

AUGUSTINE AND EXISTENTIALISM

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If the contemporary existentialist is pictured as a lonely individualist in a unique world of his own, it may seem futile to compare him with anyone as ancient as Augustine. But James Collins cautions, "In studying existentialism there is a danger of so fore-shortening the historical perspective that its roots in the philosophical tradition are overlooked. The kind of approach favored by the existentialists is not entirely novel; it has striking parallels in St. Augustine, Pascal, and other respectable thinkers."¹

A warning may be needed on the other hand, however. J.V.L. Casserley finds more than "striking parallels" to existentialism in Augustine. Casserley contends that "Existentialism is not really modern at all, but the heir of a long philosophical tradition."² And one of the existentialists in that tradition is none other than St. Augustine.

This study purposes to evaluate such claims as those of Collins and Casserley by comparing the thought of Augustine with that of contemporary existentialists. Considerable clarity is introduced into the discussion of existentialism by Paul Tillich's distinctions between an existential point of view (fallenness), an existential content or philosophy (non-essentialist) and an existential attitude (involvement). Each of these aspects of existentialism will be compared with the thought of Augustine.

I. Augustine and an Existentialist Point of View.

Tillich's concept of an existentialist point of view is formulated in terms of Plato's division between the world of eternal essences and the world of temporal particulars. The human soul has been separated from its 'home' in the realm of pure essences. "Man is estranged from what he essentially is This platonic distinction between the essential and the existential realms is fundamental for all later developments. It lies in the background even of present-day Existentialism."³ While manness may be perfect, existing men are fallen, anxious and despairing.

Not all existentialists explain the human predicament in just these terms. Heidegger and Bultmann stress the fact that man's existence is

1. James Collins, *The Existentialists* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1953), p. 2.
2. J.V.L. Casserley, *The Christian In Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 45 n.3.
3. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 127.

inauthentic. According to Buber man is threatened by depersonalization. Berdyaev considers our plight objectivization, externalization, or "thingification."⁴ In whatever terms, existentialists acknowledge that all is not well with men as they actually exist in the world. Anxiety and despair are therefore the invariable concomitants of human life.

Augustine's account of his own experience seems to indicate such a point of view. His *Confessions* express the incessant restlessness of the individual separated from God. He sought pleasure, honor, and truth, not in God the Creator, but in creatures. His childhood was filled with temper tantrums, pride, inexcusable jealousies, lies and lust. Mentally as well as morally he was restless. Like a character from a modern novel Augustine at the age of thirty was filled with increasing anxiety, a silent trembling, a loathing of self, an internal war. "Inwardly consumed and confounded," he writes, "I became to myself an unfruitful land." That confession inspired T. S. Eliot's portrayal of contemporary life in "The Wasteland."

Augustine's existential standpoint may have arisen not only from his own personal experience, but also from the exigencies of the disintegrating Roman Empire. Daniel D. Williams notes our "kinship in crisis" with Augustine. "His thought was hammered out amid the shattering of a great civilization. Ours, too, is a time of world-shaking struggle, of revolutionary forces let loose."⁵ In such times it is not difficult to see man as fallen.

Augustine's existential standpoint is vividly expressed in the famous statement, "Thou has made us for thyself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee." That, according to Stanley Romaine Hopper, is the "formula for all Christian existentialism."⁶ And John Macquarrie in *An Existential Theology* suggests the dictum "might be interpreted as meaning that, confronted with the disclosure of that anxiety which relates to nothing in the world but arises from his own being, man has an alternative to that flight into an inauthentic existence of surrender to the world — namely recourse to God, who is the ground of being, Creator of both man and the world."⁷

Reinhold Niebuhr, who so stressed man's fallenness in recent times, clearly discerns the importance of the existential standpoint in Augustine.

The realization within the post-apostolic church that the primary issue of life and history is the relation of grace to sin, rather than the subordinate problem of eternity to time, comes to its first clear and explicit expression in the thought of Augustine With Augus-

4. Will Herberg, ed., *Four Existential Theologians* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1958), p. 18.
5. Daniel D. Williams "The Significance of Augustine Today" ed., Roy W. Battenhouse) *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 4.
6. Stanley Romaine Hopper, "On the Naming of the Gods in Holerlin and Rilke" Carl Michelson, ed., *Christianity and the Existentialists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), p. 163.
7. John Macquarrie, *An Existential Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 71.

tine's elaboration of the Pauline doctrine of original sin, the Christian ages arrive at a full consciousness of the fact that it is not finiteness but the 'false eternal' of sin, the pretension that finiteness has been or can be overcome, which brings confusion and evil into history.⁸

The existentialists' return to the Augustinian insight concerning man's original sinfulness testifies to its particular contemporary relevance. Daniel D. Williams observes,

In rather recent times Augustine's emphasis on man's sinfulness has seemed too pessimistic; but in our day we are seeing even more clearly that a faith which does not recognize the evil of which man is capable cannot cope with our world of concentration camps, mass slaughter, and widespread hopelessness. In a time when plays like *Death of a Salesman* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* express our estimate of the disorder in the human soul, we are ready to understand Augustine when he says that 'we are involved in an evil from which moral effort alone will never extricate us.'⁹

While there are undoubtedly differences between the existentialists themselves, Augustine would seem to be a representative of the existential standpoint from which men are viewed as fallen, anxious and unable to save themselves. Augustine's thought, as Tillich admits, "contains more profound insights into the negativities of the human predicament than that of anyone else in early Christianity."¹⁰ But Tillich denies that it is existentialist in the technical sense of the term. Augustine's existential point of view is effective within the frame of an essentialist ontology.¹¹ According to Augustine man is able to transcend the estrangement and ambiguities of human existence in knowledge and life.¹² On the other hand, Tillich insists, an existentialist holds that "Man in the existential situation of finitude and estrangement can reach truth only in an existential attitude. 'Man does not sit on the throne of God,' participating in his essential knowledge of everything that is. Man has no place of pure objectivity above finitude and estrangement. His cognitive function is as existentially conditioned as his whole being."¹³ Tillich's judgment remains to be examined by comparing Augustine and the philosophy of existentialism.

II. Augustine and Existentialism.

A common slogan of existentialists insists, "Existence is prior to essence." There are varying interpretations of this, but Jean Wahl, in *A Short History of Existentialism* explains, ". . . the philosophy of existence is essentially the affirmation that existence has no essence (thereby going

8. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 134.
9. Daniel D. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
10. Paul Tillich, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

further than merely stating that essence comes after existence).¹⁴ Consider then how this exclusive priority is developed in relation to the priority of the particular over the universal, and faith over reason.

A. The priority of the particular over the universal.

Is the universal prior to things, after things, or in things? An existentialist couldn't care less! He is passionately concerned, not with manness, but a particular man — himself! It is not death that he fears, but his own death. Marjorie Grene explains,

It is a fact, indeed, that existentialism put before essence — but a particular human fact. Not the sense-perceptions of a Thomas, generally accessible in their standard character to all our species, not even the more 'subjective' but equally uniform impressions of Hume, but just the unique, inexpressible *that* of any one conscious being's particular existence—such is the actuality that Kierkegaard and his twentieth century successors agree in referring to when they declare, as their first principle, the priority of existence over essence.¹⁵

What then is Augustine's position on the priority of the particular over the universal? Casserley argues that the Saint is an existentialist at this point because he received from the Christian doctrine of the Trinity a concept of a person not available to the Greek philosophers. For Plato particulars were not objects of knowledge, but merely objects of opinion. And even for Aristotle the concrete individuals apparent to the senses were not knowable as such. Although perceived individually, they were objects of scientific knowledge only in so far as they could be regarded a particular instance of a universal rule.¹⁶ Furthermore Greek logic had only two kinds of propositions in respect to quantity, the universal and the particular. A singular proposition had to be regarded as universal — a class which accidentally contained only one member, or as particular — accidentally but one instance of what would be true of "some." A uniquely singular event was handled awkwardly with either the quantifier "all" or "some."

Inference as Aristotle understood it also failed to provide for singulars. There was either deduction from the universal, or induction from a number of particulars. The singular proposition was ignored. But this is precisely the kind of expression and inference which primarily concerns Christian theology.

The decisive break with Greek thought came when the Cappadocians no longer used *hupostasis* as synonymous with *ousia*, but as denoting the distinctions within the Godhead. For this purpose Latin theology used "persona" and the idea of personality was born. The uniqueness of persons is no longer a matter of their accidents, but of their irrepeatable particular existence. "In other words," Casserley concludes, "*hupostasis* was

14. Jean Wahl, *A Short History of Existentialism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), p. 19.

15. Marjorie Grene, *Dreadful Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 4.

16. J.V.L. Casserley, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

re-defined so as to represent the singular as becoming at last a proper object of knowledge."¹⁷ Influenced by this development of thought Augustine sensed the priority of his own individual life and so could write, what no Greek philosopher wrote, *Confessions*.

Jean Guitton accounts for Augustine's unquestioned emphasis upon his own unique existence quite differently. The idea of the inner history of an individual never suggested itself to the Greek, Guitton claims, "not because the Greek, as is so often said, had no conception of the 'person,' but rather because in the pure Greek view there was no real connection between the event and the person."¹⁸ When one of the ancient philosophers contemplated existence, he did so "not by viewing the whole course of his life and drawing on a full memory, but by an intuition of his essence."¹⁹ His personal life was morally tainted by existing, and the wise man could not sin. The Israelites were the first to express in a literary way the relationship between existence and sin, and "Saint Augustine is the first man in the West to have attained, in personal fashion, the experience the Jewish people had reached, in a collective way."²⁰

There may be truth in the explanations of both Casserley and Guitton, and both agree that in Augustine's *Confessions* there is a most significant stress upon an individual's existence. Are we then justified in calling Augustine an existentialist? Casserley thinks we are. Augustine's philosophy is not a metaphysic of nature, but of self-conscious religious experience. A philosophy of self-consciousness in our times is called existentialism, therefore we are justified in using the term of Augustine.²¹

In the judgment of others, since Augustine's stress on the particular does not exclude cognition of universals, his philosophy is not a type of existentialism. Jean Paul Sartre explains that both Christian and atheistic existentialists "think that existence precedes essence, or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be the starting point."²² Sartre adds that this cannot include an idea of man in the mind of God before God created man. If, like a craftsman, God has a kind of blueprint in mind before He creates, essence would precede existence and the nature of the existent would be determined. The fundamental banner under which all existentialists fly is intended to deny the very thing Augustine asserts. Augustine defends his identification of the Platonic ideas with the mind of God in his *Retractions* saying,

If anyone denies the existence of this eternal Wisdom, then logically — if a plan of creation was not present to God — he must hold that without any plan God made what He made, or that, either when He made it or before He made it, He did not know what He

18. Jean Guitton, *The Modernity of St. Augustine* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1959), p. 10.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

21. J.V.L. Casserley, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

22. Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), p. 15.

made or would make. However, if a plan was present with God, as indeed it was, then Plato seems to have called that the *intelligible world*.²³

For Augustine, then essence is prior to existence in precisely the sense the existentialists' major dictum excludes.

Furthermore, Augustine held that human knowledge is not limited to *scientia*, the rational cognizance of temporal things, but also included *sapientia*, the intellectual cognizance of eternal things.²⁴ God's image in man included a capacity like God's for contemplating changeless truth.

In ascending to knowledge of God we do not draw upon ideas from a former existence, but we ought rather to believe, that the intellectual mind is so formed in its natural order, by a sort of incorporeal light of a unique kind; as the eye of the flesh sees things adjacent to itself in this bodily light, of which light it is made to be receptive, and adapted to it.²⁵

Sapientia provides criteria for normative judgments. With all his attempted self-knowledge an existing individual does not know what he ought to be. Nor can he determine the essence of true humanity by abstraction from many particulars. As Augustine puts it,

We do not gather a generic or specific knowledge of the human mind by means of resemblance by seeing many minds with the eyes of the body: but we gaze upon indestructible truth, from which to define perfectly as far as we can, not of what sort is the mind of any one particular man, but of what sort it ought to be upon the divine plan.²⁶

For Augustine, then, essential truth is pre-requisite to value judgments among particulars.

Admittedly sin's noetic effects have blinded man to such normative truth. In order that we may see, divine illumination is necessary. But even a universal illumination which results in some knowledge of God's being and attributes fails to provide insight into God's redemptive plans and purposes in history. That we might know of God's grace a revelation has been mediated to man in the incarnate Christ and the visible signs of Scripture. Credible faith in the propositionally conveyed meaning of these signs will progressively renew a person's intellect so that he can intuit these eternal verities.²⁷

Unquestionably Augustine unites an explicit essentialism with his emphasis on the particular. Since the existentialist's priority upon the particular excludes any knowledge of universals, Tillich is right, Augustine is not an existentialist.

23. Augustine, "Retractions" I, 3, 2.

24. *On the Trinity* XIII, 19, 24.

25. *Ibid.*, XII, 15, 24.

26. *Ibid.*, IX, 6.

27. Gordon R. Lewis, *Faith and Reason in the Thought of St. Augustine* (Unpublished dissertation, Syracuse University, 1959), pp. 150-187.

B. The priority of faith over reason.

In explaining the philosophy of existence, Jean Wahl did not stop with the affirmation that existence has no essence. He stated a second characteristic of this philosophy, "that one's existence, because it is without essence, is the risk itself."²⁸ We are, he says, without finding any reason for our existence. "Why we are flung into the world we do not know."²⁹ But we do know that our finite existence is subject to death.

Sartre adds, "If existence does precede essence there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom."³⁰ Life has no meaning *a priori*. "Before you come alive, life is nothing; it's up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing else but the meaning that you choose."³¹ So we ourselves choose our own being, and there is no reality except in action.³² These choices which lead to action may be viewed as volitional commitments. For the Christian existentialists they are expressions of faith. Faith is not assent to doctrine or dogma; faith is trust apart from all evidence. In this sense faith precedes knowledge.

Is the Christian existentialist's faith not based on revelation? Rudolph Bultmann as an existentialist asserts that it is, but revelation is not the communication of information by words. It is "an occurrence that puts me in a new situation as a self . . . that opening up of what is hidden which is absolutely necessary and decisive for man if he is to achieve 'salvation' or authenticity."³³ Man is limited by death for it renders his whole life meaningless. "Revelation is an *occurrence* that abolishes death, not a doctrine that death does not exist. But it is not an occurrence *within* human life, but rather one that breaks in upon it from outside and therefore cannot be demonstrated within life itself."³⁴

The priority of faith to reason in existentialism seems to exclude all propositional revelation, historical evidences, or logical arguments from the domain of faith. In discussing Marcel's views Marjorie Grene states the point succinctly, ". . . the absolute, concrete, given fact of faith comes first — 'proofs' are only intellectual elaborations of that faith. They are at bottom, unnecessary to those who believe and unconvincing to those who do not."³⁵

When Augustine says "If ye will not believe, ye shall not understand,"³⁶ is he taking an existentialist position? At least he stresses what Tillich

28. Jean Wahl, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

30. Jean Paul Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

33. Rudolph Bultmann, "Revelation in the New Testament" Schubert M. Ogden, ed., *Existence and Faith* (New York: Living Age Books, 1960), p. 59.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

35. Marjorie Grene, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-132.

36. *On the Teacher* II, 37; and many other places.

calls the existential attitude. Tillich defines the existential attitude as "one of involvement in contrast to a merely theoretical or detached attitude . . . participating in a situation, especially a cognitive situation, with the whole of one's existence."³⁷

Meaninglessness threatened Augustine until his passionate commitment to Christ. He said "I know not whence I came hither into this — shall I call it dying life or living death?"³⁸ Carried along with the crowd; he confessed, "I wallowed in the mud of that deep pit and in the darkness of falsehood, striving often to rise, but being all the more heavily dashed down."³⁹ In spite of increasing anxiety he could not make the all important decision. "With what scourges of rebuke did I not lash my soul to make it follow me, as I was struggling to go after Thee? Yet it drew back. It refused. It would not make an effort. All its arguments were exhausted and confuted. Yet it resisted in sullen disquiet, fearing the cutting off of that habit by which it was being wasted to death, as if that were death itself."⁴⁰ Finally his "not yet" was overcome by God's "Why not now?" Tearfully he fled into the garden and with his whole being made a choice which transformed his existence. As Gilson said, "It was not an intellect that agonized in the night in the garden of Cassicaicum: it was a man."⁴¹

Throughout his life by commitment to his people in his many-sided ministry the bishop of Hippo demonstrated an existentialist attitude. Whitney J. Oakes can say, "His writing is all created in the light of his own intense mystical experience upon conversion. The inner conviction of its validity colors in one way or another everything he does and everything he says."⁴² And C. C. Martindale, commenting on Augustine's freedom in expressing his emotions, remarks, "the whole of the *Confessions* is an outpouring of his soul to God — God is the immediate audience; and only now and again does the author look aside toward his human hearers."⁴³

In writing on "The Historical Roots of Niebuhr's Thought" Richard Kroner said,

Niebuhr feels, I would presume, the deepest affinity for one feature in Augustine which has often been called his 'inwardness' — that participation of the heart in his thinking; . . . Augustine applied the 'logic of the heart' before Pascal proclaimed this logic as the only one well adapted to the exigencies of theological problems.⁴⁴

37. Paul Tillich, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-125.

38. *Confessions* I, 6.

39. *Ibid.*, III, 11.

40. *Ibid.*, VIII, 7.

41. Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950), p. 30.

42. Whitney J. Oakes, "Introduction" *Basic Writings of St. Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1948), xxi.

43. C. C. Martindale, cited by Whitney J. Oakes "Introduction" *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

44. Richard Kroner, "The Historical Roots of Niebuhr's Thought" Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., *Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1956), p. 188.

But while recognizing an existentialist attitude of involvement in Augustine, we must agree with Tillich, Augustine's thought was not existentialism. His commitment was not apart from knowledge. Neither the will nor the intellect was a separate faculty able to function without the other. Their essential oneness and relational differences along with memory illustrated the Trinity. "These three are one, in that they are one life, one mind, one essence; and whatever else they are severally called in respect to themselves, they are called also together, not plurally, but in the singular number. But they are three in that wherein they are mutually referred to each other."⁴⁵ Reason, will and memory were not only inseparably one, but co-equal, mutually containing each other.

For I remember that I have memory and understanding and will; and I understand that I understand, and will and remember; and I will that I will, and remember and understand; and I remember together my whole memory, and understand and will.⁴⁶

For Augustine reason and will are essentially one. And they function together. "What I understand I also believe."⁴⁷ And although Augustine sometimes believes an object he does not see, even that faith is not apart from knowledge.

For who cannot see that thinking is prior to believing? For no one believes anything unless he has first thought what it is to be believed. For however suddenly, however rapidly, some thoughts fly before the will to believe, and this presently follows in such wise as to attend them, as it were, in closest conjunction, it is yet necessary that everything which is believed should be believed after thought has preceded; although even belief itself is nothing else than to think with assent. For it is not everyone who thinks that believes, since many think in order that they may not believe; but everybody who believes, thinks, — both thinks in believing, and believes in thinking . . . If faith is not a matter of thought, it is of no account.⁴⁸

Knowledge is prior to faith in Augustine in respect to defining the object to be believed and the reasons why one should believe it. He takes great pains to distinguish faith from blind credulity, wishful thinking and mere opinion. And I take it that if Augustine should address us on existentialism he would distinguish faith, as he understood it, from a non-rational leap or commitment.

While we may not be able of ourselves to see eternal truths of redemption, Augustine maintained, we can rationally examine the incarnate Christ and the linguistic signs of Scripture. After historical and critical examination these give adequate evidence of being trustworthy guides to unseen

45. *On the Trinity* X, 11, 18.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *On the Teacher* II, 37.

48. *On the Predestination of the Saints* I, 5.

wisdom. Belief is justified then, in the Scriptures, and on Jesus Christ. Only by this faith can dead men come alive.⁴⁹

To sum up, Augustine has an existentialist standpoint of human fallenness, an emphasis on the existing individual, and an existential attitude of involvement. But these function within an essentialist ontology and an orthodox doctrine of revelation in Christ and the Bible. Casserley finds this combination compatible with his understanding of existentialism. Tillich, on the other hand, regards an essentialist ontology and propositional revelation to be incompatible with existentialism. Tillich's view would seem to be more in accord with the usage of leading existentialists. Augustine, then, had striking similarities to the existentialist standpoint and attitude, but was not an existentialist in the ordinary use of that word.

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49. Gordon R. Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 159-204.