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# Background to the *Confessions*

A Christian Philosopher of  
Late Antiquity

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# Augustine in Brief I

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- ❖ Augustine (Aurelius Augustinus) lived from 354-430.
- ❖ Born in Roman Africa, in Thagaste, in present day Algeria.
- ❖ His mother, Monnica, was a dedicated Christian, very devout; his father was not, but was baptized on his death bed.
- ❖ He studied grammar and rhetoric in Madauros and Carthage, with the probable aim of a career in imperial administration.
- ❖ While in Carthage, he had a monogamous non-marital relation which lasted some 14 years; he and his mistress had a son, Adeodatus.
- ❖ In 383 Augustine moved to Milan, then the capital of the western part of the empire, to serve as a professor of rhetoric.

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# Augustine in Brief II

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- ❖ While in Milan, Augustine, who had been deeply engaged with Manicheanism, discovered Platonism and began to understand Christianity in broadly Platonic terms.
- ❖ He did so partly, as he tells us, by his reading of Cicero and various 'Platonists' whom, though, he does not name (*Confessions* 7. 13).
- ❖ He equally fell under the sway of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, who taught him the allegorical method of reading scripture.
- ❖ As we will see, this was a period of uncertainty for Augustine, giving rise to intellectual foment and even crisis; he came through, converting at the back end to an ascetic form of Christianity.
- ❖ He was baptised at Easter in 387, along with Adeodatus (who died thereafter, aged 18).
- ❖ He returned from Italy to North Africa, was ordained a priest, and became bishop of Hippo.
- ❖ While bishop, he engaged in all manner of polemics, apologetics, and many of his writings bear the marks of his engagement with these controversies (against the Manicheans, Donatists, Pelagians, and pagans).

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# Augustine and the Soul

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- ❖ Although not a work on the soul, in the sense of taking the soul as its sole or even dominant subject, in the manner of Aristotle's *De Anima* and Plato's *Phaedo*, the *Confessions* are throughout concerned with the care of the soul.
- ❖ In an early work, he reports his entire theological / philosophical mission: he wishes to 'know God and the soul' (*Soliloquia* 1.7).
  - ❖ He also reports that he means to carry out this mission armed with Platonic philosophy, so long as this philosophy never contradicts sacred scripture (*Contra Academicos* 3.43)
  - ❖ Key in this campaign is the conviction, found in Neoplatonism, that knowing the soul requires our knowing our true selves and our divine origins, which knowledge in turn leads us back to the divinity whence we come (so, e.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* vi 9.7)

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# The Character of his Mission

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- ❖ This orientation inclines him to intense self-scrutiny: epistemological, psychological, moral:
  - ❖ Epistemological: he is gripped, at least early on, by the threat of scepticism.
  - ❖ Psychological: he reflects minutely on his *will*, and its relation to grace (this is partly a reflection of his polemics with the Pelagians, but also partly not)
  - ❖ Moral: he opens questions about the value and character of his own impulses, including sexual impulses, and he asks them with reference to questions of value and moral evaluation.
- ❖ All this is evident in his *Confessions*, which emerges as a kind of philosophy as autobiography, as first-person philosophy, as a theological quest.
  - ❖ Today we have in our universities one department of theology and another of philosophy. It seems fair to say that any such division would be utterly alien to Augustine's theological Platonism.

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# Some Broadly Platonic Themes

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- ❖ A two worlds view, with its characteristic dichotomy of the intelligible and sensible realm (self-consciously attributed to Plato in his *Contra Academicos* 3. 37)
- ❖ The incorporeality and immortality of the soul
- ❖ A hierarchy descending from God, soul, and body
- ❖ The non-spatial omnipresence of the intelligible to the sensible
- ❖ The existence of Platonic(ish) Forms, now located as ideas in the mind of God, but still serving, as in Plato, as perfect paradigms which sensibles strive to imitate
- ❖ The conviction that we find God and truth by turning inwards (cf. the Platonic injunction to 'know thyself'; *Charmides* (164d), *Protagoras* (343b), *Phaedrus* (229e), *Philebus* (48c), *Laws* (II. 923a), *Alcibiades I* (124a, 129a, 132c)).
- ❖ The representation of the soul's yearning for God in quasi-erotic terms (cf. *Symposium* 210a-212c)

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# An Inward Turn

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- ❖ Early in his career as a Christian philosopher, Augustine grapples with a kind of despair consequent upon the very real fear that perhaps knowledge is simply beyond our grasp.
- ❖ In his *Contra Academicos* he seeks to establish that there is something that we can know with certainty; so, we do not need to withhold assent, as a wise person with insufficient evidence always should.
- ❖ He does not, however, look to sense perception for certainty, but to the workings of the mind itself:
  - ❖ The wise person 'knows wisdom' (*Contra Academicos* 3.6)
  - ❖ I am certain of my own phenomenology: granting that maybe I am not certain that the lights are on, I am none the less certain that *it seems to me that the lights are on*; *Contra Academicos* 3.16)
  - ❖ Like Plato, he looks to our acquaintance of mathematics, logic, and other formal structure (*Contra Academicos* 3.24-29). Knowledge of these give way, again as in Plato, to knowledge of Platonic Forms (*Contra Academicos* 3.39)
- ❖ With the exception of the last of these, knowledge, he thinks is first gained by *introspection*.

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## *Si enim fallor, sum*

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- ❖ Later he makes explicit something implicit in his earlier work, namely that *if I am deceived, I am*—here, at least, we have some bedrock certainty (*De civitate dei* 11.26)
- ❖ More than a millennium later, Descartes became famous for saying much the same thing (if, however, more prominently and differently developed).
- ❖ In the case of Augustine, though, we find a direction to a method: look inward first, look towards the *a priori* before the *a posteriori*, look into the mind, into the soul for illumination.

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## *a priori vs. a posteriori*

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- ❖ This is an epistemological distinction.
- ❖ The Distinction
  - ❖ One has *a priori* knowledge that  $p$  iff one knows  $p$  by reason or conceptual resources alone (that is, the extra-mental world makes no contribution to the justification of  $p$ ).
  - ❖ *A posteriori* knowledge is knowledge that is not *a priori*.
- ❖ N.b. this is a point about *justification*, not genesis.

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# Divine Illumination

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- ❖ In this way, Augustine's epistemology is markedly anti-empiricist: he speaks, as Plato speaks, of gaining knowledge by having a first-hand acquaintance with suitable objects of knowledge.
- ❖ He repeatedly deploys two images in this respect:
  - ❖ An inner teacher (*De magistro* 40)
    - ❖ An outer teacher can point the way; but to know you must grasp the truth for yourself, by immediate apprehension.
      - ❖ Consider learning higher mathematics or logic: you know the material when you grasp it for yourself and can go on. When learning, we know we are fuzzy—until, suddenly, we are not; when we are not, we know we are not.
  - ❖ A notion of (divine) illumination: in the *Soliloquia* (1. 12-15) we have the first instance of an image more or less borrowed wholesale from Plato, though Christianized: as the sun is to the visible realm, so God (in Plato, the Form of the Good) is in the intelligible realm.