

Augustine on Self-Knowledge and Human Subjectivity

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One of the oldest topics in ancient philosophy is the connection between knowledge of oneself and knowledge of God.¹ It may be found already in prephilosophical wisdom—“Know thyself” was written above the portal of the Apollo temple in Delphi, it is preeminent in Plato’s philosophy, and was later fully developed in the later Platonic tradition.² Augustine adheres to this tradition. In his early works, he declares knowledge of God and knowledge of the soul to be the foremost concerns of his entire thought,³ and in his late writings the concept of the human mind as an

1 The introduction and sections 5.1–5.3 of this chapter rely largely on a translation and revision of my article “Endlichkeit und Subjektivität: Zur Bedeutung des Subjekts im Denken Augustins,” in *Fluchtpunkt Subjekt: Facetten und Chancen des Subjektgedankens*, ed. Gerhard Krieger and Hans-Ludwig Ollig (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001), 37–53.

2 Cf. Pierre Courcelle, *Connais-toi toi-même: De Socrate à Saint Bernard*, 3 vols. (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1974). Cf. Klaus Oehler, *Subjektivität und Selbstbewußtsein in der Antike* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1997).

3 Cf. Augustinus, *Soliloquia*, I.7 and II.1. Cf. Augustinus, *Contra academicos*, *De beata vita*, *De ordine*, *De libero arbitrio*, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 29, ed. William M. Green (Turnhout: Brepols,

image of God plays a dominating role. In his late speculation on the divine Trinity, however, Augustine begins to conceive of this connection in a new way—a way that is accompanied by decisive changes to his notion of the human mind. Subjectivity in the sense of self-knowledge, self-awareness, or self-presence is an important topic in modern philosophy but by no means an invention of modern thinking. Ancient philosophers like Aristotle and above all Plotinus developed subtle and highly elaborate conceptions of this notion. But while the ancient tradition before Augustine understood subjectivity as a feature of the divine, infinite intellect only, Augustine interprets it as an essential property of the human mind. In my opinion, Augustine's most important contribution to the philosophy of mind is his development of a theory of finite subjectivity.

In the following I will expound the connection of self-knowledge and knowledge of God as we find it in Augustine's earlier works up to his *Confessiones*. Here, Augustine's thought is strongly influenced by Plotinus.⁴ Then I will turn to the bishop's most complex work, namely *De Trinitate*, to give an account of the arguments that lead him—beyond Plotinus—to his final concept of the human mind.

5.1. SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND SELF-TRANSCENDENCE IN EARLY AUGUSTINE

In Augustine's early writings, self-knowledge primarily means insight into the metaphysical rank of the human mind above the material bodies and below God. As a reflection on the acts of the mind, especially on the conditions of the act of making judgments, self-knowledge leads to knowledge of God.⁵ The proof of the existence of God, as developed

1970), II.30, II.44, and II.47. Cf. G. Verbeke, "Connaissance de soi et connaissance de Dieu chez Saint Augustin," *Augustiniana* 4 (1954): 495–515.

4 Cf. also Phillip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31–44.

5 Cf. Augustinus, *De Ordine*, II.30–51. See also Scott Macdonald, "The Divine Nature: Being and Goodness," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. David Vincent Meconi and Eleonore Stump, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 17–36, 34f.

in *De libero arbitrio* II, rests on the idea of a hierarchy of beings.⁶ The living, Augustine asserts, is better than the merely existing. Within a living being, the inner sense is superior to the outer senses, because it judges them. On the same ground, reason surpasses the inner sense. Augustine argues further that reason passes all its judgments on perceptual entities, whether theoretical, practical, or aesthetic, by applying immutable and universally valid standards. Since the human mind is a changeable being, it cannot generate these unchangeable standards, but receives them from a higher realm—the realm of immutable truth.⁷ According to this argument, self-reflection gives proof of the existence of a divine sphere of principles prior to all judgments of human reason.

The same reasoning can be found in the *Confessiones*, especially in Augustine's report on his confrontation with Plotinus and Porphyry (book 7),⁸ and in the so-called vision of Ostia (book 9). However, the mere inference of the existence of a divine sphere is now crowned by a momentary intuition of the divine light. At Ostia, Augustine and his mother Monica encountered the divine for an instant.⁹ To achieve this, the noise of the senses had to be left behind, the soul had to fall silent and step beyond its thinking of itself,¹⁰ so that God could be perceived directly and immediately. In the *Confessiones*, self-knowledge culminates in transcending the self toward a direct vision of God, which is attainable only if the soul leaves everything behind, even its thinking of itself.

Modern research on Augustine has shown that his idea of an intellectual ascent to God is Platonic in character and inspired in particular by Plotinus.¹¹ For Plotinus, the dianoetic part of the soul becomes aware

6 Cf. Augustinus, *De libero arbitrio*, II.7–41.

7 Cf. *ibid.*, II.34.

8 Cf. Augustinus, *Confessiones*, VII.11–23.

9 Cf. *ibid.*, IX.23–26.

10 Cf. *ibid.*, IX.25.

11 Cf. Werner Beierwaltes, *Platonismus im Christentum* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, 1998), 180–84.

of its dependence on divine reason (*nous*) through a reflection on its own acts of thinking and judging.¹² Rational insight may be topped off by a momentary intuition of the realm of ideas. Plotinus' highest principle, the first hypostasis, is the pure "one," which is beyond all multiplicity. The second hypostasis is the *nous*, a unity admitting the slightest possible degree of multiplicity. For Plotinus this means that the *nous* is perfectly self-related. It is multiple by having knowledge and thus being subject to the distinction between a knowing subject and an object known. The *nous* is one, however, because it itself is the object of its knowledge.¹³ Moreover, knowledge of the *nous* for Plotinus comprises the whole cosmos of ideas, and in knowing these, it knows itself in a perfect way. Whatever object the *nous* may think, in thinking its object, it is completely present to itself.¹⁴ Plotinus conceives of the *nous* as absolute subjectivity. A typical feature of his conception of mental ascent is that in the ecstatic moment of unification with the divine the human intellect becomes part of this absolute subjectivity. While being pulled upward to the intelligible realm, the human soul comes to participate in the unimpaired self-presence of the divine mind. For Plotinus, this means that the soul has to relinquish its humanity, leave behind its finitude, and be transformed into "something other."¹⁵

Augustine holds that the human mind is capable of self-reflection, in the sense of a consideration of its own abilities, which leads to a mental ascent toward the encounter of the divine. Even the early Augustine, however, did not receive Plotinus' idea of the human mind becoming part of the divine subjectivity at the climax of the ascent. Neither in the reports of his ecstatic experiences in *Confessiones* 7 nor

¹² Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.3.4.15–23. Hereafter cited as *Enn.*

¹³ Cf. *Enn.*, V.3.5.

¹⁴ Cf. *Enn.*, V.5.1–2. For an analysis, cf. E. Emilsson, "Plotinus on the Objects of Thought," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 77 (1995): 21–41. Cf. I. Chrystal, "Plotinus on the Structure of Self-Intellection," *Phronesis* 43 (1998): 264–86.

¹⁵ Cf. *Enn.*, V.3.4.10–30.

in the description of his vision of Ostia is the ascent to God linked in any way to the notion of perfect self-presence. Thus, even Augustine's early approach departs from Plotinus in conceiving the human mind as essentially distinct from the divine.

5.2. THE DIVINE TRINITY AND THE PROBLEM OF MENTAL ASCENT

The later Augustine was increasingly skeptical about some of Plotinus' ideas. In *De Trinitate*, he shows that the scheme of mental ascent that was so important in his early writings proves to be insufficient as soon as the notion of trinity comes into play. Augustine's concept of the divine Trinity is based on four principles:

1. God is one—*una essentia* or *una substantia*.¹⁶
2. There are three divine persons. The three persons each bear the character of a substance. This is indicated by sentences like "The Father is God, the Son is God, the Spirit is God," in which each person functions as a subject of so-called *ad se* propositions, that is, essential predications in which the predicate explicates an essential property of the subject. Subjects of *ad se* propositions are ontologically "in themselves" (*in se ipso*), and that means for Augustine that they are substances.¹⁷
3. The three persons are equal to each other, because their specific *ad se* propositions have the same content: The Father is good, just, and so on, the Son is good, just, and so on, and the Spirit is good, just, and so on, and even simply the same is true of God. According to ordinary logic this would mean that there are three gods, as the propositions "Peter is a man," "Paul is a man," and "John is a man" imply that there are three men. The principle of unity, however, prohibits such a plurality in the

¹⁶ Augustinus, *De Trinitate*, V.3 and VII.10. Hereafter cited as *Trin.*

¹⁷ Cf. *Trin.* VII.2.

divine Trinity. As Augustine says, the equality of the persons is of such power that it becomes a unity.¹⁸ The consequence is that in the divine Trinity each single person represents each other person as well as the totality—that is, God, absolutely. Here two or three, as Augustine puts it, is not more than one.

4. The three persons can be distinguished only through their specific relations to each other, articulated in propositions *ad aliquid relative* (= relational predications). The Father is called Father in relation to the Son, the Son is called Son in relation to the Father, and so forth.¹⁹ Even in the divine Trinity, Augustine asserts, relations presuppose substances to adhere to,²⁰ but since the trinitarian relations are immutable, Augustine does not consider them accidents.²¹

In book 8 of *De Trinitate* Augustine tries to connect the Plotinian ascent with the concept of the triune God. If God is trinitarian, the soul that moves upward and ecstatically reaches God should see the Trinity. In a fictitious dialogue with the soul, Augustine offers the soul four ways of an ascent to the Trinity; all of them use the Platonic pattern of discursive reasoning and subsequent intuition. The first way is based on the concept of truth.²² The soul shall understand that “truth” lies at the bottom of all things true and gaze at it. The second way includes an inference from the many good things to the “good itself”; the third shows “justice itself” to be the operative principle in all the just souls,²³ and the fourth rests on “love itself” as the ground prior to all acts of loving.²⁴ With each of these four ways the ascent fails, not because the

¹⁸ Cf. *Trin.* V.9.

¹⁹ Cf. *Trin.* V.6 and V.12–16.

²⁰ Cf. *Trin.* VII.2.

²¹ Cf. *Trin.* V.5–6.

²² Cf. *Trin.* VIII.3–4.

²³ Cf. *Trin.* VIII.9.

²⁴ Cf. *Trin.* VIII.12–14.

desired view of *veritas*, *bonum*, *iustitia*, and *amor* was unsuccessful, for it is indeed attained, but because the divine Trinity did not become visible. The ideas of truth, of the good, of justice and of love are uniform in themselves; they do not reveal anything trinitarian. On the background of Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity, it is easy to see why the mental ascent to the vision of the divine Trinity could not reach its goal. All the four ideas are essential properties of God, that is, predicates that can be said equally of any person as well as of God absolutely. Thus, Augustine explains, they cannot give any indication of a plurality in God. The Plotinian concept of a connection between self-knowledge and knowledge of God such that an inward movement of the mind leads to a vision of God—a concept that the young Augustine appreciated so much—strands at the notion of a triune God.

From book 9 of his *De Trinitate* onward, Augustine develops an alternative strategy that has important consequences for his theory of the human mind. If a direct vision of the divine Trinity is not feasible, indirect access still may be possible, such as a view of God as in a mirror, or in an image. For Augustine, the human mind is the "image of God." For an interpretation of the human mind as *imago Dei*, Augustine could reach back to a tradition that emerged partly from biblical writings (Gen. 1:26: let us make humans in our image and likeness), partly from Platonic sources.²⁵ Augustine gives this tradition a new meaning by claiming that the human mind is an image of God because it, too, is trinitarian in structure. The triune God is withdrawn from our faculty of intuition, but nothing is closer to the human mind than itself. If the human mind is a trinity, we can perceive in it the triune God as in a mirror or in an image.²⁶ Augustine makes this the program of the second half of *De Trinitate*. To conduct this project, Augustine has to show that the four principles of trinitarian ontology: unity of substance, threefoldness, radical equality, and relational difference apply

²⁵ Cf. Plotinus, *Enn.* V.3.4.21–22.

²⁶ Cf. *Trin.* IX.2 and XV.10.

not only to God, but also to the human mind. This is the meaning of Augustine's theory of the human mind as laid out in books 9–15 of *De Trinitate*. According to Augustine, the key to an understanding of the trinitarian character of the human mind is the notion of its self-relatedness.

Augustine distinguishes three elements in the human mind, namely the mind itself (*mens*), its self-love (*amor sui*), and its self-knowledge (*notitia sui*), and sets out to show that they make up a trinitarian structure. He asserts that these three elements are not related to each other like a whole and its parts or like a substance and its accidents.²⁷ Evidently, the *mens* is one as God is one: but do *amor* and *notitia* have the status of substances, so that together with the *mens* they form a threefoldness? According to Aristotle's *On Categories*, knowledge (*epistēmē*) is a quality of the soul, that is, an accident.²⁸ As we know from the *Confessiones*, Augustine is well aware of Aristotle's view,²⁹ but he does not share it. Instead, Augustine advances three arguments to show that *amor* and *notitia* are to be treated like substances. First, unlike accidents they do not simply adhere to a bearer as color and shape adhere to a corporeal being, but through their intentionality they reach beyond the *mens*. Second, love and knowledge can bend backward to the *mens*, turn into self-love and self-knowledge, and thus completely penetrate its bearer, which no accident would be able to do. Third, Augustine claims that *notitia* and *amor* themselves are self-related. For Augustine, knowledge of something always carries along with it knowledge of itself, and love of something necessarily loves itself. Reflexivity indicates a degree of self-sufficiency or being *in se ipso* that no accident can have.³⁰ Thus, Augustine concludes

²⁷ Cf. *Trin.* IX.2–7.

²⁸ Cf. Aristoteles, *The Categories*, trans. H. P. Cooke, Loeb Classical Library No. 325 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 1b, 1–2.

²⁹ Cf. Augustinus, *Confessiones*, IV.28–30.

³⁰ Cf. *Trin.* IX.7–8.

that the mind, its self-love, and self-knowledge are not to be characterized as one substance with two accidental properties, but as a three-in-oneness.

Finally, Augustine maintains the equality and mutual relatedness of *mens*, *amor sui*, and *notitia sui*. The mind, he claims, loves itself as knowing and knows itself as loving; the mind loves itself completely and knows itself completely—it knows its whole love and loves its whole knowledge. Each of the three elements is in each other, and each pair of elements is included in the third. By this play with the permutations of the three elements, Augustine wants to show that *mens*, *amor sui*, and *notitia sui* are related to each other in a way that corresponds to the structure of the divine Trinity. If the mind, its self-love, and self-knowledge completely embrace and penetrate each other, then each element represents each other element and the whole, so that two or three are not more than one.³¹ At the end of book 9 of *De Trinitate*, Augustine comes to the conclusion that the human mind is a triune being just as God is triune, but for different reasons. With regard to God, metaphysical unity and infinity, combined with the biblical distinction of Father, Son, and Spirit lead to the conception of a trinity. With regard to the human mind, the trinitarian structure is based on its self-relatedness. For Augustine, self-relatedness guarantees the substantiality of *amor* and *notitia*—otherwise there would be no real threefoldness; and it guarantees their perfect mutual penetration—otherwise there would be no unity. Whereas the divine Trinity can be articulated in propositions *ad se* and *ad aliquid relative*, the human mind seems to evade this distinction, because it is essentially in relation to itself (one might say: *ad se ipsam relative*). According to Augustine, self-relation is the way in which an intelligible, but finite being imitates in itself the ontological structure of the trinitarian God. This is the result of book 9 of *De Trinitate*.

³¹ Cf. *Trin.* IX.8.

5.3. THE NATURAL SELF-PRESENCE OF THE HUMAN MIND

For two reasons, Augustine is not satisfied with this result. The first reason is that, according to the argument so far, *mens*, *amor sui*, and *notitia sui* form a trinity only if the mind is in a state of wisdom, that is, of moral and intellectual perfection. For an equality between *amor sui* and *mens* only occurs if the mind loves itself in the right way, namely more than material goods and less than God. Likewise, *notitia sui* equals the *mens* only if the *mens* interprets itself correctly as an intelligible being ranked between the material bodies and God. In book 10 of *De Trinitate*, Augustine sets out to show that it is not only the wise man's mind that is trinitarian, but the human mind as such. For Augustine, being an image of God is not a privilege of the saint or the philosopher, but an undeletable character of any human being.

The second reason for Augustine's dissatisfaction is that the result of book 9 is open to an objection advanced first by the Hellenistic skeptic Sextus Empiricus.³² The bishop knows of Sextus' argument probably via Plotinus, who discusses it in order to safeguard the self-relatedness of divine nous.³³ In Augustine's assimilation (*De Trinitate* 10), the objection runs as follows. The Delphic injunction "Know thyself" summons us to turn away from the outward world, to seek ourselves, to become aware of what we are, and thereby to develop an adequate self-knowledge. But how can the mind seek itself if it does not already know itself? As Augustine points out, all seeking presupposes a knowledge of what is sought; otherwise the seeker would neither know what he or she is looking for nor realize when the item sought is found. Furthermore, any act of seeking is motivated by love. But, as Augustine asserts, there is no indeterminate love. Love always loves something

32 Cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos VII*, trans. R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library No. 291 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 284–86, 310–12.

33 *Enn.* V. 3. 1. Cf. Christof Horn, "Selbstbezüglichkeit des Geistes bei Plotin und Augustinus," in J. Brachtendorf, *Gott und sein Bild: Augustins "De Trinitate" im Spiegel gegenwärtiger Forschung* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000), 81–103.

and knows what it loves. Thus, the act of striving for self-knowledge, as the Delphic injunction commands, is sparked by a love that must already include the knowledge of that which is sought.³⁴

Obviously, the reflecting subject can identify itself only if it knows itself in advance. Otherwise it could not recognize itself amid the many objects it encounters. Higher-order accounts of self-awareness or consciousness are either circular because they presuppose what they purport to explain, or, if the self-knowledge that makes the act of self-reflection possible is in its turn explained as an outcome of another act of reflection, it leads to an infinite regress. Thus, self-knowledge cannot be a result of a separate act of self-reflection.³⁵

Is self-knowledge therefore impossible? This is precisely what Sextus Empiricus contends. For him, the claim of self-knowledge is as dubious as any other knowledge claim. Augustine, however, draws another consequence. He admits that not only all striving for self-knowledge but even the understanding of the Delphic injunction presupposes a prior form of self-knowledge; but he asserts that, as a matter of fact, we are able to understand the injunction and to act accordingly. Thus, Augustine concludes, there must be a kind of self-awareness or self-presence that does not come into being through the act of self-reflection, but is prior to it and enables it. This original self-relation, which is the constitutive structure of human subjectivity, manifests itself only secondarily in the mind's ability to turn away from the outward world and to bend back on itself. Primarily it means that the mind always implicitly knows itself and always loves itself. Augustine thus distinguishes two levels of self-relatedness. He calls the basic level of self-presence *se nosse*, which can be understood as intuitive self-awareness,

34 Cf. *Trin.* X.4–5 and XIV.13.

35 For a critique of the "reflection model," cf. Dieter Henrich, "Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht," in *Subjektivität und Metaphysik*, ed. Dieter Henrich and Hans Wagner (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1966), 192–95. For a discussion of his views in English, cf. Dan Zahavi, "The Heidelberg School and the Limits of Reflection," in *Consciousness: From Perception to Reflection in the History of Philosophy*, ed. S. Heinämaa, Vili Lähteenmaki, and Pauliina Remes (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 267–85.

self-acquaintance, or prereflexive self-knowledge; and he calls the secondary level *se cogitare*, which means explicit self-reflection.³⁶ *Cogitare* is the mode of discursive thinking, in which we think our thoughts successively. Here we can make various things the object of our attention, even ourselves. The Delphic injunction "Know thyself" exhorts us to develop an adequate self-love and self-knowledge on the level of *se cogitare*.³⁷ The *se nosse*, however, is intuitive, not discursive; here, the self is not one possible content of thinking and willing among others, but the only possible one. As Augustine points out, being present to oneself in a prereflexive, immediate mode is the precondition for understanding the Delphic injunction and for attaining the state of moral and intellectual perfection that is required for an adequate *notitia sui*. To know ourselves in the mode of *se nosse*, however, does not presuppose any learning or education. By its very nature the human mind is always and incessantly acquainted with itself.³⁸

Due to its immediacy, the *se nosse* is unquestionable. Obviously we can be mistaken about the nature of the human mind as an intelligible being. In fact, Augustine claims that most people are mistaken, because they get used to material beings and—as a consequence of sin—even expect ultimate happiness from perishable goods, so that in the end they think of themselves as material beings. In Augustine's interpretation, the Delphic injunction has a decidedly ethical meaning. It shall cure us from wrong self-conceptions and make us aware of the intelligible nature of the soul, whose ultimate good only can be another intelligible being, namely God himself. All this, however, is a matter of *se cogitare*.³⁹ On the level of *se nosse*, there is no error and no deception, because what a human being knows just by being present to itself is not

³⁶ Cf. *Trin.* X.7.

³⁷ That it is on the level of discursive thought that our original self-knowledge can be distorted is also emphasized in John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994), 146f.

³⁸ Cf. *Trin.* XIV.13.

³⁹ Cf. *Trin.* X.11–12.

an abstract notion of the essence of the mind, but simply this: that it is itself. And nobody can be mistaken about her being herself.

5.4. THE UNITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE IDENTITY OF THE SELF

From the last books of the *Confessiones* onward, Augustine deals with the astonishing fact that nothing is closer to the human mind than itself, and yet the mind is never completely present to itself. In well-known passages from the *memoria-tractatus* of *Confessions* 10, Augustine points out that we are unable to become fully aware of all the contents of our mind.⁴⁰ How is the fragmentary self-presence of the mind compatible with the fact that nothing, not even God, is closer to the mind than itself?⁴¹ In *De Trinitate*, Augustine tackles this question again. He refers to the attempt of reconciling these two observations by declaring the mind divisible; one part of the mind would be present to itself, the other part would not. Augustine considers this attempt preposterous, because divisibility is a character of material beings, not of intelligible ones. "It is absurd to say that the whole of it does not know what it knows: I am not saying 'It knows the whole,' but 'What it knows, the whole of it knows.'"⁴² The *mens* does not know everything; it does not even know everything about itself. And yet in knowing what it knows, it always knows as the whole self. What Augustine is after in these reflections is the identity of the knowing self in the flux of its imaginations. To know as the whole self in all the thoughts means to be the identical subject of these thoughts. For Augustine, the identity of the self is grounded in the self-presence of *se nosse*. On the level of *se cogitare*, the mind's self-knowledge remains fragmentary. Its

⁴⁰ Cf. Augustinus, *Confessiones*, X.15.

⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*, X.7.

⁴² *Trin.* 10.4.6. Cf. Augustinus, *De Genesi ad litteram*, VII.27–28.

inability to understand itself completely is a mark of the finitude of the human self. On the level of *se nosse*, however, the mind's self-presence must be complete; otherwise, the identity of the knowing self would be suspended. The identity constituted by *se nosse* guarantees the unity of consciousness in the sense that all my knowledge, however limited and fragmentary it may be, is *my* knowledge.

Every mental act is accompanied by an awareness of the act. Through this awareness, the self perceives its own reality as the agent of all these acts. Augustine's *se nosse* certainly encompasses the self-perception of the acting mind, but also reaches beyond this. The mind can perceive itself only when mental acts are performed, which is not always the case. Augustine, however, emphasizes that the mind "was seen always to know itself and always to will itself," and that "it must at the same time be seen always to remember itself and always to understand and love itself."⁴³ According to Augustine, the *se nosse* is continuous. It does not depend on whether *cogitationes* occur or not. By claiming the steadiness of *se nosse*, Augustine wants to account for the continuity of the identical self.

Modern research has rightly pointed out that Augustine received important concepts and arguments from Plotinus.⁴⁴ Augustine's claim, for instance, that the mind knows itself as a whole already can be found in Plotinus, but Augustine uses it differently. Plotinus holds that the divine nous thinks the entire cosmos of the Platonic ideas. Referring to Plato's claim that the ideas are themselves living and thinking beings,⁴⁵ Plotinus maintains that in thinking the ideas the nous thinks itself as thinking. In thinking any thought, the nous comprises all possible

43 *Trin.* 10.12.19.

44 Cf. Edward Booth, "St. Augustine's "notia sui" Related to Aristotle and the Early Neo-Platonists," *Augustiniana* 27 (1977-79): 27-29; Volker Henning Drecoll, *Die Entstehung der Gnadenlehre Augustins* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 288-294; and Frederick E. Van Fleteren, "Augustine's Ascent of the Soul in Book VII of the Confessions: A Reconsideration," *Augustinian Studies* 5 (1974), 29-72.

45 Cf. Plato, *Sophistes*, 248e.

knowledge; but none of its objects of thought is external to the nous.⁴⁶ What it thinks is always itself. For Plotinus, the nous is completely present to itself precisely because its self-knowledge includes the totality of all possible knowledge. Rendered in Augustine's language: What the divine mind knows, the whole of it knows, because it knows the whole. According to Plotinus and the Greek tradition before him, only an infinite mind can be immediately related to itself. Augustine, however, denies this. He claims that even the finite human mind, although it does not know the whole, because its knowledge is limited, is perfectly present to itself in the *se nosse* that constitutes its identity. In contrast with divine self-knowledge, human *se nosse* does not contain any knowledge about the world. This would be a matter of *cogitare*. The mind's self-presence includes nothing more than the perfect and unshakable knowledge that I am myself. Thus, it may not be an exaggeration to say that Augustine's discovery of *se nosse* marks the beginning of philosophical reflection on the finite self. Augustine, so to speak, brought the concept of self-knowledge from heaven down to earth and thereby threw new light on what it means to be a human subject.

5.5. THE SELF AS AN IMAGE OF GOD

In *De Trinitate* 10, Augustine further analyzes the *se nosse* and finds three elements in it, which he calls *memoria sui*, *intellegentia sui*, and *voluntas sui*. These three constitute a trinitarian structure as *mens*, *amor sui*, and *notitia sui* did in book 9.⁴⁷ However, since *se nosse* is prior to *se cogitare*, the trinity of *memoria sui*, *intellegentia sui*, and *voluntas sui* is the foundational one. Augustine holds that in the natural, everlasting self-presence of *se nosse* we find the clearest likeness of the trinitarian God in the human mind. For Augustine, the mind is an image

⁴⁶ Cf. *Enn.* V.3, 5; V.5, 1–2.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Trin.* X.14 and X.17.

of the divine Trinity precisely by being a self in the fundamental sense explained above.

Augustine is well aware of the inadequacy of the terms *memoria*, *intellegentia*, and *voluntas*, but sees no better alternative. These terms are inadequate because in their ordinary understanding they denote faculties used by the mind in discursive thinking. To avoid any misunderstanding, Augustine makes a distinction between the “inner” *memoria*, *intellegentia*, and *voluntas* as moments of the *se nosse*, and the “outer,” ordinary *memoria*, and so on.⁴⁸ In ordinary understanding there is a temporal difference between *intellegentia* and *memoria*. The *intellegentia* grasps a thought, then stores it in the memory, where it can be found and actualized later. In the process of learning, *intellegentia* and *memoria* perform their acts successively. The *se nosse*, however, needs no learning. It is an essential property of the human mind that it is naturally present to itself. For Augustine, this means that the “inner” *memoria sui* and the inner *intellegentia sui* persist simultaneously.⁴⁹ The use of the term “memory” indicates the steadiness and permanence in which self-presence resembles any content of the memory; *intellegentia*, however, suggests an actuality, through which self-presence is similar to any actual thought. Augustine even finds a practical dimension in the *se nosse*, namely a perpetual self-affirmation that he calls *voluntas*. As he explains, this will is hard to detect, because it is not manifested in any need. It always has the self that it wants, and like the inner understanding, which is continuously directed at the self, the inner will cannot want (or, which amounts to the same for Augustine, love or affirm) anything else but the self, which it already has.⁵⁰ It is important to see that the inner will as a constituent of the

48 Cf. *Trin.* XIV.10.

49 Cf. *Trin.* X.19. For a detailed account of Augustine's conception of memory, cf. Roland Teske, “Augustine's Philosophy of Memory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), 148–58.

50 Cf. *Trin.* X.19.

self is not open to any imperative. For the outer will, which may seek its highest good in different things, it makes perfect sense to demand that it should love God more than anything else, even more than itself. Inner self-love, however, does not compete with the love of God, but makes all loving possible. If, for a moment, the human mind stopped loving itself with the inner will, it would at the same moment cease to exist. According to Augustine, the inner self-affirmation of the human mind is prior to all other acts of will, including religious ones. For only a rational being, that is, a being that has a self, is able to love God. *Memoria sui*, *intellegentia sui*, and *voluntas sui* constitute the trinitarian structure of the mind's self-presence that must be presupposed in any deliberate self-reflection as demanded by the Delphic injunction, or any deliberate love required by the commandment of the Gospel: Love God above all, and your neighbor like yourself.

Even in *De Trinitate*, Augustine remains faithful to the old idea of a link between self-knowledge and knowledge of God. However, he does not conceive of it in the Plotinian manner any more, as he did up to the *Confessiones*. For the late Augustine, discursive self-reflection with a subsequent transcending of the self is not the way to achieve a vision of the triune God. What is needed to view the divine Trinity as it can be seen during life on earth is not a transcendence but a deeper understanding of the self. Augustine wants us to understand the self by its constitutive immediate and immutable self-presence. In this regard, the mind is like the divine Trinity. If we understand what it ultimately means for a human being to be a self, we see the triune God as in a mirror or in an image.

The *se nosse*, as explained in book 10 of *De Trinitate*, is the most fundamental image of God in the human soul. It is part of human nature. Every human being is immediately aware of itself, since this is what founds a person's identity. This identity is the presupposition for being a moral agent at all. In itself it remains untouched by good or bad decisions and deeds. Thus, on the level of *se nosse*, every human being is

and has always been an image of the triune God, sinner and saint alike. Here, humans are essentially similar to God.

But for Augustine, there is also an image of God on the level of *se cogitare*, as explained in book 9 of *De Trinitate*, and this image is restricted to conditions of intellectual and ethical perfection. *Mens*, *amor sui*, and *notitia sui* form a trinity only if the mind conceives of itself correctly, namely as a rational creature, and if it loves itself correctly, namely less than God and without *superbia*. Only then is there an equality of *amor sui* and *notitia sui* equal to the *mens*, an equality that is one of the four principles of a trinity. The ethical appeal to self-knowledge, moreover, entails degrees of moral perfection. Although the sinner is always aware of himself, he lacks a comprehensive self-knowledge, because he loves himself too much, and therefore is less similar to God. The saint, however, in addition to being acquainted with himself like any rational being, also loves himself in the right way and thus gains an adequate self-conception, which makes him more similar to God. For Augustine, this similarity will be perfect in the afterlife, when the saints see God with uncovered faces.⁵¹ Then the self-knowledge of the human mind will be complete in the full vision of God.

⁵¹ Cf. *Trin.* XIV.20–24.