

Pre-existence in Augustine's Seventh Letter

R.A. Markus, in his generally excellent contribution to the *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Mediaeval Philosophy*¹, remarks in passing that my attempts to show that the early Augustine thought of man as a "fallen soul" leave him "unconvinced"². This, of course, is his right. Indeed, in a volume destined for standard reference, he is more than justified in treating with suitable skepticism a view of Augustine that has till now remained untested by scholarly criticism. Yet the prestige of the *Cambridge History* inevitably lends his observation a weight, and promises it a diffusion and influence it might otherwise not have enjoyed. And if it be true that the early Augustine did in fact consider man as a "fallen soul" in the manner Plotinus had proposed, then the issue is too important to the student of Christian tradition, particularly in our day, to be despatched in a footnote to however prestigious a volume. Perhaps it will not seem too ungracious if I make a few brief counter-observations to keep the issue alive.

The first of those observations is this : Markus does not seem to have based his judgment on any wider a textual basis than a procession of earlier scholars — Hessen, Gilson and Bardy among them, — have proposed as arguing for the pre-existence of the soul³. Even those texts, he admits, "suggest Augustine may have adopted, at least in part, the Platonic

1. Edited by A. H. Armstrong, Cambridge University Press, 1967. Markus' essay on Augustine appears on pages 341-419.

2. *Op. cit.*, p. 366, n. 2.

3. He cites only *Sol.* 2, 35 and *De quant. an.* 34. He omits the important allusion in *Acad.* II, 22 where the purified soul is depicted as "returning more safely to heaven" (*securior rediturus in coelum*), a heaven which is designated as its "region of origin" (*regionem suae originis*). But there are a number of other indices as well : Johannes Hessen, for example, adds *De beata vita* 1, *De immort. animae* 6, *De lib. arb.* 1, 24-26, and the crucial *Epistola* VII, 2ff, analysed below (see : *Augustinus Metaphysik der Erkenntnis*, 2d. ed., revised, Leiden, 1960, pp. 53-59).

theory of 'reminiscence', according to which such intelligible knowledge formed part of the mind's equipment brought with it into this life from a pre-mundane existence in the world of eternal truths and in direct contact with them"⁴. After this slightly nervous avowal, however, Markus immediately extricates himself by adding that "In later works, Augustine rejected this view", and he cites in evidence the familiar loci from the *Retractations* and from the Twelfth Book of the *De Trinitate*⁵. The *Retractations* text dates from A.D. 426 at the earliest⁶; the Twelfth Book of the *De Trinitate* can be reliably dated in the years 416-417⁷. Gilson, one remembers, placed this explicit rejection a year earlier, by appealing to Letter 166 and to *De Civitate Dei*, Book XI, both dating from A.D. 415⁸. But the nagging doubt remains: what of the intervening quarter-century that preceded this 'rejection'?

The question is only more pressing in that Gilson's judgment on the early Augustine is significantly bolder than Markus': not only the "unmistakable language" the recent convert uses, but also the very "manner of his subsequent retraction", make it "difficult to question" that he (quoting Hessen's view) "leaned towards the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul" during the years A.D. 387-389. Gilson finds himself, therefore, "inclined to think that the first Augustine accepted the genuine Platonic doctrine" of the soul's pre-existence. "This opinion", he goes on to add, "seems all the more probable if we bear in mind that he never rejects as certainly false the notion that the soul may exist before the body"⁹.

Basing his judgment on the very same texts, Gustave Bardy is only slightly less bold, but still bolder than Markus. He lists the "pre-existence of souls and reminiscence" as two connected doctrines which, "at the beginning, exercised a seductive attraction on Saint Augustine's mind"¹⁰. The disapproval the *Retractations* express anent the passage from the *Soliloquies* implying this view is, Bardy notes, "formal"; the "refutation" Augustine presents "seems to bear on the doctrine itself" contained in the passage, to wit, the "Platonic thesis of reminiscence". And the question arises whether the reminiscence doctrine there expressed entailed what Gilson terms its "natural complement"¹¹,

4. *Op. cit.*, p. 366.

5. *Ibid.* The citations are: *Retr.* 1, 4, 4 and 1, 8, 2; *De Trinitate* XII, 24 (and later, on pp. 368-9 of Markus' essay, *De Trinitate* XII, 26).

6. See Gustave Bardy, in the *Bibliothèque Augustinienne* edition of *Les Révisions* (Volume 12), Paris, 1950, pp. 17-20.

7. See the *Note Complémentaire* to this effect in the *Bibliothèque Augustinienne* edition of *La Trinité* (Vol. 15), Paris, 1955, pp. 557-566.

8. See my article on 'The Plotinian Fall of the Soul in Saint Augustine', in *Traditio* 19 (1963), esp. pp. 2-3.

9. *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, New York, Random House, 1960, pp. 71-72 and notes, especially note 11.

10. *Les Révisions*, p. 141.

11. *Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, p. 72.

the doctrine of pre-existence; and its other, equally natural complement, the "fall" of the soul.

"One would therefore", Bardy concludes, "be tempted to think that the philosopher of Cassiciacum admitted of Plato's doctrine, except for the fact that in those very *Soliloquies* we find an expose of the illumination thesis": the thesis which the Augustine of the *Retractations* sets in direct opposition to the Platonic doctrine of reminiscence¹².

That final demurrer is typical of the confusion haunting much that has been written on this thorny question — including Markus' essay¹³. For if the early Augustine defended both reminiscence and the pre-existence of the soul, the likelihood is that he held those doctrines as he came to understand them from Plotinian Neo-Platonism, and not as Plato himself presented them. And, for the father of Neo-Platonism, there is no opposition between "reminiscence" of a vision enjoyed in pre-existence, and "illumination" enjoyed by the soul even now. Plotinus avows quite frankly that here he may be departing from the common view of Plato's doctrine; but just as candidly he espouses the view that while "fallen", the soul is not entirely fallen. *Qua* fallen, the soul "remembers" the Intelligible World it gazed on "before" its fall; inasmuch as it is not entirely fallen, however, it still remains in contact with that Intelligible World, "illuminated" even now, from above.

Hence the presence of an illumination doctrine in the *Soliloquies* in no way weakens the contention that a "reminiscence" and "pre-existence" theory may be there as well. It simply warns the researcher that if such be the case, the ensemble must be designated as characteristically Plotinian rather than "Platonic" in the stricter sense. And this should be a surprise to no one¹⁴.

Markus' skepticism, then, seems based on a more timid reading of the evidence in the early Augustine than previous reliable scholars have brought to it. My next suggestion is this: his reservations may spring directly from his having misread one of the capital proof-texts bearing on this question.

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Both Gilson¹⁵ and Bardy¹⁶ interpret Letter 7 to Nebridius, written in A.D. 389, as lending substance to the suspicion that Augustine favored

12. *Les Révisions*, p. 144.

13. Markus regularly refers, as so many authors do, to the "Platonic" theory of reminiscence and pre-existence.

14. I have tried to disengage what is characteristic of Plotinus' theory in my article on "Plotinian Fall", referred to in note 8, above; see the summary on pp. 32-33.

15. *Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine*, p. 284, note 11.

16. *Les Révisions*, p. 143, note 2. Hessen gives an extended analysis of this letter; see *in/va*, notes 19 and 20.

a "reminiscence" theory implying the soul's pre-existence. Markus, surprisingly, assures us that this letter "indicates... very clearly" Augustine's later approach to the issue: it already embodies "the Platonic conception as revised" by Augustine "to free it from reference to the past". After treating of memory-of-the-past in its familiar, ordinary sense, Markus explains, Augustine "goes on to include in the sphere of memory the knowledge which we learn by reasoning, such as that which Socrates elicited from the slave-boy in the *Meno*, an example which Augustine mentions here¹⁷. But since this knowledge is not really derived from past experience, and not through the senses, so Augustine argues, it follows that *memoria* does not necessarily refer to the past and need not necessarily involve images derived from sense-experience"¹⁸.

To judge of Markus' interpretation of this letter, it is well to recall that Augustine's correspondent, Nebridius, had given it as his opinion (in Letter 6) that we cannot have any "memory" without some imaginative image; this holds, he proposes, even for acts of intellectual understanding. He asks what Augustine thinks to be the truth of the matter.

Augustine is of a different opinion; in the course of exposing it (Letter 7, paragraph 1), he would first have Nebridius note that the objects of "memory" are not always things which pass away (*praetereuntium*) but sometimes also things which still endure in existence (*manentium*). But the function of memory, he admits, "is to retain hold of what belongs to time past": *sibi memoria praeteriti temporis vindicet tenacitatem*. He is, in effect, formulating an implied objection to his eventual position: how can we be said to have memory, in the strict sense of the term, of something which endures in the present? The preliminary answer is that things which have "passed away" have "left us" (*nos deserunt*): at this point one is tempted to infer that Augustine implies that *their pastness* allows them to be objects of memory. But we are soon alerted to the contrary: even of things that still endure in existence, it can be said that "we have left them": *deseruntur a nobis*. Even in the case of the still-existent Carthage which Augustine has left, therefore, just as truly as of his dead father who has left him, it is correct to say that "memory retains what belongs to past time": *in utroque tamen horum generum praeteritum tempus memoria tenet* (*Ep.* VII, 1). A moment later, he resumes this contention in other terms: he is confident that, despite his previous admission that the term necessarily implies a reference to the past, he has "proved... that memory can be spoken of as embracing also those things which have not yet passed away": *rerum, quae nondum interierunt* (*Ep.* VII, 2).

17. Markus seems to have slipped here; there is no express mention of the *Meno*'s slave-boy experiment in Letter 7 itself.

18. *Op. cit.*, p. 370.

For (and here we come to the vital point), he "remembers" both his father and Carthage — *memini* can be used in the strict sense of both of them — *not* inasmuch as he is beholding them now, but *inasmuch as he beheld them in the past* : *ex eo quod vidi, non ex eo, quod video, memini*. What is "past" is the *seeing* of the object remembered, not necessarily the object itself (*Ep.* VII, 1).

This distinction, between the pastness of the object and the pastness of our having seen it, is what allows him then to deal with an objection some have raised against Socrates' theory that all learning is remembering. The objectors in question appeal to what "Plato himself has taught", namely, that "those things which we learn by the exercise of understanding are permanent (*quae intellegendo discimus... manere semper*), and, being imperishable, cannot be counted among things which have slipped into the past" : *non esse praeterita*. The objectors have rightly seen that "memory" necessarily implies a reference to the past ; but they misconstrue that reference by "affirming that memory has only to do with things which have slipped into the past" : *dicentes memoriam praeteritarum rerum*.

But, Augustine goes on to show in terms of the distinction developed above, the objectors have brought a groundless accusation (*calumniantur*) against Socrates' *nobilissimum inventum*. "For they fail to focus on the fact that *the seeing* in question is in the past ; because we *at some time saw* these things with our minds" : *qui non adtendunt illam visionem esse praeteritam, quia haec aliquando mente vidimus* (*Ep.* VII, 2). The presence or pastness of the objects seen, therefore, does not directly affect the issue ; it is this pastness *of the seeing* that justifies Socrates' claim that we truly "remember" those objects of understanding. Consequently, a few phrases later, Augustine can say of eternity itself, surely the unquestionable example of "something which is forever permanent", that "it could never enter the mind otherwise than by our remembering it" : *nec tamen in mentem venire posset, nisi eius meminissemus* (*Ep.* VII, 2).

Markus is, therefore, seriously inexact in interpreting Augustine as arguing here that "*memoria* does not refer necessarily to the past"¹⁹. On the contrary, the supposition throughout Augustine's argument could scarcely be clearer : to justify using the term *memoria*, there *must* be reference to the past. This supposition he shares with both Nebridius and his eventual adversaries, those who invoke Plato's authority against Socrates. Contrary to Markus' view, the Augustine of Letter 7 would have said that Plato's own theory was as "free" from "reference to the past" as his own later approach was to become : free, that is, from necessary reference to the pastness (and passing-ness) of the *objects-seen*. But this, the early Augustine would have added, is beside the point at issue : what allows

19. *Loc. cit.*, *supra*, note 18. Markus' interpretation is all the more surprising in that Hessen's dense analysis of Letter 7 brought out the same point as I do here ; see Hessen, pp. 53-54.

for our using the term *memoria* when applied to knowing the eternal objects of understanding is the *pastness of our having seen them*, sometime or other : *aliquando*.

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As vague as that provocative *aliquando* is the explanation Augustine goes on to give of why we must regain our knowledge of those intelligible objects by "remembering" : *a quibus quia defluximus et aliter alia videre coepimus, ea nos reminiscendo revisere, id est per memoriam* (*Ep.* VII, 2). Literally, he is telling Nebridius that "we have flowed down from them" (*defluximus*) : one of the classic images Plotinus uses for the "fall" of the soul. The result ? We began to "see other things in another manner" : Plotinus teaches that our present dependence on sense-knowledge for dealing with sense objects is result of our fall. To return to the direct intellectual vision of the Intelligible, we must turn away from these "other objects" and this "other manner" of seeing, — we must take the path of "memory", of "remembering" the Intelligible World we have not entirely forgotten : *ea nos reminiscendo revisere*.

To test whether this is the most natural interpretation of that vague text, one need only (as Hessen long ago took the trouble of doing)²⁰ read further. In answer to Nebridius' question about the origin of images in the soul, Augustine repeatedly refers to a "past" bearing all the earmarks of a Plotinian pre-existence. He speaks (in terms he does not think Nebridius would gainsay) of a situation of the "mind... *before* it uses the body (*priusquam corpore utatur*) to perceive bodily objects". "No sane man will doubt", he adds, that "the mind received more reliable and correct impressions *before* it was involved in the illusions which the senses produce" (*antequam his fallacibus sensibus implicaretur*) ; before, that is, it was open to these "blows inflicted through the senses" (*plaga inflictata per sensus*) (*Ep.* VII, 3). For it is "manifest" that "the mind is less liable to illusions when it has not yet been subject to the deceptive influence of the senses, and of things sensible" ; Nebridius will never convince him that "the soul, while *not yet* using the bodily senses (*nondum corpore sentientem*) and *not yet* rudely assaulted (*nondum per sensus... verberatam*) through these fallacious instruments by that which is mortal and fleeting, lay under such ignominious subjection to illusions" (*Ep.* VII, 5). The images his friend queried him about, then, "are not evolved by the mind from within itself while it has not received them through the senses from without". He does not think the mind "capable of any such conceptions *before* it uses the body and the senses" : *priusquam corpore sensibusque utatur* (*Ep.* VII, 7).

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20. Hessen, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

In order to find the pattern of Plotinus' anthropology in the early Augustine one must, admittedly, be looking for it. But let it be remembered that the slave-boy experiment in the *Meno* was originally designed to satisfy a similar, and obvious, heuristic demand: to find anything, one must have some notion of what one is looking for. In the present instance, to find possible traces of Plotinus' anthropology in Augustine's writings, one must first have a reasonably firm idea of what one expects to discover.

And once the mind has been alerted by the few stray texts that previous scholars have agreed upon as inclining them to think Augustine accepted those two complementary features of Plotinus' view of man — reminiscence and pre-existence — it is inevitable that the mind start questioning further. What *other* features are characteristic of Plotinus' theory of man as "fallen soul"? Are they, too, found in the early Augustine? Does Augustine, for instance, speak of the soul as in any sense "divine"? — identify the soul as the real "I"? — relate it to the body as Plotinus did? — imply that not all souls are equally fallen? — strive in similar terms to reconcile the "fault" involved in our fall with the workings of cosmic law? — similarly explicate the role of "memory" in the soul's "return"? Once the text is queried for all these features of Plotinus' doctrine (not *precisely* Plato's!), a host of confirmatory details leaps to the eye.

I do not claim to have presented all those confirmatory details as yet²¹; nor do I mean to blame Markus for not having searched for them. My intention here has merely been to keep the question from being closed before that search has been seriously undertaken and brought to some measure of completion.

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21. See my forthcoming *Saint Augustine's Early Theory of Man, A.D. 386-391*, Harvard University Press, 1968.