blackwell great minds

augustine

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chapter 1

the first-person point of view

The idea that the words 'I exist' (or their equivalent in Greek or Latin) might be used to state a philosophically important truth would have mystified the classical philosophers of antiquity. Of course it was important to each of them individually that they existed. Moreover, the existence of each of them individually was important to the development of philosophy. Without the existence of, say, Socrates, or Plato, or Aristotle, philosophy would not be what we know it to be today. But no major philosopher of antiquity would have thought of himself as expressing anything philosophically interesting by saying, "I exist."

This observation naturally leads to a second one. No philosopher of antiquity thought of doing philosophy from his own, singular point of view. That observation may come as a surprise. "What about the ancient relativists?" you might ask. Did they not suppose they had to start from how things seemed to them? And was not that doing philosophy from one's own, singular point of view?

The answer is 'No.' According to Plato, Protagoras, the most famous ancient relativist, said, "Each thing is to me such as it appears to me" (*Theaetetus* 152a). So far it might well *seem* that Protagoras is doing philosophy from his own first-person point of view. But we should note how the passage goes on. Protagoras adds, "and is to you such as it appears to you."

Protagoras's idea is that the wind is not, in itself, either hot or cold. The wind may be hot to me and cold to you; yet, in itself it is neither hot nor cold. Thus Protagoras denied that there is an objective fact about how things in the world are, independent of how they seem to be to this person or that. But his relativism was universal. He did not give any pride of place to how things seemed to *him*. Nor did he think he needed to start his philosophy by establishing how things seemed to him before he would be justified in allowing himself to suppose that there might be other points of view.

Protagoras does not explain how he knows there even exist other points of view. He just assumes that there are. He shows no special philosophical interest in other minds; he certainly does not suggest that one needs a philosophical argument to prove that they exist. And how things seemed to him in particular was not especially important to him. His point of view was, for him, just one among many, and not a privileged point of philosophical departure. His reflections were universal from the beginning, even if universally relativistic.

All this seems to have changed with Descartes. It was Descartes who first won broad acceptance for the suggestion that each of us must work out what we know individually, from our own first-person point of view, before we can move on to questions about how the world is, or might be, independently of us. And the foundation stone for the reconstruction of what it is we know, Descartes insisted, is the invulnerability of each philosopher's claim to know what we express when we say or think to ourselves, "I exist."

Much of modern philosophy and science has, of course, rejected this Cartesian starting point. But the Cartesian proposal has so fully insinuated itself into modern ways of thinking that it cannot be ignored, even if we would now like to do so. Popular culture, as well as academic philosophy, recognizes at least something of the significance of Cartesian first-personalism. Think of the very old *New Yorker* cartoon, in which a computer technician reads aloud, in perplexity, the output of a computer tape. "It says," he reports, "*cogito, ergo sum*." Even the unphilosophical reader of the *New Yorker* will get the joke, and hence realize something of the significance of the philosophical problem of whether a computer could have a genuine thought from its own singular point of view. In fact, it may even cross that unphilosophical reader's mind that there is a question as to whether the computer literally has a point of view of its own.

Descartes does deserve the credit (or the blame!) for convincing much of the modern world that the first-person point of view must be taken seriously. Even, or perhaps I should say "especially," diehard critics of Descartes take him seriously. Of course, the appeal of the objectivist stance, that is, of making one's thought as nearly independent as possible from one's own personal perspective, is also very attractive to many thinkers. The goal of this sort of objectivism is to gain what Thomas Nagel has called, somewhat mischievously, "the view from nowhere."[1] Yet the suspicion that, in fact, the idea of a view from nowhere is really a myth, or at least a fiction, and that we delude ourselves if we do not each respect the philosophical priority of our own individual perspective, has not altogether lost its appeal. Moreover, for at least some among us, the sense that deferring to objectivism denudes knowledge of deep significance continues to be compelling.

So how did philosophers ever come to think that there is even a choice between beginning philosophy with an objectivist point of view and starting instead from a resolutely first-person point of view? Did Descartes himself simply make this idea up? Did his first-personalism emerge from out of nowhere? Certainly not. It began with Augustine.

Descartes himself denied that his thought had been influenced in any significant way by Augustine[2] – or by anyone else, for that matter! Scholars have debated whether that could possibly be true. A good way to appreciate its implausibility is to read Stephen Menn's intriguing book *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). My purpose here, however, is not to trace out Augustine's influence on Descartes. It is rather to introduce the philosophical thinking of the first thinker in Western philosophy actually to *do philosophy* from a genuinely first-person point of view.

There will, of course, be many references in my account of the philosophy of Augustine to Descartes, as well as to later modern thinkers, even to philosophers of the last century. But my treatment of Augustine is meant to be philosophy, not the history of ideas. To appreciate Augustine's originality one needs, of course, to have some conception of what went before him. And to appreciate its philosophical value we may need to make reference to what came after him. But it is the direct challenge of Augustine's own thinking that will be my primary focus in this book. I shall refer to philosophers who came before him and philosophers who came after primarily as a way of framing more clearly his own thought.

Throughout Augustine's corpus we find a striking appreciation for the philosophical importance of what each of us expresses by saying or thinking, "I exist." Thus, for example, in Book 2 of the dialogue *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine seeks to show how it can be made clear, and by 'made clear' he seems to mean 'proved,' that God exists. But as his starting point for that ambitious project he asks his interlocutor in the dialogue, Evodius, whether he, Evodius, exists. "Or are you, perhaps, afraid," he goes on, "that you are being deceived by my questioning?" Augustine adds, as if to reassure Evodius, "But if you did not exist, it would be impossible for you to be deceived" (2.3.7.20).

Augustine encourages Evodius to erect a number of conclusions on his unshakable conclusion that he himself exists. "Since it is clear to you that you exist, and since this would not be clear to you unless you lived," Augustine points out, "it is also clear to you that you are alive." He adds, "And this third point is also clear: you understand" (2.3.7.21). When Evodius agrees that these truths are clear to him, that is, have been proved to his satisfaction, Augustine lists the conclusions that Evodius has so far agreed to:

(1) I exist.
(2) I live.
(3) I understand that I exist and that I live.

On these three foundation stones, each certified by Evodius from his own first-personal point of view, Augustine invites him to reconstruct a skeletal account of the nature of the world, and eventually, a proof of the existence of God. Implicitly, Augustine invites readers of his dialogue to follow along and reconstruct their own account of the world, and, eventually, to accept their own proof of the existence of God. We shall return to Augustine's proof of the existence of God in chapter 10.

Other chapters to follow will bring out other philosophically interesting lines of reasoning in Augustine, most, although admittedly not all, of which are informed by a first-personal point of view in philosophy. Thus Augustine recognizes from this point of view what in modern philosophy is called "the problem of other minds" – the problem of how one can be assured that there are other minds in addition to one's own. So far as I know, he is the first philosopher to bring up this problem. Appropriately, Augustine also proposes a solution to the problem of other minds. His thinking on these matters will occupy chapter 7.

The account of time Augustine offers in Book 11 of his *Confessions*, perhaps his most widely admired contribution to philosophy today, is inconceivable apart from a thoroughly first-personal point of view. That topic will occupy us in chapter 9.

Augustine's account of the meanings of words in his dialogue *The Teacher*, and his thoughts about language acquisition in his *Confessions*, are both written from the speaker's or learner's point of view. His account of language acquisition, as we shall see, rests on an assumed recollection of what it was like for him as an infant to learn his first natural language. And his explanation of how we learn the meanings of new words aims to take seriously, in a philosophical way, the apparent limitation that each of us, as language learners, has no direct access to the mind of our teacher. We shall consider some of these issues in chapter 4.

The fact that we have dreams poses interestingly philosophical problems for Augustine. Thus he tries to respond to the old skeptical question "How do I know that I am not now dreaming?" More surprisingly, he also concerns himself with the question of what moral responsibility, if any, one bears for the actions of one's dream self. Augustine seems to be preoccupied especially with the sexual activity he has dreamt having. But the moral question about responsibility for the acts of one's dream self is, in fact, perfectly general. His concern could hardly arise for him in the way it does unless he considered himself actually *to be* his dream self, rather than a mere spectator of the dreams. He sees himself as

isolated epistemologically from all other beings except God. These matters will be discussed in chapter 8.

Augustine offers several arguments for soul–body, or mind–body dualism. His most interesting argument for the dualism thesis rests, not on the difference between the idea of a mind and the idea of a body, as in Descartes, but rather on something else. His reasoning has to do with his conviction that nothing bodily need be present to a mind that is, nevertheless, fully present to itself. (See chapter 6.)

Augustine tells us that it was a work of Cicero's, now lost, that first turned him onto philosophy. Cicero not only awakened in Augustine the desire to seek philosophical wisdom; he also introduced him to philosophical skepticism. As we shall see in chapter 3, Augustine's response to skepticism itself takes a strikingly first-personal turn.

I have already pointed out reasoning in Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will* that is remarkably similar to Descartes's "I think, therefore I am." Chapter 5 focuses on two additional passages in Augustine that display this same sort of reasoning. But, as we shall see, the role of such reasoning in Augustine is rather different from its role in Descartes.

It is not, however, just the philosophical problems Augustine recognizes, or the solutions he offers to those problems, that find their basis in his first-personal orientation. It is also the literary form of some of his most important works that takes this point of view. Thus his *Confessions*, which is the first important autobiography in Western literature, takes the literary form of an extended prayer to God. Since, as Augustine supposes, God already knows what is in the heart of the person praying and God never answers back, except in quoted verses of Scripture, the *Confessions* is actually a self-revelation that readers are allowed to, as it were, "overhear."

Augustine's *Soliloquies*, another work of great originality, takes the literary form of a dialogue. Yet the participants in this dialogue are not two different human beings, but rather Reason and the Soul. So, again, we have a work that reveals the self to the self. Interestingly, the Latin word *soliloquium* seems to have been coined by Augustine himself by putting together the Latin word for 'alone,' *solus*, and the word for 'speak,' *loquor*.

I do not mean to suggest that Augustine's only claim to philosophical distinction is his innovative resolve to do philosophy from his own singular point of view (with, of course, the implicit invitation to each of his readers to do the same thing, individually, for themselves). It is an exaggeration, but an excusable exaggeration, to say that Augustine was the father of modern philosophy of religion. Anyone who takes a course in the philosophy of religion in a college or university today can reasonably expect that the course, whatever else it covers, will at least take up these four topics: (1) Faith and Reason; (2) Arguments for the Existence of God;

(3) the Problem of Evil; and (4) the Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will. As we might expect, Augustine's discussion of each of these topics bears some important relation to the thought of some earlier philosopher. But Augustine's way of presenting and discussing these problems is so close to the way they get introduced in a modern course in the philosophy of religion that passages from his writings can easily be used in an introductory philosophy class today. I take up these topics in chapters 10, 11, and 12. I have included a chapter on Augustine on wanting bad things (chapter 13) to show how Augustine's view of the dark side of human motivation anticipates modern thinking and breaks with a tradition inaugurated by Socrates and Plato. I have included a chapter on Augustine on lying (chapter 14) to show how he initiates the philosophical discussion of the perplexities that plague any attempt to understand truthfulness, a topic largely neglected in classical Greek philosophy. Then there is a final chapter on Augustine on happiness (chapter 15), which, I hope, makes interesting connections both with Aristotle and with British empiricism.

Augustine is widely recognized as a great theological dogmatist. He delineated three important Christian heresies and in this way did as much as any single person to define Christian orthodoxy. He was therefore one of the greatest theological dogmatists of all time. At the same time he found some of the doctrines he defended, and the concepts in which they are expressed, philosophically perplexing. His sensitivity to philosophical perplexity makes his way of doing philosophy unmistakably Socratic. This Socratic side to his thinking is something I try to bring out as we go along.

Augustine is widely recognized to be a great theologian. That recognition is entirely appropriate. But Augustine is not so widely recognized today as an important philosopher. I hope this book will make a modest contribution toward correcting that imbalance.

further reading

Lynne Rudder Baker, "The first-person perspective: a test for naturalism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998): 327–48. This article offers a refreshing perspective on the importance of the first-person point of view in philosophy.

notes

1 Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

2 See, e.g., his letter to Colvius, November 14, 1640, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, tr. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2: 159–60.

augustine's life

Augustine does not fit easily into our schemata for understanding the History of Western Philosophy. His dates, 354–430 CE, place him near the end of what we think of as ancient philosophy, during the period when the Hellenistic philosophies of Skepticism, Stoicism, and Neoplatonism dominated the philosophical scene. In fact, important Neoplatonic philosophers, such as Simplicius and Philoponous lived well into the second century after Augustine's death. So we might think that Augustine should be grouped with them.

Certainly Augustine was influenced by the main schools of Hellenistic philosophy. At more than one point in his life he was attracted to the skepticism of the New Academy. Stoicism also influenced his thinking, as scholars have recently come to emphasize. As for Neoplatonism, Augustine himself recognizes in his *Confessions*[1] the pivotal role "the books of the Platonists [i.e., Neoplatonists], translated from Greek into Latin" (7.9.13) played in his philosophical and religious development, even in his eventual conversion to Christianity.

Yet Augustine is not a Hellenistic philosopher. Instead, he is the first important Christian philosopher. He is also the first medieval philosopher, even though his life span does not belong to what we would otherwise think of as the Middle Ages. It belongs rather to what is best thought of as "late antiquity." In fact, if it were not for Augustine and Boethius (480–524), we would naturally think of medieval philosophy as beginning after the "dark ages," perhaps with John Scotus Eriugena (810–77), but more properly with Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), who was not born until six centuries after the death of Augustine!

Not only does Augustine fail to fit easily into the chronological categories in which we try to understand the history of Western philosophy, the place where he lived almost all his life is not one where we would expect to find any important philosophical thought at all. He was born in an inland town in North Africa, Thagaste, which is today Souk Ahras, in Algeria. Augustine did gain his higher education in Carthage, which is just north of modern Tunis, in Tunisia. But, except for a year in Rome

(383–4), and about six more years in Italy, mostly in Milan, he lived his whole life in North Africa.

Eventually Augustine became Bishop of Hippo Regius (near modern Bône, or Annaba, Algeria), which is a town on the coast of North Africa with a long history, but not a particularly memorable one. Hippo was quite a prosperous city in Augustine's day. But no other well-known figures, and certainly no other well-known philosophers or theologians, are associated with Hippo.

The anomaly of Augustine's placement in time and place is further complicated by the nature of his thought and its influence. John Rist has written an important book under the title *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). What Rist's title suggests is that Augustine's philosophy is Christianized ancient philosophy. And there is certainly something appropriate about this characterization. What is missing from it, however, is the recognition that in Augustine philosophy also has a new beginning. The first-person point of view in philosophy I mentioned in the last chapter is not to be found in ancient philosophy. In fact, it is more important in modern philosophy, beginning with Descartes, than it is even in later medieval philosophy. Moreover, the ways in which Augustine departs from ancient philosophy are as important as the ways in which he draws on the philosophical tradition he inherits.

On the other hand, there are ways in which Augustine was very much a thinker of his own time and place. He was well educated in Latin literature and rhetoric. He was deeply involved in the theological controversies of his day, which, in fact he did more to shape than any other single person. He was caught up in the social and political turmoil of his time. Thus he addresses his great work *The City of God* to the question of whether the sack of Rome in 410 is a result of its conversion to Christianity. And the Vandal hordes approached Hippo in 430 as Augustine lay there on his deathbed.

Still, there are other ways in which Augustine does not belong at all to his time or place. His confessional style of writing, including his reflections on his own inner life, strikes us today as remarkably modern. As I have already pointed out, his *Confessions* is the first significant autobiography in Western literature. His remarkably Cartesian conception of mind, his way of framing the philosophical issues raised by mind, language, and religious belief prefigure what we think of today as modern thought. Oddly for a person whose life was spent mostly in a place otherwise unimportant to us, he is also a philosopher for our own time.

* * *

Augustine was the favored son of Monica, a devout Christian, and Patricius, a pagan until he was baptized on his deathbed. Augustine had

a brother and sister, of whom we know almost nothing, and perhaps other siblings. It was Augustine on whom his family, and especially this mother, lavished their attention.

At age 12 Augustine was sent for secondary schooling to nearby Maudauros for 3 years. After returning to Thagaste for a year, Augustine went in 371 to Carthage for higher education. Augustine describes Carthage as a "cauldron of illicit loves" (3.1.1). No doubt it seemed a lecherous place to a small-town boy. In Carthage he soon found a mistress, who bore him a son, somewhat piously named "Adeodatus" ("given by God"). Augustine never tells us the name of his mistress, but he does claim to have been faithful to her (4.2.2).

To Augustine's great sorrow, Adeodatus died young, at age 18. We do not know exactly how important to his father Adeodatus was in his infancy or childhood. But Augustine's dialogue *The Teacher* is testimony to the probing philosophical conversations Augustine had with Adeodatus as a teenager.

Augustine's subject as a student at Carthage was rhetoric. He tells us that he was at the top of his class (3.3.6), and we can easily believe him. In fact, it is hard to imagine that any of his fellow students, or even his teachers, were anywhere nearly as astute or gifted as he. It was as a student in Carthage that Augustine discovered Cicero, who became his chief philosophical mentor. Augustine tells us that reading Cicero's *Hortensius*, a work that has not survived, changed his life by turning him to philosophy (3.4.7).

Cicero was not so much an original philosopher as an engaging presenter of the philosophical ideas of others. It was chiefly through Cicero that Augustine learned of the skepticism of the "New Academy," the successor to the Academy of Plato, and of the views of the Stoics and Epicureans.

At this time Augustine tried to read the Christian scriptures "to find out what they were like" (3.5.9). But he found the Bible "unworthy by comparison with the dignity of Cicero." Among the issues raised for him by this study of the Bible, no doubt the most significant one was "Where does evil come from?" (3.7.12). This issue dogged him throughout much of his life.

Consonant with his preoccupation with the origin of evil, Augustine became a Manichean "hearer" and remained one for nine years. The Manicheans, a Christian sect that flourished at the time, did at least offer a fairly clear response to the Problem of Evil. According to Manicheanism, there is a cosmic principle of darkness as well as a principle of light. What we experience in our lives is the warfare between the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness.

Augustine also faced a deep personal loss during this time of philosophical and religious searching. He devotes a long section of Book 4 of

his *Confessions* to a description of the death of a close friend, whose name we are not given, and to the depression it caused in him. "My eyes looked for him everywhere," he writes, "and he was not there. I hated everything because they did not have him, nor could they tell me 'look, he is on the way', as used to be the case when he was alive and absent from me. I had become to myself a vast problem . . ." (4.4.9).

Augustine began his career as a teacher of rhetoric in Carthage in 376, at age 22. A few years later he wrote his first book, *On the Beautiful and the Fitting*, his copy of which he soon lost (3.13.20). The work did not survive.

When Augustine was 29, a famous Manichean bishop, Faustus, arrived in Carthage. Augustine tells us that he had waited nine years, the whole period of his Manichean apprenticeship, to put his questions about the Manichean faith to Bishop Faustus. But his encounter with the famous man turned out to be an utter disappointment to Augustine. "When I put forward some problems which troubled me," he writes in his *Confessions*, "I quickly discovered him to be ignorant of the liberal arts other than grammar and literature; and his knowledge was [only] of a conventional kind. He had read some orations of Cicero, a very few books by Seneca, some pieces of poetry, and some volumes of his own sect composed in a Latin of good style" (5.6.11).

But that was all – hardly enough to prepare him to deal with Augustine's probing questions. Augustine soon lost all hope that Faustus, or any other Manichean, could resolve the difficulties he had with the Manichean faith.

In 384 Augustine left Carthage to teach rhetoric in Rome. After only a year in Rome, a year plagued by illness, he moved to Milan, where he took up a teaching post under the city's new prefect. Ambrose was then Bishop of Milan and Augustine soon found himself listening to the sermons of Ambrose in the cathedral of Milan.

Ambrose became Augustine's mentor. In Ambrose Augustine finally found an intellectual peer. Ambrose had had a successful government career before his midlife conversion to Christianity. He was steeped in classical Greek learning and he was the first Latin Doctor of the Church. Augustine could not have known anyone like him in Carthage, let alone in Thagaste.

Augustine tells of how Ambrose received him like a father and with great kindness. He writes:

> I began to like him, at first indeed not as a teacher of the truth, for I had absolutely no confidence in your [i.e., God's] church, but as a human being who was kind to me. I used to listen enthusiastically to him preaching to the people, not with the intention which I ought to have had, but as if testing out his oratorical skill to see whether it merited the reputation it

> enjoyed or whether his fluency was better than, or inferior to, what it was reported to be. I hung on his diction in rapt attention, but remained bored and contemptuous of the subject matter. My pleasure was in the charm of his language. (5.13.23)

But soon Augustine was won over to the content of Ambrose's sermons, as well as to the excellence of his oratory.

Augustine's disappointment with the Manichean Bishop Faustus had shaken his faith in Manicheanism. Faustus had shown himself incapable of dealing with Augustine's questions. Ambrose, by contrast, was a theologian of an entirely different order. It was he who led Augustine to make the crucial break with Manicheanism and to move away from the thought that, in desperation, he could always, like his mentor, Cicero, adopt the position of Academic skepticism. Augustine became a catechumen in the Catholic Church.

As Augustine describes this crucial turning point in his life, he gives special emphasis to its philosophical dimension. He writes:

> I then energetically applied my critical faculty to see if there were decisive arguments by which I could somehow prove the Manichees wrong. If I had been able to conceive of spiritual substance, at once all their imagined inventions would have collapsed and my mind would have rejected them. But I could not. However, in regard to the physical world and all the natural order accessible to the bodily senses, consideration and comparison more and more convinced me that numerous philosophers held opinions much more probable than theirs. (5.14.25)

Augustine's mother, Monica, followed him to Milan. She, too, was attracted to Ambrose. And soon they were joined in Milan by friends from North Africa, including his patron, Romanianus, who had helped finance Augustine's higher education in Africa.

Gradually Augustine began to work his way out of the assumptions of philosophical materialism that Manicheanism had so long reinforced. At the same time he returned to the Problem of Evil, which he could no longer understand in the Manichean fashion as a consequence of the warfare between the Principle of Darkness and the Principle of Light. Either from Ambrose's sermons or from his own reading of Plotinus, which began in Milan, Augustine heard that "free choice of the will is the reason why we do wrong and suffer [God's] just judgment" (7.3.5). But, he says, he could not understand this idea. Augustine asked himself:

> Who made me? Is not my God not only good but the supreme Good? Why then have I the power to will evil and to reject good? Is it to provide a reason why it is just for me to undergo punishments? . . . If the devil was responsible, where did the devil come from? And if even he began as a good

> angel and became devil by a perversion of the will, how does the evil will by which he became devil originate in him, when an Angel is wholly made by a Creator who is pure goodness? (7.3.5)

Gradually Augustine worked his way through these issues and developed arguments against the Manichean position he had abandoned. He was helped in this by coming to read, in Latin translation, works by both Plotinus and his great pupil Porphyry. "By the Platonic books," he writes, "I was admonished to return into myself" (7.10.16). One result was what seems to have been his first mystical vision:

> With you [O God] as my guide I entered into my innermost citadel, and was given power to do so because you had become my helper. I entered and with my soul's eye, such as it was, saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind – not the light of every day, obvious to anyone, nor a larger version of the same kind which would, as it were, have given out a much brighter light and filled everything with its magnitude. It was not that light, but a different thing, utterly different from all our kinds of light. (7.10.16)

Augustine became a Christian convert in July of 386, at the age of 32. Before he was baptized, he resigned his teaching position and retreated with his mother, his son, Adeodatus, then 15 years old, and a group of philosophically minded friends to a country estate, Cassiciacum, near Como. There he conducted philosophical conversations with these associates and wrote his earliest surviving work, *Against the Academicians*, as well as three other philosophical books.

At Easter of the next year, 387, Augustine and his son were baptized together in Milan cathedral. It was for Augustine a new beginning. "We were baptized," he writes in his *Confessions*, "and disquiet about our past life vanished from us" (9.6.14).

Together with Evodius, a fellow townsman from Thagaste, who was also to become a bishop and who is Augustine's interlocutor in his dialogue *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine resolved to form a Christian community in Africa. However, their return trip was halted at Ostia, the seaport of Rome, by a blockade. There Augustine's mother, Monica, fell ill. Realizing that Monica was near death, Augustine talked with her about the life the saints will have. He writes in his *Confessions*:

> The conversation led us towards the conclusion that the pleasure of the bodily senses, however delightful in the radiant light of this physical world, is seen by comparison with the life of eternity to be not even worth considering. Our minds were lifted up by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself. Step by step we climbed beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself, where sun, moon, and stars shed light on the earth.

> We ascended even further by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at your works, and we entered into our own minds. We moved up beyond them so as to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel eternally with truth for food. There life is the wisdom by which all creatures come into being, both things which were and will be. (9.10.24)

Augustine continues this description of the vision he shared with his mother for many more lines. It is, perhaps, his most eloquent description of a mystical vision.

After Augustine and his mother had concluded their vision together, Monica took her departure from him with this farewell speech: "My son, as for myself, I now find no pleasure in this life. What I have still to do here and why I am here, I do not know. My hope in this world is already fulfilled. The one reason why I wanted to stay longer in this life was my desire to see you a Catholic Christian before I die. My God has granted this in a way more than I had hoped" (9.10.26).

After nine days of illness, Monica died. She was 56. Augustine was 36.

Augustine and his associates, including his son, soon returned to Africa, indeed, to Thagaste, where they founded their Christian community. But in 391, while on a visit to Hippo, some 150 miles away, Augustine attended a service at the cathedral, where he was importuned by the assembled congregation to become a priest to assist the then Bishop of Hippo, Valerius. And so he was ordained. Five years later he himself became Bishop of Hippo.

Augustine founded a monastic community in Hippo, which became his own community for the rest of his life. His life as a bishop included pastoral duties, as well as a wide array of administrative responsibilities. He preached regularly. And he wrote, voluminously – sermons, letters, commentaries, and treatises. His literary output, produced with the help of scribes, is enormous. In addition to approximately 100 books and treatises there are approximately 250 letters and around 500 sermons, including those commenting on the Psalms.

Augustine devoted much of his energy and his writing to putting down what he viewed as important Christian heresies, especially Donatism, Manicheanism, and Pelagianism. In defining these heresies he thereby helped define Christian orthodoxy. A case could be made for saying that no theologian has ever done more to establish Christian orthodoxy than Augustine.

Two of the three heresies Augustine focused on, Pelagianism and Manicheanism, are of special philosophical interest. Pelagianism, so named for the British monk, Pelagius, who promulgated it, is epitomized in a maxim philosophers today associate with Immanuel Kant, namely, 'Ought implies can.' According to this view, if we have an obligation to

be without sin, then it is within our power to be without sin. Augustine opposed Pelagianism with his insistence on the Doctrine of Original Sin, according to which, apart from the grace of God, none of us is capable of being without sin.

Manicheanism is the view that the cosmic force of evil is equal in power to the cosmic force of good. Although we should, of course, ally ourselves with the force of good, the principle of light, we can expect that the force of evil will continue to counterbalance goodness in the world.

In chapter 8 of this book we shall find a connection between Pelagianism and the Moral Dream Problem. And in chapter 12 we shall consider Manicheanism as one response to the Consistency Problem of Evil.

further reading

Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967. This work has remained, ever since its publication, the standard biography of Augustine.

note

1 All quotations in this chapter are taken, unless otherwise noted, from Augustine's *Confessions*.