

AUGUSTINE'S SILENCE ON THE FALLENNESS OF THE SOUL

An intriguing question of Augustinian scholarship, as especially pressed by Fr. Robert O'Connell over the past thirty years or so, is whether or not St. Augustine ever believed we were fallen souls à la Plotinus¹. The supporters of the belief that Augustine did actually hold this — for whatever length of time — base the bulk of their arguments on certain texts from the Cassiciacum period, such as the following:

"Such are those who are well educated in the liberal arts. Doubtless in learning them they draw them out from the oblivion that has overwhelmed them, or dig them out as it were"².

"For, while in your [Evodius'] view the soul has brought no art with it, on the other hand, it has brought every art; for to learn is nothing else than to recall and to remember"³.

"The present question concerns our life, our morals, and the soul, which — destined to return to heaven when rendered more secure, now returning, as it were, to the region of its origin — presumes that it will overcome the opposition of all deceptive appearances; that, when it will have comprehended the truth, it will subdue inordinate desires; and that, when it will have thus become wedded to temperance it will exercise sovereign power"⁴.

¹ The following bibliography forms a good introduction to O'Connell's argument: *St. Augustine's Early Theory of Man*, A.D. 386-391 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968); *The Origin of the Soul in Saint Augustine's Later Works* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1987); *Augustine's Rejection of the Fall of the Soul*, in *Augustinian Studies* 4 (1973), 1-32; *Pre-existence in Augustine's Seventh Letter*, in *Revue des études augustiniennes* 15 (1969), 67-73; *Pre-existence in the Early Augustine*, in *Revue des études augustiniennes* 26 (1980), 176-188; *St. Augustine's Criticism of Origen in "Ad Orosium"*, in *Revue des études augustiniennes* 30 (1984), 84-99.

² *Soliloquia*, II.20.35: "disciplinis liberalibus eruditi sine dubio in se illas oblivione obrutas eruunt discendo et quodam modo refodiunt"; CSEL 89,95.

³ *De quantitate animae* 20.34: "...ut tibi anima nullam, mihi contra omnes artes animam secum attulisse mihi videri; nec aliud quidquam esse id quod dicitur discere, quam reminisci ac recordari"; CSEL 89,173.

⁴ *Contra Academicos*, II.9.22: "De vita nostra, de moribus, de animo res agitur; qui se superaturum inimicitias omnium fallaciarum, et veritate comprehensa, quasi in regionem suae originis rediens, triumphaturum de libidinibus, atque ita temperantia velut coniuge accepta regnaturum esse praesumit, securior rediturus in coelum"; CCL 29,30.

It is not at all the goal of this paper either to develop or to evaluate the arguments for holding that Augustine maintained humans had pre-existed and fallen into bodies. Moreover, it is not the goal of this paper to set forth the chief objections to such a view. Let it suffice to say that the view that Augustine was mightily influenced by a Plotinian understanding of the origin of the soul is *prima facie* the most plausible one, on the basis of texts such as the above. On the other hand, let us also begin by confessing that this evidence falls short of being absolutely compelling.

What I would like to investigate in this paper is, however, the following point. *Given* that O'Connell's case is not preposterous, several obstacles remain in the way of its becoming a compelling argument. I would like to consider one of the major obstacles people often raise to O'Connell's thesis, and show how it can be adequately met⁵. This obstacle being overcome, needless to say, does not entail that one must straight-away adopt O'Connell's position. However, if our argument is successful, it will at least show that his position is all the more respectable.

The problem to O'Connell's thesis we will treat of has two versions, both of which concern the lack of explicit statements by Augustine himself concerning his own (putative) propensity to the fallen soul account of human origin⁶. (1) Augustine never expressly affirms his adherence to a fallen soul theory, *in* those texts we have set forth as embodying this inclination. (2) Especially in the *Retractationes*, when he was reconsidering some of the texts set forth above with respect to their relationship to the issue of the origin of the soul, he is silent about his (alleged) youthful adherence to such a view, but merely contents himself by suggesting some minor emendations in the relevant texts. These two problems reduce then to what we may call the "problem of silence": If Augustine had really believed in the literal fall of human souls, then it is reasonable to suppose that he would have explicitly said so, especially in these texts; but he never explicitly says so; therefore, he probably never really believed in the literal fall of human souls, contrary to O'Connell and company.

Fr. O'Connell himself has addressed this issue of Augustine's

⁵ O'Connell himself has attempted to meet this "problem of silence" (vide *infra*) on several occasions. However, I do not think he has ever satisfactorily brought his defense together coherently. My aim is to help him do this.

⁶ I do not claim that these problems are the only ones besieging his position. There are also, for example, questions of textual interpretation, both major and minor, that he has to meet. However, in his defense, I would have to say that his view is able to account for a large number of both major and minor textual problems.

"silence"⁷, and I will make use of some of his suggestions. However, the bulk of his reply aims to demonstrate how the relevant passages in the *Retractationes* (to take only the second problem) do not fully or clearly gainsay the reputed youthful adherence to a fallen soul view⁸. My objective, on the other hand, is bolder than O'Connell's: I intend to advance arguments to show how, even if Augustine's statements in the *Retractationes* and other later works do indicate his mature repudiation of a fallen soul view, that the silence in such works does not undermine the thesis that in his youth he may well have inclined that way. O'Connell takes the silence of his maturity to betoken that even then the Bishop of Hippo had some positive inclinations toward the fallen soul position; the argument of this paper will take it to signify that Augustine maintained a fallen soul view only at the dawn of his life as a Christian.

The First Problem

At first glance it appears rather odd that Augustine never expressly admitted, in the relevant texts themselves, that he believed that humans were fallen souls. Of course, one cannot expect an author to draw explicit attention to all of the beliefs, presuppositions, etc. in his work; among other things, authors themselves probably cannot even know all such matters, much less discover the proper means of expressing them. However, a belief in fallen souls, being such a basic one to Christianity, by its very nature would seem to demand more explicit care. So let us see if there are any adequate explanations for this conspicuous silence.

First, as a type of argument *ad ignorantium*, one could equally remark that he never expressly denies that, in his earlier period⁹, we were fallen souls. That is, while talking about the "fall", "ascent", "reascent", "homeland" etc. of the soul in the early works he does not ward off any potential misinterpretations of these seductive ideas. However, such

⁷ See especially: *The Origin of the Soul in Saint Augustine's Later Works*, pp. 321-35; *Augustine's Rejection of the Fall of the Soul*, pp. 2-7.

⁸ Cf. *Augustine's Rejection of the Fall of the Soul*, p. 3: "First on the question of whether Augustine, even in his earliest of writings, held the theory of man as 'fallen soul': the burden of my entire argument will be that the evidence of the *Retractions* leaves that question open for investigation in the early texts themselves". Also, *The Origin of the Soul in Augustine's Later Works*, p. 334: "But *non accipiendum, cavendum fuit, dixissem securius* [phrases used in the *Retractationes*], here his language is more guarded: Augustine never comes right out to say he *did not then* intend to convey the meaning he now, years later, finds reprehensible or suspect.

⁹ Since in his maturity he arguably repudiates a certain type of fallen soul view — Origen's — if not indeed all kinds. Cf. *Epistle 166* to Jerome.

reticence could possibly be explained as a sign of his avowed openness¹⁰ to all of the four acceptable hypotheses concerning the soul's origin¹¹. Yet this will not completely do. For not only does he fail to ward off potential misinterpretations, but in light that the fallen soul interpretation is *prima facie* the most plausible in many cases, it should come as a little surprise that such a careful thinker as Augustine would not have taken at least some precautions against potential misunderstandings on this score.

Secondly, one has to avoid an anachronistic reading of Augustine. Present day Catholic doctrine adamantly denies human pre-existence. It may be difficult for us to accept, then, that one of the pillars of Catholic theology and philosophy would himself have erred on this important point. Perhaps then the "silence" concerning an explicit avowal that he was at that time advancing a fallen soul view of the origin of the soul strikes *us* peculiarly. For since we know (by Faith) that humans did not pre-exist, and we also accept the testimony of Augustine on this as well as other matters as being nigh-definitive, our original inclination is to expect him *qua* circumspect catechist to draw explicit attention to this which we find difficult in his teaching. Yet possibly this is an unreasonable expectation on our part. Catholic Doctrines and Dogmas have developed over time, in a wide variety of ways¹².

Thirdly, we may note that, since the bulk of his (alleged) theorizing on the literal fallenness of the soul is found in the Cassiciacum dialogues, we might explain away the "silence" concerning a fallen soul view in such works by noting that the assembly of friends around him would not have needed to be reminded that the views on the soul set forth there were Plotinian. None of the people there could have been aware that pre-existence views were false, since that issue was not yet officially decided. Moreover, the only major Christian philosopher/ theologian that all of them were familiar with was Ambrose, whose ties with Neoplatonism were doubtless well known. Now, as far as I know, Ambrose does not commit himself to

¹⁰ "Nullam [harum sententiarum] temere adfirmare oportebit"; "None of them may be rashly affirmed"; *De libero arbitrio*, III.21.59; CCL 29,309.

¹¹ "Harum autem quatuor de anima sententiarum, utrum de propagine ueniant an in singulis quibusque nascentibus nouae fiant an in corpora nascentium iam alicubi existentes uel mittantur diuinitus uel sua sponte labantur"; "Now there are these four opinions about the origin of the soul, viz., that it comes by propagation, that it is newly created with each individual who is born, that it exists somewhere beforehand and comes into the body of the newly-born either being divinely sent or gliding in of its own accord"; *De libero arbitrio*, III.21.59; CCL 29,309.

¹² This does not entail that they have ever changed, in the sense of a "truth" being rejected and replaced by some other. Development may simply refer to the sharpening of understanding with regard to some Church teaching.

any definite position concerning the origin of the soul. Might Augustine (and the others as well) have known, through personal communication, that Ambrose secretly favored this aspect of Neoplatonic thought? It is a possibility we cannot utterly reject. But more importantly, those present at Cassiciacum certainly knew Neoplatonic ideas directly, regardless of their knowledge of Christianity's appraisal of such ideas. Thus, since Neoplatonism propounds pre-existence and the fall of the soul, and since, as we have alleged, Augustine at least inclined towards this aspect of Neoplatonism at this time, we need not be overly surprised at the lack of explicit avowals of pre-existence in such works. (Indeed, given the intellectual bent of his friends, if Augustine were not setting forth a fallen soul view in such works, we would expect him to make explicit statements to this effect; but he does not do this. In this way, the silence actually supports O'Connell's contentions).

The Second Problem

We now come to the more disturbing silence, namely that found in the *Retractationes*. This silence is more vexing because in this work of his maturity we find him critiquing many of the salient errors of his corpus, yet there is hardly an explicit word about his having adopted or even having been inclined to fallen soul theories in his youth, which we have claimed, along with O'Connell, he then did maintain or at least seriously inclined towards. Rather, we find him making only claims such as these, to the effect that certain passages in his early works should be interpreted in ways other than those supportive of fallen soul views:

"In another place when I was treating of the soul, I said: 'It will return more safely into heaven'. But I would have been safer in saying 'will go' rather than 'will return' on account of those who opine that human souls, as a judgment for their own sins, have been cast into earthly bodies, either having fallen from heaven or having been thrown out of it"¹³.

"What I said in that book, that 'It seems to me that the soul has brought all the arts with it and that what is called learning is nothing more than remembering and recalling', should not be taken to mean that I agree that the soul, at some time, has lived either in another body or elsewhere in a body or outside a body, and that previously, in another life, it has learned the responses it makes when questioned, since it has not learned them here"¹⁴.

¹³ On *Contra Academicos* I.1.8: "Alio loco de anima cum agerem dixi: *Securior rediturus in caelum*'. Iturus autem quam rediturus dixissem securius propter eos, qui putant animos humanos pro meritis peccatorum suorum de caelo lapsos seu deiectos in corpora ista detrudi"; *Retractationes* I.1,3; CCL 47,9.

¹⁴ On *De quantitate animae* I.7.2: "In quo libro illud quod dixi *omnes artes animam*

"I also said that 'without a doubt, those well trained in the liberal arts bring out, in learning, the knowledge buried in oblivion within them and, in a certain way, dig it out'. But this I also disapprove of"¹⁵.

In such passages Augustine does not clearly say he is retracting his purportedly early view that we were fallen souls. Hence, in a work devoted to the correcting of his own mistakes, one's first reaction to this silence is to conclude that he had no need to retract such a view because he in fact never held it, contrary to O'Connell's thesis.

How can this seemingly devastating objection be met? We propose to meet it by showing how such silence might "cut both ways", as it were.

The case can be made that, from around 412 on, Augustine does make efforts to distance himself from fallen soul theories of the origin of the soul. The following citations are representative of this tendency:

"But that souls sin in another earlier life, and that for their sins in that state they are cast down into bodies as prisons, I neither believe nor tolerate nor assent to at all"¹⁶.

"Then by various stages, in proportion to their [souls'] various sins, they came down to earth and incurred the penalty of imprisonment in various bodies. Hence this world came into being; and the reason for the world's creation was to restrain evil, not to establish good. Hence arises the just reproach against Origen"¹⁷.

"[nor do I affirm] that third opinion which would have it that souls sinned in some other state previous to the flesh, and so deserved to be condemned to the flesh, for the Apostle has most distinctly stated that "the children being not yet born, had done neither good nor evil." (*Romans* 9:11) So it is evident that infants could have contracted none but original sin to require remission of sins"¹⁸.

secum attulisse mihi videri, nec aliud quicquam esse id quod dicitur quam reminisci et recordari, non sic accipiendum est, quasi ex hoc adprobetur animam vel in alio corpore vel alibi sive in corpore sive extra corpus aliquando vixisse et ea, quae interrogata respondet, cum hic non didicerit, in alia vita ante didicisse"; *Retractationes* I,8,2; CCL 47,22.

¹⁵ On *Soliloquia* I.4.8: "Item quodam loco dixi quod *disciplinis liberalibus eruditi sine dubio in se illas oblivione obrutas eruunt discendo et quodam modo refodiunt*. Sed hoc quoque improbo"; *Retractationes* I,4,4; CCL 47,15.

¹⁶ *Epistle* 166.9.27: "Sed in alia superiore vita peccare animas, et inde praecipitari in carceres carneos, non credo, non acquiesco, non consentio"; CSEL 44,583.

¹⁷ *De civitate Dei*, XI.23: "...et diversis progressibus pro diversitate peccatorum, a coelis usque ad terras, diversa corpora quasi vincula meruisse: et hunc esse mundum eamque causam mundi fuisse faciendi, non ut conderentur bona, sed ut mala cohiberentur. Hinc Origenes iure culpatur"; CCL 48,341.

¹⁸ *De anima et eius origine*, I.12.15: "...nec illud tertium, alibi peccasse animas ante carnem, ut damnari merentur in carnem. Apostolus quippe apertissime definivit, nondum in carne natos nihil egisse boni seu mali. Unde constat, parvulos, ut remissiones indigeant peccatorum, nonnisi originale contraxisse peccatum"; CSEL 60,314.

Now, to help the reader of his *Retractationes* to avoid undue confusion, one might expect him to make it perfectly clear in this work that even in his youth he did not positively maintain a fallen soul view, especially since with respect to these very passages in the *Retractationes* he admits that they could be interpreted in that way. But he is silent about this. In the mid 410's he became increasingly aware that fallen soul theories were not entirely conformable with a Christian conception of the world. Why then does he not make it more clear in the *Retractationes* that this was not his intention in the early works, if he was not in fact so inclined? It certainly would have cost him nothing to make such a clarification. The answer may be, then, that he well knew he then had held such a view, or at least was seriously inclined that way. So the silence can cut both ways.

However, we are not out of the woods yet. For we still ought to come up with some explanation, on the hypothesis just set forth, why the mature Bishop would have remained silent about his alleged youthful inclination to fallen soul views. One certainly cannot suppose that he was overtly dishonest — both his personal sanctity and the existence of the *Retractationes* militate against that possibility. As far as I can see there are two possibilities.

The first is that Augustine even in 427 may not have been completely certain about the falsity of the fallen soul outlook; he may have been certain that an *Origenian* view of cyclic souls was false¹⁹, but this does not mean that he regarded any pre-existence view as false. Let us keep in mind that the Pelagian dispute had been foremost in his mind ever since 412, and that at the time of the composing of the *Retractationes* he had no reason to believe the controversy would dissipate soon. Moreover, he knew he would die soon, and that other Catholics would most likely use his writings to combat them. Furthermore, since a main point of contention with them concerned the existence of original sin, the two views of the soul that best supported original sin were traducianism and some pre-existence view. Thus, since Augustine claimed himself that he

¹⁹ Cf. O'CONNELL, *The Origin of the Soul in St. Augustine's Later Works*, p. 323: "For when Augustine first makes the acquaintance of Origenism, through Paul Orosius in 414, his instincts of repulsion bear rather on its cyclic and 'fantastic' account of creation and of God's motive for creating the visible world; Origen's account of our souls as 'fallen' does not move directly into his critical sights". Interestingly, the guarded and tentative language of the *Retractationes* ("securius dixissem," "cavendum fuit," "non accipiendum," "hoc quoque improbo") may support the hypothesis that in 427 this was still Augustine's opinion: Scripture clearly rules out that the world is a prison for fallen souls, while not conclusively forbidding any pre-existent status to human beings.

could not fathom Scripture to determine which view of the origin of the soul was correct²⁰, he may have wished to leave open the possibility for future Catholics to make use of the fallen soul view if that could be wielded against the pernicious Pelagians. Thus, given such circumstances, it is consistent to hold that the mature Augustine was aware he had inclined towards a fallen soul view in his youth, and yet he did not retract such passages explicitly because he did not wish to deprive future Pelagian opponents of any weapon.

Secondly, given similar premises as above, one could argue that because of the perceived danger of a resourceful opponent such as Julian contorting even a "tame" version of pre-existence into a more Origenian view, and hence seriously damaging the Catholic position, perhaps Augustine would have remained silent about his youthful propensities in this matter²¹. In this way, by not stirring up the fires of his youth, he may have hoped to deprive Julian of a weapon. Moreover, this does not mean that Augustine was then dishonest about what his earlier opinions in fact were. It may only indicate that, for certain prudent reasons, Augustine simply did not provide a complete accounting of the exact intentions of his youth.

Do these suggestions completely put to rest any doubts about O'Connell's interpretation of the Cassiciacum inclination towards pre-existence of human souls? Of course not; the issue is more subtle than that. Nevertheless, I hope that these indications have at least put to rest the suspicion that the "silence" in the *Retractationes* renders the evidence for O'Connell's view at best "circumstantial"²². One does wish that Augustine had been more explicit and definite in this issue. But given the present state of scholarship, I do not see overwhelming reasons why one can not fruitfully proceed on the assumption that Augustine did, for a certain time at least, honestly believe we had pre-existed and fallen into corruptible bodies as a consequence.

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²⁰ Cf. *De Genesi ad litteram*, X.23.39: After pursuing this investigation as thoroughly as time has allowed, I should judge the weight of reason and of scriptural texts to be equal or nearly equal on both sides [creationism and traducianism], were it not for the fact that the practice of infant baptism gives greater weight to the opinion of those who hold that souls are generated by parents.

²¹ Cf. O'CONNELL, *op. cit.*, pp. 332-335.

²² Frederick Crosson, in personal communication, has evaluated O'Connell's thesis using such language.