

December 2020

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Recommended Citation

Carson, Joseph (2020) "Augustine's Diverse Epistemology: Love, Reason, and Presupposition," *Quaerens Deum: The Liberty Undergraduate Journal for Philosophy of Religion*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lujpr/vol6/iss1/5>

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Augustine's Diverse Epistemology: Love, Reason, and Presupposition

Joseph Carson

Introduction

In contemporary epistemology, the opposing viewpoints are numerous: different philosophers hold to internalism, externalism, coherentism, virtue epistemology, skepticism, or more postmodern theories of knowledge. In Saint Augustine's milieu, philosophers also disagreed on how to understand knowledge, exemplified by the divisions between the Neo-Platonists, Manichees, Academics, and Christian philosophers. Uniquely, however, Augustine accepted varying aspects of his contemporary epistemologies, while he still fundamentally worked *from* a Christian position. In this way, Augustine offers an attractive epistemology that could help philosophers move past the stalling dichotomies in today's theories of knowledge. Crafting a diverse epistemology over many years, Augustine emphasizes three integral features of knowledge: love, reason, and presuppositions.¹

¹ This analysis will primarily focus on Augustine's earlier thought (especially *On Free Choice of the Will* and *The Confessions*), but it also will use *The City of God* and others' analyses of Augustine's later works to be more comprehensive.

Knowledge Through Love

Augustine is well-known for his emphasis on love, but those studying Augustine might overlook how he connects love with knowledge. Augustine proposed a concept of loving rightly in order to know rightly, analogous to virtue epistemology. In the *Confessions* and *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine describes properly ordered loves as a precondition for having knowledge. In addition, James K.A. Smith has developed this Augustinian concept into an anthropology of love—humans are lovers with their ultimate love shaped by habits.

Augustine on Love

The very beginning of Augustine’s dialogue with Evodius indicates love’s centrality in *On Free Choice of The Will*. As a skilled philosopher, Augustine defines his terms early in this discussion, with evil being the most pressing term.² He defines evil as an improper desire (i.e., wrong love) and uses the case of adultery to elucidate this definition, writing, “Then perhaps what makes adultery evil is inordinate desire, whereas so long as you look for the evil in the external, visible act, you are bound to encounter difficulties.”³ If loving inordinately results in evil, then, conversely, loving properly results in righteousness. The significant

² Augustine writes in 1.3, “You want to know the source of our evildoing. So we must first discuss what evildoing *is*.” Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

point here is that the depth of meaningful living (i.e., in evil or righteousness) is determined by a person's love, which places a supremacy on the loves. This theme expands as the dialogue continues. In 2.2, after arguing that belief⁴ precedes understanding, in regard to the source of evil, Augustine writes, "For we must believe that better people, even in this earthly life, and all good and pious people in the next, see and possess these things more clearly and completely. We must hope one day to be like them, and we must wholeheartedly desire and love these things [i.e., truths regarding evil]."⁵ Here, Augustine claims that being more holy and loving rightly will aid in understanding truth. Indeed, this argument prefaces his transcendental argument for God's existence based on the existence of truth.⁶ Additionally, in book three (3.21), Augustine straightforwardly gives an existential criterion for proper belief. He writes, "With respect to created things, we ought to believe without hesitation whatever we are told about the past or future that serves pure religion by arousing our sincerest love for God or our neighbor."⁷ This is a kind of test trial for belief—will it produce proper loves?⁸

⁴ While not advocating the classical formulation of knowledge (i.e., justified true belief) that Gettier disproved, the argument in this paper holds that belief and knowledge are closely related. At the very least, belief is a necessary component for knowledge.

⁵ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 32-33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33-59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁸ This criterion comes after an analysis on the soul's origin where Augustine concludes that such peripheral issues about the soul are not as important as having correct faith in "the nature of the Creator." Augustine describes the danger of improper belief: "If, therefore, we believe that he is something other than what he truly is, our faulty aim compels us to journey into futility and not into happiness." He also argues that correct belief sends people on the right journey, produces

Augustine points to the production of love being a *necessary* condition of correct belief, though not a *sufficient* condition. Thus, Augustine argued that (1) love is integral to life's meaning, (2) a person who loves righteously will have more accurate knowledge, and (3) right belief cultivates love.

Even more than *On Free Choice of the Will*, *The Confessions* is saturated with the concept of love. The very first paragraph describes humans as having restless hearts,⁹ a theme that continues in his magisterial work. In book four, Augustine spends time lamenting his foolishness as a Manichee; specifically, he confesses a collection of Manichean writings he authored, which he wrote to gain the admiration of the orator Hierius.¹⁰ In Augustine's critique of himself, he offers a negative (i.e., it does not posit a way to know rightly, but how to know wrongly) point about knowledge. He writes,

When the impetuous power of the soul is viciously inclined, and it swaggers in mutinous, insolent pride, violent crimes are the outcome; when that appetite of the soul which thirsts for carnal pleasures is not moderated, vices are the result; so too, if the rational mind itself is vicious, errors and wrong-headed opinions corrupt our life What could be

happiness, and is often commanded by divine authority. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 111.

⁹ Augustine writes in 1.1.1, "You stir us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you." Augustine, *The Confessions*, 2nd edition, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), 39.

¹⁰ Augustine candidly writes in 4.14.23, "If he [i.e., Hierius] approved them I would glow with satisfaction, but if he did not, a heart vain and empty for lack of your solid strength would be wounded." *Ibid.*, 107.

prouder than my outlandish delusion, whereby I laid claim to be by nature what you are?¹¹

In this way, Augustine argues that someone with a vicious mind of improper loves will not be able to clearly grasp the truth. That person needs to love God rightly through illumination and God’s humbling instruction.¹² Thus, a lack of correct love (i.e., pride) will hinder a person from true knowledge.

Later in book ten, Augustine describes loving as a way of knowing. While many modern readers would likely use the word, *know* in this passage, Augustine uses the word *love*.¹³ He writes, “I [1] *love* you, Lord, with no doubtful mind but with absolute certainty. You pierced my heart with your word, and I fell in love with you. But the sky and the earth too, and everything in them—all these things around me are telling me that I should [2] *love* you.”¹⁴ In the first and last instances where Augustine uses the verb *love* in this passage, he does so in a way that involves knowing. First, he expresses how he loves God “with no doubtful mind,” meaning that the mind is a mechanism of love. Second, Augustine describes how creation draws him to love God and references Romans 1:20 as

¹¹ In the section that the ellipsis omits, Augustine writes about divine illumination, which, according to him, is how a person truly comes to know God. In addition, this idea of illumination is important for holding right Christian presuppositions. Augustine, *The Confessions*, 108.

¹² Augustine writes in 4.15.27, “[B]ut I could not [know God’s true beauty and joy], because I was carried off outside myself by the clamor of my errors, and I fell low, dragged down by the weight of my pride. No joy and gladness from you reached my ears, nor did my bones exult, for they had not yet been humbled.” Thus, humility, which likely correlates with proper loves, allows a person to have knowledge of God. *Ibid.*, 109.

¹³ That is, the Latin word for love.

¹⁴ Emphasis added. *Ibid.*, 241.

support. Traditionally, this verse has been interpreted as mostly referring to knowledge, that creation allows all people to know of God (i.e., general revelation). Yet, Augustine interprets this verse, which clearly has epistemic implications, as a matter of loving God. Thus, Augustine holds that love and knowledge are closely tied.

Humans as Lovers

Clearly, in *The Confessions* and *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine connects love and knowledge in a codependent manner, but Augustinian scholars John Rist and James K.A. Smith also see this emphasis on love throughout Augustine's thought as a whole. Addressing Augustine's view of authority and the will in his article on faith and reason, John Rist sees a close connection between the will, knowledge, and love. He writes, "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."¹⁵ Rist explains how *voluntas* (i.e., will) is often synonymous with *eros* and *amor* in Augustine's works, as love is the fundamental orienter;¹⁶ furthermore, he echoes Augustine's claim that knowledge depends on what a

¹⁵ John Rist, "Faith and Reason," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, eds. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 37.

¹⁶ Indeed, according to Rist, Augustine saw people most fundamentally as what they love; similarly, Augustine considers the will, in its purist form, to be love. Thus, these concepts are interlocking. *Ibid.*, 36-37.

person wills (e.g., ignorance is often an intentional choice).¹⁷ Thus, the loves influence knowledge through the will.

Similar and more explicit than Rist, James K.A. Smith builds upon Augustine’s philosophy of love by proposing a liturgical anthropology, which is predicated on humans being lovers.¹⁸ More than thinkers or believers, humans are what they love. First, love is exercised as intentionality—people are always moving toward something.¹⁹ Second, the telos of love orients being-in-the-world because humans are teleological: a person’s goal is an aesthetic picture of the good life.²⁰ Third, habits (i.e., virtues or vices) shape how love becomes oriented.²¹ These three points constitute the backbone of Smith’s liturgical anthropology, which is a modern Augustinian concept. Though Augustine never formulated this kind of idea explicitly, the seed of Smith’s anthropology is in Augustine’s view of love and knowledge. Indeed, if love is most orienting, then it will influence what a person values to know—learning requires a measure of love. As seen in Smith’s extension and Rist’s analysis of Augustine, this devoted Church Father certainly held that love and knowledge are dynamically tied together.

¹⁷ Rist, “Faith and Reason,” 28.

¹⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 41-47.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48-52.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 52-55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 55-62.

Knowledge Through Reason

Not only did Augustine emphasize love's relation to knowledge, but he also valued reason as a vital tool for having proper knowledge. As a Neo-Platonist philosopher, Augustine often wrote about the guiding force of reason, especially when approaching an inquiry. Though he was not a strong rationalist, like many of his Neo-Platonist contemporaries, he held that reason distinguished humans as superior to animals and would force himself to make a discussion longer for the sake of "logical rigor."²² Augustine, in both theology and philosophy, valued reason as necessary for gaining knowledge.

Augustine on Reason

On Free Choice of the Will gives a picture of Augustine as a highly rational thinker, even a little arrogant at times. The clearest example of his rationality is Augustine's argument for God's existence from the existence of truth. Beginning in book two with an idea that knowledge goes beyond and is more certain than just faith,²³ Augustine decides to begin a proof of God from a "quite obvious" foundation—that he and Evodius exist.²⁴ Existence, according to Augustine, implies being alive and having understanding.²⁵ Then Augustine

²² Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 12.

²³ Evodius describes the kind of investigation he wants to undertake, saying, "Although I hold these things with unshakable faith, let's investigate them as if they were all uncertain, since I do not yet *know* them." Implicitly Augustine thinks this approach is profitable. *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

argues that people also know that they have senses, which requires an inner sense that is perceived by reason itself.²⁶ After a further discussion of reason and the inner sense in 2.4 and the beginning of 2.5, Evodius and Augustine agree that reason is the highest aspect of humanity.²⁷ In a proto-Anselmian fashion, Augustine argues for a hierarchy of being where the highest existing being is God;²⁸ furthermore, numbers fit within this chain of being higher than human reason but not as the greatest thing.²⁹ Searching for other objective truths, they turn to wisdom as a universally shared entity, like numbers.³⁰ Finally, Augustine ties these points together. When something is known or perceived by multiple minds, Augustine claims that it has its own, higher existence in the category of Truth.³¹ Augustine concludes, “Therefore, since the truth is neither inferior nor equal to our minds, we can conclude that it is superior to them and more excellent than they are.”³² And because Truth is the most excellent thing known through reason, it either is God or God is higher than it (either way, God exists!).³³ This

²⁶ Augustine shows his high view of reason at this point when he says, “For we know only what we grasp by reason.” While modern readers might see a contradiction between this point and his epistemic claims about love and presuppositions, Augustine felt comfortable in asserting all three emphases. Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 35.

²⁷ Ibid., 40.

²⁸ Augustine has remarkable similarity to Anselm’s ontological argument. Augustine writes, “Then it will be enough for me to show that something of this sort exists, which you can admit to be God; or if something yet higher exists, you will concede that *it* is God. Therefore, whether there is something higher or not, it will be manifest that God exists.” Ibid., 41.

²⁹ Ibid., 44-47.

³⁰ Ibid., 46-47.

³¹ Ibid., 54-55.

³² Ibid., 55.

³³ Ibid., 58.

transcendental argument significantly shows that Augustine valued *a priori* truths and reason as integral for knowledge.

While the *Confessions* has passages that mitigate the power of reason, it also maintains an emphasis on humanity's cognitive abilities. For example, in book ten, Augustine describes the self as the mind and alludes to the Neo-Platonic dialectic occurring through the mind. Augustine writes, "[T]he person who remembers is myself; I am my mind."³⁴ This point arises from Augustine's inquiry into the nature of forgetfulness—he pauses to marvel at the self as the mind. Moreover, Augustine vividly writes about the mind as the self: "It is teeming life of every conceivable kind, and exceedingly vast [I]n this wide land I am made free of all of them, free to run and fly to and fro, to penetrate as deeply as I can, to collide with no boundary anywhere."³⁵ Here, Augustine views personhood as highly cognitive; people live in and through their minds. Finally, Augustine longs to experience an ascension to God through the mind (very Platonist). He writes, "I will pass beyond it [i.e., the mind] and continue resolutely toward you, O lovely Light See, I am climbing through my mind to you who abide high above me."³⁶ This passage displays Augustine's Neo-Platonist emphasis on the mind being a primary connection to ultimate reality, a means for

³⁴ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 253.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.

dialectical ascension. In this way, Augustine viewed the person as a rational, cognitive being.

Perhaps because his concepts had matured further at this point in his career, Augustine offers a more balanced view of reason in book eleven of *The City of God*. Transitioning to analyze the natures of the two cities, he first describes the ability of human reason to discover knowledge. Augustine begins by praising the ability and method of directly arriving at Truth through reason.³⁷ He writes,

For when God speaks to man in this way, he does not need the medium of any material created thing. He does not make sounds audible to bodily ears; nor does he use the kind of ‘spiritual’ intermediary which takes on a bodily shape But when God speaks in the way we are talking of, he speaks by the direct impact of truth, to anyone who is capable of hearing with the mind instead of with the ears of the body. He speaks to the highest of man’s constituent elements, the element to which only God himself is superior [i.e., reason].³⁸

Here, Augustine refers to God’s revelatory power through reason and man’s rational power to “go beyond the created universe.”³⁹ Thus, Augustine gives reason a powerful epistemic role. Yet, he views these abilities as pre-Fall rational powers; post-Fall, reason is “weakened by long-standing faults which darken it,” making it inferior to its prior abilities.⁴⁰ Christ, then, acts as the mediator for

³⁷ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), 430.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 430.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 430.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 430.

reason to be useful—graciously, he also offers Scripture as a witness to guide reason.⁴¹ This stance is likely Augustine’s mature view of reason, neither too optimistic nor too pessimistic toward rationality. Indeed, he develops a mitigated Neo-Platonist stance.

Knowledge Through Presupposition

In addition to holding reason and love as significantly related to knowledge, Augustine also claimed that knowledge should be gained through Christian presuppositions. He often asserted that only through first believing Christian doctrine can a person gain knowledge, especially theological knowledge, such as the Trinity. Again, while contemporary readers might see a contradiction between his emphasis on presuppositions, reason, and love, Augustine saw each as complementary to the others. Accordingly, presupposing the core truths of Christianity allows for richer rationality and a deeper love of God.

Augustine on Christian Presuppositions

In the very beginning of *On Free Choice of the Will*, Augustine explicitly describes the problem of evil which concerned Evodius, and then exhorts him, saying, “Be courageous, and go on believing what you believe. There is no better belief, even if you do not yet see the explanation for why it is true.”⁴² He then

⁴¹ Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, 430-432.

⁴² Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 3.

tells Evodius, that based on the belief in God’s character, they might be able “to achieve an understanding of the problem.”⁴³ In book 2, Augustine references this exhortation and reiterates it, writing,

[W]e cannot deny what we said at the beginning of our previous discussion [i.e., in book 1]. Unless believing and understanding were two different things, and we were first to believe the great and divine things that we desire to understand, there would have been no point in the prophet’s saying ‘Unless you believe, you will not understand’ For something that is believed but not known has not yet been found, and no one becomes ready to find God unless he first believes what he will afterwards know.⁴⁴

Displaying the unity in Augustine’s epistemology, this emphasis on belief as necessary for knowledge directly precedes his strongly rational argument for God’s existence. And in this way, he reveals how closely tied presupposition and knowledge are for his inquiries—Augustine ardently holds to Christian doctrine.

Similarly, two passages, one from *The Confessions* and another from *The City of God*, develop Augustine’s concept of Scriptural authority, which he sees as a means to form Christian presuppositions. He writes in *The Confessions*, “It was because *we were weak* and unable to find the truth by pure reason that we needed the authority of the sacred scriptures; and so I began to see that you would not have endowed them with such authority among all nations unless you had

⁴³ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

wiled human beings to believe in you and seek you through them.”⁴⁵ Likewise, he writes in the *City of God*, “He [i.e., Christ] also instituted the Scriptures, those which we call canonical. These are the writings of outstanding authority in which we put our trust concerning those things which we need to know for our good, and yet are incapable of discovering by ourselves.”⁴⁶ In both passages, Augustine recognizes the insufficiency of human reason to know God; yet, earlier saints have left a witness, divinely inspired by God, that allows subsequent believers to know the truths of the Gospel.⁴⁷ The act of *trusting* Scriptural authority is also an act of presupposition and faith. Contra to many fideistic concepts of faith, however, trusting Scripture in this manner still involves rational considerations;⁴⁸ indeed, Augustine praises Scripture for being “explained in a reasonable and acceptable way.”⁴⁹ Thus, Augustine argues that divine authority through the Holy Scriptures opens the epistemic possibility of knowing God.

⁴⁵ Augustine describes Scripture in beautiful dynamic terms. It is simple to understand, yet complex. It is accessible to all but contains divine mysteries for those who search. Augustine, *The Confessions*, 142.

⁴⁶ Later in the passage, he claims that the “interior perception” of the mind (i.e., the mind’s *sententia*) is only effective for things possibly known by the mind—the truths of Christianity are not naturally perceived by the mind. Thus, Augustine argues that people must trust prior saints’ testimony. Augustine, *The City of God*, 431.

⁴⁷ Going through three distinct stages in his life, Augustine’s concept of testimonial knowledge remained significant in his thought—Scripture was always a necessary source of knowledge. Matthew Kent Siebert, “Augustine’s Development on Testimonial Knowledge” (*Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2018, pp. 215–237, doi:10.1353/hph.2018.0021), 231-234.

⁴⁸ For Augustine, faith and reason were not in conflict—that tension became over-intensified by the Enlightenment. Rist, “Faith and Reason,” 26.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 142

Divine Illumination

One of the primary means to develop Christian presuppositions, according to Augustine, is through divine illumination. Augustinian scholar Gareth Matthews helpfully describes this doctrine, writing, “[T]he doctrine is appropriately called a doctrine of *divine* illumination because Augustine tells us that it is the light of Christ, or the light of God, by which the mind is said to be able to discern the objects of intellectual vision.”⁵⁰ Simply put, God allows people to have knowledge that would otherwise be hidden in darkness. In book four of *The Confessions*, Augustine makes it clear that only by God’s “true light” (the means of receiving correct presuppositions) can people partake in the truth.⁵¹

Conclusion

Simultaneously, Augustine claimed that knowledge required the basis of illuminated presuppositions, the method of reason, and the orientation of love—a diverse trinity of epistemology. Sometimes asserting all three in the same argument, he viewed each as complementary to the others, not contradictory. Today, this kind of rich variation in theories of knowledge is extremely uncommon. Perhaps the ancient epistemology of Saint Augustine can infuse life into contemporary epistemology—revitalizing an area of philosophy that is often

⁵⁰ Gareth Matthews, *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, eds. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 180.

⁵¹ Augustine, *The Confessions*, 108.

stalled in deadlock. Indeed, Augustine's thought still has a lasting impact on modern concepts of knowledge and hopefully will continue to be a beacon of encouragement for today's philosophers.

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