularity of Christian norms of community, theology has really nothing to think about. Our response to the question of what God is like is <the formation of community. The community is what God is like>.68

For Milbank, though time (as the dimension of the itinerarium)69 is privileged over space, Augustine radicalizes a stress that we only have participatory access to the eternal by remaining within the structures of space, time and human language.70 <<Because for

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60 Marion, <<The Essential Incoherence>>, p. 297 and 306; idem, <<The Idea of God>>, passim.
62 Marion, Étant Donné, p. 11: <<lorsque enfin nous opposons l’adonné à la subjectivité transcendental, nous ne suggérons pas que le sujet renaît dans la donation>>. A return to Augustine will not be for the sake of a metaphysical or transcendental subjectivity.
63 Cf. J.-L. Marion, Prologémens à la charité (Paris 1991). By means of a Pseudo-Dionysian theology of the divine names and because the Eucharist is the site of his theology of charity, communitarian praxis is not set against but in contemplation.
66 Milbank, <<Postmodern Critical Augustinianism>>, p. 227 & 237; idem, The Word Made Strange, p. 4. For his development of the notion that Christian faithfulness will require a poetic surrender to the musical flow which, as against static spatialization, stresses temporal occurrence through us which is Milbank relies upon Catherine Pickstock. Cf. Milbank, <<Pleonasms, Speech and Writing>>, p. 83, n. 62 and C. Pickstock, <<Ascending Numbers: Augustine’s De Musica and the Western Tradition>>, in: L. Ayres and G. Jones (ed.), Christian Origins, p. 185-215. Milbank's position on the ego in Augustine resembles that of Mennel, <<Augustine's <<1>>>>, n. 30 above.
68 Milbank, <<Postmodern Critical Augustinianism>>, p. 228.
70 Milbank, <<Sacred Triads>>, p. 464.
Augustine to know oneself genuinely means to know oneself as loving ... not interiority but radical exteriorization is implied>>, 

<<Augustine’s use of the vocabulary of inwardness is not at all a deepening of Platonic interiority, but something much more like its subversion>>. 

Milbank acknowledges his dependence on Rowan Williams and Lewis Ayres to establish this view of Augustine’s De trinitate.

The first of William’s two relevant articles, <<Sapientia and the Trinity>>, is largely occupied with refuting the charge made by Eastern Orthodox theologians, generally, and by a wide range of Western theologians, of whom we may take Karl Rahner as representative, that Augustine separates the treatment of the divine essence from the personal relations of the Trinity in such a way as to make the essence the subject of a knowledge of God prior to and independent of revelation. This is associated among Augustine’s critics with his continuing attachment to Neoplatonism. Williams is right in his rejection of this criticism, which is based in misapprehensions of how the divine essence and relations are connected in Augustine, of Neoplatonism – for which there is no rational knowledge of the One – and of the history of Latin theology – which derived the distinction between the de Deo uno and the de Deo trino not from Augustine but from Pseudo-Dionysius. 

I entirely agree with the direction of Williams’ argument on this point, but note what is characteristically postmodern in his theological perspective: Williams wishes to reduce substance to relation (and thus the individual to the interpersonal) and opposes autonomous philosophical reason.

This fundamental opposition, which comes out of an antagonism to modernity, produces three further and deeply problematic oppositions in Williams’ representation of Augustine. First, Williams opposes our union with God, on one hand, to the mental self-relation of remembering, knowing and loving, the image of God in us, on the other. He writes: <<The image of God in us ... is realised when the three moments of our mental agency all have God for their object ... [T]he mind ... will not know itself truthfully if it is a self-contained object to itself ... [T]he mind as independent individuality cannot image God>>. What, in Augustine, is a choice between good and evil, between conversio and adversio in respect to God and self, a choice which is only possible because of the three-fold image, has become an opposition depriving our knowledge does of a truthful basis.

Second, there is an opposition between our sapientia and the divine sapientia. <<Our knowledge is not like God’s – nor will it ever be: it will always and necessarily be a sapientia learned or acquired (xv.26), even when it is assured (as it now is not) of a truthful basis (xv.24-26)>>. This means that the human turning to God, which Williams has just demanded so that the image of God in us may be true, can never occur. In fact, we can never know in God. Williams embraces this consequence. The opposition of the two wisdoms remains absolute with the result that the knowledge of the opposition can only be increased. The same is true of the difference between creator and creature.

Third, then, Williams opposes creator and creature in such a way that they can never come together. Ours <<is a trinitarian life appropriate to the created order, as against the trinitarian life appropriate to eternity>>. Hence, our <<sapientia ... terminate[s] ... in our

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71 Milbank, <<Sacred Triads>>, p. 465.
72 Milbank, <<Sacred Triads>>, p. 465.
74 Williams, <<Sapientia and the Trinity>>, p. 319-320.
75 Williams, <<Sapientia and the Trinity>>, p. 326. There is no De trinitate, lib. XV, cap. XV 26.
recognition of our created distance from God ... [W]e are ontologically incapable of being sapientia as God is>>, 76

There is a consequence of these oppositions which is central to Ayres' treatment of the De trinitate. 77 Because union cannot be realised in sapientia, indeed, in any kind of possession and actuality, we must move from knowledge to love and to love as endless quest. For Williams the Spirit is <<love in search of an object>>, while Sapientia, <<once we are clear what sapientia really means>>, is <<a life that generates relations of love and so generates otherness, difference>>; the divine self-reflexivity is both <<complete in itself>> and <<also indeterminately in search of an object to love>>. 78 Williams concludes: <<There is certainly no trace at all here of a Neoplatonic interest in the One>>. 79

Finally, then, self-reflexivity and knowledge, on one side, and self-othering and love, on the other side, are opposed. But this judgment of Augustine, as Williams represents him, is profoundly mistaken. In fact, it is Williams himself who has interpreted Augustine in a Neoplatonic way. It is precisely the division in Plotinus and in the Neoplatonists generally – with the exception of Porphyry – between the absolute First Principle and what has self-reflexivity which separates the Neoplatonists from Augustine. In Plotinus this has consequences: first, that self-knowledge and the knowledge of the One cannot, in the end, be drawn together and, second, that there are multiple human selves. The second consequence has been recognised as cohering with a postmodern deconstruction of self-identity. 80

When we turn to Williams' article explicitly directed against finding Augustine a collaborator in building the foundations of modernity and of Cartesian philosophy, we have the same interpretative principles at work. In his <<The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge in the De Trinitate>>, Williams maintains his great separation in Augustine both of the divine and the human and of their wisdom. He rejects the possibility of a substantial human self-identity. The mind can not contemplate eternal truth or itself as objects. Self-reflection <<exists only as an awareness of the mind's working, the mind's movement>>. 81 <<Created selfhood>> is radically incomplete and other-directed. For what it really grasps in knowing is <<the lack and desire out of which we live>>. 82 Finally, for Williams,

[T]he paradox [Augustine] presses upon us is that a mind intrinsically incomplete, desirous and mobile ... can rightly and intelligibly be said to know itself completely. Self-knowledge is being defined, [therefore,] not as cognition of a spiritual substance, but awareness of the conditions of finitude and the ability to live and act within them. 83

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76 Williams, <<Sapientia and the Trinity>>, p. 325-327.
78 Williams, <<Sapientia and the Trinity>>, p. 329-331.
79 Williams, <<Sapientia and the Trinity>>, p. 331.
81 Williams, <<The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge>>, p. 122. Eternal truth would remain <<through what was mutable and corruptible in the soul, as fact, image and language>>: J. A. Doull, <<What is Augustinian sapientia?>>, in: Dionysius 12 (1988), p. 63. Doull's article is directed against such a view of Augustine.
82 Williams, <<The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge>>, p. 127.
83 Williams, <<The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge>>, p. 129.
This paradox is of Williams’ own making and comes out of his assumptions, which do not allow the most obvious features of Augustine’s text to speak to him. Self-knowledge in Augustine’s *De trinitate* is not simply awareness of the conditions of finitude and of what we lack. Sometimes, however, the text is weakly heard for a moment. According to Williams, <<Augustine is not ... appealing to some luminous intuition of our spiritual essence, though he is quite capable at times of using language which comes close to this>>.84 Ignoring this language, Williams claims that the *De trinitate* is not about self-knowledge which would constitute a union of self-certainty and substance. <<It is an affirmation of the need at least to begin with the mind’s involvement in time and in other selves>>. Entering into oneself is reworked as self-othering love and this is opposed to Plotinian *eros*. The <<Plotinian *eros* for the One is transformed into an *eros* directed to the understanding of *eros* itself>>.85

Once again, it is the contrast with Plotinus which gives away the weakness in how Williams reads Augustine. Such Christian theological postmoderns keep having trouble with the Neoplatonists because what they want to discover in Patristic Christianity is, in reality, more securely found in pagan Neoplatonism than in Christian theology. The absolute first for Plotinus is equally named by us as the Good as well as the One. The Plotinian Good is the activity of a free will which is self-productive.86 Indeed, the productivity or self-othering of this Good is its very nature – as the Latin medievals said of it, <<bonum est diffusivum sui>>.87 But there is a limit to this self-othering. In Plotinus the One-Good cannot reflect upon itself, when it does so, when it is simultaneously above and below itself, it is *nous*. In Plotinus it is, in fact, intellectual self-reflexivity which moves us down from the first to the second spiritual hypostasis. Significantly, the same is not true for Plotinus when speaking of the will or love of the Good. He writes that <<the nature of the Good is in reality the will of himself>>, he is <<choosing himself>>.88 He is, as <<cause of himself>>, <<lovable and love of himself>>.89 It is not by turning to love against intellect that we shall move from Plotinus to Augustine.

Rather it is with a reflexive union of being, intellect and love that Augustine, following Porphyry, probably mediated through Victorinus,90 and submitting to the councilian definitions of the Church, parts company with Plotinus. The Augustinian trinity, as opposed to the Plotinian triad, is self-reflexive. The Plotinian One-Good is essentially a free, generous, othering, loving activity, but it is precisely not self-othering because, as the Good, it cannot know itself in or as its other. This lack is reflected in the human self which

84 Williams, <<The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge>>, p. 130.
85 Williams, <<The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge>>, p. 132-133.
knows the spiritual hypostases by <<entering into itself>> but which cannot, in the end, hold together self-knowledge and the One. In Augustine we have genuine self-othering and self-reflexivity both in God and in his human image. What is fled by postmodern theology is what makes Augustine’s characteristic development of Christian Platonism. It is ironic that the fundamental fault of this would be theological and anti-philosophical reading of Augustine is to reduce almost to nothing the trinitarian structure of the divine and the human for Augustine. Williams, in flight from an association of Descartes and Augustine, misreads Augustine’s relation to the Plotinus whom Williams imposes on Augustine at the very moment that he polemically opposes Neoplatonism.

A Modern Ahistorical Reading: Stephen Menn’s Cartesian Augustine

In this hermeneutically self-conscious age, Stephen Menn’s Descartes and Augustine has a refreshing simplicity and directness. He is <<anti-historicist>> and works within a metaphysical science which <<progresses through emulation, criticism, and refinement>>. He reports that <<Gilson and many others think that there is something essentially modern underlying Descartes’ whole project of thought, and that this modern orientation excludes any real community of intention between Cartesian and pre-modern metaphysics>>. Though the others include Heidegger and Husserl, Menn <<can find no truth in any of this>>. Having examined Descartes’ sources, Menn discovers no <<incommensurability between Descartes’ <modern> metaphysical project and the <pre-modern> projects of his predecessors>>.

In fact, Menn reads with us a great deal of philosophical and theological text from Plato and Aristotle through the Stoics and Middle and Neo-Platonists to Augustine and within the 17th century. The reading is intelligent and sometimes informed, though not by any means weighed down, by the immense secondary literature on almost every question he touches. I cannot examine his whole argument, but I will try to indicate how Augustine appears in his relation to Plotinus from this ahistorical perspective which sees continuity between Augustine and Descartes rather than an unbridgeable gap.

Menn finds continuity at the very points where our postmodern Christians place the gaps. What Augustine learns from Plotinus and hands on to Descartes is not fundamentally a set of metaphysical theses but a spiritual discipline, an itinerarium of the soul, and Descartes’ philosophical project is a work of Christian piety inspired by the Cardinal de Bérulle. Descartes is responding to the felt need in the 17th century to develop from Christian <<Augustinian principles a complete philosophy to replace that of Aristotle>>. To search for wisdom, Augustine <<makes central use of the discipline for contemplating the soul and


92 Menn, Descartes, p. 400, 397, cf. 400-404.

93 Menn, Descartes, p. 398-399, cf. 8-17, and 64-70.
God that Plotinus had developed in defense of Platonism.\textsuperscript{94} Crucially, Augustine’s conversio is, for Menn,

not a change of religious allegiance, but a turning towards God and away from other things ... Augustine identifies his desire for wisdom with a desire <<to fly away from earthly things to>> ... God ... [<<for with you is wisdom>> ... Christianity [and Platonism are] only ... means for achieving this flight to God; ...[they are both] means to wisdom.\textsuperscript{95}

The crucial point that both Christian authority and philosophical reason are instruments of the quest for wisdom is well founded in an interpretation of the Confessiones, generally, and of Book 3, particularly. Book 3 is Augustine’s account of how his reading of Cicero’s Hortensius\textsuperscript{96} <<enflamed>> him and how he could be satisfied neither with crude Christianity nor philosophy without Christ. In fact, the mixture of Christianity and apparent philosophical sophistication drew him to Manicheism. With this Menn is able to bridge the gap, opened by Gilson and by postmodern Christian theologians, between Christianity and autonomous reason.

This gap Menn had already bridged at the other end by his account of the Christian inspiration of Descartes’ philosophical project, a bridge he supports with a description of the relation of faith and reason, philosophy and theology, in Descartes. He concludes that the Augustinian and Cartesian <<doctrines of faith are the same; and naturally so, since Descartes’ doctrine of faith is a consequence of his adoption of the Augustinian doctrine of the free exercise of will in judgment>>.\textsuperscript{97} For both, <<some truths are to be accepted on faith>>, but also, for both, we <<are to press on toward knowledge>>.\textsuperscript{98} In this schema, the character of Augustinian sapientia and its relation to the spiritual itinerarium of Plotinus become the heart of the matter.

Menn’s account of Plotinus is very much limited by his project. Neither he nor Augustine are interested in <<Plotinus’ doctrinal innovations>> within Platonism.\textsuperscript{99} Among these innovations Menn includes things essential to understanding Plotinus. Neither Menn nor Augustine are interested in the relation to the One in its distinction from nous. Theirs is an itinerarium of soul to nous. As already noted, this means that Menn does not notice the Plotinian doctrine of the two (or more) selves, the problems with the continuity of identity in bænostis, and generally the problem of whether or how human individuality is established. He sees only the positive side of Plotinus’ teaching that the real self is the one which is always above.\textsuperscript{100} Seeing only this side produces Menn’s suggestive, but rough, vague and inadequately substantiated, assertion that <<Plotinus is apparently the earliest philosopher to make rationality essential to the soul, and therefore to conceive soul through the <<first-person>> reflection which will be most prominently found, divorced from Platonist vitalism, in Augustine and Descartes>>.\textsuperscript{101} The One and the divided self are not

\textsuperscript{94} Menn, Descartes, p. 393, cf. on the role of Béroule 24, 47-49.
\textsuperscript{95} Menn, Descartes, p. 74, 132 and 206.
\textsuperscript{97} Menn, Descartes, p. 353, cf. 322-336, especially, 333-336.
\textsuperscript{98} Menn, Descartes, p. 334.
\textsuperscript{100} Cf. Plotinus, Ennade IV 3 12; IV 8 8; V 1 11.
\textsuperscript{101} Menn, Descartes, p. 112. A criticism might begin by noticing what A.H. Armstrong calls Plotinus’ discovery of the unconscious and the fact that, for him, we are only intermittently conscious of our true selves; cf. A.H.
small matters or problems within Plotinus. His doctrine of the One makes him the founder of what we call Neoplatonism; because of his teaching on the self he becomes a heretic within his own school.  

What Augustine found in Plotinus was the spiritual discipline of *conversio* and the intuitions which belong to that discipline, so that, knowing both himself and God as incorporeal substance, he was able to become a Christian. Menn maintains that Augustine took "a discipline of intellectual contemplation, understandings of soul and Nous and of the origin of evil ... and ... the essential difference between the soul and God (= Nous)". Since for both Descartes and Augustine the central problem in coming to their intellectual positions is getting free from the corporeal, Menn’s Augustine is found in the Plotinian criticism of Stoicism and the Augustinian escape from Manicheism. Menn stresses, however, that, for both Plotinus and Augustine, the thesis that "the principles of physical things are incorporeal" is not just negative and, thus, compatible with a skepticism about our grasp of "positive metaphysical knowledge". Menn thinks that Augustine followed Plotinus in a "moral and intellectual discipline" which enabled him to come to God and the other principles of corporeal things with the mind, that these belong to Augustinian *sapientia*, and that Descartes followed Augustine in the same discipline to the same intuitions.

There is nothing more offensive to postmodern theological Augustinianism than the centering of being, knowledge and presence which Menn attributes to what he deems a Platonic tradition. However, it is my judgment, which I hope to substantiate in the last part of this essay, that Augustine’s *De trinitate* shows that what Menn asserts of Plotinus is even more true of Augustine. Further, what makes Augustine worse than Plotinus (so to speak) is his modification of the Plotinian hypostatic spiritual trinity. This modification, to which he is moved by Christian doctrine and by Porphyry’s modification of Plotinus, allows him to draw together self-knowledge and a positive knowledge of God in a way Plotinus cannot do.

In Plotinus, the self and God are known together as we ascend until self-reflexivity and the knowledge of God divide when we turn to the One itself. Menn reports that "it is in our power, with an appropriate discipline, to understand [a noetic] incorporeal power, because we are such an incorporeal rational power." The turning from bodies to the soul, which is this discipline, is "a turning to oneself." For Plotinus, and for Descartes under the Plotinian influence mediated by Augustine, "soul’s reflection on itself is the necessary point of departure for coming to a ... purely intellectual understanding of the

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103 Menn, *Descartes*, p. 80, n. 7.

104 Menn, *Descartes*, p. 84, 89-98 and 132-144.

105 Menn, *Descartes*, p. 92.

106 Menn, *Descartes*, p. 100.

107 Menn, *Descartes*, p. 397: "Augustine and Descartes are Platonists" along with Plotinus.


109 Menn, *Descartes*, p. 110.
realities underlying sensible phenomena. What is known in nous, when soul turns to it in turning to itself, is a positive content. So long as self and God can come together in knowledge, there is no division between the knowledge that God is and what God is. Plotinus wants to induce actual knowledge of the separate Nous ... [and holds that Nous is the beings, and that the nature of the forms is there. Nous is itself the things it thinks.] Augustine also follows Plotinus here.

What picture of Augustine emerges when he is placed between Plotinus and Descartes? He is, first of all, in search of wisdom, sapientia. This wisdom is attained, and it is attained in the knowledge of self and God together. Book 7 of the Confessiones is central to this presentation of Augustine, though its teaching is well supported by Menn from other writings, particularly the De libero arbitrio and the De trinitate. There Augustine reports that he looked within himself and saw with the eye of his soul the immutable light above his mind. Over and again Menn tells us that this is a positive intuition and that upon this everything depends.

At some points along the way, Augustine parts company with Plotinus. According to Menn, Augustine does not remain with Plotinus in the ascent from individual to world-soul because he was interested in his own soul. Beginning from the knowledge of rational human soul, Augustine follows Plotinus to the superiority of his rational soul to the senses and, then, to a direct relation to God as Truth, the standard by which both souls and other things are properly known and judged. This Truth cannot simply be a property of propositions since it is something we look to in judging, and serves as a standard of comparison for our judgments. Menn writes, Augustine obviously intends his Truth, as a separately existing Wisdom above the soul to be equivalent to Plotinus’ Nous. Wisdom is a participation in this Truth, in God, in God’s life of wisdom. Menn concludes, God allows the mind to perceive and possess God ... Wisdom ... is a kind of truth ... but it is specifically the truth in which the highest good is perceived and contained.

Crucially, for Augustine, Plotinus and Descartes, the knowledge of the soul’s lack or need, on one hand, and the positive knowledge of God, on the other, are not divided in a postmodern way. Menn quotes the De libero arbitrio:

<<When the mind contemplates the highest wisdom – which is not the soul for it is immutable – it also contemplates its mutable self, and somehow becomes aware of itself; [Menn comments] contemplating itself as the recipient of truth and God as the source of truth, it can choose either to love God over itself, or [quoting Augustine] to imitate God in a perverse way, as wishing to enjoy its own power; thus it becomes as much lesser as it wishes to be greater.>>

110 Menn, Descartes, p. 112.
111 Menn, Descartes, p. 114; this touches the argument of E. Booth on the Augustinian and Aristotelian notitia sui (n. 84 above). Booth rightly sees the Aristotelian thinking in Augustine, owing in part to the intermediation of Porphyry. Cf. G. Girelli, Il pensiero forte di Porfiro. Mediazione fra logica platonica e ontologia aristotelica (Milan 1996).
112 Menn, Descartes, p. 119; quoting Plotinus, Ennead V 9 5 (Loeb 5), p. 296, 7-8.
113 On this sight, cf. Menn, Descartes, p. 139, 64, 81, 185.
114 Menn, Descartes, p. 146, cf. also 148-149, 166-167, 395.
115 Menn, Descartes, p. 149, 146, 151.
116 Menn, Descartes, p. 154.
Saving union, the wisdom which <<adheres to the truth>> is possible. To remain in our creaturely difference is damnation. Our participation in God cannot be reduced to awareness of need. Menn does not find a different doctrine from this in Book 10 of the De trinitate.

Considering Augustine’s taking up here (as in other places) the Delphic command *gnōthi seauton*, Menn writes:

Augustine’s point is not that the mind ... does not know itself – the mind always knows itself, because it is always immediately present to itself, and so better known to itself than anything else can be – rather ... the mind knows itself confusedly ... [W]e should not try to *add* anything to what we already know ourselves to be, but rather to *subtract* what we have illicitly added ... [Then the mind] will be left ... with a knowledge of its nature or substance.

This not only conforms to the doctrine of such works as *De libero arbitrio* but also to Augustine’s account of his *itinerarium* in the *Confessiones*.

There are problems with Menn’s understanding of Plotinus and Augustine as they appear on the way to Descartes. He neglects the relation of Plotinus and Augustine to Skepticism in favour of their critical relation to Stoicism and Manicheism respectively. Because Augustine’s teaching on the Trinity seems to Descartes to belong to the difference between their projects, neither the difference between *nous* and the One as the goals of the self emerges, nor do the problems this difference creates for the identity of the Plotinian self appear. There is a further consequence that the Porphyrian mediation of Plotinus to Augustine remains hidden. Menn does not consult later Neoplatonism to understand Plotinus and what is particular or problematic in his teaching. This conceals to him a good part of what in Augustine lies philosophically beyond Plotinus. But what is positive in the intellectual union of the human and divine he has grasped.

**Self-knowledge and God as Other in the *Enneads* and the *De trinitate***

There are two Augustines before us. For one, at least so far as knowledge is concerned, God is always beyond. If the human and divine come together at all, it is in charity, *praxis* and *poiesis*. For the other, self-knowledge and the knowledge of God are so tied up with each other that we may speak of self-preservation and rational certainty, of knowledge of God through self-knowledge, of the grasping and possession of God, of the intuition and understanding of the nature of God and ourselves. Can we decide between these Augustines?

**Plotinus**

I have indicated that there are limits to what is understood of Plotinus and thus of Augustine in the modern, anti-historicist and metaphysical perspective of Menn. However, I think that these limits can be surpassed; and, when surpassed his perspective encompasses

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120 Menn, *Descartes*, p. 252; cf. 390 n. 1.
the postmodern Augustine who turns out to be a pagan Neoplatonist just when he thinks himself to be most distinctively himself.

Crucial for the understanding of Augustine, who is explicit about it, but also for Plotinus, is that both begin in a philosophical movement from Skepticism as well as from the Stoicism emphasized by Stephen Menn. *Ennead V 1, On the Three Primary Hypostases*, an *Ennead* to which Menn refers often, begins not with a criticism of Stoicism, but from the audacious soul, thinking itself to belong to itself, delighting in its otherness and illusory independence. Running as far away from its origins as possible, it is, in fact, dependent upon the sensible below it.

This is the Skeptical soul which has returned to itself when it found that it was not able to pass from the sensible to the ideal in the Platonic manner. Not able to arrive at the knowledge of the truth, it was thrown back upon itself and discovered there, to its surprise, that it was content. With itself it achieved quietude, its always assumed ideal, an ideal it had sought in knowledge of the truth. It now decides that moving in judgment between the true and the false, the good and the evil, would not have provided quietude at all.\(^{121}\) What the self had mistakenly sought in otherness it now possesses better in itself. Plotinus administers a two-fold discipline to this soul, established in a reflexive relation to the sensible as obstacle. By these disciplines it will know its origin and worth. One part of that discipline is a contempt for the sensible. The other part is a turning inward to where the individual discovers the three primary hypostases: Soul, *nous*, and the One.

The Plotinian soul is established in a completion of the Skeptical reflection into self, a reflection which is carried to substantial self-knowledge. In that self-reflexivity the soul rises, as Menn says it does, to *nous* and to the knowledge of itself and all else in *nous*. Because the Plotinian *nous* is also self-reflexive, the human soul, established in self-knowledge in reaction to a confusion with the sensible, is able to hold together, at the level of *nous*, self-knowledge and the knowledge of the divine other. Human knowing and its object are together there, just as thought and being are established in relation to each other within the life of *nous*. However, when the individual reaches that through which both it and all else are ultimately established, the One, the limit of self-reflexivity, appears. Porphyry, in his heretical drawing together of the first and second hypotheses of the Parmenides within the First Principle, will exploit the fact that, unlike his successors, Plotinus ascribes *energeia* and *boulē* to the One in such a way that it may be said to give itself its freedom and being.\(^{122}\) However, for Plotinus, being and will do not belong to the One in an act of self-reflection. Such an act would divide the One, placing it above and below itself, as if it received itself from itself as from another.\(^{123}\) What is true of the soul which exists from another and needs


above all to know this alterity, cannot be true of the One.124 There is no reflexive self-othering within the One.

Since the knowing individual self is established in the One, the fact that a self-reflexive knowing cannot be carried to the root of the self has extremely important negative consequences for self-identity in Plotinus.125 The best treatments I know leave us with paradox and *aporia*. Gerard O’Daly shows that soul remains, as a thinking self-reflexive subject, when it achieves *benosis* with *nous*.126 But the principle of the self is the One, love of whom moves the whole *itinerarium* of self-knowledge. Ultimately the One and the individual belong together; returning to the One, the individual returns to itself.127 But awareness, when we are with the One, is beyond reason and intellectual self-reflection. There, the individual is returned to itself and yet <<he is not himself>>. Certainly, there, self-knowledge and apprehension of the One cannot be held together. We are beyond being and self-knowledge because the One is itself beyond being and reflexive knowing.128 Plotinus writes: <<Intellect ... has one power for thinking, by which it looks at the things in itself, and one by which it looks at what transcends it by a direct awareness and reception.>>.129 Significantly for our dialogue with postmodern interpreters of Augustine, this second power is <<intellect in love>>, *nous erin*. According to Gerard O’Daly, Plotinus <<must isolate an instance of *nous* which transcends its characteristic activity of reflexion and attribute to this the vision of the One ... But the notion of a non-intellectual Intellect is quickly found unsatisfactory>>. Since neither is given up, Plotinus’ thought at this point is aporetic.130

At the human level, the Plotinian higher and lower selves remain irreducibly beside one another because both the One and also the substantial being of intellectual self-relation are models and causes of its identity, freedom and authentic existence.131 A self with two such goals must move back and forth between being and non-being, between identity and otherness, between reflexivity and self-forgetful simplicity. Its identity cannot lie in a

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125 Plotinus, *Ennead* VI 9 7 (Loeb 7), p. 328, 20-21; VI 9 8 (Loeb 7), p. 323, 25-30; VI 9 9 (Loeb 7), p. 338, 56-60 and VI 9 10-11; especially, VI 9 11 (Loeb 7), p. 344, 36-51; in the last of these texts the self is on both sides of the divide between *nous* and the One.
127 Plotinus, *Ennead* VI 7 35 (Loeb 7), p. 196, 20-23, in the second kind of seeing, the intellect in love <<mingles his seeing with what he contemplates>>.
129 Plotinus, *Ennead* VI 6-7; VI 8 9; VI 8 12-13; VI 8 16-24.
knowledge which is its own.\footnote{Cf. I. Perzel, "<L’<intellect amoureux> et l’<un qui est>. Une doctrine mal connue de Plotin>>., in: Revue de Philosophie Ancienne 15 (1997), p. 223-264 which adopts a position opposed to the Hegelian and Augustinian intellectualist interpretation and extends Trouillard, Hadot and Corrigan into a paradoxical self defined differently than by O’Daly.} Of the problems and real consequences for human self-identity of what is ultimate for Plotinus, Menn seems largely unaware.\footnote{Menn, Descartes, p. 111, n. 26 recognizes some of the problems but seems to have forgotten them by the following page; cf. also 122, n. 33.} These consequences are welcomed by postmoderns who would deconstruct modern self-identity, but the postmodern theologians place with Augustine what belongs to Plotinus. To find postmodern selves, we should better look to Plotinus than to Augustine, to pagan rather than to Christian Neoplatonism.

\textit{Augustine}

In turning to Augustine, we shall not be able to separate what is philosophical from what comes from the Christian Scriptures and the authority of the Church. It is just Augustine’s theological transformation of the Plotinian divine triad with its necessarily subordinated and unequal second and third hypostases that allows him to unify the self and to bring it together with God in self-knowledge more completely than Plotinus did. In these unifications, as compared to Plotinus, to post-Plotinian pagan Neoplatonism and to postmodern Augustinianism, Augustine \footnote{R. D. Crouse, "<Praecepta mutatum verbo. St. Augustine’s Platonism>>., in: R. J. Dodaro and G. P. Lawless (eds.), \textit{Augustine and his critics} (London - New York in press). Crouse goes on: "<... in pagan Platonism ... the ascent to God demands a faculty of soul beyond intellect, where union is sought by way of the religious \textit{praxis} of the mysteries, above understanding>>. Sorabji makes a like differentiation in \textit{Time, Creation and the Continuum}, p. 170 as do Armstrong, Trouillard, Perzel, see n. 123, 128 and 132 above.} But, then, philosophy and Christian authority were both necessary to Augustine’s trinitarian doctrine.\footnote{Augustinus, \textit{De trinitate}, lib. II, proem. 1 (\textit{CCL} 50), p. 80, 16: "<... substantiam dei siue per scripturam eius siue per creaturam>>.; lib. VIII, cap. V 8, p. 277-279; lib. XV, cap. I I, p.460, 12-13: "<... diuiniae scripturae auctoritate, uerum ... ratione iam demonstrare ...>>.; cf. Crouse, "<St. Augustine’s \textit{De Trinitate}. Philosophical Method>>., in: \textit{Studia Patristica}, XVI, pt. II, ed. E.A. Livingstone, \textit{Text und Untersuchungen 129} (Berlin 1985), 506-510.} As Edward Booth, Werner Beierwaltes and Salvatore Lilla have shown, Porphyry and Aristotle are crucial for what Augustine thinks.\footnote{Cf. n. 90 and 108 above and Booth, "<St. Augustine’s <notitia suia>>. 28 (1978), p. 209-211; S. R. C. Lilla, "<Un dubbio di S. Agostino su Porfirio>>., in: \textit{Nuovi Annali della Facoltà di Magistero dell’Università di Messina} 5 (1987), p. 319-331; idem, "<Pseudo-Denys l’Aréopagite, Porphyre et Damascius>>.; in: de Andia (éd.), \textit{Denys l’Aréopagite et sa postérité en Orient et en Occident}, p. 117-135; idem, "<Neoplatonic Hypostases and the Christian Trinity>>.; in: M. Joyal (éd.), \textit{Studies in Plato and the Platonic Tradition. Essays Presented to John Whitaker} (Aldershot 1997), p. 157.} When, from the resulting self-knowledge, a principle for autonomous philosophical reason is developed, there is no betrayal.

As with his representation of Plotinus, Stephen Menn’s picture of Augustine should be augmented with a greater recognition of his relation to Skepticism as well as to Stoicism and Platonism. On his way from Manicheism to Platonism, Augustine passes through Skepticism.\footnote{Compare Augustinus, \textit{Confessiones}, lib. VI, cap. XVI 26 (\textit{CCL} 27), p. 91, 22-26 (considered in the light of lib. V, cap. X 19, p. 68; lib. V, cap. XIV 25, p. 72, 29-35 and lib. VI, cap. XI 18, p. 86-87) with \textit{Ennom V} 1 1. I owe this comparison to my student Eli Charles Diamond. That the doctrine of the \textit{De trinitate} stands in relation to the Skeptical Academy is clear from lib. XIV, cap. XIX 26 (\textit{CCL} 50), p. 458, 55-p. 459, 68 and lib. XV, cap. XII, p. 490,1-494, 98.} That this passage is indispensably important is testified not only by the \textit{Contra academicos}, but by his account of \textit{mens} with its indubitable union of being, thinking and loving, the account so troubling for a postmodern retrieval of Augustine. Augustine also begins
from the Hellenistic desire for peace, rest or quietude, and finds his way there by a reflexive movement into the self as against the sensible. The fundamental difference between Augustine and Plotinus is that Augustine is able to carry this self-reflexivity all the way through. It is carried further within the individual self so that reflexivity becomes a positive relation of remembering, knowing and loving on which much else can be established. It is also carried through to the absolute First Principle so that selfknowledge and our knowledge of God as other do not need to be opposed.

In responding to the postmodern representation of Augustine from within Menn’s perspective corrected in the way indicated, I shall look at two questions: first, the character and purpose of Augustine’s cogito and, second, the character of Augustinian sapientia. It is crucial is that both belong to what we may call <<saving knowledge>>.

I begin with the Confessions and with a point at the center of Menn’s argument and well established by him. With this one might respond to the notion of Williams and Marion that the Augustinian cogito is unlike the Cartesian, because, whereas Descartes wanted to establish that the cogito is incorporeal substance, Augustine is dealing with the <<grammar of the subject>> or <<simple identité de soi à soi>>, <<tautologie>>, <<l’identité de l’esprit à lui-même>>.

Whatever these categories of Williams and Marion signify, it cannot be denied that for Augustine the indubitable unity of thought and being in the human mind has content and that this content is absolutely central to his representation of how he came to Christian belief. Augustine cannot become a Christian believer until he can conceive incorporeal substance, until he knows not just that it is but positively grasps its nature. He comes to that conception through reflection on his own thinking as both incorporeal and indubitably existing. Because of the self-presence with which Book 10 of De trinitate is occupied, within his own thinking Augustine finds together the required knowledge both that incorporeal substance exists and what it is. Using the resulting unity of incorporeal thought and being as a place from which to perceive what is both above and below himself, Augustine arrives at a Platonic hierarchy within which God is the true identity of thought and being, like the Plotinian nous. In that hierarchy, Augustine locates his own thinking. So far as it is mutable, the human mens lies between true being above him and sensible <<almost non-being>> below. The knowledge that the human mens is indubitably


140 Williams, <<The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge>>, p. 121; Marion, Questions cartesiennes, II, p. 41. O’Daly seems to make a like distinction in Augustine’s Philosophy of Mind, p. 171.


143 This the argument of Augustinus, Confessiones VII. The hierarchy of being, with God as the <<1 am,>> the most true being, is suggested at Augustinus, De trinitate, lib. V, cap. II 3 (CCL 50), p. 208, 11-12: <<cui perfecto ipsum esse unde essentia nominata est maxime ac urcissime competit>>. Cf. also lib. III, cap. II etc.
existent incorporeal substance is thus necessary to Augustine's conversion. It is saving knowledge.

The unbreakable self-reflexive unity of remembering, understanding and loving has and must have for Augustine "<a truthful basis>". Not only does it involve an indubitable certainty, but establishing that we are rational is, from the beginning to the end of the De trinitate, required to lead us to God. The De trinitate is a step-by-step deepening of the understanding that we are essentially rational, what this means, what it makes possible and what it requires. It certainly requires self-attention and the recognition of the goodness of self-knowledge. When Augustine finally reaches the consideration of the inner and superior reason and the image of the Trinity which belongs to it, he makes his principle explicit. The image of the Trinity has been impaired by sin but not lost: "<Behold! the mind ... remembers itself, understands itself, and loves itself; if we perceive this, we perceive a Trinity, not yet God indeed, but now finally an image of God>>. When this image does not turn to that of which it is an image and thus deprives itself of the knowledge which makes it happy, it is foolish and wicked, but its being as image is what places this sin in its power. If the essential incorporeal rationality of the human soul could be denied, nothing in the whole argument would work. This is why Augustine returns to his refutation of the Skeptics in the final book of the De trinitate.

Knowledge is finally for Augustine what makes us happy. We seek union with the Good in contemplation. Vision is the realization of what love seeks; love is a steadfast perceiving. We are made happy by this contemplation because knowledge of ourselves, other persons and, indeed, all things in the Word is normative knowledge. Wisdom knows the thing and its good, and judges it by its good all at once. Fact and value cannot be separated here.

The contemplation, or wisdom, which makes us happy is knowledge of all things in the divine Word. A progressive identification of the object of beatifying contemplation, so that we come to know its character as the eternal Word, Truth and sapientia and, at the same time, come to know that our capacity and need for just that consummation are essential to us, structures the De trinitate. That need and capacity are bound up with the trinity which belongs to our higher reason and true selves, the trinity which is image of God. The discovery of this trinity, and of the sapientia which always belongs to it, is the very heart and goal of Augustine's argument. Its discovery implies that the knowing which is eternal life begins here. Rather, and better, because sapientia is always at least secretly or latently

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144 The necessity to get beyond a corporeal and sensible picture of reality is repeatedly urged in Augustinus, De trinitate, indeed, we begin there: cf. lib. I, cap. I 1 (CCL 50), p. 27, 4-8; lib. II, cap. XVIII 34-35, p. 124-126; lib. III, cap. I proem., p. 127 etc. At lib. X, cap. X 15-16, p. 328-329 this is linked with the fact that the mind knows its own substance.


147 Augustinus, De trinitate, lib. V, cap. I 2; lib. IX, cap. XI 16; X passim.


149 Augustinus, De trinitate, lib. XIV, cap. XII 15 (CCL 50), p. 443, 5; <<stulta est>>.


153 Augustinus, De trinitate, lib. I, cap. X 20 (CCL 50); lib. IV, cap. I 2 and cap. XVIII 24; lib. VII, cap. III 5, p. 253, 82-83: <<... cum de sapientia scriptura loquitur, de filio loquitur ...>>; lib. XII, cap. XIV; etc.
present in our memory, this wisdom has properly no beginning.\textsuperscript{154} Human nature has been so formed that never does it not remember itself, never does it not understand itself, never does it not love itself.\textsuperscript{155} Neither knowledge nor self-knowledge can be reduced in Augustine to empirical experience. The self which is self-known does not cease to exist when we are not empirically attending to it. This much remains in Augustine of Plotinus’ higher soul which is always in contemplation of \textit{nous}, whether or not the historical self is conscious of this contemplation. In Augustine this higher self belongs primarily to memory. So Williams is mistaken: \textit{scientia} is \textless learned or acquired\textgreater, but \textit{sapientia} is not.\textsuperscript{156}

Beatitude in contemplation, the vision of all things in the eternal Word which is their good, is our goal, but that goal is a return to our beginning, or better, to what is before our self-conscious knowing. The triad of memory, understanding and love is present in each of the three activities of mind.\textsuperscript{157} There is a knowing and a loving within memory before knowledge is projected into consciousness. The \textless before\textgreater in this knowing before knowing, so to speak, corresponds in our minds and in our being to the priority of the divine principle. Final contemplation is a return to that gaze of eternal being which belongs to memory and to the fundamental structure of our minds.\textsuperscript{158} The joining of that finality with the relation to the principle which belongs to the \textless before\textgreater of memory allows reason, in virtue of its access to its source and end, to have its proper self-completeness. By self-reflexion in and through its relation to God as Alpha and Omega, each relation having its appropriate mental character, divine form is given to the human.\textsuperscript{159} Moving to that self-completeness is the whole point of Augustine’s \textit{itinerarium} from the outer trinity of Books 11 and 12 to the inner trinity of Books 14 and 15. The result is a real participation in eternity, an overcoming of the alterity of mind turned to the historical.\textsuperscript{160} Ultimately, the result is ahistorical bliss.

\section*{Conclusion}

\begin{multicols}{2}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{154} Augustineus, \textit{De trinitate}, lib. X, cap. III 5 (CCL 50), p. 317, 24: \textless quandam occultam memoriam\textgreater; lib. XI, cap. III 6; lib. XI, cap. VII 11, p. 348, 20-21: \textless ipsa tamen acies non inde existit, sed erat ante ista\textgreater; lib. XIV, cap. VI 8, cap. VI 9, cap. VIII 11, cap. XIV 18 and cap. XV 21; lib. XV, cap. XV 25, p. 499, 43-45: \textless semper est scire quod uisit, nec tamen semper est cogitare utam suum uel cogitare scientiam uite suae \ldots\textgreater; lib. XV, cap. XXI 40, p. 518, 14-16: \textless illa est abstrusior profunditas nostrae memoriae ubi hic etiam primum cum cogitaremus inuenimus et gignitur intimum urchum \ldots\textgreater; lib. XV, cap. XXI 41. I owe what I understand of Augustine on this point to Michael Carreker.
\item \textsuperscript{155} Augustineus, \textit{De trinitate}, lib. XIV, cap. XIV 18 (CCL 50), p. 445, 5-7: \textless Sic itaque condita est mens humana ut numquam sui non meminerit, numquam se non intellegat, numquam se non diligit\textgreater;\textsuperscript{160} Williams, \textless Sapientia\textgreater, p. 326. Cf. Augustineus, \textit{De trinitate}, lib. XIV, cap. VIII 11 (CCL 50), p. 437, 29-30: \textless quae sciantur uelut aduenticia sunt in animo \ldots\textgreater. Book XI both describes the trinity in the outer man, i.e. the trinity in which there is a dependence on the external object and in which memory acquires its content from without, and moves us toward the inner trinity in which these externalities are overcome. The contrast is well drawn in lib. XII, cap. I-cap. III.
\item \textsuperscript{157} Augustineus, \textit{De trinitate}, lib. XIV, cap. VI 8 (CCL 50), p. 432, 47-49: \textless\ldots ita sibi nota est quemadmodum notae sunt res quae memoria continentur etiam in non cognitentur \ldots\textgreater;\textsuperscript{158} Augustineus, \textit{De trinitate}, lib. VIII, cap. IX 13 (CCL 50), p. 290, 21-22: \textless\ldots intus apud nos, uel potius supra nos in ipsa ueritate conspicimus\textgreater; lib. XI, cap. VII 11; lib. XII, cap. II 1; lib. XII, cap. III 3, p. 357, 4-5: \textless ex illa rationali nostrae mentis substantia qua subhaeremus intellegibilibi atque incommutabilibi urerati \ldots\textgreater; lib. XII, cap. XV 24, p. 378, 13-15: \textless mentis intellectualis ita conditionem esse naturam ut rebus intellegibilibus naturali ordine disponente conditore subiuncta sic ista uideat in quadam luce sui generis incorporeae \ldots\textgreater; lib. XIV, cap. VII 9 and cap. XV 21. Theology and philosophy after Augustine will have to sort out what are put together here: the existence of the human in its cause, memory, the structure of mind etc.
\item \textsuperscript{159} Augustineus, \textit{De trinitate}, lib. XIV, cap. XII 15-16.
\item \textsuperscript{160} Augustineus, \textit{De trinitate}, lib. XIV, cap. XIV 18 and cap. XV 21.
\end{itemize}
\end{multicols}
Augustine’s *De trinitate* is better understood from within a modern ahistoric stance, where standing within metaphysics, Augustine is placed together with Plotinus and Descartes. In fact, within that view, we are better able to understand his difference from Plotinus than the alternative postmodern perspective can.

To say this is doubtless too naïve, but the problem for postmodern retrievals of the premodern is the text. Intellectually, at least, postmodern reflection is always within the temporal and has no solution except to deepen our sense of creaturely finitude. Philosophy as metaphysics is excluded and so we cannot get beyond a historicism which falsifies older philosophy, both modern and premodern. Postmodern theology separates itself from the texts on which it depends precisely because it reduces them to text. Theology’s desire to become independent of philosophy is determined by its present philosophical situation, and it must live or die within the limits philosophy prescribes for it. Mostly it seems to die, at least as *theoria*. So far as it remains alive and yet does not pass totally into *praxis* and *poiesis*, Christian theology is assimilated to pagan Neoplatonism.

The limit of Stephen Menn’s metaphysical enterprise is the converse of the theologians. He does not draw Augustine’s theology closely enough together with philosophy. Modern and premodern philosophy are as dependent on theology as theology is on philosophy. When what is theological in the Augustinian tradition is correctly appreciated precisely by identifying more accurately <<Plotinus’ doctrinal innovations>> within Platonism and how Augustine stands to them,\(^1\) we will understand better how theology reforms philosophy in Augustine. When that is done, what will found, with Descartes, autonomous philosophy will have its own foundations more fully secured and known. That is a paradox of the *De trinitate*.\(^2\)

**Abstract**

Recent philosophical and theological writing on Augustine in France, England and North America is sharply divided between readings which serve either a historicist, anti-metaphysical, postmodern retrieval or an ahistorical, metaphysical, modern reassertion. The postmodern retrieval begins from a Heideggerian <<end of metaphysics>> and goes at least some distance with Jacques Derrida’s development of its consequences. This essay starts from engagements with Augustine by Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, moving then to Rowan William’s on the *De trinitate*, read to prevent comparison with Descartes’ *Meditations*, and considers how William’s relates Augustine to Plotinus. The opposed modernist interpretation is looked appears in Stephen Menn’s *Descartes and Augustine* which sees a continuity between Plotinus, Augustine and Descartes. Finally, the essay treats Plotinus and Augustine on God and self-knowledge, maintaining that Augustine’s *De trinitate* is better understood from within a modern ahistoric stance which, within metaphysics, places Augustine together with Plotinus and Descartes. This view better captures his difference from Plotinus than the alternative postmodern perspective tending to assimilate Augustine to Plotinus.

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\(^1\) Menn’s statement at Menn, *Descartes*, p. 200. "Augustine thinks the Platonists had the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity" is altogether inadequate.

\(^2\) This paper was originally delivered as a lecture for the Department of Philosophy, Université de Fribourg, Suisse in June, 1998. I am deeply grateful to Ruedi Imbach for the invitation, and to him and the University for their hospitality. To Michael Carreker I owe a great part of what I understand of the *De trinitate*, to Ian Stewart I owe the encouragement by which it was written and to Bruno Neveu the place in which I wrote.