

**An Analysis of the Epistemology of St Augustine.**

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### **Abstract**

St Augustine is viewed as an intellectual bridge between ancient Greek philosophy and the medieval world of ideas. His writings deeply shaped vast interests and expressions in academia in his day and after. While he made immeasurable contributions to metaphysics and theology, perhaps one of his most significant contributions is the area of epistemology which has shaped both religious and secular definitions of knowledge around the world.

This paper examines St Augustine's epistemology with a special focus on its shaping of the theory of knowledge from the medieval era to date. We will show how his brand of epistemology helped to shift prevailing philosophical discourse on it towards supernaturalism.

### **Key words**

- Epistemology
- Skepticism
- Faith and reason
- Divine illumination

### **Introduction.**

Derived from two Greek words (*episteme* and *logos*), epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with what is known and how it is known. It is interested in the sources of human knowledge and the criteria for it. Epistemologists study its nature, asking what it means for one to know something or not to know it. They also study the extent of knowledge, i.e. how much one is able to know.

*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states that epistemology is the “study of knowledge and justified belief.” In this regard, it adds that epistemology asks questions such as: what its sources are, its necessary and sufficient conditions, and what its structure and limits are. In dealing with knowledge as justified belief, the Encyclopedia adds that epistemology seeks to explain what justified belief is, what makes justified beliefs justifiable, and whether justification is internal or external to one’s mind.

Augustine’s epistemology is a philosophical attempt to synthesize Platonic and Aristotelian ideas and biblical concepts of revelation. He borrows aspects that appear harmonious with Christianity and rejects or adapts those that do not. Augustine emphasized knowledge of the truth not for purely academic purposes but as bringing true happiness and beatitude.<sup>1</sup> This view was different from that of the Greek philosophers who sought knowledge for the sake of it given that speculation and inquiry were viewed as ends in themselves. Augustine felt that the limitation of man leads him to seek understanding and so viewed the pursuit of knowledge as a function to a higher end, viz, truth.

### **Faith and Reason**

Although Augustine distinguishes between the certainty of knowledge and the insubstantial nature of belief, he also grants faith the status of knowledge if that faith is properly founded.<sup>2</sup> O’Daly adds that the validity of our belief depends upon the authority by which they are held and

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Coplestone, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 2. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1993) 1993, 52.

<sup>2</sup> Gerard O’Daly, “Augustine.” in *Routledge History of Philosophy*. Vol. 1. *From the Beginning to Plato* ed. C.C.W. Taylor (London: Routledge, 1996), 369.

the evidence which provides grounds for assent<sup>3</sup>. Augustine taught that history and religion are two sources of authority and that each commands a different kind of knowledge. He says historical evidence can only be believed but is not scientific, while religious knowledge can only be fully attained in the afterlife.<sup>4</sup>

Frederick Copleston tells us that Augustine saw reason as having a part to play in bringing a man to faith and, once someone had the faith, reason had a part to play in penetrating the data of faith. His own journey to faith was a proof of this. Reason helped him find faith and the same reason helped him to understand and keep the faith.<sup>5</sup>

In 386 A.D. Augustine held a series of discussions at a villa of Cassiciacum near Milan where he shared his position on revealed truth and how that truth stood against the skepticism of the day held by the “New Academy,” which was patterned after Plato’s Academy. These discussions led to the writing of one of his famous early works titled *Contra Academicos* (Against the Academicians), a sharp polemic which tore to pieces the skeptical arguments of the disciples of Cicero, their progenitor. Unlike the prevailing skepticism of the day which held that one could not know anything with certainty, Augustine taught that truth exists and it is knowable. His theory of knowledge began with the conviction that there is such a thing as truth and that it is accessible to human reason.<sup>6</sup> Augustine taught that there is a self-evident intuition which is free from any sign of error.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> O’Daly, *Routledge History of Philosophy*, 370.

<sup>5</sup> Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, 61.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Nash, *The Light of the Mind: St. Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge*, (The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, 1969), 12.

The “New Academy” philosophers taught that certitude was not possible. They went as far as postulating that, since nothing could be apprehended for sure, nobody was to hold onto anything in a serious manner and all assent had to be suspended. They refused to affirm or deny any statement. This led to a situation of moral indecision and people would not do their duties arguing that they could not be certain what those duties were.

### **Against Skepticism**

In *Contra Academicos* written in 386 A.D., Augustine argues that truth is knowable and gives several grounds to defend his position. First, he offers the argument from “common sense” saying it is just as ridiculous to say we do not know truth as it is to say someone resembles his father without knowing who the father is or how he looks like. According to Augustine, when we make a comparison between two entities or even in matters of probability, common sense implies that we must first have knowledge as a basis for what we are comparing.<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the skeptics’ definition of a wise man, Augustine argued that one would have to know what wisdom was before seeking or calling someone wise. He saw the Academics as people who trap themselves when they assert, “both that man can be wise and yet that knowledge cannot fall to the lot of man.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, it could be concluded that the wise man has knowledge because he knows enough about what he seeks in order to start seeking. Even if what he seeks is false, he has the object of seeking, and it does not matter if he finds it or not. The commitment and the ability for one to seek implies knowledge, hence the absurdity of anyone claiming that we cannot know truth.

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<sup>7</sup> Aurelius Augustine, *Against the Academicians*, trans. Mary Patricia Garvey, (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1942), 56

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

Augustine also used reduction ad absurdum arguments to challenge the skepticism of the Academics who suspended assent on the basis of Zeno's paradoxes and logic. Zeno had claimed that a perception is truthful if it accurately reflects the way the world is, and it is not caused by anything else other than its actual cause. The skeptics took this teaching too far and argued that nothing can be known and that assent should always be withheld. They added that a claim could not be satisfied because things are naturally obscure. And hence difficult to represent. Moreover, they said that things could not be accurately be distinguished as causes because they may resemble each other too closely. The skeptics then advised that the wise man should not risk error and should not give assent because doing so risks error."<sup>910</sup>

In *Contra Academicos*, Augustine vehemently attacks this kind of epistemology and demonstrates its absurdity. He offers disjunctive cases and illustrations to demonstrate how absurd it is to postpone assent or deny knowledge and truth. He challenges the Academicians to attempt refuting something such as a definition. Failure to refute a definition would apprehend the same definition with certitude. Success to refute the definition would equally affirm the alternative that they postulate in the place of the definition. This leads to the emergence of a very clear disjunctive. Either the definition is true or not true. Augustine drives this disjunction to its ultimate implications. First, he says, "For we know that it is either true or false; we do not therefore know nothing." In other words, the very existence of a disjunction is itself knowledge.<sup>11</sup> He says that in a disjunction, we know that it is raining or not raining. We know the truth of both statements whether anyone of them is true or false.

Augustine illustrates this disjunctive further by stating this:

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<sup>9</sup> Peter King. *Augustine: Against the Academicians and The Teacher*, (Indianapolis IN: Hackett Publishers, <sup>10</sup>), 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

I am certain that there is either one world or more than one world, and, if more than one, then that there is either a finite or an infinite number of worlds.’ Similarly I know that the world either has no beginning or end or has a beginning but no end or had no beginning but will have an end or has both a beginning and an end. In other words, I am at least certain of the principle of contradiction. Again, even if I am sometimes deceived in thinking that appearance and reality always correspond, I am at least certain of my subjective impression.<sup>12</sup>

He added that he had no complaint to make about the senses, because “it is unjust to demand of them more than they can give: whatever the eyes can see they see truly.”<sup>13</sup> He observes that even if a stick appears to be bent when looking at it in water, it does not mean the eye is deceived because that appearance itself is real.

One aspect Augustine can be commended for in this regard is providing balance in the entire empiricist debate on the reliability of the senses. While he places the senses at the bottom of the spectrum of knowledge, he nevertheless, offers a new focus on the senses as essential providers of essential data to our minds. Hence, while they cannot be fully relied upon, they can be trusted to provide information which the mind can then synthesize, leading to knowledge. Thus, while the stick may appear bent which is a true visual observation of the senses, it provides sense-based information regarding how the human eye might perceive a stick in water. This appearance applies to all other aspects of the senses, including smell, taste, hearing, etc.

To quote Augustine:

“...grant it the cause why it appears in that way (i.e. bent), if the oar, when plunged into the water, appeared straight, I should rather accuse my eyes of playing me false. For they would not see what, granted the circumstances, they ought to see. . . . But I am deceived, if I give my assent, someone will say. Then don’t give assent to more than the fact of appearance and you won’t be deceived. For I do not see how the skeptic can refute the man who says, “I know that this object seems white to me, I know that this sound gives

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<sup>12</sup> Coplestone, *A History of Philosophy*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

me pleasure, I know this smell is pleasant to me, I know that this tastes sweet to me, I know that this feels cold to my touch.”<sup>14</sup>.

Later philosophers continued this debate although they tended to run away from the synthesis Augustine achieved. While Rene Descartes belabored the aspect of appearance and reality, Kant seemed to push the idea of illumination via what he called the noumenal world. Augustine’s balance, thus remains one of the most comprehensive in past and contemporary philosophy. Augustine then offers another blow to skepticism by giving the example of mathematical truths, which he says are independent of sense perception. These hold true whether one is dreaming, hallucinating or one is awake. In other words, 2 plus 3 is 5, whether one is asleep or not and whether one accepts it as a fact or not.

Another argument Augustine gave to support his theory of certainty concerns existence. He asked whether we can be certain of the existence of real objects or whether we are confined to knowledge of principles of abstract and mathematical truths. Almost in a Cartesian idiom, Augustine sums up his theory along “cogito-like” statements like “If I am deceived, I am.” Reduced to his arguments about doubt, we could sum him as saying, “I doubt therefore I am.” He suggests that the answer to this question is that a man is at least certain of his own existence, even though he might doubt the existence of other objects or that of God. According to Augustine, the very fact that someone can doubt proves that he exists, because if he did not exist, then he would not be able to doubt. Again, it would not be helpful to be deceived about one’s existence because only those who exist can be deceived, for deception is not possible without existence. So, if one exists, he is capable of understanding. Because of this existence, it does not

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 53

matter if one is asleep or awake or even if one is mad. Lack of ability to know is possible only if one exists.<sup>15</sup>

Responding to the claim by the skeptics that our senses can deceive us, Augustine says that they cannot invalidate the certainty of knowledge the mind has by itself without the intervention of the senses.<sup>16</sup> Because the senses can deceive, should we discover such deception, we would be better off reaching into our inner soul which aspires towards God. He calls the soul “the image of God” by which we step out to reach towards Him. According to Augustine, although the senses can deceive and although we admit the possibility of such deception, it is not right to adopt skepticism on this ground because we still learn a lot through the senses. In comparing the sense knowledge human beings have with that of brute beasts, Augustine says that brute beasts are able to perceive corporeal objects and remember, seeking after what is helpful to them and avoid what is harmful. However, they cannot commit anything to memory or recall them at will. Human beings, on the other hand, are superior to brute beasts because of their ability to reason. Copleston explains that this implies that man is able to make rational judgments regarding corporeal things and to perceive them “in proportion to eternal standards.”<sup>17</sup> According to Augustine, the lowest level of knowledge is sensation, the next is the use of human reason and the highest the contemplation of eternal truths and wisdom via the mind.

### **Augustine’s Theory of Illumination**

The second aspect of Augustine’s epistemology that sets him apart is his postulation that illumination by Christ is a superior way of understanding truth than Plato’s theory of

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<sup>15</sup> Copleston, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 70

recollection. Plato had taught that all instances of learning are simply appearances. Having taught in his book, the *Meno*, that the soul is eternal, Plato had defended the view that all learning is the soul's remembrance or forgetfulness of previously known truths. Recollection was thus the recovery of knowledge by oneself which is inside him. In the *Meno* Plato presents to us one of the Socratic dialogues where a slave is given a geometrical challenge and gets it wrong at first but when asked some questions, he thinks through his mistakes and corrects them, thus arriving at the correct answer. Plato uses this geometrical example to demonstrate that, through reflection, people can arrive at the truth

Augustine disagreed with this view, arguing that the principle of recollection would make it impossible for learning or transference of knowledge from one person to another to happen. He suggested that this is an internal process that is not entirely dependent on reflecting on a challenge for some time. He says that sometimes when one is stuck he often receives insight or enlightenment. According to Augustine, this illumination is given to us from without by Christ, the teacher. While Plato thought that continuing to ask someone questions can lead to truth, Augustine disagreed, arguing that the eternal Spirit of Christ has all the truth that we need to know and reveals it to us through enlightenment.

According to Augustine, asking questions does not generate independent truth but it transfers the knowledge of the one asking the questions into the heart of the person receiving it. Such knowledge is generated from one's inner being, is conveyed through words and then taken into someone else's heart via the air and the ears. Augustine distinguishes between "general illumination" and "special illumination" When something is applicable to all instances of knowledge, then it fits in the former category. When it is needed only for special cases, it fits the latter. For Augustine, this knowledge is transferrable through language because through it, we

get to know what is knowable as well as what is not knowable through words and symbols. Foucault and other contemporary post-modern thinkers have taken Augustine's semiotics to another level. They use Augustine's reference to language as a sign or what is signified and develop an epistemological compass that is driven by hyper reality, taking us right back to some of Zeno's deconstructionist positions.

On illumination, Augustine said that we cannot perceive the immutable nature of things unless they are illuminated to us the same way the sun shines on things and makes them explicit or visible. He calls it "divine light" and says it comes from God and illumines our minds. To Augustine, God is the "intelligible light." Through God, in Him and by Him all things are luminous to the intellect. Notably, Plato's "cave analogy" gives us this same conclusion, although he focused on the "good" rather than God as Augustine does. According to Plato, when one comes out of the cave into the light, he can see things better. For Augustine, it is coming to God's light by His own merciful grace. Augustine postulated that we need this illumination because truth is greater than our minds and we need God to make known this truth because by our own we cannot apprehend it. Truth is not inferior or equal to our minds and God must light our minds because no creature is capable of lighting itself. Again in a platonic idiom, Augustine suggests that God has created us as rational beings so that our minds can participate in eternal things through His illumination. Our ability to perceive unchanging truths indicates that God illumines our minds since we do not generate these ideas in our minds and neither can the senses be the source of such truth because they are changing. Both our minds and the senses are contingent, hence only illumination can explain our perception of unchanging truths as well as comparative standards such as beauty or goodness.

O'Daly observes that this concept of illumination seems to point back to Plato's theory of

“anamnesis” although Augustine rejects it. The theory says that in the human mind there is knowledge that is not derived from sense experiences. Augustine could not shake himself from believing that knowledge is recollection whereby the mind recalls what is latent in it. Here truth is elicited by concentration. Although Augustine believed this, he rejected the pre-existence of the soul as held by Plato.<sup>18</sup>

That Plato influenced Augustine’s theory of knowledge is also evident in his adoption of Plato’s teaching that there are different levels of being. Augustine saw this through a hierarchical arrangement of senses, mind and eternal categories. In Plato’s *Republic*, this is represented by a line that is divided into two parts, one representing what is visible and the other the realm of the intelligent. Each part is then further divided into “shadow” and “object.” As seen in the parable of the cave, Plato assumes that one is more enlightened as he moves towards what is more real. The ontological levels of ascending towards God indeed represent some kind of Platonic “forms” in which man can participate. The difference is that, for Augustine, what Plato called “forms”, Augustine located in the eternal mind of God.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, let us point out that Augustine’s epistemological influence cuts across all the major disciplines including education, theology, philosophy, psychology and language. As one reads him, an important discovery is made, i.e. the difficulty of separating theology from philosophy as indeed other disciplines. Augustine does not systematize this theory, but shows us

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<sup>18</sup> O’Daly, *Routledge History of Philosophy*, 372.

clearly how epistemology is a critical foundation for truths held or believed as well as their justifications.

For Augustine, therefore, certainty is a key component of knowing and being wise. Unlike skeptics, Augustine leaves us the strong argument that it is possible to know truth because God constantly illumines our minds, giving us His perspective on what we ought to know. In essence, therefore, Christian truth, according to Augustine, is always with us and can be apprehended by God's light shining on us.

We must observe here, too, that Augustine's epistemology is a perfect confirmation of how ancient Greek philosophy heavily influenced the reflection, doctrine and practices of the Church. While it is not helpful to belabor the acceptability of this mix, Augustine shows us how our daily discourses are a direct product of our cultural upbringing and interaction. Both Plato and Aristotle influenced Augustine irreparably, but so did Plotinus. A whole discussion could be made on the platonic influence on Christianity as well as the ramifications that ensued. Suffice it to finish by commending Augustine for weaving large themes and debates into manageable portions by giving us a rational explanation for faith. His disjunctive reasoning indeed does a big blow to skepticism at large, past and present.

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