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Augustine and Kant – Two Founders of Modern Thinking

A number of factors have contributed to spectacular technological progress in recent times, one of the most important of which was the development of philosophical ideas, especially the concept of the autonomous subject. The concept emerged at the beginning of the modern era, with the arrival of Descartes, the Enlightenment and, finally, Immanuel Kant. The publication of “The Critique of Pure Reason” at the end of the 18th century that provided theoretical foundations for the notion of the rational, independent subject seems to be the key moment of the process. Man proved to be capable of experiencing reality in a rational way and of creating systems of knowledge which equipped him with instruments for controlling the material world; he discovered the inner sense of moral obligation by which he was able to control his actions and build rational, social relationships. Over the two centuries that followed, people have tried, for better or worse, to create within the framework of western civilization a rational reality based on the knowledge and principles dictated by the autonomous mind.

There are, in my opinion, four elements that constitute Kant's concept of the autonomous, thinking subject:

- Apperception. An inherent part of the subject is the ability to think which, in its ultimate sense, means relating things to itself. It is, as it were, "the substance of the subject". All the creations of the intellect are accompanied by "I think".
- Infinity. Thinking is an infinite process; it is a source of endless development.
- Synthesis. The process of thinking generates specific relations, leads to structuring and classifying which, in turn, makes it possible to synthesize that is to combine separate elements to form a coherent whole. Thus, a large part of Kant's Critique concentrates on revealing the secrets of different levels of synthesis.
- Expansiveness. Thought has the ability to expand outwards – the logic of inner relations can organize and transform material reality. Hence, the critique of reason – recognizing the structure of rational thought becomes the key to our perception of reality.

I would like to show in my paper that the sources of the concept of the autonomous subject developed by Kant can be found in the philosophy of Saint Augustine, especially in his treatise "On the Holy Trinity". I will try to underline the specific analogy between "the life of the soul" described by Augustine and Kant's account of "pure reason"; to emphasize the remarkable parallel between the two works: "The Critique of Pure Reason" and "On the Holy Trinity" which, as stated by a renown Polish philosopher, Józef Tischner, "is as much a treatise on God as it is on man"¹. Drawing such historical parallels is dangerous and may arouse doubts about one's methodology. The two works are separated by a span of nearly fourteen centuries; they were written in different historical epochs, the two giants of philosophy, their authors, apparently had nothing in common and set themselves different aims². In spite

¹ Jozef Tischner, "O Bogu, który jest blisko: wprowadzenie do lektury *O Trójcy Świętej* św. Augustyna", in: Św. Augustyn, *O Trójcy Świętej*, transl. Maria Stokowska (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1996), 9.

² As a matter of fact, Kant, in his numerous works, quotes Augustine only once: In a little known treatise from 1764 *Untersuchung über die Deutlichkeit der Grundsätze der natürlichen Theologie und der Moral* he recalls the famous line from Augustine's *Confessions* concerning

of that, I will support the hypothesis that Kant's theory is a philosophical development of intuitions formulated, in a metaphorical way, by St. Augustine.

Kant was concerned with man's ability to create science and, based on that, to build a rational world, whereas St. Augustine sought to know God. Yet, both of them turned towards the subject in their search; according to their philosophies, the key to discovering what man is most interested in, lies inside the human mind. As regards St. Augustine, this conviction was based on an intuition which was never given precise formulation, which emanated from some kind of inspiration or epiphany and resulted more from the religious belief that God addresses man directly rather than from a meticulous analysis which would justify it. That is why I describe the concept of the subject he uses in his philosophy as "metaphorical". Subsequent generations of modern philosophers drew upon this concept which culminated in publishing "The Critique of Pure Reason".

In order to justify, at least to some extent, the formulation of the hypothesis concerning a particular bond between St Augustine and Kant, let us recall the words of Arthur Schopenhauer. In his original interpretation of Kant's thought, this remarkable philosopher assumes that Kant's system of philosophy is a scientific extension of Plato's intuitions which, according to him, can also be found in Oriental Philosophy. The intuition in question was that man is able to perceive with his senses only a reflection (or veneer) of the true reality that remains hidden from him. This intuition can be found both in Plato's texts (for example the famous metaphor of the cave) and in the Vedas (the veil of Maya which blinds people's eyes). Evoking these images, Schopenhauer says:

But Kant not only expressed the same doctrine in a completely new and original way, but raised it to the position of proved and indisputable truth by means of the calmest and most temperate exposition; while both Plato and the Indian philosophers had founded their assertions merely upon a general perception of the world, had advanced them as the direct utterance of their consciousness, and presented them mythically and poetically rather than philosophically and

time. He also refers to Augustine in one of the footnotes in *Perpetual Peace*, but the sentence he quotes, about Providence, comes, in fact, from Seneca (vide "Dissertations on the History of Philosophy"). So there is nothing to suggest that Kant studied Augustine's works.

distinctly. In this respect they stand to Kant in the same relation as the Pythagoreans Hicetas, Philolaus and Aristarchus, who already asserted the movement of the earth round the fixed sun, stand to Copernicus³.

It is the way Schopenhauer looks at Kant's work that will inspire my reflections. I will try to discover spiritual affinity between Saint Augustine and Kant and to show that a scientific exposition of Augustine's intuitions which are, to a great extent, based on religion, is reflected in Kant's transcendental philosophy.

Let us then trace how St Augustine describes "the life of the soul" (the depth of the mind) and, consequently, the structure of the subject. Augustine's grasp of the concept of the thinking subject and, thereby, of man as an individual, is strongly grounded in Christianity. His texts are more religious than philosophical in character – they are an attempt to come into contact with God, they render worship unto Him and, after all, try to express the feelings of anxiety and emptiness caused by His apparent absence. It is obvious that what St Augustine is most interested in are ways of knowing God. This is, on the one hand, an intellectual interest – *sui generis* "scientific curiosity" reflected in the question: who is God? On the other hand, this interest possesses emotional and existential traits expressed by the belief that it is impossible to live a life sensibly without knowing God. The peculiar mood of Augustine's texts is rendered by the well-known sequence from his *Confessions* in which the Father of the Church addresses God with these significant words: "You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you"⁴.

Augustine's greatness and significance lies in the fact that he formulates his innovative theses of a strictly philosophical nature based on purely religious issues such as the doctrine of divine choice, God's entering human history through the Incarnation or man's desire to be in contact with God. One

³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation. Appendix to Vol. I*, transl. by Richard Burdon Haldane and John Kemp, 9, acces 20.06.2019, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_World_as_Will_and_Representation.

⁴ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1, 1.1.1, transl. Edward Bouverie Pusey (Oxford: J.H. Parker; London: J.G. and F. Rivington, 1838), acces 27.06.2019, <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/Englishconfessions.html>.

of such fundamental discoveries we will concentrate on in this paper is that the key to solving all the mysteries that man is intrigued by lies inside the human mind and not in the outside world. This great thinker maintains that the truth is not to be found in external objects; it is revealed by Christ living within us⁵. The idea that all knowledge, finally, refers to God, persistently reappears in Augustine's texts. He writes elsewhere: "For he is taught not by words, but by the realities themselves made manifest to him directly by God revealing them to his inner self"⁶. God, as the inner teacher, is present in human consciousness, and this is where He is to be sought.

Leaving aside the religious context of the idea according to which what distinguishes man from all other creatures is his direct contact with God, let us concentrate on how this idea has influenced our understanding the concept of the subject and what the philosophical consequences of such a fundamental distinction of man are.

Let us start with the texts indicating areas in which God can be recognized. This will enable us to establish the above-formulated thesis which says that the aim of cognition is the inner man. Augustine writes: "In order that we may discover clearly what we are now seeking, as far as in such a subject is possible, let us treat of the mind alone"⁷. This is a clearly expressed message that the best way to reveal the unknown is to investigate the mind. The above text also suggests that the mind has a complex, multilayer structure – finding the correct perspective of looking at things involves penetrating its depth. Therefore, it seems that the first prerequisite for knowledge is situating what is to be known, metaphorically speaking, in the light which emanates from the human mind. This intuition is also, or maybe first of all, related to the primary object of cognition, that is to God: "Let us attend as much as we can, and let us invoke the everlasting light, that He may illuminate our darkness, and that we may see in ourselves, as much as we are permitted, the image of God"⁸. The mind itself is not the source of light that permits seeing,

⁵ St. Augustine, *The Teacher*, XI, 38, access 27.06.2019, <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/gmoran/augustine.pdf>.

⁶ *Ibidem*, XIV, 46.

⁷ St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, IX, 2, access 27.06.2019, <http://www.logoslibrary.org/augustine/trinity/index.html>.

⁸ *Ibidem*, IX, 2.

but it seems to be the place in which “the everlasting light” can be disclosed. Thus, the mind contains a divine element, the image of God. These two “divine attributes” of the mind intertwine in Augustine’s thought, being either equivalent or treated as separate concepts. Firstly, the mind is permeated by the light of God that makes it possible to see – in this sense, investigating the mind becomes the prerequisite of cognition. Secondly, the structure of the mind reflects the structure of God, is the image of God; analysing “the life of the soul” brings man closer to knowing what is most important, and that, in the case of Augustine, certainly is knowing God.

However, the question is, what does investigating the mind involve? According to Augustine “knowledge is a kind of life in the reason of the knower” and the nature of this life is such that: “the mind knows itself through itself”⁹. Because knowledge is “life”, it is motion and has its dynamics. Speaking formally then, “the knowledge” or “life” of the mind is a kind of movement in which the mind as a whole refers to itself and also its particular components are related to one another.

The essence, as well as the internal dynamics, of this “substantial relation” is love, so “On the Trinity” is a magnificent treatise on the love between God and man. However, this basically theological and apparently most important aspect of the work is not the subject of our analyses. We only ask about formal relations within the mind resulting from the processes metaphorically and evocatively described by Augustine. From a formal standpoint, the main idea underlying the processes, defined by the philosopher, which take place within the mind such as love, knowledge, desire or the faculties which constitute the mind’s nature such as reason, memory or will can be reduced to the possibility of referring the mind to itself: “For certainly the mind is in itself, since it is called mind in respect to itself:

Although it is said to be knowing, or known, or knowable, relative to its own knowledge”¹⁰.

Augustine’s intuition given above points to a fundamental property of the mind (or subject) which is called apperception. It can be characterized in the

⁹ Ibidem, IX, 3.

¹⁰ Ibidem, IX, 5.

following way: *The nature of the mind (its “substance” or essence) is its ability to relate (to refer) to itself.*

Let us trace, in a formal way, the new dimensions opening for the mind which result from that unusual attribute, that is the mind’s possibility of referring to itself. While studying the contemplations of “On the Trinity”, we might feel a growing sense of paradox. On the one hand, the way Augustine describes the life of the soul impresses us with its inner freedom, we would even say with its lack of constraint; mutual relations are not supported by a definite foundation, the frequently mentioned growing and perfecting seem to aim at an indefinite target. The mind vibrates with vigour, pulsates, but the question, according to what principles this unrestrained process is formed, remains open. On the other hand, if we look at Augustine’s texts from a different standpoint, we will see that they are characterized by unusual discipline; the life of the soul is subject to the logic of love. The quintessence of this apparently paradoxical intuition can be found, for example, in the frequently repeated phrase: “for that of which any one is utterly ignorant, he can in no way love”¹¹. The mind is driven by the desire of ultimate fulfilment, “heart’s anxiety”, something that Plato called the divine element or Eros. The mind does not know how it can achieve the desired gratification but is not completely ignorant of that mysterious “something”: “For that species touches the mind, which the mind knows and thinks”¹². Thus, human perfection depends on some divine energy. Charles Taylor writes about Augustine’s intuition: “We can only understand ourselves if we ourselves are in contact with a perfection which is beyond us”¹³.

An interpretation of this intuition is that there is an empty, unfilled place in the structure of our mind. In such a place, on the one hand, a specific archetype is revealed to which we compare all known objects, and by which we understand them. On the other hand, this empty place is permeated by some energy which propels the subject because the quest for filling it becomes the sense of the life of the soul. This quest is an endless process, its end would have to be utmost perfection.

¹¹ Ibidem, X, 1.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), VII, 2.

This fundamental property of the soul is related, in Augustine's philosophy, to another important intuition: the life of the soul focuses on the future: "Perfection in this life, he tells us, is nothing else than to forget those things which are behind, and to reach forth and press in purpose toward those things which are before. For he that seeks has the safest purpose, [who seeks – A. B.] until that is taken hold of whither we are tending, and for which we are reaching forth"¹⁴. The depth of the soul is open to infinite perfection, which attracts and gives the soul its dynamics. In its search for the unknown, the soul is able to exceed itself, that is to reach a higher level the one it is currently at. For Augustine, this is a religious process, God attracts man with His love and, in a way, "charges" him with his perfecting energy: As a result the mind, aiming for the right goal and approaching it with moderation, perfects and "expands" itself. The possibility of referring to itself generates here a certain self-control mechanism, which makes it possible, as Augustine puts it, to wait patiently for God to call upon you. Apperception also enables the subject to pass to a "meta-level" – the subject, while referring to a thing, positions itself above it, looks at it from a certain perspective and, moving to a higher level, widens its horizon, thereby increasing its own size. We should remember, however, that apperception is just a mechanism which enables the mind to grow, the real driving force is God, in other words, infinity manifests itself in the inner life of the soul.

The philosophical message discussed above, which has had a great impact on western philosophy, can be formulated in the following way: *Infinity, understood as something both familiar and unknown and which is the driving force of endless development, is present in the structure of the soul.*

We have accepted Augustine's view that the essence of the mind is its ability to refer to itself. This introduces us to unusual relations and specific dialectic. Let us draw attention to the following text: "these things [i.e., love and knowledge] exist in the soul, and that, being as it were involved in it, they are so evolved from it as to be perceived and reckoned up substantially, or, so to say, essentially"¹⁵. The particular elements of the soul are, on the one hand,

¹⁴ St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, IX, 1.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, IX, 4. As we can see, despite all Augustine's innovation, his approach to the subject in terms of substance is traditional, the same as in the case of Descartes. It is in Kant's philosophy that the "severance" of the subject from the substance will be accomplished.

autonomous, so they can be treated as separate entities but, on the other hand, they reach their climax (“they evolve”) only in mutual relations – “for not only is each [i.e. memory, understanding, will] contained by each, but also all by each”. Augustine carries this line of thought further: “For I remember that I have memory and understanding, and will; and I understand that I understand, and will, and remember; and I will that I will, and remember, and understand; and I remember together my whole memory, and understanding, and will”¹⁶. Apperception creates a specific kind of bond – the components of the mind equipped with this property can infiltrate one another, can always be reduced to one, possess some “common denominator”, and are “compatible” with one another. Thus, on the one hand, they create unity; on the other, they preserve their individual character.

Augustine develops his ideas in the context of exploring the mystery of the dogma of the Holy Trinity. Yet, by doing so, he discovers an unusual quality of the mind which, later on, will be ascribed to thinking; thinking is the ability to create unity, to combine various components into an ordered whole, in other words: the ability to synthesize. As Charles Taylor aptly says when commenting on Augustine’s texts, thinking involves combining elements in order to create internal harmony¹⁷. The essence of thinking is to provide a synthesis which constitutes a certain structure: this vision has enormously influenced modern philosophy. The discipline, or even mathematical rigour of thinking, will become a distinctive feature of Descartes’ arguments, unceasingly continued by Kant.

Summarizing the intuitions discussed above we can define another formal property resulting from the apperceptiveness of the mind: *Apperceptiveness is the source of specific bonds and the origin of harmony, it enables the mind to synthesize, thereby creating concord.*

Until now, we have been concentrating on the intuitions relating to the internal life of the soul. However, we should not be misled into thinking that

¹⁶ Ibidem, X, 11. A similar text referring to the mind, love and cognition can be quoted: “they are each severally in themselves and mutually all in all, or each severally in each two, or each two in each. Therefore all are in all [...] these three things are marvellously inseparable from one another, and yet each of them is severally a substance, and all together are one substance or essence, while they are mutually predicated relatively”. Ibidem, book IX, chapter 5.

¹⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, VII, 2.

these intuitions concern only that area. Augustine writes: “But the mind can also love something besides itself, with that love with which it loves itself”¹⁸. The love of the soul can also cling to external objects; the dynamic of the internal life generating specific relations and bonds creates a mechanism which builds the structures of harmony and unity, and thereby affects the material world. As a consequence, a vast area of correlations between reasoning and sensuality is opening up. Although Augustine claims that sensual knowledge is secondary to spiritual cognition, he admits that it substantially influences the way the mind functions: “But because it [the mind] is in those things which it thinks of with love, and is wont to be in sensible, that is, in corporeal things with love, it is unable to be in itself without the images of those corporeal things”¹⁹.

By introducing appropriate relationships to the material world, the mind also changes itself and this relation to itself can be modified by sensual images. Yet, according to Augustine, this entails danger: “And hence shameful error arises to block its way, while it cannot separate from itself the images of sensible things, so as to see itself alone. For they have marvellously cohered with it by the close adhesion of love. And herein consists its uncleanness; since, while it strives to think of itself alone, it fancies itself to be that, without which it cannot think of itself. When, therefore, it is bidden to become acquainted with itself, let it not seek itself as though it were withdrawn from itself; but let it withdraw that which it has added to itself”²⁰. It can be clearly seen that, according to Augustine’s intuitions, the life of the soul has power over the outside world, it is the mind which, at its discretion and using its logic (with Augustine it is the logic of love) can add external elements to its structure. The danger of deflecting from a straight path appears when the relation is reversed, that is, when the mind is immobilized in sensual images and identifies itself with them. Leaving aside the question of potential mistakes resulting from the mind entering the sphere of sensuality, let us define, based on the above considerations, the subsequent property of the soul: *The*

¹⁸ St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, IX, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, X, 8.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

life of the soul “radiates” outwards – the logic of inner relations can alter the material world.

This short analysis of St Augustine’s texts makes it possible to account for the dissertation’s title: He was indeed the founder of the modern way of thinking, which was developed and accomplished later by Immanuel Kant. For the both philosophers, the basic concept was the idea of the autonomous subject whose “substance” is apperception, i.e. relation to itself. Such a subject is capable of endless development and, through its ability to synthesize, of introducing harmony to the outside world. It is worth noting that this unique distinction conferred upon man-subject is based in Augustine’s philosophy on religious arguments: through the love that God has for man, He is present in his soul and it is the analysis of this “life of the soul” that constitutes a breakthrough for modern philosophy and culture.

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Abstract

A number of factors have contributed to spectacular technological progress in recent times, one of the most important of which, in my opinion, was the development of philosophical ideas, especially the concept of the autonomous subject. The key moment for theoretical foundations of that concept seems to be the publication of *The Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant. In my paper, I would like to show that the sources of the concept of the autonomous subject developed by Kant can be found in the philosophy of Saint Augustine, especially in his treatise "On the Holy Trinity". I will try to underline the specific analogy between "the life of the soul" described by Augustine and Kant's account of "pure reason"; to emphasize the remarkable parallel between the two works: "The Critique of Pure Reason" and "On the Holy Trinity". Drawing such historical parallels is dangerous and may arouse doubts about one's methodology. The two works are separated by a span of nearly fourteen centuries, two giants of philosophy who were their authors apparently had nothing in common. In spite of that, I will support the hypothesis that Kant's theory is a philosophical development of intuitions formulated, in a metaphorical way, by Saint Augustine.

Keywords: Kant; Augustine; thinking; subject