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Faith and reason

"Since the blindness of our minds is so great, by reason of the excesses of our sins, and the love of the flesh . . .

They try to overcome the most stable foundation of the well-established Church by the name and appeal of apparent reasoning."

(*Ep.* 118.5.32)

If there is a God, it is possible that he cannot be known by our reason. If reason could attain to religious truths, faith would be unnecessary. If faith is needed, reason is somehow inadequate. But why? Either because the human mind cannot comprehend the mysteries of God in whole or in part, so that (at least some) religious truths – such as the Resurrection or the Day of Judgment, according to Augustine (*De vera relig.* 8.14; cf. *De Trin.* 4.16.21) – are inaccessible to unaided reason; or because such truths cannot be demonstrated and can only be shown to be more or less plausible or possible; or because our minds are now damaged and need to be habituated – by faith, by the practice of the virtues or by both – to reason more effectively; and above all not merely to rationalize.

Augustine normally holds that in this life we can know a certain amount about God by reason alone, but not enough for happiness and salvation;¹ that our consequent need for faith, that is for true belief, in matters of religion can be compared with our need for – and reliance on – *belief* in other areas of our lives; and that our weakened capacity to reason, and consequent ignorance, must be explained as a result of the original sin of "Adam."

Three problems can be immediately identified. First, it is misleading to see Augustine directly engaged with the problem of faith *versus* reason, since he normally discusses the relationship between reason and authority.²

Secondly, in a late text, Augustine defines believing as "thinking with assent,"³ but since this formulation represents his standard position, we can ask – without fear of producing a false synthesis of his views – what he means by "assent," examining in particular the relationship between willing, wanting, loving,

intending, and determining, and hence his understanding of the "will" (*voluntas*). Finally, since Augustine thinks within a tradition going back to Plato, we must consider the relationship between Augustinian "faith" and Platonic "belief," since in Augustine's view – but not in Plato's – faith (a variety of belief) seeks and understanding finds (*De Trin.* 15.2.2).

The modern problem of faith *versus* reason – as developed since the seventeenth century – is part of a discussion of the nature of philosophy itself, hence the concern whether Augustine should even be called a philosopher – or whether, despite his description of Christianity as a philosophy,⁴ he ceased to be a philosopher when he converted. The modern problem is supposed to arise because philosophy, exclusively concerned with argument and argued conclusions, can allow no room for faith and authority, while Augustine holds that the philosophers fail to recognize the limits of reason and, from his conversion, gives authority a certain priority: he tells us (*C. Acad.* 3.20.43) that he will never depart from the authority of Christ, but that he will investigate his beliefs with the most sophisticated reasoning in the hope of advancing to understanding.⁵ Later, in the same spirit, writing in 410 or 411 to a certain Dioscorus (*Ep.* 118.5.33), he observes that when the school of Plotinus flourished at Rome, some of them were deprived by their indulgence in magic but others realized that Christ is the sum of authority and the light of reason: authority and reason are compatible.

Not for everyone – indeed not for Augustine himself – a simple unreasoning faith. For all Augustine's occasional deprecation (as in *De quant. anim.* 7.12) of what is called "reasoning" but which in fact is mere noxious opinion about the faith, he is prepared to endure the long circuitous paths which reason demands,⁶ urging that reason not be abandoned because of its frequent abuse (*Ep.* 120.1.6). Still, conventional philosophy is wrong in one important respect: it claims always to *start* with reason,⁷ whatever the subject-matter. Such an apparently reasonable claim, Augustine wants to show, is irrational.

Long before returning to his mother's Catholic Christianity Augustine had been inspired to philosophy by Cicero's *Hortensius*; then, believing himself to be throwing off his fear of enquiry (*De beata vita* 1.4), he joined the Manichaeans; when they no longer satisfied, he turned, in the steps of Cicero and Varro, to the Skepticism of the New Academy. Both moves were undertaken in the belief that reason alone could lead to the truth, even if the truth is that nothing can be known for certain. Augustine always insists that the Manichaeans claimed – falsely as he later believed – to rely on reason alone. He told Honoratus that they declared that they would lay aside all awesome authority and by pure and simple reason bring to God those willing to listen to them (*De util. cred.* 1.2). The Catholics, in their view terrified by superstition, were bidden to believe rather than reason, while they themselves pressed no one to believe unless the truth had been discussed and unraveled.⁸ Their claim, however, faltered over astrology,

though for a while Augustine preferred the authority of that pseudo-science to the skepticism of his friends Vindicianus and Nebrius (*Conf.* 4.3.6).⁹

With his loss of confidence in the Manichaean, Augustine almost lost confidence in reason itself,¹⁰ returning to Ciceronian Skepticism. He was in no doubt that ascent – as the Stoics had it – should be given to the truth, but who was to show him the truth (*C. Acad.* 3.5.12)? Perhaps to reach it is beyond the capacity of the human mind. Yet *some* forms of knowledge are possible: there is a certain knowledge of disjunctive propositions. We know that either p or not-p is the case (3.10.23), and we have certain knowledge in mathematics. And we have what has been dubbed “subjective knowledge”: “When a man tastes something, he can swear in good faith that he knows that this is sweet to his palate . . . and no Greek sophism can deprive him of that knowledge” (3.11.26).¹¹ Such claims confound the *global* versions of Skepticism normal in antiquity. If some knowledge is possible, perhaps religious and metaphysical truth can be obtained.

Augustine never loses confidence that there is “truth”; the problem, as he sees it, lies with human capacity. The example of sense-knowledge suggests that firsthand experience is a possible route to knowledge, but there is a huge range of possible knowledge neither “subjective” nor mathematical nor logical; religious claims fall outside these limits, and after the Manichaean debacle, though inclined to despair, Augustine persisted in seeing the possibility of progress:

Often it seemed to me that truth could not be found . . . but often again, as I reflected to the best of my ability how lively was the human mind, how wise, how penetrating, I could not believe that the truth must lie undetected. Possibly the manner of seeking truth might be hidden and would have to be accepted from some divine authority. (*De util. cred.* 8.20)

From such thoughts springs to Augustine’s regular recourse to Isaiah 7.9 (in the Latin translation of the Septuagint), “Unless you believe, you will not understand”¹² – and the early *De mortibus ecclesiae catholicae* indicates a similar approach (2.3; cf. 7.111): the mind is weak and needs the guidance of authority; human wickedness clouds the light of truth. As yet, however, Augustine offers no more radical explanation in terms of the “ignorance” resulting from original sin and its accompanying weakness of will (*difficultas*).

Yet the latter as much as the former is to provide Augustine with the resources to explain the present limited power of the human mind. We fail to understand not only because “now we see through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13.12), but because we do not always *want* to know, or even want to want to know, what is good and true. A classic example, for Augustine, is strict atheism;¹³ in antiquity it was rare, and Augustine suggests that denial of God’s existence is often due to the moral corruption of atheists: being slaves of desire, they do not want to believe in goodness or recognize the truth.¹⁴ Even if they “know” the truth, their wickedness

may choose other “riches.” Augustine himself did not want to know too much about chastity, lest he should feel impelled to it (*Conf.* 8.7.17).¹⁵ But for a thinker in the Platonic tradition, reflection on the limits of our knowledge could only promote a re-evaluation of the low status of belief and consequent concern to identify credible authorities.¹⁶

Skepticism about the ability of human reason to attain to knowledge, combined with a belief in truth itself, led Augustine to conclude that belief or faith is the only way forward. Accordingly he offers an analysis of different types of *credibilia*: facts to be believed.¹⁷ First, we have historical truths which can *only* be believed since we have no first-hand knowledge of them. In *De util. cred.* Augustine notes that we know on Cicero’s own authority of the execution of the Carlinarian conspirators. This authority is sound, as is that on which we know who are our parents; our mothers identify our fathers, and various midwives and other servants corroborate the claims of our mothers. It would be grotesque to refuse reverence for our parents on the grounds that we do not *know* who they are (*De util. cred.* 12.26).¹⁸ Augustine is impressed by the fact that some of the most basic human relationships – the love of a child for its parents and the closeness of friends and married couples – can only depend on trusting beliefs.¹⁹

Next, Augustine speaks of those epistemic situations where belief and understanding go hand in hand: we believe in the truths of logic and mathematics only when we understand what we believe. Finally come those beliefs – only theological beliefs such as belief in the Trinity are cited – where belief is a necessary precondition for understanding, but no guarantee of it. How does that cohere with his conviction that the Platonists have formulated – and obviously believe – true propositions in the philosophy of religion, such as a belief in the intelligible world, indeed in the existence of God? The answer is that the Platonists understand only incompletely what they profess to know.

In theory, they are in a position to proceed to understanding, but their arrogance (*superbia*) prevents them from so doing even to the limited degree possible for human beings in the present life. They do not understand the intelligible world; hence they give a picture of it which is incomplete, liable to degenerate into error, indeed prone to promote it – particularly in their inferences as to how to live the philosophical life. While making proper inferences about God, they fail to understand their theoretical and practical import. In part this is to be explained by the fact that their “philosophical” experience of God is not first hand, for (as Augustine argues in a Platonic spirit, not least in *De mag.*)²⁰ if we are to *understand* the world rather than believe things about it, we must experience it at first hand. Miracles and special graces aside, a non-Christian, lacking faith, cannot reasonably hope for the type of experience necessary for a proper understanding of the Christian God.

Augustine's rhetoric can mislead us about belief, as at times it may have misled its author. In some passages he suggests a more radical contrast between reason and faith than he strictly intends, claiming baldly that faith starts from authority while reason may refuse to do so (*De ord.* 2.5.16²¹ 2.9.26; cf. *De Trin.* 4.1.6.2.1, etc.). Yet he is well aware of the need for discernment among authorities,²² and discernment is a function of reason: reason does not desert authority when we consider who is to be believed (*De vera relig.* 24.45). Between this position and any more radical contrast between faith and reason there is a tension which perhaps can be resolved only if reason's universal claims – themselves unreasonable – are toned down; a proper responsibility of reason is to recognize its limitations.

When sharply contrasting it with "faith," Augustine seems to think of "reason" as stricter demonstration, perhaps as a simply deductive process. In the discernment of authorities, of course, no such logical certainty can be attained. Something more empirical and at best inductive is appropriate – and judgment rather than deduction. Here is a different use of our rational capacity.

In the first instance it is part of reason's role to identify who is worthy to be believed; the first step towards a resolution of the problem of the relationship between reason and religious belief is the recognition not just of authority but of credible authority. If, for example, unaided reason is liable to lead us, as it led Augustine, into the chaos of Manichaeism or the despair of Skepticism, perhaps insistence on the autonomy of reason guarantees a false starting point. Augustine regularly claims to seek only knowledge of God and the soul – a range of interests less restricted than might at first appear – but God and the soul cannot be the objects of the kinds of *knowledge* Augustine identifies in *C. Acad.*; rather they must be the objects of faith, that is, of *religious* belief. Augustine certainly claims that belief that God exists is importantly like other kinds of belief, such as that Cicero executed the Catilinarian conspirators, though, as we have noticed, he wants to say not that *all* knowledge is preceded by belief, but that all *theological* understanding arises from a preceding belief. Apparently wherever Augustine claims that belief is a prerequisite for understanding (*intellectus*), he is thinking of some theological proposition.²³ He may be mistaken in limiting himself so strictly – or perhaps the sense of "theological" can be expanded.

As some sort of Platonist, it was incumbent on Augustine, proclaiming the usefulness of belief in general and of theological faith in particular, to spell out and justify his novel position. Plato had claimed in the *Republic* that we cannot have true beliefs about Forms. Of Forms only knowledge or ignorance is possible, because one of the prerequisites of knowledge is first-hand experience;²⁴ we have already noticed the importance of first-hand experience in Augustine. Augustine, however, has learned from Scripture that now we see God by faith; only in heaven will we pass beyond faith and see him face to face (*Sol.* 1.7.14).

So a major difference between Plato and Augustine is that Augustine has lost confidence in our comprehending and understanding the Good in this life; our mind, he insists, is now inadequate. And while admitting that the Platonists advance true metaphysical propositions, above all about the existence of the immaterial world, he observes in the *Confessions* (7.20.26) that he was fortunate to meet the Platonism of Plotinus before converting to Christianity. The reverse order would have been unfortunate; he would have failed to recognize the difference between presumption and "confession."

Having indicated where Augustine thinks belief to be a necessary prerequisite for understanding, we should consider whether he is correct in limiting this to directly theological propositions. In fact, he makes no such formal limitation himself; the limitation has been supplied by scholars who have pointed out that in all cases where Augustine cites belief as a prerequisite for understanding the context is theological. Part of the reason for this is that some beliefs – and certainly religious beliefs – must be affectively experienced as well as cognitively grasped, and Augustine held more generally that where beliefs have affective associations, the two can only be separated conceptually. Hence if religious beliefs are to lead to understanding, they must be held with a specifically religious affectivity. In Augustinian language, if a belief is to lead to a specifically religious understanding, it must be accompanied by a specific disposition of the "will" – to retain that popular if inaccurate representation of the Latin *voluntas*. For the moment we may leave the "will" aside, merely asking whether Augustine was right to limit the prior beliefs required for understanding to strictly theological propositions.

Other candidates might be proposed, the most obvious being ethical beliefs. In the last analysis Augustine might include these under the theological rubric, maintaining that no proper ethics (or aesthetics) is possible without metaphysical, indeed theistic foundations. Furthermore, effective ethical beliefs – as the practical ineffectiveness of Platonism showed – have to be accompanied by a proper ordering of the emotions; they cannot be merely cognitive states. And since God as love is the foundation of Augustine's ethics,²⁵ ethical schemata devoid of that belief must be theoretically inadequate and practically empty; indeed God is to be seen not merely as love, but in the light of love as understood in the scriptures and Catholic tradition. We conclude that even if all Augustine's examples of propositions where affective belief may lead to full understanding are propositions in "systematic theology," he could easily accommodate himself to a longer list, itself determined by the identification of those areas of philosophy where affective belief bears on our judgments: especially, that is, in aesthetics and ethics – including meta-ethics. For Augustine the human mind should typically be used for the discernment of authorities; it is inadequate and irrational to identify certain major theological, and probably also ethical and

aesthetic, truths without such authorities. Augustine claimed that he would not have believed the Gospels without the authority of the Catholic Church (*C. ep. fund.* 5.6). But he is also aware that human discernment is impoverished, and he blames the Fall for such impoverishment. How then does he know that he has discerned his authorities correctly? Of course, he does not *know*, but he claims true belief or faith. Insofar as his discernments are correct, this correctness has been achieved through the grace and aid of God – which can often be identified retrospectively; God works in history to show which individuals and which institutions are worthy of theological belief, and in the individual to enable him to see that to which he may normally be blind. As Augustine increasingly put it after 412, citing Proverbs 8.35, the “will is prepared by God.”

At this point we touch on (but cannot linger over) Augustine’s theory of illumination: he is puzzled (for example) as to why when once he looked at the scriptures, he could read the words and know what they meant, but he did not understand them (*De Trin.* 11.8.15).²⁶ After he has believed, however, or rather in learning to believe,²⁷ he is in a state to benefit further from divine illumination: here indeed faith has been the prerequisite to understanding. In treating of illumination, of course, Augustine does not limit himself to the understanding of theological propositions. Unless we are illumined, any teacher can bombard us with truths which we cannot take in and understand.

Faith – necessarily associated with hope and love²⁸ – is required as a prerequisite to understanding, not only because an affective belief – say, about God – would indicate a different mentality from its theoretically non-affective equivalent,²⁹ but also because Augustine must explain why, though the Christian God is Truth, there are non-believers, some of them philosophically competent. His not infrequent reply, as we have seen, is that the non-believer is morally undeveloped or corrupt, or – more philosophically – that his moral and spiritual disposition is poorly attuned to reality; he is inadequately formed – either because he has rejected the opportunity for Christian belief or because he has had no such opportunity. In either case he is unable (morally or spiritually) to assent to certain true propositions; he simply does not (or cannot) *want* to believe. In explicating this claim we both learn more about the kind of “faith” which Augustine holds to be prerequisite for theological understanding and are brought up against the second of the problems we identified at the outset: that of willing and assenting.

Augustine’s identification of belief as “nothing other than thinking with assent” (*De praed. sanct.* 2.5) sounds Stoic, but it will turn out to indicate a Stoicism transformed.³⁰ The Stoics had introduced the concept of assent into ancient accounts of action so effectively that even hardened Aristotelians, like the great second-century commentator Alexander, assumed that it was already a feature of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.³¹ But the notion of assent is in itself

far from transparent. What does it mean to “assent”? For the Stoics, the answer is clear: we assent to propositions, and this assent is a good or bad judgment. But Augustine’s view is more complex and richer – expanded on what he could find in Cicero or even in Seneca, the Stoic who on this topic is his most plausible source. Let us begin with a passage of *De spir. et lit.* (34.60): “To yield our consent . . . or to withhold it is the function of our *voluntas* – if we function properly.” Which means that to understand “assent” we need to understand *voluntas*. If we want to translate *voluntas* as “will,” then we need to determine Augustine’s account of the will – which may or may not be ours, or that of the medievals, or that of the Stoics. If we understand “will,” we may understand more of Augustine’s concept of assent, and if we understand his concept of assent we may understand why – in many important matters – his account of belief as a prerequisite for the most important forms of understanding is both intelligible and challenging.

Augustine’s concept of *voluntas* is best approached through the Stoic ideas with which he was familiar.³² Recognizing these ideas as both resembling and differing from his own, we shall see how, in the concept of *voluntas* as elsewhere, he transposes much inherited Stoicism into a form of Platonism, highlighting the fundamental orientation of each human being and emphasizing love over both want and obligation in his account of moral agency and of the virtues – and explaining how no merely “cognitive” knowledge of God, but a pure heart,³³ a loving faith, and a personal experience of God are prerequisites both for the good life and for the highest metaphysical enquiries – those, that is, about God himself. In a brief treatment of the Stoics, we should consider texts from Seneca and Epictetus (the latter of whom Augustine had not read), since in view of the limited survival of Old Stoic material in Greek – which in any case Augustine did not use – and of the comparative lack of relevant material in Cicero, these provide the most readily accessible points of comparison. The Epicurean Greek term with substantial similarities to *voluntas* is *prohairesis*.³⁴

For Epictetus our *prohairesis* (moral character) is opposed to our *sarx* or carnal self.³⁵ To have the right moral character is to have the correct moral beliefs, and it is up to us, as moral agents, whether we give our own moral well-being the proper primacy in our thoughts, plans, and desires. If we do, we shall intend the right, whatever the consequences, and we shall demand a similar attitude in others. A few examples will make the thesis clearer: “Nothing has power over our *prohairesis* except itself” (1.29.12); “It was not Socrates who was taken off and given the hemlock. It was not Socrates’ *prohairesis* but his body which suffered in this way” (1.29.16ff.); “You will fetter my leg but not even Zeus can conquer my *prohairesis*” (1.1.23). From Augustine’s point of view such texts display several moral errors, but we shall concentrate on just one. According to Epictetus, arguing in orthodox Stoic fashion, man’s basic nature is pure (and

mere) reason. Thus to behave morally is no more than to behave in accordance with right reason – which is very different from saying that moral behavior is (*inter alia*) rational. And the “will” (the *prohairesis* or *voluntas*) is to be seen in terms of a settled capacity and determination of the reason to make judgments of whatever sort: in ethics the ability both to make second-order judgments about wanting to want to do right, and to form and want to persist in moral (i.e. rational) intentions and rational decisions.

As with Epicurus, so with Seneca: in the latter *voluntas* is usually best translated as “intention” or “purpose,” or, more literally, as what we want to do.³⁶ Certainly it indicates more than mere cognition (or recognition), indeed something which we would call volitional, but for the Stoics volition itself, if properly activated, is a kind of single-minded showing forth of a correct judgment, arising, as Seneca puts it (*Epistulae morales* 95.57) from a right disposition of mind. In Seneca there is no special *faculty* of the will. If I will X, I show the direction in which my “reason” takes me (rightly or wrongly).

According to the later Stoics, when we make a moral mistake, or exhibit weakness of will, our reason somehow acts unreasonably or against right reason. In their technical language, our assent to the relevant proposition is “weakly given.” When reason acts irrationally, it gives way to the accumulated weight of past mistaken beliefs which have formed bad habits. We yield to such habits like animals, our habits being themselves a set of beliefs, and our “mind-sets” (*voluntates*) – or the intentions or purposes which result from such mind-sets – being beliefs and desires particularized as judgments determinative of action. Thus, when we are cowardly, it is just that, because of our bad habits, beliefs and desires, we assent to the false proposition that death is to be feared.

Unlike most Stoics, Epicurus believes that he needs innate ideas to get moral talk off the ground. We all have a general idea (a *prolepsis*) of good and evil; our problems arise when we try to apply that *prolepsis* to individual circumstances. Some grasp of the formal significance of good and evil (that is, without specific understanding of what is in fact good and evil) seems necessary for moral discussion at all – as was part of Aristotle’s point when he put goodness outside the categories – but according to Epicurus our innate grasp of good and evil – which is more than what may be loosely called “formal” – is such that if we live in accordance with it we best preserve our moral character (*prohairesis*).

That best *prohairesis* will be informed by some grasp or understanding of what is the case about the universe: above all that – like it or not – there is a god, a source of providence, which we defy or deny at our peril. Our *prohairesis*, at its best and properly tended, is thus realized as a form of rational comprehension so that insofar as we are moral agents, we turn out to be impersonal but normally beneficent spirits.³⁷ If we translate *prohairesis*, or see *prohairesis*, with reference to the “will,” as does C. H. Kahn, then the Epicurean “will” itself

is to be identified (at its best) as a simple, “impersonal” judgment-making and judgment-enacting capacity.

These claims find their parallel in certain forms of Kantian and post-Kantian ethics. An apparent objection to all of such ethics, whether ancient or modern, has been expressed in terms of the following question: If you were seriously ill, would you prefer to be looked after by someone motivated by impersonal duty or by someone whose sense of duty is bound up with affection and love? Most people would prefer the latter, holding the man of duty to have an insufficiently broad understanding of the requirements of morality, while Epicurus would surely hold the broader view to be less moral but more sentimental. In contrasting the Stoics with Augustine, however, we are less concerned about the importance in morality of duty or of altruism as such than about the moral importance of emotional and affective commitment – which carries corollaries about the nature and importance of persons as individuals, and probably also the implication that unless we are concerned with others in a non-impersonal way, our proper concern for the well-being of our own *prohairesis* is misguided in that it is doomed to be ineffectual.

Like the Epicureans – though Stoic solutions are less brutal – the Stoics are aware of a moral demand for commitment, while remaining – again like the Epicureans – very conscious of its dangers. It is what I do for someone else, and not at all the degree to which I also empathize with him, that is the measure of my faithfulness to him (and faithfulness, for Epicurus especially, is a primary virtue); I must help him without risking emotional disturbance to myself. Now the claim of those critics – and they would include Augustine – who point out that we would prefer to be helped by a committed friend rather than a faithful Stoic is that, without commitment and affection, care, however effective, remains empty duty, indeed inhuman and conceivably hypocritical.

For Augustine it is not enough to build the concept of *voluntas* simply on assent to propositions, on a combination of belief and desire, on intentions, decisions and judgments, or even on persistence in wanting. Such an analysis is incomplete, too negligent of the relation between our moral beliefs and determinations on the one hand and our most basic loves and hatreds on the other. Augustine maintains – not in the Stoic, but in the Platonic tradition, contradicting Cicero (*De civ. Dei* 2.21.2) – that by their loves and hates, by their orientation either to God or the Devil, we can identify the nature of both individuals and societies. It is two loves which have formed two cities, that is, the secular city and the City of God (14.28). It is by assenting to our loves and hates – not even simply to our “wants”; that would be insufficiently personal and human – and by the habit of such assent that we develop, each one of us, a mind-set: what *he* thinks of as a *voluntas*. Augustine’s *voluntas*, certainly influenced by Stoic ideas, is to be seen as formed not only by beliefs and desires but primarily by our love of God or lack of it.

Leaving the world of Epicurus and Seneca (let alone the earlier Stoics), we conclude that Augustine uses the word and concept "*voluntas*" not only to point to beliefs and wants, but to do some of the work of the word and concept "*eros*" – the love of the good and the Beautiful, and the perversions of that love – in the Platonic tradition. Hence we should not be surprised that *voluntas* is often interchangeable with *amor* and in its perfect form identified with it: that is, as the Holy Spirit (*De Trin.* 15.17.31; 15.20.38; 15.21.41). An essential feature of Augustine's account of God, and therefore – through the notion of man as an image – of the ideal human person, is that God (or the good man) not merely does not intend to do wrong, does not plan to do wrong, does not determine to do wrong, but that he cannot *want* to do wrong, since he cannot *love* to do wrong – indeed *cannot* love to do wrong.

If we translate *prohairesis/voluntas* as "will," we have to say that Augustine's account of the will and/or of the moral person – and therefore of assent itself – is far richer than his definition of belief as thinking with assent might seem to suggest. To understand Augustine's view – in contradistinction to that of the Stoics (even of Seneca) – we revert to that typical definition of the virtues found in the early treatise *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*. Virtue, says Augustine (1.15.25), is "nothing other" than the supreme love of God. In brief, while for the Stoics all forms of virtue are modes of right reason and intentionality, for Augustine they have become modes of love: rational, of course, but far more than that. According to Augustine, among human beings – all of whom are incomplete in virtue – women are superior in emotional strength, that is in love, to men. Which is why Mary Magdalene was able to be the first witness of the Resurrection of Jesus³⁸ – and why the cleverest philosophical reasoners may be far from salvation.

In the *Discourses* (1.29.16ff.) Epicurus remarks: "Nothing has power over our *prohairesis* except itself." In *De lib. arb.* (1.12.26) Augustine commits himself to "What is so much in the 'will' as the will itself" ("Quid enim tam in voluntate quam ipsa voluntas sita est?"). Both thinkers maintain that human beings can, or ought to be able to, act well, but the nature of the proper state of the *voluntas/prohairesis* – and therefore of the soul – is widely different. Epicurus is concerned with the failure of our judgment to distinguish good from evil, while Augustine would be quite dissatisfied with what he would perceive as the superficial incompleteness of such an explanation.

In Augustine's view we do not hold false moral and theological beliefs because of some mere error in our rationality. We do not assent "weakly" merely after some failure in rational calculation or in our rational habits, but often because we "love to" hold such and such a belief. Assent is not only a determining judgment, but a determining love. Consider someone who succumbs to peer-pressure – as Augustine tells us in the *Confessions* he succumbed over the famous theft of

pears (2.4.9; 2.8.16, etc.). He may have believed that since other people are perverse, he was licensed to be perverse too; but the actions to be performed are in some sense "wanted," even "loved." Augustine, it may be said, both loved to do wrong and loved to be popular with his friends, rather as Adam, according to *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim* (11.42.59), wanted to be popular with Eve when he ate the apple.

The Stoic analysis of the relation between moral belief and affectivity is seriously flawed. While correctly counting assent as substantially dependent on habit, the Stoic account of habit-formation neglects the fact that we are not what we believe (perhaps the original Stoic view), nor what we want (perhaps the supplementary view of Seneca), but what we love (*In Iohannis epistolam ad Parthos tractatus* 2.14): "Do you love earth?" Augustine asks. "You will be earth. Do you love God . . . ?" When "will" is more intense, it is called love. In God, as we have seen – and therefore in our fully purified and unified selves – genuine love and the "will" are identical.³⁹

We return directly to faith and reason. We have seen how the ability to form and understand theological (and probably other) propositions ultimately depends on identifying and following the correct authorities, our reason being aided by God, and that our beliefs about such authorities – themselves dependent on what we are, on our mind-set or *voluntas* – cannot depend on mere cognitive acts. That is not the kind of beings we are; such are not the motives which drive us. To be able to believe in God, to have faith in him, is to have something of the love of God (itself a gift of God) – that loving belief being the prerequisite to further moral and theological understanding. There can be no merely rational substitutes. If we are to understand that belief is thinking with assent, Augustine holds that we must know in the case of each belief the conditions under which such assent can be secured. In religion (widely conceived) thinking the truth cannot be separated from loving the truth, and in our present world loving the truth cannot be separated from faith.

In about 410 Augustine exchanged letters (119–120) with a certain Consentius, perhaps a monk of Lérins and the future recipient of his treatise *Contra Mendacium*. In reply to Consentius' claim that theological truth must come from faith *rather* than reason – otherwise only the wise could be happy – and that one must simply follow the authority of the saints, Augustine sets out his position once more, in a text often considered definitive of his mature views. Correcting what he sees as Consentius' fideism, he urges that the goal of religious thought must be to see by reason (properly understood) what we now hold by faith. Isaiah's "If you will not believe, you will not understand" would have summed it up once more. Once again faith is not religious understanding but only the necessary prerequisite to it, for, continues Augustine, God forbid that he should hate in us that faculty by which he made us superior to all other living

beings. It is wrong to adopt the kind of belief which wishes to exclude the light of understanding. The scriptures themselves urge us to think about the Trinity (2.12).

Since we are rational beings, it would be absurd to suppose that the prerequisite that faith precede reason is irrational – and we have now seen in what way it is eminently rational. The unbeliever, who asks for a reason for what he cannot understand without prior belief, is in an impossible situation, but the believer will eventually find himself capable of understanding. It is loving faith which *pre-pares* the mind for reason to be able fully to perform its proper and most important functions. By such faith the philosopher can develop the love which builds on the foundation of humility which is Christ Jesus and which leads to understanding and the good life (*Conf.* 7.20.26).^{40, 41}

NOTES

- 1 "Normally" indicates that whatever his early hesitations, Augustine through the major part of his career as Christian thinker would defend the views, if not always the specific formulations, given roughly systematic form below. For a general introduction to questions of Augustine's development see Rist 1994, 13–19.
- 2 So Gilson 1960, 33.
- 3 *De praed. sanct.* 2.5.
- 4 Cf. *De vera relig.* 1.1.5; *Contra Iulianum* 4.14.72, etc.
- 5 Even in the Cassiciacum dialogues (as this passage of the *C. Acad.* indicates) reason must always be subordinated to authority. Scholars have sometimes argued that in early Augustine reason by itself (at least for a few) is a possible way to salvation. Even if this were correct, Augustine soon changed his mind.
- 6 Note already the tone of *De ord.* 2.9.26: "I do not know how I could call those happy who . . . content with authority alone . . . apply themselves constantly only to good ways of living and to prayer." Cf. *De ord.* 2.5.16.
- 7 *So De ord.* 2.5.16; *De Trin.* 4.16.21.
- 8 Cf. *De util. cred.* 9.21; 11.2.5; *De vera relig.* 1.4; *Conf.* 3.6.10. See Russell, 1975, 14–15 and Burnaby 1938, 74.
- 9 Cf. Van Eleren 1973, 36.
- 10 For his disillusionment see *Conf.* 6.4.6. For the continuing caution which the experience engendered see *De ord.* 2.5.17.
- 11 See Kirwan 1989, 37.
- 12 *De mag.* 11.37; *De lib. arb.* 1.2.4, 2.2.6; *Sermons* 118.1, 126.1.1; *Ep.* 120.1.3; *De Trin.* 7.6.12, 15.2.2; *In Joannis evangelium tractatus* 29.6, 45.7; *C. Faust.* 1.46, etc.
- 13 Strict atheism would be the denial of the existence of God or the gods; more common in antiquity – and still called atheism – was the denial of providence.
- 14 *De vera relig.* 38.69; *In Joannis evangelium tractatus* 106.4; *Enarr. in Ps.* 53(52).2; cf. *De Trin.* 8.3.4.
- 15 More generally see Crawford 1988, 291–302.
- 16 Further early texts on reason and authority include *De ord.* 2.5.16; *De vera relig.* 7.12.
- 17 *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 48; cf. *Ep.* 147.6–8. Cf. Markus 1967, 350.
- 18 Cf. *Conf.* 6.5.7; *De civ. Dei* 11.3.
- 19 *De util. cred.* 12.26; see *De fide rerum invisibilium* (1.2) on friendships and 2.4 on stable marriages.
- 20 See Bunyveat 1987.
- 21 For the limited success of philosophy even among the philosophers, note "Philosophia rationem promittit et vix paucissimos liberat." See Madec 1970, 179–186.
- 22 *De ord.* 2.9.27; *De vera relig.* 2.5.46; *De util. cred.* 9.21.
- 23 See Kretzmann 1990, 15.
- 24 Cf. *Memo* 97Aff; *Theaetetus* 201Bc.
- 25 Note the definition of the virtues as early as *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 1.15.25: they are "nothing other" than forms of the supreme love of God.
- 26 Cf. Coward 1990, 26. Note that "heretics" too accept the scriptures as authoritative, but still do not understand them (*Ep.* 120.3.13).
- 27 To understand how Augustine thinks God prepares the will, we need to understand his account both of *voluntas* itself and of its relationship to "cognition" and "assent." See pp. 35–37 below and more generally Sage 1964.
- 28 *Enchiridion de fide, spe et caritate* 2.8; cf. Kretzmann 1990, 25.
- 29 In theology, metaphysics, and ethics Augustine, we have suggested, would deny the "real" existence of non-affective beliefs. If our beliefs about God were not affectively "informed" by Christianity, they would be informed by other, hence damaging, affectivities.
- 30 Cf. *De spir. et lit.* 31.54 ("Quid est enim credere nisi consentire verum esse quod dicitur?"). The Stoicism is noted by Holte 1962, 81.
- 31 Alexander, *Quaest.* 3.13, 107.18; see Dobbin 1991, 123.
- 32 My account of the "will" is necessarily curtailed; no adequate treatment yet exists. It is often (wrongly) assumed that Augustine's views became standard; it would be nearer the truth to say that deformed versions of them became standard. For Seneca see Inwood (unpublished).
- 33 Only the pure in heart can understand the divine: *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 48; 68.3; cf. *Ep.* 120.1.3–4 and *Sermons* 43.10.10 on the cleansing power of faith.
- 34 Kahn 1988, 234–259, drew attention to many similarities between Epicurus and Augustine on the "will," but neglected the important differences to be discussed below. See also Rist 1994, 186–188.
- 35 Modern treatments of Epicurus' notion of moral character still depend much on Bonhoeffer 1890.
- 36 Cf. *Ep.* 34.3, 71.36.
- 37 Thus we may wish to restrain the enthusiasm of Kahn 1988, 253 ("Theoretical reason is essentially impersonal"), who argues that the Stoic emphasis on *practical* reason, and in particular Epicurus' identification of himself "not with reason as such but with the practical application of reason" is "a momentous one for the evolution of the idea of person and selfhood."
- 38 For Augustine's doctrine of deification see *Sermons* 192.1.1: "Deos facturus qui homines erant, homo factus qui Deus est", with Bonner 1984.
- 39 *Sermo Guelf.* 14.1=229L.1; 45.5; 51.2.3; 232.2.21, 244.2; 245.2; *De Trin.* 4.3.6; *In Joannis evangelium tractatus* 121.1.
- 40 *De Trin.* 15.20.38; 15.21.41; cf. *Enarr. in Ps.* 122(121).1; *Conf.* 13.9.10; *De civ. Dei* 11.28; cf. Burnaby 1938, 94, note 1; Holte 1962, 243.
- 41 My thanks to Eleonore Stump for constructive comment on an earlier version of this chapter.