

SAINT AUGUSTINE'S MILAN VISION RECONSTRUCTED

A hundred years ago no one doubted that Augustine's autobiography told the story of his conversion to Christ and the Church.¹ In the early 1920s, however, the historical accuracy of the *Confessions* was challenged for the first time. Prosper Alfarcic pointed to discrepancies between Augustine's early works and the *Confessions* in order to argue that the text was an idealized reconstruction of his experience, claiming that Augustine's original conversion had not been to Christianity but to Neo-Platonism.² In the decades that followed many scholars came to the defense of the traditional interpretation, but the debate was not stabilized until the 1950s with the arrival of Pierre Courcelle's *Recherches*.³ Here Courcelle established that the account of Augustine's exposure to Neo-Platonism in the *Confessions* was still compatible with orthodox Christianity by demonstrating that the 4th century Christian community of Imperial Milan was steeped in Platonism, and therefore that a Christian experience rich in Platonic language and themes was to be expected. As a result of Courcelle's work contemporary scholarship on the *Confessions* has centered on further illuminating the exact nature of Augustine's relationship with the Neo-Platonic tradition.

One of Courcelle's more notable contributions has been his interpretation of book 7 chapter 10 of the *Confessions* where Augustine recounts the content of his first contact with Platonic philosophy,

¹ J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*. Vol. 1., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. xx.

² P. Alfarcic, *L'évolution intellectuelle de Saint Augustin: I, Du Manichéisme au Néoplatonisme*, (Paris, 1918). See also, G. Boissier, "Est-ce à dire que, dans ses *Confessions*, saint Augustin ait volontairement altéré la vérité?: La conversion de saint Augustin", *Revue des Deux Mondes* 85, (Paris, 1888), p. 43-69.

³ P. Courcelle, *Recherches sur les 'Confessions' de saint Augustin*, (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1950), p. 60-4. Early defenders of the more traditional interpretation include scholars such as Jules Martin, see J. Martin, "Saint Augustin a Cassiciacum veille et lendemain de sa conversion", *Annales de philosophie Chrétienne*, XXXIX (1898), E. Portalie, see E. Portalie, "Saint Augustin", *Dictionnaire de théologie Catholique* (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1903), Etienne Gilson, see E. Gilson, "Revue critique", *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger*, LXXXVIII, (1919), and, most famously, Charles Boyer, C. Boyer, S.J., *Christianisme et Néoplatonisme dans la formation de saint Augustin*, (Paris: G. Beauchesne, 1920). For a thorough treatment of the debate in general see M. Garvey, *Saint Augustine: Christian or Neo-Platonist?*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1939).

an encounter, he says, that results in the vision of an immutable light which transcends his mind. According to Courcelle's interpretation of this passage, while reflecting on the immaterial nature of Truth, Augustine has a mystical vision that, although partially frustrated, reveals God's ultimate nature as He Who *is*.⁴

Debate, however, still continues concerning the exact nature of Augustine's vision: essentially, interpretations of how Augustine arrives at knowledge of God's ultimate identity fall into two main categories. The first consists of those who hold that it is through a Neoplatonic inspired mystical vision, while the second consists of those who hold that it is through an argument for God's existence based on the transcendence of Truth.⁵ What is common to both interpretations, however, is their reliance on the internal ascent to God found in the *De Libero Arbitrio* for establishing the proper understanding of the chapter. Simply, the internal ascent functions as a template against which the vision passage is structured.⁶

⁴ James O'Donnell describes *Confessions* 7.10.16 and Courcelle's reading in the following manner: "This paragraph contains the first of two (by some counts: three) accounts of what Courcelle defined as 'vaines tentatives d'extases plotiniennes'... Courcelle's views are most concisely presented at *Recherches*, 160-164, where he presents three passages – 7.10.16 (a), 7.17.23 (b), and 7.20.26 (c) – in parallel columns, marking seven stages, which he identifies: (1) reading the *platoniorum libri* (ac), (2) searching for truth and finding above himself (abc), (3) ascent by degrees (b), (4) Rom. 1:20 (bc), (5) sense of certainty but incapacity (abc), (6) 'faiblesse' (abc), and Rom. 1:20 (a). This schema highlights the parallels among these paragraphs, but imposes a structure that should not be understood as originating with Augustine"; see, J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*. Vol. 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 434-435.

⁵ With regard to the former see S. Mac Donald, "Augustine", *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia and Timothy B. Noone, (Blackwell: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 167, and, C. Vaught, *Encounters with God in Augustine's Confessions*, (New York: SUNY, 2004), p. 44. With regard to the latter see, P. Cary "Inner Vision as the Goal of Augustine's Life", *A Readers Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, ed. K. Paffenroth, & P. Kennedy, (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2003), pp. 115-126, S. Menn, *Descartes and Augustine*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 136-150, and, R. O'Donnell, *Images of Conversion in Augustine's Confessions*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), p. 142.

⁶ This understanding of the *De Libero Arbitrio* argument as Augustine's principal argument for the demonstration of God's existence was furthered by the great Medievalist Etienne Gilson, see E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, trans. L.E.M. Lynch, (New York: Random House, 1960), pp. 11-24, and is typified in the entry under the subject heading "God" in the Augustinian encyclopedia *Augustine Through the Ages*: "First Augustine realized that God was the "light" of truth itself [i.e. in the vision passage]: immaterial, eternal, and everywhere and indivisibly present. God was the immaterial source of all perfections and all truth... Third, Augustine realized that God was Being itself. "Truth itself" was identical with

But acute contradictions arise when one attempts to project this text onto the vision passage, and therefore, in order to arrive at the true nature of Augustine's experience in *Confessions* book 7 chapter 10, it is necessary to overcome the history of interpretation that superimposes the *De Libero Arbitrio* onto the vision passage. A twofold strategy will be employed in order to accomplish this. First, various readings of the vision passage will be shown to be contradictory, and, broadly speaking, this will show that it is neither the account of a mystical vision nor an argument for God's existence based on the transcendence of Truth, that is, based on the nature of truth as the transcendent standard of one's value judgements. Second, it will be demonstrated that the principal argument Augustine uses to reason to God's essential nature is the existential proof, the form of argumentation which shows that created being is dependent upon uncreated Being. More specifically, close analysis will establish that the chapter which precedes the vision passage, chapter 9, certainly foreshadows the use of the existential argument, that the chapter that follows it, chapter 11, explicitly references it, and that chapter 10 itself describes what Augustine saw in terms of ontological dependence: therefore, because all three chapters touch on the defining characteristic of the existential argument, that is, *rational* knowledge of God as Being gained through reflection on one's ontological dependence, and because there is no other known argument for God's nature used by Augustine that makes use of this relationship, Augustine must be giving a description of its use in chapter 10. In short, in book 7 chapter 10, Augustine attains the rational insight that his being is dependent upon Being Itself.⁷

the real source of all existence, and thus the incorporeality and infinity of truth itself did not mean that God was literally nothing". This reduction of Being to Truth may also be seen in John Rist's presentation of Augustinian metaphysics in his work *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*. See, L. Ayres and M. Barnes, "God", *Augustine Through the Ages: an Encyclopedia*, ed. A. Fitzgerald, O.S.A., (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) and J.M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Interestingly, Gilson offers the most unique but least plausible reading of *Confessions* 7.10, denying the presence of the *De Libero* argument in the chapter, and claiming that it is an example of a "spontaneous natural theology", see E. Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1936), p. 51.

⁷ For discussion on Augustine's understanding of God as Being see J.F. Anderson, *Augustine and Being* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1965), and E. Zum Brunn, *St. Augustine: Being and Nothingness*, trans. R. Namad (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1998). With Gilson, it is accurate to say that Augustine's understanding of being remains on the level of essence, if what is meant by this is that *esse* is a concept intuited by the mind: clearly, for Saint Augustine, apprehension of the verb *to be* is not

1. A History of interpretation

In book 7 of the *Confessions* Augustine relates three chapters that describe the Platonic arguments which allowed him to set aside his materialistic conception of God. According to James O'Donnell, "All discussions of Augustine's Platonic indebtedness since Courcelle have returned to these paragraphs in which we get our fullest – if not clearest or most concrete – view of the impact that the *platoniorum libri* had on him."⁸ Of these three chapters chapter 10 is certainly the most controversial, and if one is to have full insight into Augustine's understanding of the Platonists' contribution to his intellectual formation the essential content of this passage must be identified. Because the history of commentary surrounding the passage is so extensive, this section will cover the alternative interpretations of the chapter that have been advanced thus far and the paradox that results as a consequence of these interpretations. Such an analysis will demonstrate that book 7 chapter 10 of the *Confessions* can neither be understood as a rational insight based on a Neo-Platonic meditative ascent to Truth nor as the account of a mystical vision.

Augustine's fusion of Biblical and Platonic themes in the vision chapter makes its proper interpretation challenging, but a careful reading of the text establishes that he is giving the description of a rational insight reached via reflection on his ontological dependence. In order to see this the passage itself must first be considered:

By the Platonic books I was admonished to return into myself. With you as my guide I entered into my innermost citadel and was given power to do so because you had become my helper (*Psalms* 29: 11.) I entered and with my soul's eye, such as it was, saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind – not the light of every day, obvious to anyone, nor a larger version of the same kind which would, as it were, have given out a much brighter light and filled everything with its magnitude. It was not that light, but a dif-

reduced to a judgment, that is, the properly Thomistic mode of grasping *esse* for Gilson. If, however, one claims that Augustine's "essentialist" understanding of *esse* means that Augustine understands *esse* to be capable of definition, (for example, Gilson seems to indicate that Augustine understands the essence of *esse* to be immutability) then such an understanding would not be compatible with this essay. In regard to the role of immutability in Augustine's thought it seems reasonable to offer that Augustine understands immutability to be convertible with *esse*. See for example *De Moribus Manichaeorum*: 2.1.1. With regard to Augustine's "essentialist" understanding of *esse* see E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. L. Shook (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 49,50,89.

⁸ Augustine: *Confessions*: p. 434.

ferent thing, utterly different from our kinds of light. It transcended my mind, not in the way that oil floats on water, nor as heaven is above earth. It was superior because it made me, and I was inferior because I was made by it. The person who knows the truth knows it, and he who knows it knows eternity. Love knows it. Eternal truth and true love and beloved eternity: you are my God. To you I sigh 'day and night' (*Psalms* 42:2.) When I first came to know you, you raised me up to make me see that what I saw is Being, and that I who saw am not yet Being. And you gave a shock to the weakness of my sight by the strong radiance of your rays, and I trembled with love and awe. And I found myself far from you 'in the region of dissimilarity,' and heard as it were your voice from on high: 'I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me.' And I recognized that because of iniquity you discipline man and 'cause my soul to waste away like a spiders web' (*Psalms* 38:14), and I said: 'Surely truth cannot be nothing, when it is not diffused through space either finite or infinite?' And you cried from far away: 'I am who am' (*Exodus* 3:14.) I heard in the way one hears within the heart, and all doubt left me. I would have found it easier to doubt whether I was myself alive than that there is not truth 'understood from the things that are made' (*Romans* 1:20).⁹

Scholars argue that there are two lines that constitute the nucleus of Augustine's insight in the above, and they claim that the key to

⁹ *Confessions*: 7.10.16: Et inde admonitus redire ad memet ipsum intravi in intima mea duce te et potui, quoniam *factus es adiutor meus*. Intravi et vidi qualicumque oculo animae meae supra eundem oculum animae meae, supra mentem meam lucem incommutabilem, non hanc vulgarem et conspicuam omni carni nec quasi ex eodem genere grandior erat, tamquam si ista multo multoque clarius claresceret totumque occuparet magnitudine. Non hoc illa erat, sed aliud, aliud valde ab istis omnibus. Nec ita erat supra mentem meam, sicut oleum super aquam nec sicut caelum super terram, sed superior, quia ipsa fecit me, et ego inferior, quia factus ab ea. Qui novit veritatem, novit eam, et qui novit eam, novit aeternitatem. Caritas novit eam. O aeterna veritas et vera caritas et cara aeternitas! Tu es Deus meus, tibi suspiro die ac nocte. Et cum te primum cognovi, tu assumpsisti me, ut viderem esse, quod viderem, et nondum me esse, qui viderem. Et reverberasti infirmitatem aspectus mei radians in me vehementer, et contremui amore et horrore; et inveni longe me esse a te in regione dissimilitudinis, tamquam audirem vocem tuam de excelso: "Cibus sum grandium: cresce et manducabis me. Nec tu me in te mutabis sicut cibum carnis tuae, sed tu mutaberis in me". Et cognovi, quoniam *pro iniquitate erudisti hominem et tabescere fecisti sicut araneam animam meam*, et dixi: "Numquid nihil est veritas, quoniam neque per finita neque per infinita locorum spatia diffusa est?". Et clamasti de longinquo: "Immo uero ego sum qui sum". Et audivi, sicut auditur in corde, et non erat prorsus, unde dubitarem faciliusque dubitarem vivere me quam non esse veritatem, quae per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conspicitur. All English translations are those by Chadwick; see H. Chadwick, *St. Augustine's Confessions*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

understanding this chapter lies in the proper interpretation of these lines, each of which admits of two different readings. The first line relates, "The person who knows the truth knows it, and he who knows it knows eternity... love knows it." This line can be read either literally or figuratively. According to the literal reading the statement *qui novit veritatem novit eam et qui novit eam novit aeternitatem* means just that: Truth is what Augustine saw and it is Truth that is eternal and Truth that is known by love.¹⁰ The alternative way of reading the line would understand the phrase, "he who knows the Truth knows it," figuratively, that is, as understanding truth, love, and eternity to point beyond themselves in order to signify a reality other than them. The interpretation of the second line depends on the rendering of the latin *tu adsumpsisti me ut viderem esse quod viderem, et nondum me esse qui viderem*. Thus, it can be read as either, "you raised me up to make me see that what I saw was Being and that I who saw was not yet Being," as in the above, or as, "you raised me up so that I could see that there was *Something* [emphasis added] to be seen, but also that I was not yet able to see it."¹¹ If one restricts oneself to the use of the *De Libero Arbitrio* argument and the absolute centrality of these two lines, there are basically four possible ways of interpreting the above, and each of these four readings has had a concrete historical realization. In the following, these four interpretations will be briefly sketched, and it will be seen that the first pair of scholars interpret the vision passage as the description of a rational insight, and that the second pair interpret it as the account of a mystical vision. After this survey has been made the most probable interpretation will be identified and shown to account for a portion of the content and form of the experience Augustine relates in chapter 10.

Philip Cary is an example of a scholar that defends the first possible interpretation.¹² According to Cary *qui novit veritatem novit eum* is read literally, that is, as knowledge of Truth, and *ut viderem esse* is understood as knowledge of "something." Advocates of this position are forced, due to the literal reading of *qui novit veritatem novit eum*, to understand the passage as referring to a rational insight based on the

¹⁰ Although this reading seems unlikely it is still adopted by some scholars; see, Philip Cary, *A Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, p. 115.

¹¹ The strong reading of *esse* was first suggested by Solignac. See, Solignac, Aime, S.J. *Les Confessions. Bibliothèque Augustinienne*, series of *Œuvres de Saint Augustin* vol. 13, (Paris, 1962), pp. 616-617. See also, Mac Donald, S. "The Divine Nature", *Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Kretzmann, N. & Stump, E. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 86-87, n. 4.

¹² *A Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions*, p. 115.

internal ascent to Truth found in the *De Libero Arbitrio*.¹³ In other words, those who advance this reading generally use the *De Libero Arbitrio* as a template against which to structure the passage, and therefore the *De Libero Arbitrio* must be briefly considered.

Augustine's argument in the *De Libero Arbitrio* runs as follows. If something exists that is superior to one's mind then it is God. Truth exists and is superior to one's mind. Therefore God exists, that is, God is Truth. Advocates of this interpretation hold that at the center of the Augustinian metaphysic is the notion of immutable Truth, for, because one judges according to its standards (standards such as "the inferior is subject to the superior"), Truth is higher than one's mind, and because God has been defined as that which is greater than one's mind, Truth must, therefore, be called "God." Further, Truth does not change, and what does not change simply *is*: therefore, God is He Who *is*. It follows that this interpretation leads to the reading that, in book 7 chapter 10, Augustine gives the account of a rational deduction, an insight reached via reflection on the nature of Truth, for it is the nature of Truth that is explicitly (i.e. literally) referenced by the phrase *qui novit veritatem novit eum*.

Robert J. O'Connell is a proponent of the second possible interpretation. He holds that *qui novit veritatem novit eum* should be read literally, again, as a vision of Truth, while *ut viderem esse* should be read as referring to the insight *that* God exists.¹⁴ In regard to the former line, as with Cary, O'Connell's literal reading moves him to interpret the passage as a rational insight. In regard to the latter, he renders it: "And when first I came to know You, You raised me up, so that I might see that what I saw *existed* [emphasis added], and that I, who saw, did not yet exist." O'Connell's literal reading of *qui novit veritatem novit eum* forces him to interpret the reference to *esse* as a *verification* of God's existence made immediately after the conclusion of an ascent to Truth. So even though O'Connell holds that Augustine makes an explicit *reference* to *esse*, his literal reading of *qui novit veritatem novit eum* forces him to understand it as referring to the fact *that* God exists and not to the truth that God *is* Existence.

Carl Vaught supports the third possible interpretation, holding that *qui novit veritatem novit eum* is figurative and that *ut viderem esse* refers to a vision of "Something," a reading most conducive to being interpreted as a mystical vision. Vaught claims that, "At this crucial

¹³ *De Libero Arbitrio*: 2.7-2.12.

¹⁴ *Images of Conversion in St. Augustine's Confessions*, pp. 129-131.

juncture [i.e. the vision line of book 7 chapter 10], Augustine is not drawing a conclusion from an argument for God's existence... [instead] he is responding to what he hears from what exists beyond his soul where the truth that stands over against him can be seen and understood through the things that are made." According to Vaught, Augustine uses the language of seeing, speaking, and hearing, along with analogy and metaphor, in order to describe, in purely figurative expressions, an experience that "could not be reduced to scientific terms."¹⁵

Finally, Scott MacDonald advocates the fourth possible interpretation.¹⁶ Here *qui novit veritatem novit eum* is read figuratively, as signifying something other than Truth, and *ut viderem esse* is interpreted as a vision of Being, not "Something." MacDonald, again, as with most of the other scholars above, uses the *De Libero Arbitrio* as the ultimate model for Augustine's metaphysics, but argues that it is unable to give Augustine an insight into God's ultimate nature. MacDonald claims that there is an intrinsic difficulty with the conclusion that Truth is superior to one's mind as reached in the *De Libero Arbitrio*, a difficulty, he says, that is acknowledged by both Augustine and his interlocutor in the text.¹⁷ That is, MacDonald notes that Augustine's interlocutor in the *De Libero Arbitrio* points out that to demonstrate that there is something higher than reason does not yet prove that God exists, for when one says "God" one does not simply mean "that which is higher than one's self," but, "that than which nothing is higher."¹⁸ MacDonald holds that this argument does not reveal "that than which nothing is higher," or Being Itself, and so he argues that an experience *beyond reason* is the only way to explain Augustine's mature understanding of God's nature. Consequently, he says, "Augustine's own intellectual ascent seems to have succeeded where his argument [the *De Libero Arbitrio* argument] falls short... because, as he reports it, his own ascent culminated in a glimpse of the divine nature itself." Immediately after this sentence he quotes book 7 chapter 10 of the *Confessions*, relating to the reader the first version, cited above, of the *ut viderem esse* line. According to MacDonald chapter 10 must be understood as an account of a vision of Being for three additional

¹⁵ *Encounters with God in Augustine's Confessions*, p. 44.

¹⁶ *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, pp. 86-87, n. 4. It is important to note that Courcelle and Henry hold a version of this argument. They differ from MacDonald in that they are not committed to the strong reading of the *viderem esse* line that he advances.

¹⁷ *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, p. 167.

¹⁸ *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, pp. 86-87, n. 4.

reasons.¹⁹ First, he argues that the translation which holds that Augustine has a vision of "Something" does not capture Augustine's own thoughts concerning the experience, for, describing this vision, Augustine says things such as, "I first came to know *You*," and, afterward, "I was loving *You*," and, "a memory of *You* remained in me." MacDonald claims that if one accepts the second reading of the *ut viderem esse* line, these claims become unjustified, for, "if Augustine has come to know and love the true God as a result of this event, he must have seen more than merely that there was *something* [emphasis added] to be seen – he must have seen *what* it was he was seeing."²⁰ Second, Augustine goes on to say that he is *nondum esse*, "not yet Being," a phrase, claims MacDonald, that is often intentionally mistranslated, but which certainly reads "not yet Being." This statement, claims MacDonald, would make no sense unless Augustine intended to draw a contrast between God's nature as Being (*esse*) and Augustine's nature as that which is not yet Being (*esse*.) Finally, MacDonald holds that the second reading fails to connect with the chapter that immediately follows it, chapter 11, where Augustine says, "I turned my gaze to the other things below you (*inspexi cetera infra te*) and saw that they are neither entirely being nor entirely non-being."²¹ The second interpretation of the *ut viderem esse* line would not convey Augustine's principal philosophical point clearly articulated in chapter 11, again, the chapter immediately following the vision chapter, for here he relates that all beings are dependent upon Being Itself. In other words, according to MacDonald, in chapter 11 Augustine applies to creation the point that his vision of God as Being has made clear to him in chapter 10.

Given the premises that Carey, O'Donnell, Vought, and MacDonald start with their four conclusions are only natural, but a more fundamental way of reading the passage is possible. Before this is shown, however, it must be seen that these four readings don't allow for a coherent account of Augustine's experience, for several contradictions surface when one attempts to read the chapter as either a Neo-Platonic inspired mystical vision or as a rational argument based on the transcendental proof.

Consider first the claim that the passage describes an experience beyond reason. The first inconsistency involves Augustine's use of the phrase, "not yet Being." Such language explicitly opposes the

¹⁹ *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, pp. 86-87, n. 4.

²⁰ *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, pp. 86-87, n. 4.

²¹ *Confessions*: 7.11.17.

idea that Augustine had a mystical vision, for Plotinus maintains that mystical visions amount to an absolute assimilation of the soul with the One: in such a state there is no distinction between the soul and the ultimate principle because the soul's identity is "absorbed," for lack of a better term, into the One.²² If this had been an authentic Neo-Platonic ascent Augustine would not have claimed that he could see that he was "not yet Being." Second, and most importantly, this cannot be the account of a mystical vision because, immediately after the vision passage, Augustine claims that his insight was the conclusion of a rational process, for he says that he came to know the truth, "from the things that are made," a quotation of *Romans*: 1:20.²³ Now, in the account of his insight that God is Being Augustine claims that God raised him up in order to see either *esse* or "Something," and that he, who saw, was "not yet Being" or "not yet able to see." But, no matter how one reads this line, if this is the account of a mystical vision then it cannot be the account of Augustine's grasping truth "from the things that are made," for then the truth that God is Being would not be inferred but "seen" in *The Thing* (i.e. God) that is unmade. That is, the account given in chapter 10, if it were to be a mystical vision, would communicate to Augustine immediately that God is Being and that Augustine receives his being from God: this would not be knowledge received through a created reality, and therefore *Romans* 1:20 would have been quoted in vain. Augustine would be moving from the cause to its effect, not from an effect to its cause, and Augustine certainly understands Saint Paul to mean the latter. Nor can one say that Augustine experienced God's immediate presence, and then, at a subsequent time after the withdrawal of God's immediate presence, formed a concept of this reality, a concept of Being, and, after that, inferred that he was not Being and required a cause for his being. This is not possible because it is clear that there are not two separate experiences related in chapter 10. There is only one. In other words, if Augustine was to have had a purely mystical experience of God's presence in this passage he would then require a second experience in which he confirmed God's existence purely through rational inference prior to his claim that God can be known from the things that are made. However, there is no second experience made before this claim. Therefore, Vaught and MacDonald's positions can be set aside for the experience Augustine describes is not a mystical one.

²² B. Switalski, *The Neoplatonic Ethics of Saint Augustine*, (New York: Polish Institute of Arts and Sciences in America, 1946).

²³ See, *City of God*: 8.6 and 22.29

Incredibly, neither is it possible for the vision passage to be an account of a rational argument for God's existence based on Augustine's famous internal ascent to Truth. Simply, this argument does not harmonize with rigorous analysis, for the language of ontological dependence used in describing Augustine's relationship to what he saw takes on a much stronger and more central role than would be found in an argument based on the *De Libero Arbitrio*. Again, what is meant by an ascent to Truth is a demonstration for God's existence and nature as found in book 2 of the *De Libero Arbitrio*. According to this theory the individual mind participates in the mind of God, the unchanging and eternal exemplars that are the patterns of all changing and temporal things. One uses a meditative ascent that is meant to clear from one's mind those images, impressions, and ideas that prevent one from seeing the mind's self-evident participation in Truth itself. Augustine, however, cannot be understood to be referring to a demonstration for God's existence based on such an argument. This is clear from his use of the verb *facere* in the lines that precede the vision, for here Augustine uses the verb *facere* in order to designate a relationship of ontological dependence: "It was superior because it made me (*fecit me*), and I was inferior because I was made by it (*factus ab ea*)."²⁴ This relationship is totally alien to the context of the *De Libero Arbitrio* argument, but is often used by Augustine in the context of existential dependence.²⁴ This is not to say that Augustine does not

²⁴ The verb *facere* is not used in Augustine's demonstration from Truth in the *De Libero Arbitrio*: 2.15, or in *Confessions*: 7.17.23. It is, however, often used within the context of Augustine's "existential" proofs for God's existence or passages in which he is discussing the dependence of beings on Being. There are several instances of the latter, for example, *De Civitate Dei*: 8.6, *Confessions*: 11.4.6. In the latter Augustine says, "See, heaven and earth exist, they cry aloud that they are made, for they suffer change and variation. But in anything which is not made and yet is, there is nothing which previously was not present. To be what once was not the case is to be the subject to change and variation. They also cry aloud that they have not made themselves: 'The manner of our existence shows that we are made, for before we came to be, we did not exist to be able to make ourselves.' And the voice with which they speak is self-evidence. You, Lord, who are beautiful, made them for they are beautiful. You are good, for they are good. You are, for they are. Yet they are not beautiful or good or possessed of being in the sense that you their maker are. In comparison with you they are deficient in beauty and goodness and being. We know this – thanks to you – and yet our knowledge is ignorance in comparison with yours." The latin reads, *Ecce sunt caelum et terra, clamant, quod facta sint; mutantur enim atque variantur. Quidquid autem factum non est et tamen est, non est in eo quidquam, quod ante non erat: quod est mutari atque variari. Clamant etiam, quod se ipsa non fecerint: 'Ideo sumus, quia facta sumus; non ergo eramus, antequam essemus, ut fieri possemus a nobis'. Et vox dicentium est ipsa evidetia. Tu ergo, Domine, fecisti ea, qui pulcher es: pulchra sunt enim; qui bonus es: bona sunt enim; qui es: sunt enim. Nec ita*

have a secondary demonstration for God's existence based on such a proof, but simply that such a demonstration is not at work in this passage.²⁵

So as is clear from *Romans* 1:20, Augustine cannot be understood as giving the account of a mystical vision, and therefore Vaught and MacDonald's position is found to be deficient, but, neither can it be said that the argument based on the transcendence of Truth is at work here because such a proof is not grounded in a relationship of ontological dependence, while the argument in book 10 certainly does. Therefore, this passage presents the reader with a seemingly insurmountable paradox: it explicitly states it is not the account of a mystical vision yet it does not relate what scholars believe is Augustine's most trusted argument for God's existence. In what way then does Augustine come to knowledge of God's ultimate nature?

2. The philosophy of *Acts* 17:28

The phrase "in Him we live and move and are" found in *Acts* 17:28 is borrowed by Paul from a 6th century Greek poet named Epimenides and it occurs 33 times in the Augustinian corpus.²⁶ One of

pulchra sunt nec ita bona sunt nec ita sunt, sicut tu Conditor eorum, quo comparato nec pulchra sunt nec bona sunt nec sunt. Scimus haec, gratias tibi, et scientia nostra scientiae tuae comparata ignorantia est.

²⁵ There is a second way of reading the *De Libero Arbitrio* argument. The second way is based on the movement from immutable truth to Truth Itself. This reading of the *De Libero* holds that the immutable and eternal truths grasped by the mind are not Truth Itself; truths that are not Truth Itself however require an eternal sustainer: therefore all truth must have a ground in Truth itself. However, neither form of the *De Libero Arbitrio* argument can be at work in book 7 chapter 10. More specifically, second version cannot be implemented in chapter 10 because there is no intermediary between Augustine's mind and what he sees. That is, the text explicitly says that Augustine moves from his mind to that which transcends it: there is no account of a move from his mind to truth, and from truth to Truth Itself. Thus, it is certain that Augustine gives a description of the existential proof.

²⁶ These 33 occurrences may be found in the following texts: *Epistulae* 140 and 187; *De Genesi ad Litteram*: 4.12 (2), 4.18, 5.16; *Quaestionum in Heptateuchum*: 4.42; *Expositio Quarundam Propositionum ex Epistula ad Romanos*: 3; *Enarrationes in Psalmos*: 34.2.6, 99.5, 137.2; *Sermones*: 7, 68 (2), 171, 362, 369, 198; *De Civitate Dei*: 8.10; *Contra Ad Versarium Legis et Prophetarum*: 2; *De Trinitate*: 4.1, 4.17, 8.3, 14.12(2); *Contra Litteras Petiliani*: 2.30.69; *De Unico Baptismo*: 4.6 (2); *Contra Gaudentium*: 2.10.11; *Contra Julianum*: 3.56; *Contra Maximinum*: 1.12; *Contra Sermonem*; *Arianorum*: 30. The preceding passages have been identified with the aid of the *Cetedoc Library of Christian Latin Texts (CLCLT)*, ed. P. tombeur. Turnhout: Brepols, 1991. For articles concerning *Acts* 17:28 see: Francois Chatillon, "Quidam secundum eos": Note d'exégèse augustinienne (*Conf.*, 7, ix, 15), dans *Revue*

these occurrences is found in *Confessions* book 7 chapter 9, and understanding Augustine's use of Acts 17:28 in this chapter is essential for the correct reading of *Confessions* book 7 chapter 10. But before chapter 9 can be analyzed, one must first understand how Augustine interprets this passage in general. More specifically, study of this passage will reveal that Augustine understands Acts 17:28 to refer to an axiom that reveals one's ability to attain knowledge of God as He Who is by way of natural reason.

The metaphysical core of Acts 17:28 is interpreted literally by Augustine only once, and this interpretation is found in his work *De Genesi ad Litteram* in a passage that concerns the manner in which one is to understand Scripture's claim that God rested on the seventh day of creation. According to Augustine there are at least two different ways to understand God's rest on the seventh day. The first is as a type of pre-figurement of the spiritual rest that God's people were going to experience through Christ, a rest which is to be had prior to Christ by imitating God's model of inactivity on the seventh day. The second is to see it as referring to His having rested from making any new types of creatures. Augustine qualifies this latter form of rest by noting that, although no new creatures were made, God continued to conserve the existence of the things he had already made:

It is the creator's power, after all, and the virtuosity, the skill and tenacity of the almighty, that causes every created thing to subsist. If this tenacious virtuosity ceased for one moment to rule and direct the things that have been created, their various species would at once cease to exist, and every nature would collapse into nothingness...

Indeed, the very expression employed by the Lord, *My Father is working until now*, points to the continuousness of his work, by which he holds together and manages the whole of creation. It could, you see, have been understood differently if he had said, "and is now working," here we would not have to take the work as being continuous. But by saying *until now*, he forces us to understand it in the other sense, that is, as meaning from the time when he had worked at the original establishment of all things. And then there is what is written about his Wisdom: *She reaches from end to end mightily, and arranges all things sweetly* (Wisdom 8:1) about whom

du moyen âge latin, 1, 1945, pp. 287-304; Pierre Courcelle, *Un vers d'Epiménide dans le "Discours sur l'Aréopage"*, dans *"Revue des études grecques"*, 76, 1963, pp. 404-414; G. Folliet, *Les Citations de Actes 17,28 et Tite I, 12 Chez Augustin*, dans *Revue des études augustinienne*s, 11, 1965, pp. 293-295.

it is also written that her movement is swifter and more nimble than all movements...

And then there is what the apostle said when he was proclaiming God to the Athenians, that *in him we live and move and are* (Acts 17: 28); interpreted straightforwardly, to the extent of the human mind's capacity, it will support this conviction which makes us believe and say that God is ceaselessly at work in the things he has created. We are not in him, I mean to say, like his substance, in the way it is said that *he has life in himself* (John 5:26); but evidently, since we are something different from him, we are only in him because he is working at this, and this is his work by which he holds all things together, and by which his Wisdom *reaches from end to end mightily and arranges all things sweetly*, and it is by this arrangement that "in him we live and move and are." From this the conclusion follows that if he withdraws this work from things, we will neither live nor move nor be.²⁷

According to Augustine, Acts 17:28 and Wisdom 8:1 signify God's continuous creative action, and, as is clear from the language he uses to illuminate this passage, Augustine understands Acts 17:28 to be pregnant with the most fundamental theme of metaphysics, the tension between being and non-being, for God actively sustains creatures by giving them being and by preventing them from collapse into non-being. What establishes this reading for Augustine is Paul's use

²⁷ *De Genesi ad Litteram*: 4.12.22-23: Creatoris namque potentia, et omnipotentis atque omnitenentis virtus, causa subsistendi est omni creaturae: quae virtus ab eis quae creata sunt regendis, si aliquando cessaret, simul et illorum cessaret species, omnisque natura concideret... Proinde et quod Dominus ait: *Pater meus usque nunc operatur*, continuationem quamdam operis eius, qua universam creaturam continet atque administrat, ostendit. Aliter enim posset intellegi si diceret: Et nunc operatur, ubi non esset necesse ut operis continuationem acciperemus: aliter autem cogit intellegi cum ait: *Usque nunc*, ex illo scilicet quo cuncta cum conderet operatus est. Et quod scriptum est de sapientia eius: *Pertingit a fine usque ad finem fortiter, et disponit omnia suaviter*; de qua item scriptum est, quod *motus eius agilior celeriorque sit omnibus*... Et illud quod ait Apostolus cum Deum Atheniensibus praedicaret. *In illo vivimus, et movemur et sumus*, liquide cogitatum quantum humana mens valet, adiuvat hanc sententiam, qua credimus et dicimus Deum in iis quae creavit, indesinenter operari. Neque enim tamquam substantia eius sic in illo sumus, quemadmodum dictum est, quod habeat vitam in semetipso: sed utique cum aliud sumus quam ipse, non ob aliud in illo sumus, nisi quia id operatur, et hoc est opus eius, quo continet omnia, et quo eius *sapientia pertendit a fine usque ad finem fortiter, et disponit omnia suaviter*; per quam dispositionem *in illo vivimus, et movemur, et sumus*. Unde colligitur quod si hoc opus suum rebus subtraxerit, nec vivemus, nec movebimur, nec erimus. The English translation used above was taken from *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees/Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis/The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, ed. J. Rotelle, trans. E. Hill (Hyde-Park: New City Press, 2002).

of *summus*. Because of God we *are*, as opposed to not. Therefore, *summus* demonstrates that the phrase refers to a form of ontological dependence in which one receives the totality of what one is, the totality of one's being, from God.

Due to the ontological primacy of the concepts Augustine finds latent in this passage, it should come as no surprise that several books later he develops the full implications of this insight in a passage concerning the immutable and eternal nature of the divine exemplars, and in this passage, *De Genesi ad Litteram* 5.16, Augustine clearly indicates that he holds the phrase "in Him we live and move and are" to refer to rational knowledge of God as Being reached through reflection on one's ontological dependence:

So then, that eternal and unchangeable nature, which God is, having in itself to be, just as Moses was told: "I am who am" (*Exodus* 3:14), is totally different from those things which have been made. Only that, you see, really and truly and primordially is, which always is in the same way, and not only never changes but is absolutely incapable of changing. So without bringing into existence yet any of the things which he made, he has all things primordially in himself in the same manner as he is. After all, he would not make them unless he knew them before he made them; nor would he know them unless he had them with him; and he would not have with him things that had not yet been made except in the manner in which he himself is not made.

So what I am saying is that although that substance is inexpressible and can only be presented by one human being to another in words taken over from space and time, though it is before all times and places, still for all that the one who made is nearer to us than the many things which he made, "for in him we live and move and are," while most of these things are removed from the human mind on account of their dissimilarity in kind, being corporeal.

Nor is our human mind capable of seeing them where they are with God, in the formulae according to which they were made, so that in this way we might know how many, how great and of what sort they are, even though we do not see them with the senses of the body. The fact is they are remote from our bodily senses, being so far away, or cut off from our observation and activity by the interposition of other bodies. The result is that it is much harder work to find out about them than about the one by whom they were made, and furthermore it is incomparably more satisfying and worthwhile for the devout mind to come into the slightest contact with him, than for it to comprehend the whole universe. So how right the book of Wisdom is to find fault with the investigators of this world and age! "For if they were capable," it says, "of so much that they could appraise and weigh up the world,

how is it that they did not more easily find its Lord?" (*Wisdom* 13:9.) The foundations of the earth, after all, are inaccessible to our eyes, and [yet] the one who laid the earth's foundations draws near to our minds.²⁸

In the above *Acts* 17:28 is interpreted as an axiom used to reach the conclusion that God is more easily known, that is, "near to us," than the things that are made. This is clear from the relationship between the second and first paragraph. The second paragraph is a commentary on the first, and what Augustine is saying in the second paragraph is that it is easier to know God as He is described in the first paragraph, as Being (*Ego sum qui sum*), than it is to know material things due to *Acts* 17:28: therefore *Acts* 17:28 leads to knowledge of God as Being. The argument takes the form of a "reversed" syllogism. As with all reversed syllogisms the conclusion is stated first, "He who makes is nearer to us than the things that are made," followed by the second premise, "in Him we live and move and are." Augustine then indicates what one is to draw from *Acts* 17:28 in order to reach this conclusion by opposing it to the first premise he uses in the argument, a premise which explicitly contrasts its content: "*while most of these things are remote from the human mind on account of their dissimilarity in kind, being corporeal.*" This line is meant to designate the opposite of *Acts* 17:28, and therefore if one

²⁸ *De Genesi ad Litteram*: 5.16.34: Quamvis ergo illa aeterna incommutabilisque natura, quod Deus est, habens in se ut sit, sicut Moysi dictum est: *Ego sum qui sum*; longe scilicet aliter quam sunt ista quae facta sunt: quoniam illud vere ac primitus est, quod eodem modo semper est, nec solum non commutatur, sed commutari omnino non potest; nihil horum quae fecit existens, et omnia primitus habens, sicut ipse est: neque enim ea faceret, nisi ea nosset antequam faceret; nec nosset, nisi videret; nec videret, nisi haberet; nec haberet ea quae nondum facta erant, nisi quemadmodum est ipse non factus: quamvis, inquam, illa substantia ineffabilis sit, nec dici utcumque homini per hominem possit, nisi usurpatis quibusdam locorum ac temporum verbis, cum sit ante omnia tempora et ante omnes locos; tamen propinquior nobis est qui fecit, quam multa quae facta sunt. *In illo enim vivimus, et movemur, et sumus*: istorum autem pleraque remota sunt a mente nostra propter dissimilitudinem sui generis, quoniam corporalia sunt; nec idonea est ipsa mens nostra, in ipsi rationibus quibus facta sunt, ea videre apud Deum, ut per hoc sciamus quot et quanta qualiaque sint, etiamsi non ea videamus per corporis sensus. Remota quippe sunt a sensibus corporis nostri, quoniam longe sunt, vel interpositis aut oppositis aliis a nostro contuitu actuque separantur. Ex quo fit ut maior ad illa inveniendae sit labor, quam ad illum a quo facta sunt, cum sit incomparabili felicitate praestantius illum ex quantalacumque particula pia mente sentire, quam illa universa comprehendere. Unde recte culpantur in libro Sapientiae inquisitores huius saeculi: *Si enim tantum, inquit, potuerunt valere, ut possent aestimare saeculum; quomodo eius Dominum non facilius invenerunt?* Ignota enim sunt fundamenta terrae oculis nostris, et qui fundavit terram, propinquat mentibus nostris.

inverts its meaning one arrives at Augustine's understanding of *Acts* 17:28 in this context. His argument may be expressed more clearly as follows:

1. Material things are not easily known.
2. God is easily known (*Acts* 17:28).
3. Therefore God is more easily known than material things.²⁹

According to Augustine if one understands the full implications of *Acts* 17:28 one will see how the second premise used in the argument above can be generated from it. More precisely, Augustine is able to derive the premise "God is easily known" from *Acts* 17:28 because he interprets his description of God's nature in the first paragraph as an insight that follows from *Acts* 17:28 considered as an axiom that reveals God's existence and nature immediately upon the definition of its terms:

1. Created being is not the cause of its own being.
2. Uncreated Being is the cause of its own being.
3. Therefore created beings receive their being from uncreated Being or "In Him we live and move and are".

From the argument above, it is clear that the premise needed to establish his conclusion in the second paragraph follows from *Acts* 17:28, for it demonstrates that knowledge of God is easily attained and that God is immaterial.³⁰ It is certain that Augustine intends *Acts* 17:28 to refer to *rational* knowledge due to the quotation from the book of *Wisdom* in the third paragraph which says, "If they could know so much that they could speculate about the universe, how did they not more easily discover the Lord of this world and its Creator?" This quote from *Wisdom* repeatedly signifies rational knowledge for Augustine.³¹ In addition, because the phrase refers to *rational knowledge of God as Being itself reached by way of reflection on one's ontological dependence* one must conclude that Augustine is describing the use of the existential argument here, for, as was mentioned previously, the transcendental proof argues for God's nature by showing the mind something qualitatively superior than itself and not

²⁹ Or "Most of these things are remote from the human mind because they are corporeal", but "In Him we live and move and are": therefore, "He who makes is nearer to us than the things that are made".

³⁰ i.e. He Who *is* is unchanging and what is unchanging is non-material.

³¹ See Augustine's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 3.3.

through reflection on its contingency. That is, analysis of this axiom demonstrates that God can be known as He Who *is* by way of natural reason, a conclusion that is grounded in Augustine's most basic interpretation of the scriptural passage given earlier in book 4, reflection on creation's ontological dependence. It is only by reading *Acts* 17:28 in this manner that one can explain the conclusion reached in the second paragraph quoted above.

Acts 17:28 is explicitly associated with knowledge of Being attained through reflection on one's ontological dependence in at least 3 other places. The first occurs in book 8 chapter 3 of *De Trinitate* in a passage which concerns the nature of the Good. Here Augustine begins his description of the Good by reflecting on the various experiences one has of predicating goodness of things. For example, when one says that "Food is good" it is because it is "conducive to health," and when one says that a "Farm is good" it is because it is "pleasant and fertile." Augustine claims that if one takes away the subject of the statement "x is good," one will see that which is "Goodness Itself," the Good of every other good. According to Augustine, one would not be able to make value based predicative statements if the idea of the Good Itself had not been impressed on one. This is because the Good is not that which one judges but that by which one judges, and therefore the true object which one loves, the true object that one values. Augustine attempts to clarify his position with the example of a "good soul." He explains that he understands two concepts when he hears these two words: one by which the object spoken about is a "soul," and one by which it is "good." These must be separate, says Augustine, because, "certainly the soul itself had nothing to do with making itself a soul, for at that time it was not, so that it could not bring about its own being." Augustine continues, this time giving a more properly philosophical account of the relationship that he is trying to explain. He begins by stating the Platonic axiom that holds that "there are no changeable goods without an unchangeable Good." It follows from this that when one sees goods that are not good in all respects one understands the Good Itself simultaneously for these goods are good by participation in the Good Itself. In other words, if one strips away from one's mind the goods that are good by Goodness one will see that which is absolute Goodness. Therefore, one should love goods for the sake of the Good Itself and the one who loves goods for their own sake is foolish. Augustine then qualifies this position, for, even though goods are loved only for the sake of the ultimate Good, the soul that properly understands itself may love itself insofar as it understands itself in the "Art" in which it was made: that is, one does

not love the soul itself because of itself, but because in it one sees the eternal archetype in which it was made. This archetype is "the Truth and the simple Good." Augustine then attempts to clarify his understanding of this Platonic axiom by rearticulating his argument in other terms, and it is here that *Acts* 17:28 contributes to his account of one's knowledge of the Good. Augustine begins his attempt to illuminate his previous line of reasoning by noting that in order to be good the soul turns to the Good it owes for being a soul:

In order to be good therefore, the soul turns to this Good to which it is also indebted for being a soul. Hence, the will then works in harmony with nature when, in order that the soul may be perfected in good, that Good is loved by the will turning to it, from which that other good also comes that is not lost even by the turning away of the will. For by turning away from the Supreme Good, the soul ceases to be a good soul, but it does not cease to be a soul, and even as such it is already a better good than the body. The will, therefore, loses that which the will acquires. For there already was a soul that could wish to be turned to that from which it was, but there wasn't yet a soul that could wish to be before it was. And this is our Good, when we see that it [the soul] owes or has owed being we comprehend whatever has or had to be, and when we see that it [the soul] could not be unless it owed being we do not in anyway comprehend whatever had to be. Therefore this Good is not far from anyone of us, for "In Him we live and move and have our being."³²

Here again one sees the basic metaphysical theme of being and non-being. The Good is that which gives being: "the Good is loved by the will turning to it, from which that other good also comes that is not lost even by the turning away of the will" for "by turning away from the supreme Good...the soul does not cease to be a soul." By turning away from its source the soul does not lose its being but the

³² *De Trinitate*: 8.2.5: Ad hoc se igitur animus convertit ut bonus sit, a quo habet ut animus sit. Tunc ergo voluntas naturae congruit ut perficiatur in bono animus, cum illud bonum diligitur conversione voluntatis, unde est et illud quod non amittitur nec aversione voluntatis. Avertendo enim se a summo Bono, amittit animus ut sit bonus animus; non autem amittit ut sit animus, cum et hoc iam bonum sit corpore melius; hoc ergo amittit voluntas quod voluntas adipiscitur. Iam enim erat animus, qui converti ad id vellet a quo erat; qui autem vellet esse antequam esset nondum erat. Et hoc est bonum nostrum, ubi videmus utrum esse debuerit aut debeat, quidquid esse debuisset aut debere comprehendimus, et ubi videmus esse non potuisse nisi esse debuisset, quidquid etiam quomodo esse debuerit non comprehendimus. Hoc ergo bonum non longe positum est ab unoquoque nostrum: In illo enim vivimus, et movemur, et sumus. The English translation found above is mine made with the aid of Edmund Hill's translation. See, *The Trinity*, (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1996).

Good Itself: "The will therefore loses that which the will acquires." The reason it must be the Good Itself that is lost is that the soul loves the Good Itself but is not the Good Itself: "for there already was a soul that could wish to be turned to that from which it was but there wasn't yet a soul that could wish to be before it was." This is merely the reapplication of the principle articulated earlier in the chapter which holds that a thing cannot bring about its own being. Finally, this rather cryptic manner of revealing the soul's relationship with its source is then explicitly given content in the second to the last line: "This then is our Good, when we see that it [the soul] owes or has owed being we comprehend whatever has or had to be, and when we see that it [the soul] could not be unless it owed being we do not in anyway comprehend whatever had to be." A point must be made regarding the correct English rendering of, *et hoc est bonum nostrum, ubi videmus utrum esse debuerit aut debeat, quidquid esse debuisset aut debere comprehendimus, et ubi videmus esse non potuisse nisi esse debuisset, quidquid etiam quomodo esse debuerit non comprehendimus*. The latin expression *debere esse* is typically rendered "ought to be," and so, for example, the McKenna translation reads: "And this is our good, wherein we see whether the thing ought to have been or ought to be, insofar as we comprehend whatever ought to have been or ought to be; and wherein we see that the thing could not have been, unless it ought to have been, although at the same time we do not even comprehend in what manner it ought to have been."³³ There are, however, several deficiencies that surface if this reading is accepted, a point that becomes clear when one considers what *must* be present in these lines simply by virtue of their context. First, due to the presence of *ergo* in the final line, knowledge of God must be understood as a conclusion that follows from the lines that preceded it; but what exists in the conclusion must pre-exist in the premises, and therefore the *Et hoc est bonum nostrum* line must be understood as the initial part of an argument that refers, in some manner, to the nature of the Good. Second, the theme of ontological dependence is so strong in chapters 4 and 5 that it is certain that Augustine intends to focus on the fact that finite beings owe their being to God, an observation he makes in the *De Libero Arbitrio* with the use of *debere* reflected in the translation offered here.³⁴ This is clear from the fact that the theme of ontological

³³ *On the Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, ed. Gareth B. Matthews, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

³⁴ See for example *De Libero Arbitrio* 3.15.32, "Thus temporal things do as much as was given them to do, and they repay their debt to God, to whom they owe the fact

dependence is mentioned at least 6 times, for example, the reference to a good's participation in Goodness, the need for an unchanging principle to sustain any changing thing, the dependence of a mutable form on an eternal archetype, and the notion that the Good gives the soul being, to name the most obvious instances. Third, it must be the case that whatever insight is conveyed in the first clause is mirrored in the second due to the repetition of *ubi*, *videmus*, *debere*, *quidquid*, and *comprehendimus*. It is precisely these three points that are not met by the McKenna translation. That is, if we accept the necessity of finding a reference to the Good in the *Et hoc est bonum nostrum* line it is unclear what manner the phrase "whatever ought to be" would describe this Good, if in fact it was even intended to do so; if one does not read the *Et hoc est bonum nostrum* as referring to the Good then the use of *ergo* and the nature of the final line as a conclusion are left unexplained. Second, it is clear that the theme of ontological dependence reflected in chapters 4 and 5, as well as *Acts* 17:28 itself would also be left totally unexplained in the McKenna translation. Finally, if McKenna is referring to the Good with the phrase "whatever ought to be" he does not parallel this reference in the final clause, and therefore the intended symmetry between the two clauses would be broken. Simply, Augustine uses *Acts* 17:28 to signify the soul's radical ontological dependence on its cause, a dependence grasped by natural reason, a fact that is clear from the Platonic language and Augustine's description of the soul's relationship to its ultimate cause. With regard to the phrase *quidquid esse debere* itself Augustine merely wishes to point out that something had to be in order for the soul to owe being (i.e. to give being to the soul), an insight that is reflected in the irony of the two senses of *debere esse* which is revealed in what is essentially a play on words.³⁵ Moreover, according to Augustine, to see that one owes one's being does not mean that one will understand *how* whatever had to be had to be: simply, one will not fully grasp what one sees.³⁶ Further, as the dependent nature of the soul illustrates, something that participates in being needs a cause that does not

that they exist in whatever degree they exist" (*Quantum enim acceperunt, tantum agunt, et tantum reddunt ei cui debent quod sunt in quantumcumque sunt*), and 3.16.45, "Therefore, all creatures owe something to God. First, they owe him whatever they are insofar as they are natures" (*Omnia ergo illi debent, primo quidquid sunt, in quantum naturae sunt*).

³⁵ In the irony of the two possible uses of the verb one can see the necessary metaphysical connection between contingency (owing) and necessity (having to).

³⁶ This reading is confirmed by the fact that it is precisely the theme of God's incomprehensibility that begins the chapter that follows.

participate in being because it is itself Being. In highlighting this insight Augustine is merely returning to a theme that he begins in chapter 1 of *De Trinitate* and with which he touches on repeatedly throughout the text, for God's nature as He Who *is* is one of the key interpretive tools he uses to describe the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. Finally, it should be noted that the methods of demonstration touched on before the final argument function as analogs for the nature of the ultimate and more fundamental argument reflected in the final line. That is, when he takes up the theme of the soul's being in the final paragraph with phrases such as "the soul could will that from which it was but there wasn't yet a soul that could will to be before it was," Augustine elevates the argument to the existential level.

Augustine addresses the meaning of *Acts* 17:28 again later in the *De Trinitate*. The theme of *De Trinitate* 14.15 concerns the human mind's ability to always remember, understand, and love itself, and, according to Augustine the mind's love for itself is so strong that even when it is immersed in the love of material goods it loves itself more. He uses the example of a man confronted with the choice of loosing either his mind or his sight, and he argues that such a man would clearly choose to loose his sight, even though it is the highest of physical powers, because without his mind he would be a mere animal. He goes on to explain that the mind could not love itself if it did not know itself, and this ability of the soul to know and love itself is significant for Augustine because the human mind is made in the image of God, and therefore, in loving itself, the mind also manifests its love of God. Further, Augustine claims that the image of God that is the soul of man has the power to "cleave" to its Creator, and when it finally cleaves to Him in its destined state of eternal bliss everything that it sees will be "unchangeable." In the soul's present fallen state it can in no way see the unchangeable Good. According to Augustine, this is clear from the fact that the soul is unhappy, but yet desires to be happy. This could not be the case if the soul could see the unchangeable good, that is, it could not be changed from a state of unhappiness to happiness. Further, Augustine claims that the soul cannot even remember what it is like to be happy. It can only believe in the tradition passed on to it by the prophets concerning Adam's original state in the temporal bliss of paradise. Interestingly, although it cannot remember this state of original bliss but it can remember its Creator:

The mind does however remember its God. He always is; it is not the case that he was and is not, or is and was not, but just as he never will not be, so he never was not. And he is all of him everywhere, and

therefore *in Him it lives and moves and is* [emphasis added], and for this reason is able to remember Him.³⁷

Here again Augustine links *Acts* 17:28 with Being (*est*) in order to indicate knowledge of God reached via the insight that one is ontologically dependent. It is important to note that this account of the soul's ability to remember its creator is the conclusion of a theme set forth at the end of chapter 12 where Augustine makes an explicit reference to *Acts* 17:28 and comments on the paradox it sets forth: namely, that one cannot be without Him in whom one is, and yet, if one does not remember, understand and love Him, one is *not* with Him in whom one is. This paradox is resolved, as one can see in the above, when one realizes that one truly is (exists) not just by being but by imitating (remembering, understanding, and loving) Being Itself. Although there is a change in person and number it is clear that Augustine understands the two formulations to convey the identical philosophical point. In other words, in the above, *Acts* 17:28 is slightly adapted in order to highlight the soul's dependence on God, but the terms and meaning are identical to the original formulation. With regard to the line of argumentation itself, Augustine holds that due to the fact that the soul lives, and moves, and is in God it is possible to remember Him, for the soul has a notion of the Divine impressed on it that is revealed through rational reflection on one's contingency. This is possible because God is everywhere. He is everywhere in the sense that he cannot be reduced to a finite interval of time, (either past, present or future), or place: He *is*. The soul, however, which is finite, is and is not: therefore the soul is (exists) through God because God always is. It is worth nothing that this reading is supported by the manner and context in which *Acts* 17:28 was used in chapter 8, treated above, where Augustine pointed out that "the soul had nothing to do with making itself a soul, for at that time it was not, so that it could not bring about its own being." Again, the crucial notion is that the soul had a beginning, a bringing into being, which requires a source that had no beginning, a source that can give being because it always is, and it is precisely this understanding of God that underlies Augustine's line of reasoning in chapter 8. Ultimately, no matter how this example of *Acts* 17:28 is supported by the reading offered in chapter 8, it is important to note that the above passage clearly stands by itself, that is, separate from any other textual evidence, as a paradigmatic example of Augustine's use of the phrase.

³⁷ *De Trinitate* 14.15.21: Ille quippe semper est, nec fuit et non est, nec est et non fuit, sed sicut numquam non erit ita numquam non erat. Et ubique totus est, propter quod ista in illo et vivit et movetur et est, et ideo eius reminisci potest.

Finally, *Acts* 17:28 is treated again in a sermon on *Exodus*. Here Augustine wishes to explain the meaning of God's self given name "I am who am:"

So now the angel, and in the angel the Lord, was saying to Moses when he asked his name, *I AM WHO AM; this is what you shall say to the children of Israel: He who is has sent me to you (Exodus 3:14)*. "Is" is a name for the unchanging. Everything that changes ceases to be what it was and begins to be what it was not. "Is" is. True "is", genuine "is", real "is", belongs only to one who does not change... If in any way at all we are able to seek God and track down Him Who is – and indeed He is hidden *not far from each one of us; for in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:27-28)* – let us then praise, though we cannot find words for it, his being and love his mercy. Amen.³⁸

In the above Augustine claims that one is able to "seek God and track down Him Who is" (*Eum qui est*), that is, know Him, due to *Acts* 17:28. Simply, as in *De Genesi ad Litteram* and *De Trinitate*, reflection on the relationship of ontological dependence seen in *Acts* 17:28 leads one to knowledge of God's ultimate nature.

The above survey of Augustine's use of *Acts* 17:28 is significant for, again, it establishes that it leads to rational knowledge of God as Being by way of reflection on one's ontological dependence. Further, because it leads to rational knowledge of God as Being by way of reflection on one's ontological dependence as does the existential argument and because there are no known alternative arguments that use this relationship, *Acts* 17:28 must, therefore, refer to an insight generated by the existential proof. Again, *Acts* 17:28 cannot be interpreted as a reference to the *De Libero Arbitrio* argument for two principle reasons. First, of the 33 times it is used by Augustine, the movement from reflection upon one's ontological dependence to the insight that God is He Who is is never mediated by truth. Second, as was argued earlier, the argument from Truth is not rooted in the notion of

³⁸ *Sermones* 7.7: *Iam ergo angelus, et in angelo Dominus dicebat Moysi quaerenti nomen suum: Ego sum qui sum. Haec dices filiis Israel: Qui est misit me ad vos. Esse nomen est incommutabilitatis. Omnia enim quae mutantur desinunt esse quod erant et incipiunt esse quod non erant. Esse est. Verum esse, sincerum esse, germanum esse non habet nisi qui non mutatur. Ille habet esse verum cui dicitur: Mutabis ea et mutabuntur, tu autem idem ipse es. Quid est: Ego sum qui sum, nisi, aeternus sum? Quid est, Ego sum qui sum, nisi, qui mutari non possum... Si quo modo possimus Deum quaerere et investigare eum qui est, et quidem non longe positum ab unoquoque nostrum: In illo enim vivimus et movemur et sumus; laudamus ergo ineffabiliter eius essentiam et amemus misericordiam. The English passage above is taken from *Sermons* (1-19), trans. Edmund Hill, (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1990).*

God as the sustaining cause of all beings. Instead, it establishes that there is something superior than reason by revealing those normative standards that are presupposed in one's value judgments. The argument referred to here, however, concerns a relationship of ontological dependence, a relationship totally foreign to the *De Libero Arbitrio* argument.

3. Book 7 chapter 10 reconstructed

Book 7 chapter 10 of the *Confessions* is often misinterpreted because scholars neglect to read it within the context of the chapters that precede and follow it. Review of these chapters, however, is essential for the proper understanding of the vision passage. More specifically, the theme of ontological dependence found in the existential argument can also be found in chapters 9, 10, and 11, and close analysis of these chapters will establish that chapter 10 is the account of its use.

In book 7 chapter 9 Augustine uses a slight variation on the meaning of *Acts* 17:28 presented above. Of the 33 times that *Acts* 17:28 is used 10 of these instances include the concluding remark "as some of you have said." For example, Augustine's work *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* was composed in 394, approximately three years before he began work on the *Confessions*, and here, in what is the earliest known use of the phrase, Augustine clearly indicates that he holds "in Him we live and move and are, as some of you have said," to refer to the Athenians' ability to know God through natural reason. More specifically, Augustine's interpretation of *Romans* 1:18 is that God's existence and intended order can be known from His effects, and he arrives at this interpretation with the help of *Wisdom* 13:9 and *Acts* 17:28. He begins by observing that, in the book of *Wisdom*, those whom Solomon chastised did not come to knowledge of God through reflection on creation even though they could have, a fact which is established, says Augustine, by Paul's statement to the Athenians:

"The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all impiety" and so on (*Romans*: 1:18). Even Solomon said, concerning those whose wisdom is of this world, "If they could know so much that they could speculate about the universe how did they not more easily discover the Lord of this world and its Creator?" (*Wisdom* 13:9). Those whom Solomon reproved had failed to know the Creator through his creation; but those whom the Apostle reproved knew but did not give thanks

and, claiming to be wise actually became fools and fell into idolatry. For that the wise among the Gentiles had discovered the Creator, the Apostle himself plainly showed when he spoke to the Athenians. For when he had said "In Him we live and move and are," he added, "so even some of you have said" (*Acts* 17:28).³⁹

From the above it is clear that *Acts* 17:28, when linked with the phrase "as some of you have said," means that the Athenians have attained rational knowledge of God, for Augustine says that those whom Solomon chastised "had failed to know the creator through his creation" (a phrase derived from *Romans* 1:20), while "the wise among the Gentiles had discovered the Creator," that is, had attained this knowledge, a fact which he establishes by quoting *Acts* 17:28. Augustine believes that *Acts* 17:28 establishes that the Athenians had rational knowledge of God because he reads the phrase "in Him we live and move and are" as an axiom which holds that all beings are dependent upon Being Itself, an axiom that, upon definition of its terms, demonstrates God's existence and nature.

As was mentioned previously, in all the instances that *Acts* 17:28 is used 10 of them include the concluding remark "as some of you have said," a phrase which almost always refers to a rational insight, and it is in precisely this manner that it is used in *Confessions* book 7 chapter 9. In this chapter, again the chapter immediately preceding the vision passage, Augustine is introduced to the books of the Platonists and in these books he reads what he describes

³⁹ *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 3.3: Quod autem dixit: Revelatur ira Dei de caelo super omnem impietatem et cetera, ait et Salomon de sapientibus mundi: Si enim tantum potuerunt scire, ut possent / aestimare saeculum, quomodo ipsius mundi Dominum et Creatorem non facilius invenerunt? Sed quos arguit Salomon, non cognoverunt per creaturam Creatorem; quos autem arguit Apostolus, cognoverunt, sed gratias non egerunt et dicentes se esse sapientes stulti facti sunt et ad colenda simulacra deciderunt. Nam sapientes gentium quod invenirent Creatorem, manifeste idem Apostolus, cum Atheniensibus loqueretur, ostendit. Cum enim dixisset: Quia in ipso vivimus et movemur et sumus, addidit: Sicut et quidam secundum vos dixerunt. The English passage above is taken from *Augustine on Romans: Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans & Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle of the Romans*, trans. P. Fredriksen-Landes, P (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1982). Another example is *De Civitate Dei* 8.10: '[T]hat he may not suppose that all philosophers are such as do this [i.e. deceive Christian believers], he hears the same apostle say concerning certain of them "Because that which is known of God is manifest among them, for God has manifested it to them. For his invisible things from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things which are made, also his eternal power and Godhead." And when speaking to the Athenians, after having spoken a mighty thing concerning God, which few are able to understand, "In Him we live, and move, and have our being," he goes on to say, "As certain also of your own have said"'.

as a scientific account of the beginning of Saint John's gospel. Augustine is quick to point out that the books make no reference to the incarnation or Christ's saving action through His death on the cross, but despite the fact that the gentiles lacked this revealed knowledge, they were, he says, still "called into God's inheritance" through those truths generated by natural reason. He goes on to explain that it was through these truths that he himself came to know God. Augustine justifies this path by referring to the pillaging of the of the Egyptians by the Hebrews in *Exodus*, a passage that establishes for him scriptural support for the Christian practice of appropriating truths from pagan texts, and it is in the course of this explanation that Augustine appeals to *Acts* 17:28:

So also I read of 'the glory of your incorruption' changed into idols and various images 'in the likeness of corruptible man and birds and beasts and serpents', that is the Egyptian food (lentils) for which Esau lost his birthright (*Genesis* 25:33). Your firstborn people honored animal's heads instead of you, 'being turned in heart towards Egypt' (*Acts* 7:39) and making your image, their own soul, bow down before a calf that eats hay (*Psalms* 105:20). I found this in those books and did not feed on it. It pleased you, Lord, to 'remove from Jacob the opprobrium of being junior' (*Psalms* 118:22), that the 'elder should serve the younger' (*Romans* 9:13); and you called the Gentiles into your inheritance. And I had come to you from the Gentiles and fixed my attention on the gold which you willed your people to take from Egypt, since the gold was yours, wherever it was. And through your apostle you said to the Athenians, that in You 'we live and move and are' (*Acts* 17:28), as also some among them had said, and Athens is where these books came from. I did not give attention to the idols of the Egyptians which they served with your gold and 'changed the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator' (*Romans* 1:25).⁴⁰

⁴⁰ *Confessions*: 7.9.15: Et ideo legebam ibi etiam inmutatam gloriam incorruptionis tuae in idola et varia simulacra, in similitudinem imaginis corruptibilis hominis et volucrum et quadrupedum et serpentium, videlicet Aegyptium cibum, quo Esau perdidit primogenita sua, quoniam caput quadrupedis pro te honoravit populus primogenitus, conversus corde in Aegyptum et curvans imaginem tuam, animam suam, ante imaginem vituli manducantis faenum. Inveni haec ibi et non manducavi. Placuit enim tibi, domine, auferre opprobrium diminutionis ab Iacob, ut maior serviret minori, et vocasti gentes in hereditatem tuam. Et ego ad te veneram ex gentibus et intendi in aurum, quod ab Aegypto voluisti ut auferret populus tuus, quoniam tuum erat, ubicumque erat. Et dixisti Atheniensibus per Apostolum tuum, quod in te vivimus et movemur et sumus, sicut et quidam secundum eos dixerunt, et utique inde erant illi libri. Et non attendi in idola Aegyptiorum, quibus de auro tuo ministrabant, qui

The purpose of this passage is to tell the reader what Augustine took and what he did not take from the books of the Platonists. What he did not take was polytheism. What he took was the gold of the Egyptians (i.e. the pagans) defined in terms of *Acts* 17:28. The argument runs as follows: the Athenians say, "In Him we live, and move, and are," and the books were written by the Athenians: therefore, the books say, "In Him we live and move and are." In other words, according to Augustine, the Athenians say that rational knowledge of God as Being is attained by reflection on one's ontological dependence (in Him we live and move and are), and Athens is where these books he read came from: therefore *the books say that rational knowledge of God as Being is attained by reflection on one's ontological dependence*. The gold that Augustine gleaned from the pagans, the gold that is defined in terms of *Acts* 17:28, is the Platonic insight which holds that all beings are dependent upon Being Itself. Consequently, Augustine, as found in *De Genesi ad Litteram* 5.16, *De Trinitate* 8.3 and 14.14, and *Sermon* 7, consistently interprets *Acts* 17:28 as an axiom that demonstrates God's existence and nature.

Again, in book 7 chapter 10 of the *Confessions*, Augustine, while reading the books of the Platonists, has the vision of an immutable light higher than his mind. The central lines of this chapter should be briefly revisited. Augustine describes his relationship to what he saw in two critical lines that precede the vision passage. The first reports, "[I] saw above the same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind (*mentem meam*)," and the second, "it [the Light] was superior because it made me (*fecit me*) and I was inferior because I was made by it (*factus ab ea*)."⁴¹ From these passages it is clear that Augustine is describing the most primordial relationship of ontological dependence possible, the dependence of one's individual being upon Being Itself, due his use of *facere*, a verb that is consistently used by Augustine to refer to such a relationship.⁴¹ Further, no matter how the *viderem esse* line is read, one knows that the passage concerns the insight that God is Being because Augustine says, "And you called out from far away: 'I am who am'" (*Et clamasti de longinquo: 'Immo uero ego sum qui sum'*). Again, one also knows

transmutaverunt veritatem Dei in mendacium et coluerunt et servierunt creaturae potius quam creatori.

⁴¹ Again, the verb *facere* is not used in Augustine's demonstration from Truth in the *De Libero Arbitrio*: 2.15, or in *Confessions*: 7.17.23. It is, however, often used within the context of Augustine's "existential" proofs for God's existence or passages in which he is discussing the dependence of beings on Being. Again, there are several instances of the latter, for example, *De Civitate Dei*: 8.6, *Confessions*: 11.4.6. See fn. 25.

that Augustine understands it to be a rational insight, for he says, "I would have found it easier to doubt whether I was myself alive than that there is no truth 'understood from the things that are made'" (*Romans* 1:20) (*faciliusque dubitare vivere me quam non esse veritatem, quae per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conspicitur*). That is, through reading the books of the Platonists Augustine comes to understand that his mind has being but is not the cause of its own being: he sees, therefore, that there must be a cause for his mind's being that is itself absolute Being. Moreover, this interpretation is further substantiated by chapter 11, and, although Mac Donald notes this, he does not develop its full implications.⁴² In chapter 11, the chapter immediately following the vision chapter, Augustine applies his experience to the world around him:

And I considered the *other things* (*cetera*) below you, and I saw that neither can they be said absolutely to be or absolutely not to be. They are because they come from you. But they are not because they are not what you are. That which truly *is* is that which unchangeably abides.⁴³

Here again one can see the repetition of the same theme. Created being is dependent upon uncreated Being, and it is clear that this axiom is understood by Augustine to be apprehended by natural reason. What Mac Donald does not develop is that, when he says, "the *other things* (*cetera*) below You," Augustine indicates a first thing other than God that he understood to be neither absolutely being nor absolutely non-being from which the existence of God is inferred. What could this first finite effect be? From the fact that Augustine begins his meditation by entering his "innermost self" it is clear that he is not speaking of matter, and because he says it is, "below You," it cannot be God. Therefore it is clear that the original object contemplated by Augustine was his own mind (*mentem meam*), for it is the last finite reality referred to before his vision.

Conclusion

In summation, from *Romans* 1:20 and *Acts* 17:28 it is certain that Augustine is referring to a rational insight in chapter 10, and therefore it is not possible to interpret it as the account of a mystical

⁴² *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, pp. 86-87, n. 4

⁴³ *Confessions*: 7.11.17: et inspexi cetera infra te, et vidi nec omnino esse nec omnino non esse: esse quidem, quoniam abs te sunt, non esse autem, quoniam id quod es non sunt. Id enim vere est, quod incommutabiliter manet.

vision. Further, due to Augustine's use of the verb *facere* in the description of his vision it is not possible to interpret chapter 10 as a rational ascent to Truth, for this argument, the *De Libero Arbitrio* argument, refers to the transcendent standard presupposed in one's value judgments and not to a relationship of ontological dependence as is designated by this verb.

In order to come to the correct understanding of this chapter one must remember that chapter 9 certainly foreshadows the use of the existential argument due to the presence of *Acts* 17:28, that the chapter that follows it, chapter 11, explicitly deals with it in its treatment of the *cetera* which *nec omnino esse nec omnino non esse*, and, as it has been repeatedly noted, that chapter 10 itself describes what Augustine saw in terms of radical ontological dependence as is indicated by the use of the verb *facere* – in terms of the fundamental relationship described in the existential proof. Therefore, because all three chapters deal with the defining characteristic of the existential proof – *rational* knowledge of God as Being gained through reflection on one's ontological dependence – and because there is no other known argument for God's nature used by Augustine that makes use of this relationship, Augustine must be giving a description of its use in book 7 chapter 10. It is the connection between *Acts* 17:28, *Romans* 1:20, the verb *facere*, and the use of *cetera* that form the essence of this interpretation, for these points of congruence, taken as a whole and put against the backdrop of the proven incoherence of previous interpretations, establish the reading of *Confessions* book 7 chapter 10 offered here as the strongest possible.

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