

Did Augustine decisively settle the issue of Pre-existence of Souls?

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The Catholic Church denies the preexistence of souls with unambiguous finality, the Catechism stating that the human soul “is created immediately by God - it is not produced by the parents”, and, at the moment of conception, God instantly ‘wills’ a “spiritual soul [so] that the body made of matter becomes a living, human body”¹. This view, whilst not as overtly stated, is one also supported by the majority of Eastern Orthodox and Protestant denominations in their accepted biblical dogma and orthopraxy. These facts mean that amongst the three largest Christian groups there are an estimated 2.38bn souls, one third of the world’s population, who are taught, or indeed believe, that this is their one and only lifetime².

The ecclesiastical career of Aurelius Augustine (354 - 430 CE) began at the age of thirty-six as a junior clergyman and culminated in him gaining one of the most senior roles available within only six years: Bishop of Hippo, a post he held until death. This rapid progression was due to his skill as rhetorician, author and teacher. Only baptised in 387 CE by Ambrose (339 - 397), Bishop of Milan, before taking the bishopric he had already produced completed works

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Popular and Definitive Ed. 2000 v366 - 369

² <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2011/12/Christianity-fullreport-web.pdf>

such as *On Blessed Life*, *On The Teacher* and *On True Religion*, and begun others e.g. *On Free Choice (of Will)* and *Eighty Three Different Questions*. He would go on to produce over one hundred titles, making him one of the most prolific authors in Christian literary history. In coming to priesthood late, Augustine held a more colourful past than many of his counterparts, a past that included “living in sin” with his partner, a near career as a Manichean mentor and an illegitimate son who, in today’s language Augustine “single-parented” from the age of fourteen, but who died shortly before his eighteenth birthday. His two most famous works are *The City of God*³; a long and often uneasy read (in one section he discusses whether someone who is raped has also sinned⁴, throughout he makes clear God’s love is conditional); a socio-political treatise, attempting to align his new Roman allegiance and Platonic leanings by “treating” or correcting this pagan history with Christian theology, and *The Confessions*⁵. The latter, a contemplative journal of his relationship with God over his lifetime, coupled with a detailed exegesis of Genesis that was both guided by and aligned to these personal experiences, is widely recognised as one of the greatest contributions to Christian philosophy and theology, and was the first to be delivered in such a individualised manner, paving the way for confessional works of the future. In his account of the history of Christianity, Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903) extolled Augustine as, “of a most powerful genius and thoroughly saturated with sacred and profane learning, with the loftiest faith and with equal knowledge, he combated most vigorously all the errors of his age”⁶. He was feted too by Reformists such as Luther (1483-1546) and Calvin (1509-1564), who famously wrote “Augustine is so wholly within me, that if I wished to write a confession

³ https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0354-0430,_Augustinus,_De_Civitate_Dei_Contra_Paganos

⁴ In Book 1, Chapter 16, in a sentence that heralds millennia of misogyny whereby the victim has also sinned in shame by being unable to prevent herself taking pleasure from the attack

⁵ A number of translations of *The Confessions* have been accessed for this essay. If not cited they have been added to Additional Resources.

⁶ <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo13/l13cph.htm>

of my faith, I could do so with all fullness and satisfaction to myself out of his writings”⁷, and credited as the well-spring for so many that followed. That list would be too extensive to cover but includes major thinkers such as Anselm (1033–1109), Aquinas (1225–1274), Palamas (1296 – 1359), Descartes (1596 - 1650), Locke (1632 - 1704) *et multi alii*, as it were.

So, if the denial of the preexistence of souls is a significant and agreed tenant of mainstream Christianity, which it is, and if Augustine is considered an authoritative forefather, absolutely integral to the development of Christianity, which he is; surely it would follow that Augustine himself denied preexistence? In this essay, I will argue that he does not.

My argument takes two forms to establish that he was not decisive in settling the issue of preexistence, they are both concerned with the basic coherency, soundness and cogency of Augustine’s conclusions. Firstly, I aim to demonstrate Augustine’s vagaries on the topic. That the immortal soul is created by God, ex-nihilo (from nothing) at the same time as the body, with the inherited Original Sin from the Fall of Adam, whose life is already known through divine foreknowledge which includes whether it will be saved, whose only option for salvation rests on the Grace of God, is Augustine’s accepted basic theistic substance dualism position⁸. And yet the difference in strength of his arguments for the other principles he posits, such as those on free will, predeterminism and Original Sin, versus the comparative weakness he provides to support his position on the origin of the soul, becomes evident. Furthermore these “stronger” principles actually struggle to function without an element of preexistence (Goetz and Taliaferro, 1999), which, alongside his temporal inconsistencies, create the sense that this position has been taken for reasons other than that of his certainty.

⁷ Cole, H. (ed.), Calvin, J. Calvin’s Calvinism: A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination, 1536

⁸ Taliaferro, C., et al. “Emergentism and Consciousness: Going beyond Property Dualism.” in *Soul, Body, and Survival: Essays on the Metaphysics of Human Persons*, Corcoran, K, 2001

Secondly, from a position of psychological reasoning (Matthews 2000⁹, Martin 2006), it is clear that in appearing to change his mind on the issue of preexistence over time, but not explaining why he has changed it, instead offering uncharacteristically weak surrender on the topic, he thus allows challenge on motivational and political grounds.

My conclusion is supported by the fact that if Augustine's ontology and metaphysics had excluded preexistence in a wholly authoritative, incontrovertible i.e. decisive manner, then consideration of preexistence would not have been taken up by later Christian thinkers. But it was, and these thinkers, from the mediaevals John Scotus Eriugena (800–877), Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) and Nicolas of Cusa (1401–1464) to 19th Century Christian Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and David Henry Thoreau (1817–1862) evidence this¹⁰. More conclusively still is that these thinkers were not off on a “folly of their own”, moreover their arguments for preexistence recognise both their debt to Augustine's work and they have all extrapolated their speculations from the very same cornerstone of Platonic, Neoplatonic and Christian thought that was Augustine's foundation.

Consideration is given in counter argument using a variation of the “God of the Gaps”¹¹ response to support Augustine's indecision and reversing the element of motivation, e.g. did Augustine have any intention when writing his works that they would become the foundations for such a vast sway of Christianity's development? If he did not, then presumably it can be argued that he had no ambition of ever creating anything that purported to be indisputable; the question itself is then unjust as his works are merely a collection of

⁹ Matthews, G.B. Internalist Reasoning in Augustine for Mind-Body Dualism in Wright J.P. and Potter P. (Ed) *Psyche and Soma* 2000

¹⁰ Givens, T. L. Chp. 10 Romanticism and Transcendentalism, 1800–1900. In *When Souls Had Wings* 2009

¹¹ Beall, Jc, and A. J. Cotnoir. “God of the Gaps: A Neglected Reply to God's Stone Problem.” *Analysis*, vol. 77, no. 4, 2017

humble musings of one man. Ironically however, such positions against any authoritative vision held by Augustine, do not necessarily provide a succinct rebuttal to either the objective (coherence, soundness, cogency) or subjective (motivation, intent) elements of my arguments; indeed the only watertight refutation may rest on a highly limiting definition of the word “settle”.

Returning briefly to the first paragraph, and our 2.38 billion souls, this issue is clearly of paramount importance in the Christian personal understanding of the nature of the self, and, because of the evolution to reach this teaching, so is Augustine’s engagement. A caveat, though, is that it is not my role here to argue *for* preexistence. It would be an understatement that the subsequent effects of such a challenge are quite radical; challenging established eschatology, creating spatio-temporal relation to the experience of heaven and hell whilst potentially sanctioning a juxtaposed immaterialism, and facilitating not least panentheism, if not pantheism. Moreover they would require a level of detailed study that it would simply not be possible to do justice to in a short essay. I do briefly address these considerations in my closing remarks, but it is important to bear in mind that this is focused on illustrating that despite him being a founding contributor of Christianity today, and the denial of preexistence of souls being a concept that was established through his contributions, Augustine did not decisively settle the issue of preexistence of the soul.

Augustine arrives at a volatile moment in history, in between the second and third ecumenical councils (Constantinople 381 CE and Ephesus, 431), at a time when the Roman Empire’s status was under inordinate threat (Augustine died during a Vandal siege at Hippo). There were great pressures for a unified Church and one, that although still fairly newly adopted as

the official religion of the Roman Empire¹², could support Rome in its desire to maintain its power. This backdrop is important to understand - the momentum of the Church leaders at the time, one of whom Augustine became, was to simultaneously cement the authority of Church and State, resolving internal and historical dilemmas whilst outwardly presenting strength in unity of both. The councils thus far had been concerned with establishing the fundamentals of Christendom in separation from the Jews, and had primarily focused on resolving issues between adoptionism and docetism, and upon assimilating, curtailing or demolishing the Arians, the Gnostics, the Essenes and other sects. One of these sects, Manicheism, a third century religion with echoes of Zoroastrian ontology, was Augustine's first spiritual home, giving him personal eschatological and cosmological perspectives that were at odds with the developing unified position. The issues between docetism, that Jesus of Nazareth was the fully Divine Christ who appeared as an illusory human, and adoptionism, that Jesus was fully human but exalted by God, from a dynamic monarchianism without trinitarian roots, were not just theoretical oppositions but geographical ones between the early churches at Alexandria and Antioch. Origen of Alexandria (185-253), praised for his trinitarian work, which was adopted by the councils, then fell foul of the burgeoning codification by his insistence that the origin of the soul was effectively "next on the list" after the resolution of Jesus' state of being¹³. Origen argued for preexistence of souls, in his often startlingly insightful work *On First Principles*, which, whilst not doubting the creation of the soul by God and its necessary ensoulment in a body, the position supported by Augustine, he argued that it is "more probable" that the incorporeal soul was "anterior", i.e. before the body¹⁴. The possibility of the pre-body soul was discouraged during the second council and later Origen would be

¹² 312 CE with the conversion of Constantine, although he was not baptised until his deathbed in 337 CE

¹³ This issue was not fully concluded until the 4th Council of Chalcedon in 451 that Jesus Christ is both fully divine and fully human, another indication of just how much work was going on in the Church at the time to establish its fundamentals.

¹⁴ See particularly Chapter 7, On Incorporeal and Corporeal, notably p462

dismissed by the Church for these views¹⁵. Augustine's arrival coincides with all these matters, the unification of Church doctrine, the growth of Christianity as part of the Roman Empire, Rome's failing grip on its territories... and no clear position on the origin of the soul¹⁶.

In his review of Goetz and Taliaferro's *A Brief History of the Soul*¹⁷, Givens notes that "Augustine long favoured preexistence as carrying less theological baggage than the alternatives and only retreated from the idea when grace became a greater theological concern than free will", adding that, "any conception of a human soul that did not posit its preexistence could not adequately ground a theory of free will"¹⁸. Goetz and Taliaferro elaborate that Augustine considered four possibilities on the origin of the soul¹⁹, two of which deny preexistence: creationism - the accepted doctrine of today, and traducianism, the genetic generation of the soul through human procreation. He also considered two that posit preexistence, both wherein the soul enters the body at birth, either it having been sent to the body by God, or it having chosen the body for itself. Note the language here is "at birth" rather than "at conception". Remarkably, the timing of foetal ensoulment was not absolutely committed as "at conception" by the Catholic Church until 1869²⁰. Augustine and his counterparts invariably saw an unclear but existing delineation between a "formed" (ie with a soul and sentience) and unformed (without and lacking sentience) foetus; a position based

¹⁵ There are some disputes outside the scope of this document as to whether this Origen was the Origen in question branded as a heretic by the fifth ecumenical council, and certainly Augustine takes great care to refer to a different Origen in *The City of God*.

¹⁶ See also Bostock, G. Origen: The Alternative to Augustine, 2003 Cameron, Michael, 'Origen and Augustine', in Ronald E. Heine, and Karen Jo Torjesen (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Origen* 2022

¹⁷ Goetz S., Taliaferro, C., *A Brief History of The Soul*, 2011

¹⁸ Givens TL. *Church History*. 2012;81(3):656-658. doi:10.1017/S0009640712001357

¹⁹ These can be found in *On Free Choice* 3, 21, 62 and also in *Letters* 167, see also Rombs, Ronnie J. "Introduction." *Saint Augustine and the Fall of the Soul: Beyond O'Connell & His Critics*, Catholic University of America Press, 2006, pp. xv–xxviii. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt2853js.6>.

²⁰ Østnor, Lars. *Stem Cells, Human Embryos and Ethics: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Netherlands, Springer Netherlands, 2008

upon the Septuagint translation of Exodus²¹. In both sets of alternatives however the possibilities seem rather extreme, the soul is either created by God *or* created by the parents, he does not consider an amalgam of the two. For the preexistence scenarios there is no option for a reconciled process of transmigration (at its most literal: the movement of the soul from one place to another, it was not linked purely to moving into a new body after death until late sixteenth century²²) that involves both God and soul. For someone who is so preoccupied with God's ability to move in grace through human affairs, the idea that this could also be a non-corporeal action seems to elude him completely. In *On Free Choice (of Will)*, he argues that souls are eternal and thus participate in a divine realm before the material world, an example of preexistence. He provides his one and only direct refutation to preexistence in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis* (which, according to Teske he "ended" circa 415 CE, nearly 20 years after becoming Bishop, but left incomplete²³) where he only denies pre-existence as punishment for a former life's sin as a response to Pelagius (354-418), but he does not deny preexistence *per se*.

This well documented Pelagian/Augustinian debates provide insightful attestation to the *modus operandi* of Augustine, and contributes toward understanding the nature of his indecisiveness on the issue of preexistence. They centred primarily on issues concerning Original Sin, Pelagius taking a theological position that Adam's fall was the same as all individual's *propensity* to fall and could not be inherited, a position that for Augustine, and others, is a scriptural heresy²⁴. These swift and vehement rebuttals to Pelagius potentially led

²¹ *Ibid.*, and see also Noonan, T.J. Jr *An Almost Absolute Value in History: The Morality of Abortion, Legal and Historical Perspectives*, Harvard University Press 1970

²² <https://www.etymonline.com/word/transmigration>

²³ Teske, R. *On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees; and, On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis, an Unfinished Book*. (Translation of: *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* and *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectum liber.*) Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990.

²⁴ Pelagius was indeed branded a heretic by Rome in 418 CE and the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE

Augustine to an even further entrenched position, deepening his commitment to Original Sin, and quite possibly furthering his emphasis towards his solution of Grace. As Wetzel observes, “assessing Augustine’s motives for holding a position, it is sometimes hard to sort out what he holds in response to an opponent from what he would have held regardless of opposition”²⁵. Here we are starting to understand the multifaceted motivations of Augustine; yes, a man passionate to define and defend his religion, but also a fierce and confrontational dialectic swordsman. He ostensibly loves Truth, and his commitment to *exercitatio animi*, his process of clearing preconceptions and false judgments to be able to see the truth, is a key characteristic of his work. It is one of the key characteristics that define him as both philosopher and theologian and not just the latter; he is keen to follow a reasoned approach from an objective (as possible) standpoint at all times (O’Donnell 1969, Harrison, 2006). However, once having reached what he believes to be true, we also see a man who very much also *wants to be right*. Augustine apparently held great self confidence in his articulacy and linguistic dexterity and often set to demean and diminish both his detractors and their words harshly, suggesting such exchanges suited his beliefs and his ego, evidenced by *Letters* (386-429 CE) - a compendium of over three hundred pieces. As example, of his *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manicheans* he stated that they were “explicitly published against the Manicheans in defence of the Old Law which they [the Manicheans] attack with the passionate zeal of their unhealthy error²⁶”, a sentence which could give any psychologist with only a passing interest in projectionism an enticing study.

On the other hand, we see the use of this *exercitatio animi* used to defer or even avoid reaching a conclusion on something he is uncertain of (O’Donnell, 1969)²⁷. This black and

²⁵ Wetzel, James, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, 1992

²⁶ Teske, *ibid* n.23

²⁷ *Odyssey of The Soul*, esp. Introduction pp15-22

white, either/or is symptomatic of Augustine's methodology; he is very much an "A is and therefore B is not", rather than "A is, and B is also". This may of course be sufficient reason as to why he demonstrates such uncertainty on preexistence, he is "shy" on the position of the origin of the soul other than it is inexorably linked with the the origin of the body because he would then be committing himself to his, if A *is*, B *is not* preferred modality. As soon as he can say, "the soul is created only at the moment of conception", he must then say, "and therefore it is does not exist before", which he is unwilling to do. Instead in the sixth and seventh chapters of *The Confessions*, discussing infancy, he merely alludes to the fact that if God had wanted him to know whether souls existed prior to the body, God would have revealed this to him.

Is this the real reason for his reticence or is it driven by other motives? To understand this history is required again. Firstly, the environment, already acknowledged as one where the newly Romanised Church required both power and authority, cannot have failed to be an influence on the Church's decision making machine: the Bishops. Tearing apart the geo-political pressures of the time to answer what specifically that might be has been deliberately avoided for the purposes of this exercise as a rabbit hole down which it would be foolish to go. That is not to say the historical occurrences have been avoided, they have not, and are mentioned briefly earlier and make clear that there was significant pressure on the Church both from within and from without. Augustine's views on whether the soul is created immediately with the body or exists previously do not seem to have visibly added to the debate at the time; moreover they suggest that after entertaining both he then takes a decision, sometime after 396, to "toe the party line" on the issue and refuses to elaborate on his own views much further. That is one historical aspect. The other is more personal to Augustine,

and centres on his desire to fuse the Platonist and Neoplatonism ideas he was exposed to in Milan around his conversion.

Alfaric states, “If [Augustine] had died after he had written Soliloquies, we would not have regarded him as anything but a convinced Neo-Platonist, with a tincture, more-or-less, of Christianity”²⁸. Whether we agree with Alfaric or not is rendered irrelevant to the fact that Augustine was most certainly shaped by Plato and Neoplatonism, in the *City of God* he urges Plato and Porphyry to a mutual (and posthumous) Christian understanding, in the *Confessions* he often refers to the “books of Plato” although philosophical and historical consensus is that he actually only had access to one, *Timaeus* and the other Neoplatonistic thought he demonstrates is more likely to have been in discussion ((O’Connell 1969, Birger 2001). In *The Confessions* Augustine reflects on how exposure to these sources in Milan allowed him to align the idea of the incorporeal, immortal soul with the body to form the his basic soul-body substance dualism, a view that allowed him to eschew the Manichean perspectives of his earlier adulthood and one, which once formed, he never wavered from despite the problems it caused him. Rather customarily however Augustine also threw out his links to Plato, writing in *Revisions*; “the praise with which I so greatly extolled Plato and the Platonists (or the Academic philosophers) was most inappropriate for these impious persons and has rightly displeased me; it is especially in the face of their great errors that Christian teaching must be defended”²⁹. Perhaps it would be more helpful to reflect that there may be no Augustine without Plato.

²⁸ Prosper Alfaric, *L’Evolution Intellectuelle de Saint Augustin* quoted in O’ Meara, J.J., *The Young Augustine*, 1954 p132

²⁹ *Revisions*, 29, *Revisions* (Vol. I/2) (*Works of Saint Augustine: a Translation for the 21st Century*) (The Works of Saint Augustine) Kindle Ed.

If one were a supporter of Augustine, one might wish that he were familiar with Beall and Cotnoir's *God of the Gaps* (2017), or the work of Dummett (2017), all of whom argue that classical logic will always fail in the field of divine foreknowledge, i.e. there is always bound to be a "gap". In Dummett's words, "God can distinguish between those of our thoughts that we shall later recognize as true or as false, and those that will never be verified or falsified. It may appear that, on this assumption, a notion of truth, for propositions that we can grasp, becomes available to us that goes beyond what we can now recognize as true: a proposition is true in this sense if God knows that we shall recognize it as true". I find Dummett's arguments very simple to follow, and would prefer not to be using them as a counter argument to myself, however, I shall. If we entertain the prospect of an omniscient God who does indeed know all things, present in the timeless "now" is thus able to move within that based on "what is", and, as God is both changeless, in being God, and forever changing as the free-willed man makes choices moment by moment, God moves, I imagine like some huge inner clockwork with Swiss precision, to restore that to which God wills at every moment³⁰. Following Dummett's argument to a conclusion, whether or not the soul is preexistent becomes moot; God is both in time and outside of it, and in the non-spatial "space" outside of it, the soul either is or is not, so to be pre or post anything becomes redundant other than to observe that at some point the soul also experiences time. It leaves Augustine's openness on preexistence entirely correct.

Earlier I called this position in preexistence uncharacteristically weak. And so, what if the position was not weak at all? What if it was deliberate? Much of this discussion has been predicated towards the assumption that Augustine somehow failed to establish an accepted tenet of the Church, as if his intention was to succeed. What if, however, it was not?

³⁰ Dummett, M. p110 <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199207275.001.0001>

Could it be that Augustine had intended that the position on the origin of the soul be deliberately left open to allow for further thought on preexistence? We might thereby find ourselves back with a scholar I mentioned earlier, “the most outstanding philosopher after Boethius” for a further 6 centuries³¹: Eriugena. Eriugena’s Peryphyseon solves many of the Augustinian dilemmas, where God is neither creates nor is created, the ultimate reality, Augustine’s ex-nihilo, and God creates and is not created (these are two of Eriugena’s divisions of nature and God is both), man being that which is created and can create and a further realm that is created but does not create. Notwithstanding their differences on Original Sin, Eriugena’s optimism versus Augustine’s pessimism, Eriugena’s cyclical emanation and return versus Augustine’s repeated “one time acts” of creation, and Augustine’s personal and relational God versus Eriugena’s transcendental one, the Platonic and Christian influence of both is evident. Whilst sharing Platonic ideals of the love of wisdom and being equal to the love of God, and placing reason, dialectic and truth, and intellectual enquiry to understand God, there is an almost natural sense to their differences. If time allowed, I would develop this further with Meister Eckhart, who successfully unites the personal and transcendental.

The works of St Augustine are so voluminous, and the commentaries on his works so vast, that “his analysis is not presented in a coherent and organised fashion.. ..found in a number of partial fragments in different texts, written decades apart”³². This makes it especially difficult to determine the *exact* nature of Augustine’s thought on anything. On preexistence it may be

³¹ Moran, Dermot and Adrian Guio, "John Scottus Eriugena", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/scottus-eriuena/>.

³² Rae, G “Augustine, Free Will, and Evil.” *Evil in the Western Philosophical Tradition*, Edinburgh University Press, 2019

concluded that under Platonic influence he possibly held it as true, and under Christian influence, he probably did not hold it to be true, and in his latter days as a Bishop he rebuffed Plato, and in doing so may or may not have destroyed the last vestiges, if any, that he still held of it as an idea, therefore his position could hardly be determined as settled from himself let alone any other. Moreover whilst he constantly stated that creation of the soul occurred simultaneously with the body, he also constantly alluded to the fact that the soul may have existed before. Finally, despite the impact of his words, it is possible he did not care too much either. I shall leave the last word to him; “it is of no harm to me if I do not retain the beginning of my span of life, as long as I know where I shall rest”³³.

³³ Augustine, *On Free Choice (of Will)*, III, 2

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