

AUGUSTINE'S INNER
DIALOGUE

The Philosophical Soliloquy in Late Antiquity

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Contents

<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	page ix
<i>Augustine of Hippo (354–430): dates in his early career</i>	xi
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xii
Introduction	i
1 Toward inner dialogue	18
2 Soliloquy and self-existence	62
3 Order and freedom	121
4 Narrative	181
Conclusion	229
<i>Index</i>	233

Introduction

The subject of this study is a literary and philosophical genre which is defined in the writings of Augustine of Hippo as the soliloquy (*soliloquium*). This is a type of rational dialogue (or dialogue with Reason) in which questions are asked and answers given within the mind of a single person.¹ In the pages that follow I examine Augustine's use of soliloquies in the works known as his "dialogues,"² as well as in the *Confessiones*, *De Civitate Dei*, and *De Trinitate*.

¹ *Sol.*, 2.1.1; cf. *Retr.*, 1.4.1, where Augustine speaks of an inner dialogue with Reason. For a discussion of types of soliloquies in his writings, see [Chapter 2](#).

² The composition of the "dialogues" can be divided into two phases of Augustine's activity (omitting the lost *De Pulchro et Apio*, from 380–381):

(1) The period between 23 August 386, when Augustine departed from his teaching position in Milan, and 24/25 April 387 (Easter), the date of his baptism by Ambrose in Milan. Works of this period include *Contra Academicos*, *De Beata Vita*, *De Ordine*, and *Soliloquia*, to which he refers as a group at *Conf.*, 9.4.7 and *Retr.*, 1.1.1. During this period he probably also wrote *De Dialectica*, *De Grammatica* (possibly surviving as a fragment), and a first draft of *De Immortalitate Animae*.

(2) The period that begins with his sojourn in Rome in 387–388 and, following his return to Africa in 388, ends with his episcopal ordination in 395 or 396. Works of this period include *De Musica* (387–388/390), *De Quantitate Animae* (388), *De Magistro* (388–389), and *De Libero Arbitrio* (387–388; finished by 395); *De Vera Religione*, sent to Romanianus in 391; and *De Diversis Quaestionibus*, which resulted from conversations between 388 and 395 brought together in 395–396.

Cassiciacum, where Augustine and his students met, can possibly be identified with Cassago Brianza, which lies some 30–40 km northwest of Milan; see O. Perler, *Les voyages de saint Augustin* (Paris, 1969), pp. 138f., and 179–176; and his article, "Recherches sur les Dialogues et le site de Cassiciacum," *AG* 13 (1968), 344–352. The alternative site of Casciago, near Varese, is suggested by Luigi Beretta, "Rus Cassiciacum: Bilancio e aggiornamento della vexata questio," in *Agostino e la conversione cristiana*, ed. A. Caprioli and L. Vaccaro (Palermo, 1987), pp. 67–83, and by Silvano Colombo, "Ancora sul Rus Cassiciacum di Agostino," *ibid.*, pp. 85–92. On the friends assembled at Cassiciacum, the classic account remains Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 2nd edn (Berkeley, 2000), pp. 108–120; cf. Serge Lancel, *Saint Augustin* (Paris, 1999), pp. 146–162. For biographies on the participants, see *AL*, s.v.

For an outstanding introduction to the themes of Augustine's early writings, see Goulven Madec, *Saint Augustin et la philosophie: Notes critiques* (Paris, 1996), with bibliography, pp. 12–13. An important review of scholarship for the early period of Augustine's activity is found in Therese Fuhrer, *Augustin Contra Academicos* (Berlin, 1997), pp. 7–12. For the most recent authoritative dating of the dialogues, see *AL*, vol. 1, xxvi–xlii; on earlier chronologies, see Pierre Courcelle,

I am chiefly concerned with one use for soliloquies in these works. This is Augustine's development of a consistent philosophy of narrative between roughly 386 and 400 and the application of that philosophy to his conception of the self. The book's organization is intended to reflect this progressively developing concern with *soliloquium*, *narratio historica*, and personal identity. I begin in **Chapter 1** with a review of the influences that shaped Augustine's conception of inner dialogue. **Chapter 2** deals with an important example of this type of discourse in his early writings, namely his demonstration of the existence of the self. In **Chapter 2** I also introduce the theme of the narrative self, toward which, I argue, he orients his reiterated uses of this demonstration in the years leading up to his conversion to the religious life. **Chapter 3** discusses soliloquies and narratives in the dialogues devoted respectively to order and free will, namely *De Ordine* and *De Libero Arbitrio*. **Chapter 4**, which is theoretical in focus, takes up the topics of words, images, time, and memory as they pertain to the book's major themes.

In the Introduction I would like to touch on three topics which lie in the background of the works discussed in these chapters: the relationship of inner dialogue to Augustine's philosophy of language; his assumption that narrative is a basic feature of human thinking and behavior; and the reasons for his doubts concerning the possibility of progressive knowledge on theological issues concerned with the self.

LANGUAGE

I begin by reminding my readers that there has never been any question about the importance of the dialogues within Augustine's *oeuvre*.³ These works provide an introduction to one of the enduring themes of his writings, namely the search for wisdom (*sapientia*) and the happy life (*beata vita*).⁴ They also present thinking of acknowledged originality

Les Confessions de saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire (Paris, 1963) and *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1968).

³ For a refreshing view of the dialogues with many insights, see Catherine Conybeare, *The Irrational Augustine* (Oxford, 2006).

⁴ On the question of continuity central to the thinking of Goulven Madec, see Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology* (Oxford, 2006). The terms *sapientia* and *beata vita* recur frequently in the following pages, and therefore some explanation of what I mean by them is appropriate at the outset. I normally render *beata vita* as "happy life," but there is no adequate translation for the expression in Augustine's writings. In the dialogues the noun *vita* refers both to the awareness of being alive and to the pattern of one's life as a whole, as contrasted with its constituent episodes, while the adjective *beata* makes an implicit distinction between pleasure as a sensory experience, giving rise to good feelings, and happiness or blessedness, which is

on topics that are of interest in the contemporary study of philosophy, psychology, theology, and literature. Among these are gesture, mimesis, and non-verbal communication; linguistic conventions and the theory of signs; secular and religious (or biblical) hermeneutics; the will, intentionality, and ethics; temporal and spiritual forces in history; and areas of inquiry linking ancient and modern philosophy, such as sensation, perception, imagination, memory, materialism, and the origin of the human soul.⁵

Despite the range and significance of these themes, the dialogues have been a source of problems in Augustinian scholarship for well over a hundred years. One of these concerns arises from the impression of intellectual disorderliness which they create in the minds of those who try to follow their arguments. The lack of disciplined thinking is evident in the content of these works, which sometimes moves from one topic to another without apparent reason, as well as in their literary form, which frequently abandons logical development in favor of dictated views. Although Augustine's model was doubtless Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, his dialogues do not present either pagan or Christian doctrines with the rigor with which Cicero outlines his philosophical positions. In view of their rickety construction, many students of the Augustinian dialogues have asked, as did H.-I. Marrou, whether these writings possess any recognizable principle of organization, or whether, despite their moments of brilliance, they merely reflect the eclectic reading habits of a *lettré de la décadence*.⁶

non-sensory and permanently unattainable in a lifetime. (On Augustine's notion of the *beata vita*, see the bibliography by J. Doignon in *AL*, vol. 1, pp. 623–624; on Stoic notions of “the wise man,” with which his notion of happiness has much in common, see the summary in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 455–456). As it pertains to the life that is lived, Augustine's use of *beata* likewise extends and transforms Plotinus's *Εὐδαιμόν*, which does not mean “happy” but “being in a good state”; cf. A. H. Armstrong (trans.), *Plotinus*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA, 1966), 170n1; this may come about through divine beneficence; see A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, 2nd edn (Berkeley, 1986), pp. 4–6, 61–69; 179–184; 196–209. In Plotinus, as in Augustine, this approach to ethics is not only envisaged for the sage but for all seekers of wisdom; see Alexandrine Schniewind, *L'Éthique du sage chez Plotin: Le paradigme du “spoudaios”* (Paris, 2003), pp. 171–197. The most important study of these themes in Augustine's writings remains Ragnar Holte, *Béatitude et sagesse. Saint Augustin et la fin de l'homme dans la philosophie ancienne*, trans. de Paillerets, Refoulé, and Sandby (Paris and Worcester, MA, 1962).

⁵ On these themes, see the valuable synthesis of Gerald O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* (London, 1987). For an assessment of Augustine's influence based on such philosophical insights, see Goulven Madec, “Saint Augustin est-il le malin génie de l'Europe,” in *Imaginer l'Europe: Le marché européen, tâche culturelle et économique*, ed. Paul Kowalski (Paris, 1992), pp. 279–290.

⁶ H.-I. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la culture antique*, 4th edn (Paris, 1958), p. 337; cf. Marrou, *Décadence romaine ou Antiquité tardive* (Paris, 1977). An excellent reassessment of the

In the pages that follow I argue that there are essentially two sources of disorderliness in Augustine's early writings. One of these results from failures of reasoning on the part of Augustine or his interlocutors, which have frequently been the subject of comment. The other is deliberately introduced by Augustine as a part of the dialogues' literary and philosophical design. The purpose of this calculated decentering is to illustrate the sorts of problems which arise when philosophical or theological questions are discussed in an open forum. Augustine proposes that these difficulties can be eliminated, at least in part, when the external dialogue is replaced by the soliloquy or inner dialogue. This thinking becomes clear if we follow his criticisms of the open dialogue through his early writings and take into account his extension of interior reasoning to an ever widening circle of issues.

The contrast between outer and inner dialogue provides Augustine with a way of dramatizing his attitude towards exterior and interior words, and this theme is presented more systematically in his philosophy of language. This philosophy is principally introduced into his early writings in *De Magistro*, and, after a series of restatements and modifications, is summarized in the later books of *De Trinitate*. In book nine of the latter work he observes that "we use the term 'word' in one sense when we speak of words which fill a determined space of time with their syllables, whether they are spoken or simply thought; in a different sense when everything that is known is called a word impressed on our mind, as long as it can be brought forth from memory and defined."⁷ Speaking of the same subject in book fifteen Augustine further suggests that the unspoken words of thought are the intellectualized designs, even, one might suggest, the intentions, of spoken words, which issue forth in specific languages, such as Latin, Greek, or Punic.⁸ On the nature of this functional interior speech he asks:

What is that which can be a word, and, therefore, is already worthy of the name of a word? What, I say, is this word formable and not yet formed, except something of our own mind which we cast this way and that by a kind of revolving

philosophical issues in such an evaluation is John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge, 1994).

⁷ *De Trin.*, 9.10.15: "Aliter enim dicuntur uerba quae spatia temporum syllabis tenent siue pronuntientur siue cogitentur; aliter omne quod notum est uerbum dicitur animo impressum quoadmodum de memoria proferri et definiri potest." For an outline of types of speech in Augustine, see Christopher Kirwan, "Augustine on the Nature of Speech," in *Companions to Ancient Thought 3: Language*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 188–211, from which this trans. is taken; cf. Christopher Kirwan, *Augustine* (London, 1989), pp. 55–59.

⁸ *De Trin.*, 15.10.19.

motion, according as we think now of this and now of that thing, just as they are found, or as they occur to our mind? And it then becomes a true word when that which we cast, as I have said, by a revolving motion, arrives at that which we know ... And, therefore ... something of our own mind is already to be called a word which can be formed from our knowledge even before it is formed, because it is, so to say, already formable.⁹

It follows that there is a hierarchy of types of words leading from spoken words to the interior words of thought, and finally to the Word of God, as he observes later in the same discussion:

Hence, the word which sounds without is a sign of the word which shines within, to which the name of word more properly belongs. For that which is produced by the mouth of the flesh is the sound of the word, and is itself also called the word, because that inner word assumed it in order that it might appear outwardly. For just as our word in some way becomes a bodily sound by assuming that in which it may be manifested to the senses of men, so the Word of God was made flesh by assuming that in which He might also be manifested to the senses of men.¹⁰

In a philosophical context the lowest level in this scheme is occupied by the indiscriminate use of words in conversation, just as, in the dialogues, the lowest level of argumentation is represented by the students' verbal disputations in the presence of their master. In both cases what Augustine has in mind is the disorderliness that can be created by the unreflective use of language. His students move in an undisciplined manner from point to point, as long as their thoughts are carried forwards by their verbal exchanges, until at length they realize, as does Adeodatus in *De Magistro*, that interior instruction is the only way to get to the bottom of their problems. For Augustine, this admission is the beginning of wisdom, since the starting point of all self-understanding "is an inner knowledge by which we know that we live."¹¹

THE SELF AND NARRATIVE

Augustine proposes, then, that the best way to do serious thinking is not by talking to others but by talking to oneself. As my last quotation suggests, the first thing that he learns when he is engaged in such inner conversation is that he exists.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.15.25, trans. Stephen McKenna.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.11.20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.1.2.21.

In one of his earliest compositions in dialogue form, the *Soliloquia*, he draws attention to the connection between the form of his discourse, which is carried on in the first person within himself, and the product of that interchange, which is the assertion of self-existence. On reading his statements on this theme, it is tempting to think of the bishop of Hippo as a precursor of Descartes, who, possibly echoing his views, more famously states “*Cogito, ergo sum.*”¹² But, (as I point out in Chapter 2) this temptation must be resisted. For one thing, Augustine and Descartes have different attitudes towards Scepticism, which is what their statements concerning self-existence are intended to refute. Descartes’ is a thorough rejection, without compromise, while Augustine refuses one part of the Sceptical position while accepting another. For Descartes the “proof” of the self’s existence is the starting point for gaining certain knowledge about objects in the external world. Augustine is “proving” nothing: he is just saying that his self-existence is something of which he is undeniably aware but that the source of this awareness is not traceable to his formal knowledge. In a similar way, in book eleven of the *Confessiones* he argues that he has an awareness of time even though he cannot say that he knows what time is.

Another reason for distinguishing between these pivotal spokesmen on the problem of self-existence arises from their attitudes towards the connection between self-existence and narrative. Put simply, Descartes’ view of the self, as defended by his “*cogito,*” excludes narrative, while Augustine’s version subtly incorporates it. In the three works in which Descartes’ conception of the self is most clearly outlined, namely *Discours de la méthode* (1637), *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641), and *Les Passions de l’âme* (1649), there is no serious analysis of narrative (except, in the *Discours*, as the recapitulation of a failed education). By contrast, in the *Confessiones*, personal narrative plays an important rôle in defining the modalities of self-understanding, since the bishop of Hippo is convinced that almost everything we know about ourselves is derived from events recorded and reinterpreted in the memory. When Augustine utilizes soliloquies, therefore, in the context of self-knowledge, he is not only talking to himself about timeless philosophical questions, such as the nature of existence; he is also engaged in an internal conversation about the meaning to himself of the flow of events over time, which the passage of his spoken words illustrates.

¹² The classic statement of the principle is in *Discours de la méthode*, chapter 4 (ed. C. Adams and P. Tannery, (*Œuvres de Descartes*, Paris: Vrin, 1969), vol. 6.

Augustine's thinking on these issues has a great deal of novelty but his conclusions can nonetheless be situated within a venerable tradition of thinking on the topic of latent knowledge. In this tradition the highest truths are thought to be concealed in the literary, philosophical, and theological works of a remote period of time.¹³ These can be accessed through the patient scholarly unraveling of the secrets contained in such writings, which involves a combination of philology, philosophy, and theology.

Following this line of thinking, many ancient commentators were convinced that Homer and Hesiod communicated the essence of their teachings under the integument of poetry.¹⁴ Christian authors were similarly persuaded that the Bible presents ethical and cosmological doctrines through such literary genres as prayer, historical narrative, and prophecy. Augustine proposes that the Bible has been brought forth by God "like an epic song from an incomparably fine musician"¹⁵ and awaits skilled exegesis.¹⁶ In *De Vera Religione* he makes use of Plato's view that the form of sacred writings can tell us something about the design and composition of the universe.¹⁷ The great Neoplatonic prayer with which the *Soliloquia* begins is a striking example of his belief that poetic prose can be used to describe inner and hidden cosmic harmonies. He is sympathetic to Socrates' view that "every discourse must be organized like a living creature ... [in which the parts] are fitting in relation to each other and to the whole."¹⁸ He illustrates this doctrine in his hermeneutics, in which the "parts" and "wholes" of biblical texts are understood to be mutually supportive. Like many ancient writers he is convinced that works of literature and philosophy can contribute to the mental and moral health of their readers, restoring and maintaining their emotional equilibrium.¹⁹ The lengthy dialogue, *De Ordine*, may be a response to a poem by his

¹³ For a review of earlier approaches to this question, see G. R. Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenic Philosophy: A Study of its Development from the Stoics to Origen* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 3–27; on its absence before Judaism, see Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), pp. 1–8; on composite notions of wisdom in ancient thought, see George B. Kerferd, "The Image of the Wise Man in Greece in the Period before Plato," in *Images of Man: Studia Gerardo Verbeke* (Louvain, 1976), pp. 17–28.

¹⁴ On the early development of this method, see Glenn W. Most, "The Poetics of Early Greek Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. A. A. Long (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 342–359.

¹⁵ *Ep.*, 138.5 (to Marcellinus in 412): "uelut magnum carmen cuiusdam ineffabilis modulatoris".

¹⁶ *De Gen. ad Litt.*, 12.9.20.

¹⁷ *Critias* 106a; cf. *Timaeus* 29a–30a; 56a–b. On this theme see Pierre Hadot, "Physique et poésie dans le *Timée* de Platon," in *Études de philosophie ancienne* (Paris, 1998), pp. 278–305.

¹⁸ *Phaedrus* 264c, trans. H. N. Fowler (Loeb); cf. 265d.

¹⁹ On the analogy between sight, insight, and healing, see *De Doct. Christ.*, 1.9.9; 1.14.13; 1.16.15; on the Platonic context, see Anthony Kenny, "Mental Health in Plato's Republic," in Kenny,

friend Zenobius on this very topic, suggesting a solution which combines asceticism and the liberal arts.²⁰

It is within this tradition that Augustine evolves an original and influential view of narrative,²¹ which develops in three directions in his early writings. One of these is outlined in book six of *De Musica*, where he talks about narrative at a microscopic level as it moves from the voice to the mind in a sequence of syllables. In his view, these sounds are lodged in the memory in the order in which they arrive and they can be retrieved in that order by the speaker as words, sentences, or larger units of discourse. Secondly, he speaks of narrative thinking within an interpretative (or exegetical) framework. This conception is well summed up in the term *enarrationes*, which is employed in the title of the lengthy commentary on the Psalms begun during his early priesthood. In its literal context an Augustinian *enarratio* is a description or explanation: a recounting of events, the exposition of a theme, or the interpretation of a text or author (the term *enarrator* in fact representing what we nowadays call a text's interpreter). Finally, Augustine has a conception of narrative which is autobiographical,²² and this appears to be largely his own invention.

These types of narrative – auditory, expository, and creative – present particular difficulties which are addressed in the pages that follow. However, by way of introduction something has to be said about autobiographical narrative, since this is the source of the largest controversy in Augustinian studies over the past century and is directly linked to Augustine's notion of soliloquy through the *Confessiones*. The problem has arisen because he left differing accounts of the same events in his life, and it is unclear how these accounts reflect what actually took place. The debate on the question reached a turning point in 1950, when Pierre Courcelle published a rigorously argued set of studies, which effectively distinguished between "historical" and "theological" motivations in Augustine's records of his intellectual pursuits down to the time of his conversion to the religious life. Courcelle challenged many statements

The Anatomy of the Soul. Historical Essays in the Philosophy of Mind (Oxford, 1973), pp. 23–24; on the Ciceronian background, see Stephen A. White, "Cicero and the Therapeutists" in *Cicero the Philosopher*, ed. and intro. J. G. F. Powell (Oxford, 1995), pp. 215–221, 226–233; for insights into Augustine's terminology for emotions and emotional experiences, see Philip Burton, *Language in the "Confessions of Augustine"* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 133–172.

²⁰ *De Ord.*, 1.7.20.

²¹ See Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, vol. 1, ch. 1 (Paris, 1983 = *Time and Narrative*, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, Chicago, 1984).

²² See Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, trans. E. W. Dickes, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1951).

concerning events related in the *Confessiones* and proposed that a more accurate account of the formative years of the bishop of Hippo could be pieced together from letters, dialogues, and commentaries written before 397.²³

On the whole historians have accepted his conclusions,²⁴ but the results of his research have been complemented from two directions. First, in the light of recent thinking on the nature of autobiography, it has become customary to look on Augustine's personal reflections on his life as revisions, rewritings, or reinterpretations, rather than to defend any one version of the story as a factual record.²⁵ After the Second Sophistic, such accounts frequently take the form of a "weaving" of events and their interpretation.²⁶ As a result, the view that a life is something in itself has been supplemented by the view that an autobiography consists largely "in the constructing, in the text, or the text making."²⁷

Also, in the minds of many historians, it is questionable whether the term "autobiography" adequately characterizes the *Confessiones*. In recent years Augustine's masterpiece has been increasingly viewed as a Christian version of a mental, emotional, and spiritual discipline common to several schools of philosophy, whose earlier history has been patiently reconstructed by Pierre Hadot.²⁸ Previous work on these "exercises" has

²³ *Recherches sur les Confessions*, 1st edn (Paris, 1950); cf. with useful insights, Joanne McWilliam, "The Cassiciacum Autobiography," *SP* 18.4 (1990), 14–43.

²⁴ Two important discoveries have supplemented the evidence accessible to Courcelle and his critics: (1) Johannes Divjak (ed.), *Epistolae ex duobus codicibus nuper in lucem prolatae* (CSEL 88 [1981]); on which see Goulven Madec, "Du nouveau dans la correspondance augustiniennne," *REA* 27 (1981), 56–66; Henry Chadwick, "New Letters of St. Augustine," *J. of Theological Studies* 34.2 (1983), 425–452 (afterwards referred to as 1*, 2*, etc); and (2) *Vingt-six sermons au peuple d'Afrique: Retrouvés à Mayence, édités et commentés par François Dolbeau* (Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 147, Paris, 1996); on which see F. Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons au peuple d'Afrique (Augustin): Mise à jour bibliographique 1996–2000* (Paris, 2001); cf. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, vii, pp. 501–502.

²⁵ See, for example, James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago, 1998).

²⁶ Richard Sorabji, "Soul and Self in Ancient Philosophy," in *From Soul to Self*, ed. James C. Crabbe (London, 1999), p. 17; on Augustine's notion of the contemplative self, as the development of Plato and Aristotle, pp. 21–22; on the Plotinian contribution, highly influential on Augustine, see E. R. Dodds, "Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus," in *The Ancient Concept of Progress and other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 129–132, 135–139.

²⁷ Jerome Bruner, "Self-making and World-making," in *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2001), p. 27.

²⁸ *Conf.*, 10.1.1–10.4.5; see Pierre Hadot, "Spiritual Exercises," in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. and intro. Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford, 1995), pp. 81–125; *What is Ancient Philosophy*, trans. M. Chase (Cambridge, MA, 2002), parts 1–2. An important study with comparable themes is Anthony Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford, 2002).

been concerned chiefly with their philosophical implications; however, in Augustine, they regularly unite philosophy and rhetoric and become in themselves a novel literary genre which effectively combines self-talk with self-narrative. In this respect, Augustine doubtless intended the *Confessiones* to stand beside, if not to rival, Vergil's *Aeneid*, the canonical text of Roman moral education which he and his students were studying together in Milan and at Cassiciacum.²⁹ His rhetorical talents are deployed in persuading the reader that such an exercise, involving a reinterpretation of one's life, can provide counsel on how to reach the ancient goals of wisdom and happiness.

In this book I attempt to show how Augustine engages in a traditional programme of spiritual exercises while at the same time writing about that program in a literary and narrative form which is clearly addressed to an audience. As a result of these experiments involving soliloquy and narrative, he becomes the first person in the ancient world to contrast the psychological and historical notions of the self (as illustrated in [Chapters 2 and 3](#)).³⁰ The psychological configuration, which is non-narrative, is built around the fact of self-consciousness, and this is defended by different versions of the anti-Sceptical statement, "*Si fallor, sum*."³¹ The historical configuration, which is a narrative construct, derives ultimately from the story of the creation of man and woman "in God's image and likeness" in the book of Genesis. This notion is introduced into his thinking on the subject as early as 390 in *De Vera Religione*; it is subsequently elaborated in the *Confessiones* and *De Civitate Dei*, in the one through the history of the individual, in the other through the history of mankind.³²

²⁹ For interesting reflections on Vergil's influence with an extensive review of the important contributions in German, see Sabine MacCormack, *The Shadow of Poetry: Vergil in the Mind of Augustine* (Berkeley, 1998).

³⁰ Like other Latin and Greek authors in the period, Augustine has no specific term for the self, frequently expressing what he has in mind through pronouns; e.g., *Sol.*, 1.1.1: "Volventi mihi ... ac ... quaerenti memetipsum ..., ait mihi ... sive ego ipse sive alius quis," my italics; cf. 7.1.2: "ego nec mibimet ipse uel ipse conspicuus." The discussion of the self at *Alcibiades* 129b, ff., which can be conceived as a precedent to late ancient thinking on the subject, is unknown to Augustine; however, he utilizes the analogy of the mirror image, which he may have acquired through Plotinus; on this topic, see below, [Chapter 1](#). Another ancient theme with which Augustine is concerned is the relation between self-knowledge and self-care; cf. Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, MA, 1988), pp. 25–26; for a revised and more extensive statement, see *L'Herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France 1981–1982* (Paris, 2001).

³¹ *De Civ. Dei*, 11.26. ³² See *Conf.*, 4.12.29 and *De Civ. Dei*, 11.1.

PROGRESSIVE KNOWLEDGE

The appearance of a notion of the self arising from a theory of narrative coincides with Augustine's rethinking of another problem which is touched upon in the chapters that follow. This concerns the possibility of self-progress over time, and the rôle of acquired knowledge in such progress. For, if knowledge is hidden in philosophical works or the Bible, and this knowledge can be accessed through a combination of reason, traditional interpretive strategies, and faith, it is legitimate for the individual in search of such enlightenment to ask whether information acquired in this way has any part to play in reaching his or her ultimate goal, namely lasting happiness.

Augustine's thinking on this question undergoes a considerable evolution. He is initially optimistic about making progress on achieving happiness by means of philosophy, and a part of that optimism is reflected in the playfulness with which the topic is approached in his first four dialogues, beginning with *De Beata Vita*. However, as time passes, his views are considerably altered, and it is with a sense of disillusionment over his youthful enthusiasm that he attacks the issues in book ten of *De Trinitate*, where he asks himself what precisely was intended by the Delphic oracle's command for men and women to gain self-knowledge.³³ The turning point in his discussion of this theme is his conversion to the religious life, after which he distances himself from the gradational, hierarchical, and abstract schemes for personal betterment with which he is fascinated in Milan and at Cassiciacum.³⁴ As an aspect of this negativism he abandons the notion of the progressive development of human thought from first principles, which was advocated by his philosophical

³³ *De Trin.*, 10.5.7.

³⁴ On the introduction of such schemes based on the upward ascent of reason, see the discussion of *De Ord.*, below; on the later transformation, emphasizing the limits of hermeneutics within the constraints of sacred history, see *De Doct. Christ.*, 2.7.9–11. For good accounts of the issues, see R. A. Markus, "Alienatio. Philosophy and Eschatology in the Development of an Augustinian Idea," *SP* (Berlin, 1966), pp. 431–450; R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Augustine* (Cambridge, 1970); cf. Basil Studer, "Geschichte und Glaube bei Origenes und Augustinus," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 25.1 (2004), 13–19. (Medieval schemes for spiritual advancement frequently traced their inspiration to Augustine, but a more powerful influence was Dionysius, the Pseudo-Areopagite, whose *Celestial Hierarchy* combined themes from Neoplatonism and Christianity in delineating the soul's ascent through stages of purification, illumination, and union with God. A brilliant application of this scheme is found in Bonaventure, *Itinerium Mentis in Deum* 2.5, 2.10, 4.3, 4.4, and 5.11. The medieval adaptations of such ideas, on which some modern conceptions of "Augustinianism" were based, generally did not take account of the internal evolution of Augustine's thinking which took place in his dialogues and after his return to Africa; on the latter phase, see Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons*, from 397: *Sermo de bono nuptiarum*, pp. 77–84; *Sermo de verbis Evangelii impleta sunt tempora*, pp. 107–114; and *Sermo de versu Psalmi xvii*, pp. 168–171.)

mentors such as Cicero and Plotinus, in favor of the non-progressive approach to knowledge shared by different religions in late antiquity³⁵ and strenuously promoted by the Psalms, prophetic books of the Bible, and letters of St. Paul. It is the last of these texts which he pictures himself poring over in book seven of the *Confessiones*, as he disengages with Manichaeism and, under the influence of Ambrose's sermons, recovers the ancient faith he was taught by his mother.

In his initial statements on wisdom and happiness in the dialogues the salient questions are drawn from the Platonic, Neoplatonic, and Academic writings with which he became acquainted in Carthage, Rome, and Milan: chiefly, how to sift realities from appearances, how to ascend from the sensible to the intelligible by means of reason, and how to ascertain (or deny) the validity of mental impressions of existing things. In the *Confessiones* and even more emphatically in *De Civitate Dei* these pre-occupations are superseded by an interest in the manner in which individuals fulfil their destinies within a divinely organized plan through a binding decision taken with free will. As a consequence, Augustine's interest in the theme of personal progress is largely replaced by a concern with the way in which men and women deal with situations in which they do not in any sense "progress." Following an initial, irreversible event, namely the fall, human existence is conceived as a journey in, through, and by means of time (as much later, in Heidegger, who benefits from Augustine's insights without agreeing with their metaphysical assumptions). Augustine is convinced that it is the temporal dimension of their lives that provides individuals with the ever-present evidence of mankind's initial moral error. Because of their inherent imperfections, and their latent, discoverable, and ineradicable knowledge of these flaws, mortals cannot entertain the possibility that a state of virtue is achievable through rational means alone.

Such considerations begin and end in Augustine's mature thinking with the dispiriting knowledge that whatever is done in the ethical sphere is foreknown and predestined. As Luther was to argue along Augustinian lines, the practice of good works has no predictive value in the overall calculation of a life's worth. The adoption of this austere outlook, which was revived and much admired in the seventeenth century at Port-Royal, accounts for Augustine's contrasting opinions on the purpose of his philosophical writings, which is initially positive but later tentative and

³⁵ Among them African Manichaeism, to which he adhered, at least as an "auditor," for some nine years.

circumspect. In his disillusionment with cumulative or progressive knowledge one can perceive the warning signs of a more general pessimism, which emerges in his doctrine of grace.

Augustine reaches his conclusions on these matters after an inquiry into the roots of personal and historical memories, which takes the form of a series of interpretive soliloquies. Just as the secrets of wisdom are preserved in the ancient writings of the Bible, so there is, he proposes, deeply lodged within each person, an instructive text, so to speak, imprinted on the human conscience,³⁶ which is hidden from view and contains the stamp of inviolable moral truth. Personal memories, when considered as narrative units, are comparable at a formal level to historical accounts in scripture, which provide coded instruction to informed readers concerning the forces shaping major phases of earlier civilizations. Also, in his view men and women carry a reminder of their inherent capacity for wrongfulness, as well as their potential for overcoming it, in their perishable bodies. Societies, too, retain the memory of what has come before, and by means of written records transmit to later generations the cumulative understanding that comes about as a result of a succession of transient historical experiences. Just as men and women are victims of original sin,³⁷ these shared memories are witnesses to history's errancy, which has resulted in recurrent cycles of war, tyranny, and lawlessness.

Within this project (to which I turn in [Chapter 4](#)), Augustine contrasts the permanence of the truths which the study of the Bible can unlock with the impermanence of personal and artificial memories, which no amount of interpretive ingenuity can fully overcome. Language, which conveys such memory images from one person to another, suffers from comparable constraints, owing to the imprecise relationship between realities, their configuration in the mind, and their expression in words. Given these epistemological limitations, he has little confidence in a scheme for improvement like that of Plato's *Republic*, which is based on education, or the plan attributed by Seneca to Posidonius, which relies on technical improvements and their scientific context.³⁸ On the contrary, near the end of *De Magistro*, he states categorically (if somewhat

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.18.29: "scripta conscientia." For the biblical parallel, see *Conf.*, 3.7.13.

³⁷ A phrase first used at *Conf.*, 5.9.16.

³⁸ Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* 90.7–15; see Theodor Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress: The Background of *The City of God*," in *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. E. F. Rice, Jr. (Ithaca, NY, 1959), pp. 265–298, and, more extensively, Gerhart B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge, MA, 1959), pp. 153–283.

rhetorically) that we learn nothing from our instructors, past or present, that we are unable to teach ourselves by means of self-instructive soliloquies.³⁹

In place of proposals for personal or social advancement, which he considers illusory, he offers the evidence of reiterated human errors documented by the Old Testament prophets, to which he adds his notion of the providential unfolding of history based on the interplay of reason and grace. It is in this context that we find much that is original in his writings on the biblical and Plotinian theme of the soul's exodus from an ideal state, which is transformed in *De Civitate Dei* into an earthly "pilgrimage" in the company of his fellow citizens.⁴⁰ A comparable motivation lies behind the writing of "autobiography," which is his way of distancing himself from progressive thinking and supplementing this approach with the search for permanent values enshrined in the preconscious past of the soul.⁴¹ On this view, the unraveling of the self's history by means of conversations with oneself is a way of deciphering the self's meaning, as much later, in a different context, in Freud.

BROADER CONTEXTS

The connection between these themes is less evident to modern readers of Augustine than it was to those in the late ancient or medieval periods, owing to the fact that psychological and historical conceptions of the self have found their way into modern thought by different paths. As noted, the psychological notion has been reintroduced into thinking about the self chiefly through the writings of Descartes, and this appears in contemporary views of the issues, Cartesian and anti-Cartesian, in which historical factors do not play a large part.⁴² The historical conception is developed by such writers as Dante, Petrarch, and Montaigne, and resurfaces much transformed in the writings of Giambattista Vico, an

³⁹ *De Mag.*, 14.45; a view that nonetheless owes a great deal to the Platonic notion of anamnesis.

⁴⁰ *Conf.*, 10.4.6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1.7.11, where infants are guilty of original sin, even though they are not conscious of committing sins.

⁴² E.g., Jean-Pierre Changeux, *Neuronal Man: The Biology of Mind* (New York, 1985), where Cartesian and Spinozan influences are at work, and for the opposed view see Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York, 1994). A recent review of ethical issues in the brain sciences is Michael Gazzaniga, *The Ethical Brain* (The Dana Foundation: New York, 2005), pp. 87–165. For a contemporary defence of the view, originating with Augustine, that all thinking is intentional, see John R. Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, 1983).

attentive student of *De Civitate Dei*,⁴³ who attempts to trace the manner in which successive mentalities take shape in the “primitive” or “archaic” modes of thought of the pre-Homeric period. In contrast to Descartes, who rejects history, Vico offers readers of *La Scienza Nuova* (published in different versions in 1725, 1730, and 1744) a tentative version of the social-scientific configuration of the self in which stages in collective self-consciousness inform the individual’s identity by means of shared cultural memories. Augustine can be seen as the distant inspiration of both of these approaches to the self: the one leads in the direction of Descartes’ “method,” the other in the direction of Vico’s “historicism.”⁴⁴

Needless to say, the positions adopted by these later writers on the progress of human understanding are more optimistic in their conclusions than the Augustinian originals on which they are based. The bishop of Hippo remained unconvinced that we are able to gain more than a partial understanding of our selves or our histories, in contrast to what many pre- and post-Enlightenment thinkers believed. The modes of explanation that appear most frequently in Augustine’s early writings, namely causal principles and meaningful stories, do not in his view truly explain anything. The trouble with both “paradigmatic” and “narrative” methods, to employ Jerome Bruner’s convenient terms,⁴⁵ is that they lack certainty, the one owing to the limits of reason, the other owing to our restricted understanding of the past and future. These unknowns do not arise because they cannot be known but because humans are incapable of knowing them: the fact that they are knowable, although not by us, is the real source of Augustine’s anxiety, rather than the impossibility of humans attaining such knowledge.⁴⁶ By framing the issues in this manner Augustine adds a significant detail to the map of uncertainties inherited from ancient Scepticism. In the *Confessiones*, he creates an epic in which the hero is

⁴³ On 31st August, 1735, Vico recited verses dedicated to Augustine’s memory in the Neapolitan Accademia degli Oziosi in which he claimed for his patron:

Altre maggior vittorie il nume eterno
a l’Africa serbò contro di Roma,
su le quali non val tempo né obblío.
Questa crebbe in immenso, e poi fu doma
del mio Agostino dal saper superno
che vi spiegò l’alma città di Dio.

Giambattista Vico, *Autobiografia seguita da una scelta di lettere, orazioni e rime*, ed. Mario Fubini (Turin, 1970), p. 213.

⁴⁴ See Erich Auerbach, “Vico und die Idee der Philologie,” *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie* (Bern, 1967), pp. 233–241.

⁴⁵ See Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), pp. 11–43; cf. *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (New York, 2002), pp. 63–87.

⁴⁶ *Conf.*, 6.4.5; 6.5.7.

largely motivated by his own self-questioning. If doubt is the modern "crown of thorns," as T. E. Lawrence suggested, the thinker responsible for popularizing the theme in late ancient literature is the bishop of Hippo.

In Augustine's early writings, therefore, soliloquies are the most prominent example of forms of discourse that are used (*uti*) so that higher things can be enjoyed (*frui*).⁴⁷ The soliloquy may be superior to the external dialogue, as he proposes, but soliloquies, whatever their value, are just conversations. His conviction of the limited usefulness of all types of verbal exchange sounds a note of caution for historians who propose to interpret the works of his first decade of activity within an evolutionary scheme. His purpose in writing is not chiefly to acquaint his readers with episodes from his personal history, nor is it to present his views on a number of conceptual problems. As he sees matters, these types of inquiry, as important as they may be, are just academic way-stations: valuable, doubtless, for the potential light they shed on a person's life and thought, but diversions from what he sees as the main objective of philosophical investigations. This is the attainment of a contemplative and transcendent state of mind at the personal level through prayer and self-examination, and at a non-personal level through the unfolding of sacred history, which will eventually re-establish the ideal state that mankind lost through sin in Eden: a state, needless to say, beyond time, language, and human understanding.

From a contemporary standpoint, it is legitimate to think of Augustine's uses for the soliloquy as the beginning of a long tradition of first-person discourses in philosophy, which leads over the centuries to such diverse spokesmen for this approach as Anselm, Abelard, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein. However, in his view inner dialogues are a part of the ancient discussion of rationality and their purpose is to teach us to recognize the limits of personal rational thinking. This is above all a lesson in humility: for Augustine fears he may never truly become Paul's "new man"; worse, that his "old" self may reappear through force of habit and remake him in the likeness of the person he wants to leave behind. We can perhaps conquer ourselves, he suggests, through the application of philosophical strategies inherited from the past, such as the rational or interior dialogue, but without help from outside we cannot hope to remain victorious for long.

⁴⁷ The classic statement is *De Div. Quaest.*, 30; for a fine introduction to the subject, see Rudolf Lorenz, "Fruitio dei bei Augustin," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 63 (1950-51), 75-32, and Lorenz, "Die Herkunft des augustinischen *frui deo*," *ibid.*, 64 (1952-53), 34-60.

What was Augustine's reason for introducing such existential issues into discussions traditionally concerned with the fate of the soul, especially as he chose to do so in a manner that questioned venerable philosophical methods, some of which he inherited from Cicero and evidently respected? A complex answer is outlined in his early writings, chiefly through his analysis of the ancient dialogue, the sources of freedom and necessity, and the themes of time, memory, and narrative, which, accordingly, form the divisions of this study. In the final analysis his solution to the problem of wisdom and happiness may have to be viewed within the context of the patristic debate on the merits of Hellenism and Hebraism, phases of which were terminated in the late fourth century by Jerome and Augustine. By 386, when Augustine was beginning his dialogues, Jerome had opted for a historical and philological solution in the notion of *Hebraica ueritas*.⁴⁸ Augustine's proposal is also a version of *narratio historica*; however, in contrast to Jerome, he declares in *De Doctrina Christiana* that it is not whether we learn to speak Greek or Hebrew that matters in Christianity, but our recognition of the fundamental rôle of language in giving continuity to cultural tradition.⁴⁹ This statement effectively opens a new chapter in the Western consideration of the self and its history. The reorientation begins in works written before 400 and the philosophical soliloquy plays a major part in their evolution.

⁴⁸ See Megan Williams, *Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago, 2006).

⁴⁹ *De Doct. Christ.*, pro., 5.