

Charles Taylor,

Sources of the Self

On the way from Plato to Descartes stands Augustine. Augustine's whole outlook was influenced by Plato's doctrines as they were transmitted to him through Plotinus. His encounter with these doctrines played a crucial role in his spiritual development. He could liberate himself from the last shackles of the false Manichaean view when he finally came to see God and the soul as immaterial. Henceforth, for Augustine, the Christian opposition between spirit and flesh was to be understood with the aid of the Platonic distinction between the bodily and the non-bodily.

Along with this duality, Augustine took on the full panoply of related oppositions, of course. The higher realm was also that of the eternal as against the merely temporal, of the immutable in contrast to the ever-changing.

And he also took over the Ideas. These are now the thoughts of God and hence can remain eternal even in this new theistic context. Augustine was deeply impressed by the account of the making of the world in the *Timaeus*, for all its important differences with orthodox Christian belief. He stresses the likeness, and was one of the founders of the line of Christian thought that sees Plato as the 'Attic Moses'. The Christian God can still make things on the model of the Ideas, because they are his own thoughts, eternal like him. Augustine can even take over the Platonic-Pythagorean sense of the ontological foundation of creation in numbers.¹

The doctrine of creation ex nihilo is thus married with a Platonic notion of participation. Created things receive their form through God, through their participation in his Ideas. Everything has being only insofar as it participates in God. Augustine, in explaining the Christian notion of the ontological dependence of things in Platonic terms, here as elsewhere makes a synthesis with striking new possibilities. The conception of an order of creation made according to God's thoughts merges with the great Johannine image of creation through the Word, and hence links Platonism with the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity. If everything participates in God and

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everything is in its own way like God, then the key principle underlying everything is that of Participation or Likeness itself. But the archetype of Likeness-to-God can only be God's Word itself, begotten from him and of one substance with him, i.e., the Second Person of the Trinity, by whom all things were made.

In any case, whether this synthesis works or not, Augustine gives us a Platonic understanding of the universe as an external realization of a rational order. Things should be understood ultimately as like signs, for they are external expressions of God's thoughts. Everything which is, is good (Manichaean error is totally repudiated); and the whole is organized for the good. Here is another of those crucial junction points where Jewish theism and Greek philosophy can be stitched together. The affirmations of Genesis 1, "and God saw that it was good", are linked to the Platonic doctrine of the Idea of the Good, only the place of that all-structuring Idea is now taken by God himself (either the First or Second Persons of the Trinity). Augustine takes over the image of the sun, central to Plato's discussion of the Idea of the Good in the *Republic*, which both nourishes things in their being and gives the light to see them by; but now the ultimate principle of being and knowledge together is God. God is the source of light, and here is another junction point, linking up with the light in the first chapter of John's Gospel.

So the created world exhibits a meaningful order; it participates in God's Ideas. God's eternal law enjoins order. It calls on humans to see and respect this order.² For Augustine as for Plato, the vision of cosmic order is the vision of reason, and for both the good for humans involves their seeing and loving this order. And similarly, for both what stands in the way is the human absorption with the sensible, with the mere external manifestations of the higher reality. The soul must be swivelled around; it has to change the direction of its attention/desire. For the whole moral condition of the soul depends ultimately on what it attends to and loves. "Everyone becomes like what he loves. Dost thou love the earth? Thou shalt be earth. Dost thou love God? then I say, thou shalt be God".³

Of course, in agreeing with Plato about the pivotal importance of the direction of our attention and love, Augustine alters the balance between these in what turns out to be a decisive way. It is love and not attention which is the ultimately deciding factor. And that is why the Augustinian doctrine of the two directions is usually expressed in terms of the two loves, which can ultimately be identified as charity and concupiscence. I want to return to this below.

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Augustine shifts the focus from the field of objects known to the activity itself of knowing; God is to be found here. This begins to account for his use of the language of inwardness. For in contrast to the domain of objects, which is public and common, the activity of knowing is particularized; each of us is engaged in ours. To look towards this activity is to look to the self, to take up a reflexive stance.

But this understates the case. There is a less radical kind of turning to the self which was a relatively common topic among ancient moralists. Foucault has mentioned the importance of the theme of "the care of oneself".⁷ The call to a higher moral life could be phrased in terms of a call to give less concern to the external things that people normally care for: wealth, power, success, pleasure; and more concern for one's own moral condition. But 'care of self' here meant something like the care of one's soul. The point of call was to show how foolish it is to be very concerned about the state of one's property, for instance, and not at all about the health of one's own soul. It is analogous to the comment someone might make today to a busy executive who is driving himself beyond all limits: "Why try so hard to make an extra million when you'll give yourself a heart attack in the process?" This advice might also be couched in the terms: "Take care of yourself".

This injunction calls us to a reflexive stance, but not a radically reflexive one. The stance becomes radical (this is a term of art I want to introduce here) when what matters to us is the adoption of the first-person standpoint. This could perhaps take a bit of explaining, in view of the place it will hold in my argument.

The world as I know it is there for me, is experienced by me, or thought about by me, or has meaning for me. Knowledge, awareness is always that of an agent. What would be left out of an inventory of the world in one of our most 'objective' languages, e.g., that of our advanced natural sciences, which try to offer a "view from nowhere", would be just this fact of the world's being experienced, of its being *for* agents, or alternatively, of there being something that it is like to be an experiencing agent of a certain kind.⁸ In our normal dealings with things, we disregard this dimension of experience and focus on the things experienced. But we can turn and make this our object of attention, become aware of our awareness, try to experience our experiencing, focus on the way the world is *for* us. This is what I call taking a stance of radical reflexivity or adopting the first-person standpoint.

It is obvious that not all reflexivity is radical in this sense. If I attend to my wounded hand, or begin (belatedly) to think about the state of my soul instead of about worldly success, I am indeed concerned with myself, but not yet radically. I am not focussing on myself as the agent of experience and

making 'this my object. Similarly, I can muse in general terms about there being a dimension of experience, as I did in the previous paragraph, without adopting the first-person standpoint, where I make *my* experience my object. Radical reflexivity brings to the fore a kind of presence to oneself which is inseparable from one's being the agent of experience, something to which access by its very nature is asymmetrical: there is a crucial difference between the way I experience my activity, thought, and feeling, and the way that you or anyone else does. This is what makes me a being that can speak of itself in the first person.

The call to take care of oneself as emanating from an ancient sage, or as addressed to a modern executive, is not an appeal to radical reflexivity. It is a call to concern ourselves with the health of one very important thing (our soul for the ancients, the body for the modern) as against being completely absorbed in the fate of something much less important (our property or power). But in either case, what this leads us to focus on, i.e., the causes and constituents of (psychic or bodily) health and sickness, bears no special relation to a first-person standpoint. Thus we today have a science of what it is to be healthy which is impersonally available, and in no way requires for its understanding that we assume the first-person stance. A similar point could be made about the ancients' lore of the soul. Of course the identity of knower and known is very relevant to my *caring* about the soul/body in question: the whole point of the appeal is that it points up the absurdity of my not caring for my own soul (or body). But this identity is of no importance in learning and defining what it is to care for this soul (body).

Augustine's turn to the self was a turn to radical reflexivity, and that is what made the language of inwardness irresistible. The inner light is the one which shines in our presence to ourselves; it is the one inseparable from our being creatures with a first-person standpoint. What differentiates it from the outer light is just what makes the image of inwardness so compelling, that it illuminates that space where I am present to myself.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that it was Augustine who introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the Western tradition of thought. The step was a fateful one, because we have certainly made a big thing of the first-person standpoint. The modern epistemological tradition from Descartes, and all that has flowed from it in modern culture, has made this standpoint fundamental—to the point of aberration, one might think. It has gone as far as generating the view that there is a special domain of "inner" objects available only from this standpoint; or the notion that the vantage point of the 'I think' is somehow outside the world of things we experience.