Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self

The Legacy of a Christian Platonist

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For Nancy
Beloved Other, One Flesh

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Preface

Of Traditions, Inventions, and Ancient Fathers

This is the story of the invention of something new, and like all such stories it is not as straightforward as one could wish: one arrives at new things only after exploring a great deal of other territory and poking into many blind alleys. I hope to have made the story easier to follow by providing summaries of each chapter, so that readers can always have a map of where they are in the whole exploration, and those who like to skip around in the more familiar parts of the story can do so. The problem is that even the chapters that fill in background information contain a great deal that will be unfamiliar to the non-specialist, as well as controversial to the specialist, and hence for both reasons could not be omitted. My test of whether all that background material was really needed is my sense of how very bizarre the climactic narrative (in chapters 6 through 10) would be without it. You are welcome to try the test yourself.

Throughout, it has been my concern to make this book accessible to non-specialists (i.e., everyone who has not studied Augustine's debts to Platonism) while also addressing the deep issues raised by the specialist scholarship. The two non-specialist audiences I have had most in mind are those interested in philosophy and general intellectual history on the one hand, and those interested in theology and the history of Christian thought on the other. I have often stopped to explain things to the one audience that I would take for granted as familiar to the other, and vice versa. And in both cases, even the most familiar themes, I have often found, had to be handled in unfamiliar ways in order to make sense of the astounding phenomenon of Augustine.

It will help you follow the twists and turns of this story if I tell you that I think of intellectual history or the history of ideas primarily in terms of intellectual traditions and their problems.[1] A tradition involves the handing on (*traditio*) of something from generation to generation. In an intellectual tradition this includes not only doctrines or teachings but also the problems raised by them.[2] Such problems, in addition to encounters with other traditions, are prime movers of inquiry in a tradition, and thus a prime source of new ideas in human history.

An inquiry is a kind of adventure or exploration, a search to find a solution to a prob-

lem. This "finding" is the root sense of the word "invention" in the book's title: originally, the Latin word *inventio* meant finding the right word or thought for an occasion, hence also finding the solution to a problem. Ancient *inventio* eventually became modern "invention"—the making up of something new rather than the finding of something already there—because an invention in the modern sense is typically the finding of a solution to some problem of design, thought, or practice. My story represents the concept of inner self as an invention, in the sense that it is the finding of a solution to a philosophical and theological problem. But of course that leaves open the question of whether inwardness, and in particular the private inner self, is *inventio* in the ancient sense or invention in the modern sense—an old thing found or a new thing produced.

Though I would like to leave the question open as far as I can for you to form your own judgment, it is only fair to let you know at the outset that in my own view the private inner self is in fact something Augustine made up rather than discovered. In this respect you can call him original or creative. I myself shall avoid such terms, however, for they fit the subject badly. Like all ancient thinkers, Augustine would have regarded "originality" as innovation and novelty, which are bad things—opposed to the antiquity of truth. So "invention," with its peculiar ambiguity, is the most neutral term I could find for what Augustine is up to. Besides, the term itself plays a key role in Augustine's concept of the inner self, as shall be seen in the last chapter.

The inner self is the sort of issue on which it is hard not to take sides, so let me try to explain (especially to those on the opposite side) why I think mine is the sort of story that is best told by someone who is not fully in sympathy with his protagonists. I shall portray Augustine (and Plato and Aristotle and Plotinus) as writers offering us solutions to problems that may or may not be our own, depending on whether or not we accept the premises of the problem. If you already believe certain doctrines are true, then finding a good solution to the problems raised by those doctrines gives you reason to believe the solution is true as well. But if you don't think the doctrines are true in the first place, then you can regard the solutions as inventions (in the modern sense of the word). In my experience, not believing the doctrines that produce philosophical problems makes it easier to discern what is actually going on in the solution. Otherwise one's hopes or fears that the solution be true tend to get in the way of understanding it on its own terms, as one either tries to assimilate it to one's prior convictions or else rejects it as a mistake because one can't assimilate it. Since the problems I study here all arise within the Platonist tradition, and I am no Platonist, I do not think the solutions to these problems are true. Yet by the same token they are not mere arbitrary mistakes either. They are inventions, new concepts in the tradition of Western philosophy and religion—profound and beautiful in some ways, wrongheaded and dismaying in others, and immensely influential—and for all these reasons worth careful, patient and sympathetic study.

I tell the story of the invention of something new—a new concept, I will call it, for lack of a better word. A concept is whatever it is that is represented by a term in some discourse—or perhaps it is the term itself. How concepts are related to words is a deep question, on which I shall do my best to avoid taking sides, except to say two things: a concept always belongs to a whole network of concepts that is structured by logical relations such as consequence and inconsistency (which is why a concept can be used to solve conceptual problems as well as be the source of new problems) and a concept in use belongs

to a way of thinking and therefore to a form of human life. The concepts I study here became an integral part of Western thought and therefore of the lives of human beings in the West. The conviction that Augustine *invented* the concept of private inner self is thus not inconsistent with the observation that the inner self has long been a formative element in Western experience. But it is part of our experience like Hamlet, say, rather than like Shakespeare. It is an image of ourselves that a great dramatist has set on the stage of our literature, and subsequently it has had much to do with who we are.

My attitude toward this invention and its subsequent history is complicated by the fact that it was invented by a *Christian* Platonist and influenced primarily the Western *Christian* tradition. For though I am not a believer in Platonism, I am a believer in Christ. The complication arises because Platonism and Christianity are not two entirely separate traditions (see chapter 4). Christianity has been using Platonist language since the New Testament and borrowing (or stealing?) Platonist concepts since the Church Fathers, and the latter of course made an art form of reading Platonist concepts into the Bible by means of what they called "spiritual" as opposed to "literal" exegesis. Since the origin of the orthodox traditions of Christianity (which includes not only the Eastern Orthodox traditions, but Roman Catholicism and the Protestant traditions as well) lies with these Fathers, no adherent of orthodoxy can afford to dismiss all things Platonist as if they were unchristian. And certainly such dismissiveness has led to misunderstandings of Augustine (see chapters 3 and 5).

On the other hand, as both an intellectual historian and an adherent of orthodoxy, I am interested in issues of provenance. I argue that the inner self is a Christian idea that originated in the Platonist tradition; but that puts it in the same category as the Fall,[3] the immortality of the soul, and the notion that if we are good our souls will go to heaven when we die.[4] If you can accept these other notions as Christian then you might be able to do the same with the inner self. The difference is mainly that the inner self entered Christianity later than these other doctrines and is therefore not so deeply rooted in the Christian traditions (especially not in the East, which is scarcely indebted to Augustine). It is also particularly fascinating in that it is a Platonist idea that was invented by a Christian. But in any case the historical point is that all these doctrines (and many more) both belong to the Christian tradition and originate in the Platonist tradition. One therefore cannot justly reject them as unchristian simply on the historical ground of distinguishing Platonism from Christianity; to reject them as unchristian means criticizing the Christian tradition from within. But of course Christianity (like Platonism) has always been a self-critical tradition, recognizing and investigating problems in itself, and indeed one widely accepted name for the self-criticism of the Christian tradition is simply "Christian theology."[5] One of my motives for offering this historical study is to provide material for this ongoing self-critical enterprise of the Christian tradition.

It is not a new thing for a Christian to reflect critically on the relation of the Christian and Platonist traditions, but such reflection usually goes by other names, such as "the relation of philosophy and theology" or "the problem of faith and reason." Since with this book we are stepping into this long history of reflection (like stepping into the course of a great flowing stream, it can put one off balance) I had better say something about my own perspective on this theological issue. Readers accustomed to the relation of philosophy and religion in modernity, where "philosophy" typically plays critic and "religion" desig-

nates a tradition under criticism, need to adjust to the situation in late antiquity where, despite occasional fierce criticism by pagan Platonists (who were hostile not to "religion" in general but to *Christianity*), Christians found Platonism profoundly attractive. Hence my theological concern in this book is not to counter the critical force of philosophy but to resist the religious attractiveness of Platonism. What I hope for in a Christian theologian's relations with philosophy is something like the medieval notion of philosophy as handmaid of theology—in other words, I think Christian theologians should appropriate concepts from various philosophical traditions whenever they prove useful in saying what Christians need to say, but without any ultimate loyalty to the meaning these concepts had in their original context (e.g., of systematic Platonism).[6] Hence it seems to me quite right that Christian theologians make use of Platonist concepts to describe the eternity and omnipresence of God, for example (and in the current theological environment, that is a rather hefty concession to the value of Platonism).

Where my concerns diverge from those of most medieval theologians is in my awareness that philosophy in the patristic era (i.e., mainly Platonism) did not offer to stand to the Christian religion in the relation of nature to grace, as if philosophy was earthbound human rationality and Christian faith was heavenly and spiritual wisdom. On the contrary, Platonism is *more* "spiritual" than Christianity, in the sense that it is more resolutely focused on the soul and its relation to eternal things (more "other worldly," as they used to say). For example, it is Platonism that gives us the concept of the immortality of the soul, whereas the Christian Gospel proclaims the resurrection of the dead. The one teaches that a part of us does not die, whereas the other teaches that we die but God can give life to the dead.[7] Hence instead of an intrinsic immortality, the Christian Scriptures place hope of eternal life in the proclamation that God has already raised Jesus Christ bodily from the dead. For the distinctive feature of Christian faith is that it finds no God separated from the flesh of Christ.

One of the crucial theological achievements of the Church Fathers in the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity and the Christological doctrines that followed in later centuries was to negotiate the relationship between Platonist spirituality and this distinctive feature of Christian faith—its Christological fleshliness. My placement of Augustine's concept of the inner self in the context of his Platonism is ultimately concerned with its relation to this fundamental issue of Patristic and all Christian thought: what is the meaning and power of Christ's flesh? The critical question I would pose regarding Augustine's Platonist spirituality is this: why should we want to turn to our inner selves if God is to be found in something external, the flesh of Christ? (And what, after all, is more external than flesh?) I am, in the end, a critic of Augustine's inward turn for two reasons: I think it directs our attention toward something that does not exist (the inner self) and away from that in which resides our salvation (the flesh of Christ). But again, that is only my position, and I hope to have portrayed Augustine's inwardness fairly enough for you to make your own judgments.

Let me add, however, for Christians who wish to defend him on this score, that there is much more to Augustine than just his inwardness. I have had to neglect a great deal of Augustine's thought, because this book is not about Augustine but about the concept of private inner self. It tells only so much of Augustine's story as is necessary to trace the origin of that one concept. In several places I have suggested criticisms of the concept, which should not be mistaken for a blanket condemnation of Augustine—any more than this

book should be mistaken for a comprehensive account of his thought. There are indeed certain problems I think orthodox Christians ought to have with Augustinian concepts of inwardness. Augustine himself had some of these problems, and he addressed them by developing a new account of the significance of external things, to go with his new concept of the inner self. But that is the subject for another book. Hence my criticisms of Augustinian inwardness do not amount to a rejection of Augustine's thought as a whole—for I offer here no assessment of his thought as a whole. What I do offer, I hope, is a serious warning for Christians who are attracted to an inward turn.

My desire is that this book will prove useful not only to those who belong to one of the Christian traditions, but also to those who are simply interested in the history of Western thinking about the self and what it means to be human. It was necessary that I explain the complication of my perspective on Christian theology, however, because it accounts for much that is peculiar about the tone of this book, which you might notice. A great deal of the peculiarity is perhaps due to Augustine rather than just me. For anyone in the West at the beginning of the third millennium, whether Christian or not, Augustine must seem both strange and familiar—startlingly different from yet disquietingly similar to ourselves. Getting to know him is like going back in a time machine to talk with one's great-great grandfather from the old country. He speaks a different language, is at home in a far-off world we can scarcely imagine, and has all sorts of outlandish ideas, yet he undoubtedly helped bring us into being—and sometimes it is the strangest things about him that are most important in giving us our present identity. To recognize ourselves in him is to perceive, I hope, something about our own strangeness.

Of course this filial relationship is especially complicated for orthodox Christians in the West, to all of whom Augustine has the right to speak using Paul's words: "Though you have many teachers in Christ, you do not have many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel" (1 Cor. 4:15). That is roughly what the Western Christian tradition means by calling him a Church Father: we owe our particular tradition of Christianity in large part to him, as troublesome and questionable a legacy as that may be. Augustine does in fact invite us to question his legacy in the name of the truth of the Catholic faith.[8] But let him speak in his own words, as near as my translation can give them to you:

> To be sure, in all my writings I desire not only a pious reader but a free corrector. . . . But as I want my readers not to be bound down to me, so I want my correctors not to be bound down to themselves. Let not the reader love me more than the Catholic faith, and let not the correctors love themselves more than the Catholic Truth.[9]

In dealing with this extraordinary, troubling, and beautiful Father, I have been helped most by the work of Robert J. O'Connell. Many other scholars have filled in missing pieces of background for me, but it was O'Connell's writings that performed the unique and (by the nature of the case) unrepeatable service of convincing me I might actually be seeing what I thought I was seeing. This happened not long after I found that the proof of the immortality of the soul in Augustine's *Soliloquies* required us to believe in the intrinsic divinity of the soul—and was astonished to discover such a thing in a Church Father. Then I came upon O'Connell's discussion of "the soul's divinity at Cassiciacum"[10] and it was like being given permission to see with my own eyes. Of course it is not his fault if I have seen

amiss; but if I have seen aright it should help confirm some of the more controversial stands he has taken in the past thirty-five years of his patient and adventurous scholarship.

My other great debts are to friends and teachers at Yale, where this book first took shape, especially Nicholas Wolterstorff and George Lindbeck, my advisors, and Han Frei, who is still much missed. He was the one who reminded us all that one particular human being, Jesus Christ, is central to the whole Christian faith—a reminder all the more valuable because it was so odd it should ever be needed. But that is how Christian theology goes: at its best it is a reminder of what Christians should never have forgotten in the first place. And I cannot say how much I owe to ongoing conversations with the likes of David Yeago, Kendall Soulen, Kathryn Greene-McCreight, Rusty Reno, Sondra and Tom Wheeler, Roddey Reid, Peter Rodgers, and Nancy Hazle. I could wish all my readers such debts.

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All translations from ancient and medieval texts are my own, as are all other translations, unless an English edition is given in the bibliography. Italics in quotations are mine (their purpose being usually to emphasize the part of the quotation on which my exegesis turns). Citations from ancient texts omit the chapter number where redundant: for example *Confessions,* book 7, chapter 10, section 16 is cited *Conf.* 7:16.

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Introduction

There are varieties of inwardness, so it is important to know which one is being investigated in this book. My concern here is with the concept of self as private inner space or inner world—a whole dimension of being that is our very own, and roomy enough that we can in some sense turn into it and enter it, or look within and find things there. This, I take it, is the deepest and most thoroughgoing form of inwardness; other forms shall be of interest in this investigation only insofar as they lead up to it. In this regard all roads lead to Augustine: the thesis I argue here is that he invented the concept of private inner space. The argument for this thesis consists of two narratives: one telling of the tradition of philosophy upon which Augustine drew (part I) and the other of the development of Augustine's own thought (part II). The aim is to watch the concept of private inner self as it is under construction: to discern its Platonist philosophical foundations, its Christian theological connections, its memorable metaphorical texture, and the motives that led to its being constructed in the first place.

The inwardness being tracked down in this book is a concept, a way of thinking about the human self, and therefore an element in human self-understanding. As such it has worked its way deeply into the intellectual heritage of the West and therefore into the experience of Western individuals, many of whom have experienced themselves as inner selves. But the focus of investigation here is the concept, not the experience. Without the concept, people would describe their experiences differently, and there would be no phenomenon of inwardness to track down in the texts. Moreover, as I hope to make clear from the texts, this concept did not arise directly out of experience, as if it was the expression of some deeper, inarticulate feeling. Rather, it is the product of highly articulate philosophical inquiry, arising in a quite definite theological context in order to solve quite specific conceptual problems.

Its use in technical philosophical discourse is the reason why the concept of a private inner space is something more than a metaphor. The inner space of the self is of course not literally "inner" like the space inside a box. It is not literally a space at all and therefore not "inner" in a spatial sense. This is a new, incorporeal sense of "inner," associated specifically with the soul rather than the body, which begins as a metaphor and becomes estab-

lished as a piece of technical terminology in Neoplatonist metaphysics. Thus it retains much of the imaginative power of metaphor while also gaining a new literal sense, the sense established by its use in a particular philosophical and theological discourse. The inner space is a dimension or level of being belonging specifically to the soul, distinct from the being of God above it (and within it) and from the world of bodies outside it (and below it). It is like a space, however, in that it is a dimension of being that can contain things: things are found and seen there, as well as lost and hidden there.

The inner space has its ancestors and cousins. Part I of this study tells the tale of the ancestors, part II is concerned with the thing itself, and a planned sequel deals with its important cousin, which I shall call "expressionism." This cousin has perhaps the most ancient lineage of all, which can be traced back to very old and widespread talk about how people can hide their thoughts in their heart and bring them forth in speech. Augustine gives new rigor to this talk by identifying the hidden heart with the private inner space and conceiving speech as an expression of what lies within that space. It was an epochal innovation when Augustine classified words as a species of signs, and treated signs as external indications of the inner will of the soul—thus laying the groundwork for medieval understandings of word and sacrament as well as much of modern semiotics and theory of language. But that subject takes us beyond the scope of this book, to Augustine's account of how the inner self is related to external things and especially how signs communicate or express what is within.

Although expressionism is not the variety of inwardness being tracked down here, it does make a contribution to it that should be mentioned now. One of the things that makes the inner space private is that it is hidden from view: other people cannot look within it. That we can hide what is in our hearts or minds is a commonplace that goes back long before Augustine and extends beyond any one tradition: both Homer and the Hebrew Scriptures speak of this sort of thing. The contribution this notion makes to later forms of Western inwardness is unmistakable when, for instance, Paul contrasts being a Jew "in appearance" (i.e., because of circumcision) with being a Jew "in what is hidden" (i.e., in the heart)—and then this is translated in the King James and Revised Standard Versions of the Bible as "outwardly" and "inwardly," respectively (Romans 2:28–29). Paul is not using the vocabulary of inwardness here, but translators in the wake of Augustine find it natural to translate his words into that vocabulary—and the reason they find it natural is because Augustine himself made the connection for them: the inner is that which is hidden in the heart.

Augustine frequently describes the inner as "hidden," meaning that we cannot see each other's minds or souls. But when I speak of the "privacy" of the inner self, I have more in view than just the contrast between what is hidden in the heart and what is outwardly manifest. There is another conceptual contrast whose field of force, as it were, shapes this space, and that is the contrast between what is common to all souls and what belongs properly to one individual rather than another. For a Platonist, this contrast has some distinctive features. Since the best things in reality are One not Many, they are things that souls can only have in common. Thus, for example, wisdom in one soul is not ultimately different from wisdom in another, for there is ultimately only one true Wisdom. This Platonic Idea or Form of Wisdom is common to all, not the private possession of the indi-

vidual, and it is equally available to all who have eyes to see it. Hence it is not so obvious that the inner self must be private. On the contrary, the natural thing for a Platonist to say (once Platonism acquires a concept of inner space) is that the inner realm is public not private, since the goods in it are common possessions rather than private property.

The new and specifically Augustinian contribution to the notion of the inner space—the thing that distinguishes it from previous forms of Platonist inwardness—is precisely that Augustine's inner space is actually private. However, Augustine is different from most of his successors in the West in that for him this privacy is not natural or good but results from our estrangement from the one eternal Truth and Wisdom that is common to all. The inner self is private only because it is sinful, fallen away from God.

To bring into focus the particular variety of inwardness we are looking for, we can place Augustine's picture of the inner self between representative pictures from two ancestors and a descendant—like putting four snapshots in a row. The oldest snapshot is Plato's picture in the Allegory of the Cave: an eye that has escaped from bondage in the lower darkness is now gazing upward, away from itself, at the sun. There is no inwardness here, but there is a key concept, intelligibility or intellectual vision, which will be at the heart of later Platonist inwardness. The next snapshot gives us the much less familiar picture of Plotinus: the soul is like a sphere revolving around the source of all light at the center of the universe and turning inward to see it. Our particular souls are each points of light on the revolving sphere, capable of looking outward upon the darkness or turning into the inside to behold the realm of light. This inner realm is the Platonist's "intelligible world," which has now become an inner world—although unlike Augustine's inner space it is common to all, not private. Augustine's picture comes third, and it is of an inner palace, with great courtyards open to the sun. To see the light means both entering within and looking upward—combining Plotinus's inward turn with Plato's ascent to vision. The result is that what you find when you turn inward but not upward, is your own private inner space. Last, there is John Locke's picture of a dark room where there is nothing to see but images projected within. No sun shines into this room from above, and even the windows afford no direct view of the external world but only serve as a lens to project images of what is outside onto a blank inner wall. The thread of continuity tying these pictures together (like four beads on a string) is the metaphor of the soul as an eye, based on the Platonist notion of intelligibility as the visibility of something to the eye of the mind. Plato's picture is intellectual vision pure and simple, Plotinus's is intellectual vision construed as inward turn, Augustine's is intellectual vision resulting from a turn first in then up, and Locke's picture is of a self with no direct intellectual vision of anything but its own private inner world, seeing only the images of things outside.

Hence Western inwardness can be traced back to the Platonist inward turn, represented by Plotinus, which is adopted and modified by Augustine to produce the concept of private inner space, which later undergoes modifications of its own in Locke and others. As we go from Plotinus to Augustine to Locke, we find the inner world shrinking—from a divine cosmos containing all that is ultimately real and lovely (in Plotinus) to the palace of an individual soul that can gaze upon all that is true and lovely above (in Augustine) to a closed little room where one only gets to watch movies, as it were, about the real world (in Locke). It is a progression in which the inner self contains progressively less of reality and divinity—from Plotinus's divine inner self, to Augustine's inner self, in which God can be found, to Locke's inner room where there can be literally no idea of God.