

# St Augustine on the Trinity—VI

EDMUND HILL, O.P.

We left St Augustine at the end of our last article and of book x of the *De Trinitate* with his image of the divine Trinity in the mind now completely delineated, and comprised in the mind's acts of remembering, understanding, and willing itself. A question, however, remained outstanding: whether there is any real distinction between the mind's memory and understanding of itself or only the verbal one. St Augustine is quite capable of showing the reality of the distinction by an effort of sheer mental introspection, and in fact he will do so in book xiv. But for the moment he is going to illustrate it by observing the lesser trinities in the lower levels of human cognition, in sensation, imagination, and mental knowledge of the external, temporal world.

His reason for doing this is in fact more complex than a desire to make it easier for the *tardiores*, the more backward brethren, which is the reason he mentions at the end of book x. For in this sort of matter we are all of us *tardiores*; the balance of our minds has been universally disturbed, and though we are by nature intelligible and spiritual rather than sensible and corporeal beings—for the essential man is the inner, spiritual man, the mind (*animus*), not the outer bodily man, the senses—nonetheless we all find the outer, sensible, corporeal realities easier and more congenial to investigate than the inner intelligible realities. This primary bias of the human consciousness and attention to the material world outside is not natural to man in Augustine's thought, as it is in St Thomas'; it is a consequence of the fall, part of the sickness of our nature. Human consciousness has fallen downwards and been scattered outwards from its proper citadel of the intelligible world. The situation must be recognised, and a remedy sought for it by working inwards and upwards again:

While we, being minds, are not sensible objects, that is bodies, but intelligible ones, since we are life; nonetheless we have grown so accommodated to bodies, and our interest, so strangely preoccupied with them, has been so forcefully directed outwards, that when we divert it from the uncertainties of the bodily world to fix it in a much more certain and stable knowledge on the spiritual, it runs away back again to those bodies, and there seeks its ease where it caught its

disease. We must adjust ourselves to this sickness; and if we would try to achieve a nicer discernment of the inner spiritual realities and a readier access to them, we must first grasp the pattern of their likenesses in outward bodily things (XI, 1 (1)).

The metaphysical assumptions underlying this passage: 'we, being minds' (*nosque ipsi animi*); the stark opposition between sensible and intelligible things; what an alien neo-platonic world of thought this language plunges us into! And even more disconcerting is Augustine's casual identification of his metaphysical categories with those of St Paul, of the intelligible and the sensible with the spiritual and the carnal, and of mind and senses with the inner and outer man respectively. Absolutely speaking, this is not acceptable, because the Apostle was not a neo-platonist, and his categories were not ontological but moral. But the same, I am convinced, is really true of St Augustine as well; his mind is deeply and sympathetically Pauline, it is only his language that is neo-platonic. His interest is not in the metaphysical analysis of man, but in his concrete moral history. This interest is in fact safeguarded, not jeopardised, by his casting his metaphysical presuppositions into the Pauline mould of inner and outer man. The two cardinal texts, which he quotes at the beginning of book XI, are Colossians 3. 10, where the Apostle declares that 'the inner man is being renewed in the recognition of God, according to the image of him who created him'—hence the divine image belongs only to the inner man; and 2 Corinthians 4. 16, 'And even if our outer man is decaying, yet the inner is being renewed from day to day'. Though the outer man is subject to decay, nonetheless his being called 'man' at all, implies that there is some similarity of pattern in him to the inner man, and though we would not look in this field for the image of the Trinity, we may profitably look for 'some sort of sketch' of the Trinity, for lesser trinitarian analogies, for declensions from the image in the inner man.

We begin, then, by observing a trinity in the field of sensation, confining our attention (since we are only concerned with constructing a paradigm, not with a study of sensation) to the act of seeing. Three elements concur to produce a deliberately conscious act of seeing; the thing seen, the sight of it, the interest (*animi intentio*) which 'keeps your eye on the ball'. These three are of such disparity of nature and diversity of substance, that they clearly cannot give us an image of the divine Trinity. Yet the relationships which unite them in the act of seeing do follow the trinitarian pattern; for the thing seen begets actual sight in the sense of sight, begets *visio in visus*, according to the Latin's nicer

discrimination, since *visio* (the act of seeing) is nothing other than the sense of *visus* informed by the visible object, which impresses its likeness on the sense. Now while I am actually seeing an object, say a red box, I do not actually see with my eyes the difference between the form of the red box in itself as visible object and the like form impressed or begotten by it in my eyesight. Indeed since it is by the conformity of these forms one to the other that I actually see the object, there is no room, says Augustine, for telling them apart by sight (xi, 2 (3)); their edges so perfectly coincide. But I can tell by reason that they must be distinct, and that there would be no seeing unless some likeness of the seen object were produced in the sense of sight. Indirect visual evidence of the distinction is given by the experience of seeing double when I do not focus, for example, on my finger held an inch from my nose; the object produces an image of itself in each eye, and what I am visually aware of is the distinction of the two images or impressed forms. When I shut my left eye the right hand finger disappears, and when I shut the right eye the left hand one vanishes, but why this should be, the author remarks, would take too long to discuss and is not to the present purpose (ib. 2 (4)). Another evidence adduced here is the phenomenon of persistence of vision.

The third element, interest, is in fact identical with will, and is what joins the first two together, and maintains their conjunction as long as the seer, precisely, wills. In this outer trinity of the outer man, it is the only wholly spiritual or mental element. Sometimes it is so vehement that it modifies not merely the sense but the whole organism, if it is of a sufficiently susceptible constitution, to the object seen—as in the case of the chameleon, or the biblical instance of Jacob's stock-breeding device (Gen. 30. 37 ff.). Here we return to the moral dimension; that a rational soul should be chameleon-like in its affective response to sensations, or should bring forth works striped and speckled in conformity with its sensual impressions, like Jacob's ewes, is a bad thing:

The rational soul lives a misshapen sort of life when it lives in accordance with the trinity of the outer man; that is, when it devotes to things which influence the senses of the body from without, not the praiseworthy will to put them to some use, but the sordid itch to clutch at them (xi. 3 (6)).

We delay no longer on the possibilities of deformed sensual living, or virtuous use of the senses; after all, we have not yet discussed the principal moral agencies of the soul. This little passage on the dangers of

chameleonism was simply introduced to remind us of the overriding moral dimension of our investigation, at the moment when we make a transition, and pass a little further inwards to consider a trinity, still of the outer man, but this time in his activity of inner or imaginative vision—what we may call the inner outer man, as distinct from the outer outer man of external physical sensation. Inner vision means fixing, not the eyes on some external object, but the *acies animi* (conscious attention, or concentration of the mind) on the record or look (*species*) of some external object retained in the memory. Think of the Albert Memorial; in calling to mind your record or impression of it, you are engaged in what Augustine here calls an act of internal vision. Here again we can discern three elements, your memory of the Albert Memorial, your mental attention, focused on and formed by that memory, and again your interest, your *animi intentio* or act of will which does the focusing. It is exactly parallel to the external trinity of the Albert Memorial *in se*, your sense of sight informed by it, and the interest which keeps your eyes fixed on it.

But in the case of this inner trinity the three elements are much more homogeneous, they are all indeed 'of one and the same substance', all one *animus*. The distinction now between the first and second elements of the trinity is even less evident to the conscious awareness than it was in the case of external seeing; yet it is equally clear to reason that they must be distinct. For experience shows that you retain your memory of the Albert Memorial even when you let it drop entirely out of your mind and address yourself to your dinner. And you can recall what it looks like and think about it again without being under the hard necessity of going and looking at it afresh. The form or look of it is retained in your memory, whatever you are actually thinking about, and it begets an identically similar form in your consciousness, or as we say in your mind's eye, when you turn your attention to it. And again what holds these two forms together in the conscious act of seeing with the mind's eye is your interest, intention, or will.

The following conclusions emerge from Augustine's examination of the two trinities of the outer man; the two cognitive elements, namely the look of the object, whether in itself or in the memory, and the corresponding look, whether in the eye or in the mind's eye, are really distinct; the second in each case also arises from the first, as 'quasi-offspring' from 'quasi-parent'; and the intention, interest, or act of will which achieves the trinitarian act by joining them together cannot be called either parent or offspring in any sense, because it neither gives rise

to either of them or arises from either of them. We remember that one of the questions which had been puzzling Augustine from book IX and earlier was why the Holy Spirit is not called Son, though proceeding from the Father in equality and consubstantiality of nature. Here in these extreme analogues we can see displayed how the element that corresponds to the Holy Spirit is not an offspring, but a conjoiner of the other two elements.

But in these lesser trinities the third element does not even proceed from the other two in any way; on the contrary, it precedes and exceeds them both in dignity and in function. The analogy in fact breaks down, and this is one reason why in these trinities of the outer man we cannot recognize a genuine image of the divine Trinity. Two other even weightier reasons are that these trinities involve an extraneous object, even in the case of inner vision, since here the memory derives from a sense-impression of an external object; and that it is possible to live misshapenly (*deformiter*), according to these trinities of the outer man. So in our search for the image we must return once more to the inner man, to the mind, and this we proceed to do in book XII.

By the inner man we mean those elements of our consciousness that are proper to our human nature, and not common to us and to animals. There is evidence enough to show that animals have memory, and therefore that inner level of sentient awareness which we have called the inner outer man. But we first remark a specifically human form of consciousness in the deliberate control and use of our imaginative assessment of our sensations and above all in the judgment that we exercise upon them. This rational judgment upon our external experience and concerns is made according to certain 'incorporeal and eternal norms'. But we could not judge by these, which being unchangeable must be above the human mind, unless 'something of ours were in direct contact with them'—his actual expression is 'were subjoined to them', which conjures up a picture of a fly on the ceiling (XII, 2 (2)). Thus he begins his investigation of the inner man or mind by distinguishing two levels here, just as there were two levels or stages in the outer man. We have an outer inner man and an inner inner man, as well as an outer outer man and an inner outer man. And just as the outer outer man of the senses is open to and oriented to the sensible world of bodies beneath him, so the inner inner man is open to and ought to be oriented to the spiritual world of unchangeable eternal truth above him. The critical point in this fourfold chain of energies that is man, is in the outer inner man, which is the meeting place of two worlds, the point of tension

and potential disharmony, the *quoddam hominis exterioris interiorisque confinium* (ib. I (1)), where the issue is decided whether the impetus of the inner man upwards and Godwards will control the drives of the outer man, or whether the attraction of the outer man downwards will seduce the inner man to his ruin. This is how St Augustine states the distinction and the relation between the two stages of the inner man:

That part of us, which though engaged in the business of managing bodily and temporal things is yet not shared with us by animals, is indeed rational; but it is a sort of declension from that rational substance of our mind whereby we are directly attached to intelligible and unchangeable truth; something delegated to manage and direct the lower world around us. For just as among all the animals no assistant was found for the man like himself, until something taken out of him was fashioned into a partner (Gen. 2. 20 ff.); so for our mind, by which we consult the higher and inner truth, no assistant like itself is to be found for using bodily things, in the manner man's nature requires, from among those parts of soul which we have in common with animals. And therefore something of our rationality is set apart in function of its activity, as it were drawn off in aid of the common effort, not cut off in breach of unity. And just as male and female are two in one flesh, so our understanding and our activity, or our deliberation and execution, or reason and rational appetite, or whatever they may be more accurately called, are comprised in the nature of one mind; and as it was said of those 'They shall be two in one flesh', so it may be said of these 'Two in one mind'.

Thus when we discuss the nature of the human mind, we are discussing one thing, nor do we double it into the two elements I have mentioned except by distinction of functions; and in looking for a trinity in it, we are looking for one in the whole mind, not so separating its rational activity in temporal matters from its contemplation of things eternal that we have to look further for some third thing to complete the trinity . . . But having made our distinction, it is only in the function of contemplation that, not merely a trinity, but the image of God can be found; in the function drawn off to temporal activity we may find a trinity, but not the image of God (xii, 3, 4).

As a matter of fact, the search for trinities is suspended for the rest of book xii, and only resumed at the very end of book xiii. The rest of this present book is occupied with the relations between these two functions of mind, which the later scholastics conveniently named *ratio inferior*

and *ratio superior*, though Augustine does not use those terms. The dominant idea—and a very odd one it seems to modern eyes—is the analogy between these two functions of the human mind and the relationship of Adam and Eve, already introduced in our quotation. It is Augustine's thesis that, without prejudice to the literal historical sense of the narrative, the story of the creation, temptation, and fall of our first parents symbolises the story of every human being; each of us is Adam, Eve, and the serpent rolled into one. Adam is the higher, masculine function of the mind by which we are in contact with eternal principles of truth, the contemplative function; Eve is the lower, practical, 'housewifely' function by which we manage the world we live in; the serpent is the allurements of the senses, the sensual appetite. It is to be borne in mind that Augustine is not here just illustrating his rational analysis of man from scripture, in order to make it more vivid and interesting; he is offering a perfectly serious mystical interpretation of scripture, suggesting to us that this is one of the things which the Bible really means by the story of Adam and Eve. For his concern, let me repeat, is not Platonic but Pauline, not metaphysics but the drama of human sin and salvation.

It is indeed the Apostle who, as it were, triggers him off, with his remarks in I Cor. II. 2-16, about why women should be veiled in church. It is possible that it was this whole passage which had led some people to propose that it is the relationship of man and woman (and child) in the family which really constitutes the human image of the divine Trinity, each member of the family triad representing one of the divine persons. At any rate Augustine, after remorselessly pulling this view to pieces and showing that the relationships in each case simply do not correspond, finally disposes of it with v. 7 of this chapter from St Paul: 'Man indeed ought not to veil his head, since he is God's image and glory; but woman is man's glory'. The Apostle says of the man that he is the image of God; therefore he cannot be just one element in the image of God; and so the idea of the 'family image' of the Trinity breaks down.

But St Paul's words raise a very serious difficulty; they seem to imply that only men and not women are in the image of God. This however is against the sense of Gen. I. 27: 'And God created man (*hominem*, not *virum*) in his own image; in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them'; it is also against the sense of the whole Christian gospel of redemption and salvation for all human beings, without distinction of sex. St Paul himself says that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3. 28), and he bids all, women as well as men, 'be

renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, him who has been created according to God' (Eph. 4. 23); and again: 'Putting off the old man with his actions, put on the new, who is being renewed in the recognition of God according to the image of him who created him' (Col. 3. 9). Therefore, when he says that the man (male) is God's image and glory, while the woman is man's glory, he must be interpreted not literally, but symbolically; he is suggesting the mystical significance of the story of Adam and Eve, and intimating (Augustine suggests) that we are to look for the divine image in every human being in the 'masculine' component of rational contemplation, not in the 'feminine' element of rational activity over temporal things. It may be far-fetched, but it is certainly highly ingenious.

Let us now follow Augustine as he transposes the story of the fall into the key of individual man's personal sin:

Thus in the minds of men and women we recognize one common nature, but in their bodies we see symbolised the distinction of functions in that one mind. As our consideration climbs step by step inwards and upwards through the parts of the soul, we meet something that we do not share in common with the beasts, and this is where reason begins, and the inner man can now be recognized. If he, in the exercise of that function of reason which is deputed to the management of temporal things, bursts out in uncontrolled movement too far into external matters, and his head consents to this progress—that is, the function of reason which presides in the watch-tower of counsel, as in the husband's quarters, fails to check and restrain it; then he grows old among his enemies (Ps. 6. 8), the demons and their prince the devil, who envy all virtue; and that vision of eternal things is withdrawn even from the head, as he eats the forbidden fruit with his partner, so that the light of his eyes is no longer with him (Ps. 37. 11). Thus both are stripped naked of that radiance of truth, the eyes of conscience are opened to see how unseemly and unsightly they remain, and so they sow together, like the leaves of delicious fruits but without the fruit, good words without good works, in order to live badly and cover up their shame by talking well. (The fig-tree cursed by our Lord because he found no fruit on it here influenced the interpretation of the fig-leaves of Eden).

The soul, that is to say, loving its own power, slides away from the whole which is common to all into the part which is its own private property. By following God's directions and being perfectly governed by his laws, it could enjoy the whole universe of creation;

but by the apostasy of pride, which is called the beginning of sin (Eccli. 10. 15), it strives to grab something more than the whole and to govern it by its own laws; and because there is nothing more than the whole, it is thrust back into anxiety over a part, and so by being greedy for more it gets less. That is why greed is called the root of all evils (I Tim. 6, 10). Thus all that it tries to do on its own against the laws of the universe, it does by its own body, which is the only part of the universe it has a part-ownership in. And so it finds delight in bodily shapes and movements, and because it cannot take them inside, it wraps itself in their images which it has fixed in the memory. In this way it defiles itself foully with a fanciful sort of fornication, prostituting the imagination by referring all its activities to one or more of three ends; curiosity, searching for material and temporal experience through the senses; swollen conceit, affecting to be above other souls which are given over to their senses; or carnal pleasures, plunging itself in that muddy whirlpool . . . .

But it would not slide down to such ugly and wretched prostitution straight away from the beginning . . . For just as a serpent does not walk with open strides, but wriggles along by the tiny little movements of its scales; so the careless glide little by little along the slippery path of failure, and beginning from a distorted appetite for being like God, they end up by becoming like beasts. So it is that stripped naked of their first robe (the expression is taken from the *stola prima* in which the prodigal was clothed on his return to his father), they earned the skin garments of mortality . . . For man's true honour is God's image and likeness in him, but this can only be preserved when turned towards him from whom it is transmitted. And so the less love he has for what is his very own, the more tightly will he be attached to God. But out of greed actually to experience his own power he tumbled down, by some sort of downward drag of his own, into himself as though down to the middle level. And then while he wants to be, like God, under nobody, he is thrust down as a punishment from his own half-way level to the bottom, down to the material things in which the beasts find their pleasure . . .

How could he travel this long way from the heights to the depths, except through the half-way level of self? If you neglect to hold dear in charity the wisdom which always remains the same, and hanker after knowledge (*savoir-faire*) through experience of changeable temporal things, this knowledge puffs you up instead of building you up (I Cor. 8. 1). In this way the mind is over-weighted with a sort of

self-heaviness, and is therefore heaved out of the state of happiness, and by that experience of its half-wayness it learns to its punishment what a difference there is between the good it has forsaken and the evil it has committed; nor can it go back up again, having squandered and lost its strength, except by the grace of its maker calling it to repentance and forgiving it its sins. For who will ever free his hapless soul from the body of this death, except by the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 7. 24)? But this grace, as far as he permits, we shall discuss in due course (xii, 8 (13)-II (16)).

It may be thought, perhaps, that St Augustine is almost gloating over the seamy side of life, without much interest in its more positive hopes. But let us do him the justice of being patient; there are three more books of his work yet to come. In due course, in book xiii to be precise, he will expatiate on the grace of Christ restoring the soul by faith. This will be the other panel of the diptych. In this last paragraph of our quotation he has just introduced the two terms on which he will hang his subsequent reflections, knowledge and wisdom. They are the knowledge and wisdom of I Cor. 12. 8: 'To one is given through the Spirit the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit'. Though 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' are often used in a wide sense which makes their meaning vague and almost indistinguishable, St Paul is clearly distinguishing them here. But he does not tell us what the distinction is. So we search the scriptures, according to the principle of interpreting the Bible by the Bible, and we find this in Job 28. 18: 'Behold piety is wisdom, and to abstain from evil is knowledge'. 'Piety', Augustine observes, is doing duty for a Greek word (the Greek version of the Old Testament was for him the authoritative one) which means literally 'God-worship'. So what this text is really saying is that contemplation, the higher function of the mind, is wisdom. For 'what among things eternal is more excellent than God, whose nature alone is unchangeable? And what is his worship but love of him, by which we now desire to see him, and believe and hope that we will' (xii, 14 (22)). If wisdom belongs to the mind's higher function of contemplation, then knowledge belongs to its lower function of action, that is management of temporal affairs. For knowledge is abstaining from evil, and there is only question of this in the material, temporal sphere. 'For it is with reference to time that we are among evils, from which we must abstain in order to come to those timeless eternal goods. Therefore whatever we do prudently, courageously, temperately and justly, be-

longs to that knowledge or science which occupies our activity in avoiding evil and seeking good. And this knowledge also includes whatever we gathered from historical information by way of examples to shun or to follow, and of necessary skills in all sorts of matters that are suited to our use' (*ibid*).

Theoretically the eternal things whose contemplation is wisdom include the platonic ideas, what Augustine calls the *rationes* of material and temporal things. The speculations of the pure mathematician are theoretically an exercise of wisdom. These are the examples that Augustine gives here of 'the word of wisdom', and takes the opportunity this affords him of criticizing Plato's theory of reminiscence, which sees in our capacity to understand these *rationes*—for example principles of geometry—a sort of dim memory of what we knew in a previous immaterial existence. But in Augustinian fact there are only two eternal realities whose contemplation is wisdom, and they are God, in whose creative Word the ideas of Plato subsist, and the mind, which is subjoined (like the fly on the ceiling) to this divine eternal truth.

Now knowledge, which is the proper field of the lower rational function, tends, the Apostle assures us, to puff up. We have seen how it does so; how we are tempted by the fruit of the tree of knowledge with the specious expectation of becoming like gods. But it is also the very essence and condition of virtue; only to be genuinely virtuous it must first be overcome by charity. And in order to be overcome by charity it must first be purified by faith, faith in the material, temporal persons and events of saving history. To this saving knowledge in faith of *Heilsgeschichte*, which is the fundamental task of the lower, feminine, active function of the mind, Augustine will turn in the next book. But not even there will he find the image of God.