

St Augustine on the Trinity—V

EDMUND HILL, O.P.

The three-penny Catechism of Christian Doctrine (1958 edition) has two questions, 29 and 30, on 'the likeness to the Blessed Trinity in the soul'. They state that 'there is this likeness to the Blessed Trinity in my soul; that as in one God there are three Persons, so in my one soul there are three powers. The three powers of my soul are my memory, my understanding and my will'. This is an echo, but a seriously distorted one, of Augustine's teaching about the image in the *De Trinitate*, especially in books IX and X, which we will be examining in this article. The distortion is curiously ancient, not to say inveterate; it is to be found in the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, the twelfth century work which was to remain the standard theological text-book of the schools until the sixteenth century and beyond, and although it was explicitly corrected by St Thomas, here it is, as brazen as ever, in the catechism of the twentieth century.

St Augustine does not treat of memory, understanding, and will as powers of the soul, but as activities of the mind. Nor is it his thesis that there is this likeness (and this alone) to the blessed Trinity in my soul (and not in my body), that in my one soul there are three powers. His position is that man, body and soul, is made in the image of God. The Catechism quotes this scriptural datum in question 3, but without any reference to the Trinity. But Augustine reasons that as God is Trinity, this divine Trinity must be reflected in the human image; and he says

could learn, with encouragement, the prayers of at least the Canon by heart. This is a task which would be perhaps even easier for the illiterate than the literate. If we concentrated attention on learning these prayers then the variations in the proper would matter much less, since even if the vernacular were not used these could be read before mass and the main meaning would be recollected at the right place. These are only some of the obviously numerous possibilities which would be practical if we really felt this to be of central importance. Though it is a matter of dispute I think that these methods would be better than providing prayer books with 'short versions' of the mass prayers for those who cannot read fast enough to keep up with the priest, because though they are more trouble to start with they give rise to no invidious distinctions within the congregation.

that man is found to be a trinitarian image of the triune God with respect to his *mind*, in virtue of its three cardinal or characteristic activities of remembering, understanding, and willing. With respect to the many other powers and activities which the human soul disposes of there are several lesser and remoter likenesses or traces of the divine Trinity to be found, but they are too disparate from the divine exemplar to qualify man as having been made in God's image. We will find him considering them with some minuteness in book XI, in order to explain and clarify the one likeness which does so qualify him, that of his mind with its trinitarian activities or functions of remembering, understanding and willing.

Meanwhile we must try and follow his thought as he establishes this likeness in books IX and X. He had ended the previous book by unravelling a certain threeness or trinity in love, namely lover, beloved, and the love that is between them.¹ And he had concluded with the words:

It remains to climb on from here, and to seek these things higher up, as far as it is given man to do so. Yet here we may relax our efforts for a little while, not indeed that we may imagine we have already found what we are looking for, except in the way that we talk about finding the place in which to look for something. That something has not yet been found, but the place to look for it in has. (VIII, 10 (14))

He begins book IX by repeating his reminder to us of what we are about; we are engaged in a search, a search for the divine Trinity in faith. And we have to understand from the start that it is a search which will not be concluded this side of the grave. But that should not deter us from proceeding with it; the proper and the safest role for the Christian in this life is that of the seeker.

To be sure, we are looking for a threefold; not any sort of threefold, but that which God is, which we call the Trinity. Wait patiently then, you who are listening to this; for we are still seeking, and nobody will find fault with a man for engaging in such a search—provided of course that he is seeking, strong as can be in faith, something difficult as could be to know or utter.

‘Seek God’, it says, ‘and your soul shall live’; and in case any one should start congratulating himself too soon as though he had attained the goal, it goes on, ‘Seek his face always’ (Ps. 104 (105). 4) . . . As the Apostle says, ‘Brethren, I do not suppose myself to have

¹See previous article, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, July 1962.

attained; one thing however I do—forgetting what lies behind, stretching out to what lies ahead, I press on intently to the prize to which God is calling me above in Christ Jesus. As many therefore as are perfect, let us have this mind' (Phil. 3.13-15). Perfection in this life, he says, is nothing else but forgetting what lies behind and stretching out intently to what lies ahead. The safest thing is to be intent on seeking until we attain what we are intent on and what we are stretching out to. But to be sure that we are stretching out in the right direction, we must start from faith. For it is the certainty of faith that initiates any sort of knowledge; but knowledge will not be perfected in certainty until after this life, when we shall see face to face (I Cor. 13.12). Let us then have this mind, to prefer the sound attitude of seekers of truth to the presumption of pretending to knowledge of the unknown. Let us then so seek as men who are going to find, and let us so find as men who are going to go on seeking . . .

About things which we have to believe let us have no unfaithful doubts, about things we have to understand let us make no rash affirmations; in the one case authority is to be accepted, in the other truth to be sought out. (IX, I (I))

He then rehearses the trinitarian faith in the unity and equality of the three divine Persons, which we hold on authority. This is what, as seekers of God, we are intent on understanding, knowing full well that we will not achieve this end until we see face to face. But we begin by trying to seek out and understand the image of the divine Trinity which we are ourselves, and in so doing to become that image ever more perfectly. We will never be fully with St Augustine unless we bear constantly in mind that his doctrine of the image of God in man is a guide to the Christian spiritual life, a plan for advance in holiness, a doctrine of continual conversion. As we proceed we shall discover that the divine image is not so much something we are as something we have to realize, not a state of existence but a mode of activity.

He begins, then, with the trinity of love with which he concluded the previous book, lover, beloved, and love. But it does not last very long, because in the case where I love myself lover and beloved are identical, and the trinity is reduced to a duality. And this is the primary or essential case of love, its first declension so to speak, where we must look, if anywhere, for the essential image. St Augustine reduces it yet further to essentials by saying firmly, 'Let us put aside from this investigation all the many other things of which man consists, and to

clarify the issue, let us discuss only the mind' (ix, 2). For it is mind that is the essentially human thing about man, that distinguishes him from beast. So it is here that we must look for the stamp of the divine image.

Thus we have reduced what we begin with to mind loving itself. To love oneself is 'to wish to be present to oneself in order to enjoy oneself'. This self-love is not here being considered as something reprehensible, or indeed as morally qualified one way or the other, but simply as something that is necessarily involved in being a living subject, being a mind. It is perhaps curious that 'self-love' should have come to mean something bad and distorted, that it should be a negatively loaded term, unless it is carefully qualified and apologized for; whereas 'self-knowledge' has acquired a morally creditable significance as a term of positive value. And yet each, stripped of its ethical overtones, implies the other.

Self-love, at least—and this is our immediate concern—implies self-knowledge. For you cannot love what you do not know. And so once again we have a trinity, and this time an irreducible one, of mind, its love of itself, and its knowledge of itself. We recognize the categories of love and knowledge, goodness and truth, which St Augustine had introduced in book viii. We failed there to apprehend the essential truth and love which God is, because it is beyond our comprehension; now we have these categories displayed in the existence of the mind, and its acts of knowledge and love. Augustine proceeds in some detail to match the trinity of mind, its self-knowledge, and its self-love with the divine Trinity of Persons, in accordance with the rules of logic and language that he discussed at length in books v-vii.²

After showing how the mind's self-knowledge and love, when total or complete, are consubstantial and equal to the mind itself, he goes on to show how we can reasonably talk of knowledge as a 'word' which the mind conceives and bears, and call this mental word both image and offspring of the mind. He is of course pressing the analogy with the second Person as far as he can. It is the name 'Word' which St John ascribes to the Son that suggests the analogy in the first place. But in introducing his development of the analogy St Augustine shows that he is not satisfied with a mere comparison point by point between the mental trinity and the divine Trinity. This comparison has indeed pride of place at this stage of his investigations, but what is going to interest him more and more is not the parallel resemblances between the mind and God, but rather the direct communication, contact, derivation from

²See the second article in this series, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, November 1961.

the divine Trinity to the human image. And we are given an inkling of this even here at the beginning of our search; for the mind's conception and mental utterance of a true word of awareness is not a kind of intellectual parthenogenesis; every genuine and universally valid idea that we have, everything of which we can say that we see it is true, without having to take it on someone else's authority—e.g., that two and two make four, or that you should do as you would be done by—such awarenesses, and among them a true awareness of itself, the mind conceives from the *aeterna veritas*, that unseen but immediately present and indispensable validator of all judgment about true and false, which is in fact God himself.⁸ The created trinity of the mind only comes alive when it is illuminated by the uncreated Trinity it reflects.

But this derivation of the mental word from the divine Word is only hinted at here. Augustine's main concern at the moment is its relationship with the mind's love of the object known, whether the mind itself or anything else. The mental word, by which the mind makes itself consciously aware of the object, is conceived, he says, in love and it is born *cum excogitatum placet*—when you are pleased with the little scheme you have excogitated, and consent to it either to sin, or to do right (IX, 8 (13)). For the mental word is as often as not a practical judgment of the mind about something to be done, and the love with which it is conceived will be either *caritas* or *cupiditas*, according or not as the object thought of is 'referred to the Creator' at least implicitly. It is worth noting that the word of the mind's self-knowledge can be conceived with either sort of love, and what we usually reprobate under the name of self-love is a pleasure in the excogitation of oneself that is not referred to the Creator, but just stops at self, is in fact self-centred.

The mental word then can be defined as *amata notitia*, knowledge that is lovingly held. But most of us know many things that we do not love in the least, that we would rather not know. Do we not then form a mental word about them? Augustine's answer is that in such cases the word our minds conceive and utter is really our judgment of disapprobation on the hateful objects, and since presumably we approve of our disapprobation, this word is conceived with love and excogitated with a certain sort of pleasure. But there is another question which he does not ask, but which might well be raised. These mental words that are conceived in the greedy sort of love, and particularly the distorted self-awareness which must be presupposed to be the bad sort of self-love, are these too conceived from the eternal truth, which is in

⁸See the previous article LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, July 1962.

fact God? I am sure that Augustine would say they are, simply as mental words, as containing in some way or other positive judgments. Their distortion consists in a lack, a non-reference to the Creator, but there must be some truth there for this negative falsity of judgment to vitiate. And this will be seen in the eternal truth. Such distorted judgments of the mind are really half-truths—perhaps all lies are really half-truths, and the true half in them can with complete propriety be fathered on God.

So far St Augustine has been concentrating mostly on the analogy between the second Person of the Trinity and the mind's self-knowledge; this knowledge proceeds from the mind as a mental utterance or word, in such a way that it can be called the mind's offspring—Augustine never applies the precise word 'son' to it—conceived and begotten by the mind, expressing the mind's likeness in a reflection or image of it. All this fits in easily enough with what seem to be the natural metaphors that we use in speaking about the activities of mind; 'concept' has become a technical mental word, and it is commonplace to talk about an idea, especially a practical and novel one, as the brain-child of the man who thought of it, or about being in travail with a book, article, speech, or other form of utterance which is to present an accurate impression or image of one's mind.

Now we never talk in this sort of way, using this sort of figurative language, about love. St Augustine goes on to ask himself why not, hoping that in answering this question we may be enlightened a little on the difficult point of why the Holy Ghost, though he proceeds from the Father, is not said to be begotten—and indeed is expressly said in the Athanasian creed not to be begotten; why he cannot be called Son, even though he must surely be as much 'the spit image' of the Father as the eternal Word is, since he proceeds from him in equality of nature and identity of substance.

St Augustine recurs again and again to this question all through this work, and never finds an answer that really satisfies him. Meanwhile his answer to the preliminary question here in book IX, why we do not talk of love as the offspring of mind in the same way as knowledge or thought, does not seem at first sight very convincing, depending as it does on Latin word-play, which cannot be rendered in translation. Knowledge, he says, especially that finished knowledge which we express in the mental word of a judgment, is the end of a process; it is discovery crowning search. What we know has been found; *notitia jam inventum est*—and here comes the wordplay—*quod partum vel repertum*

dicitur. Synonyms for finding, in Latin, are verbs compounded with *parere*, which means to bear or bring forth. Thus knowing crowns a search which could be defined as an *appetitus inveniendi, quod idem valet si dicas reperiendi*; an urge to find, which amounts to saying bring to light. 'And what is brought to light', he goes on, 'is as it were brought to birth (because *reperere* is practically the same word as *parere*); for this reason it is like offspring; and where is this offspring found if not in the knowledge which is its finding?' (IX, 12 (18))

Now this process by which a mental word is found in knowledge, i.e., brought forth, according to our punning, as an offspring of the mind, begins with an *appetitus*, an urge, that is with a form of love; and it ends with a love transformed, no longer an *appetitus* or urge, but a delight or pleasure in the thing known. It would scarcely be appropriate to call

this urge by which knowledge is conceived and brought forth a sort of offspring itself; this same urge to know something becomes a love of the thing known as it holds and fondles its dear offspring, namely knowledge, and unites it to its progenitor. And thus we have some sort of image of the Trinity, the mind, and its knowledge, which is its offspring and its word about itself, and thirdly its love, and these three one thing and one substance. (IX, 12 (18))

But it is only a very rough-hewn image as yet, and in book X St Augustine proceeds to chisel it into a finer likeness. He leads off with an idea that he has just turned up in his rather far-fetched word-play, the *appetitus inveniendi*. This thoroughly commonplace and prosaic experience of 'wanting to know' is discovered when you squeeze it to be strangely paradoxical. It seems to involve loving what you do not know, and we have seen that that is impossible, for love implies some sort of knowledge of the thing loved. At some length St Augustine satisfies himself that this *amor studentium*, this love of what we want to know, but do not yet know in fact, is not a love of the completely unknown; the love of medicine, for example, that presumably actuates the genuine medical student, is stirred by some sort of knowledge about medicine, an acquaintance with doctors and their work, even before the student has acquired any particular knowledge of medicine. Further, the student knows what it is to know.

However, there is a particular case of 'wanting to know' which immediately concerns our enquiry and remains problematic, the case of wanting to know oneself, or rather, in St Augustine's framework, of the mind's wanting to know itself. The assumption is, not that

people always do want to know themselves, but that they ought to, according to the commonplace moral maxim 'Know thyself'. But the question this time is: how can the mind not know itself, that it should ever be in a posture to be seeking knowledge of itself? It cannot be in the same case with respect to itself as the raw medical student with respect to the subject of medicine, possessing as yet only a rudimentary and external awareness of it, which study is to make deeper and more intimate. The mind, simply by being what it is, a thinking subject, is as intimate to itself as can be. Nor, surely, can it partly know itself and partly not. It is absurd—for Augustine at least—to talk about only part of the mind knowing things, and not the whole of it. It seems clear that in his language there were no such idiomatic expressions as 'to give only half one's mind to a matter', or 'the back of one's mind'; Augustine and the other ancients can talk about 'soul' in spatial metaphors as divisible into parts and areas, but their word *mens*, it would seem, did not lend itself to such treatment. If then the whole mind is engaged in knowing whatever it knows, the whole of it must also be engaged in being known, when it is its own object of knowledge; for the object being known is the knowing mind, i.e., the whole mind. (x, 4 (6))

Why then, Augustine asks after amusing himself at length with such dialectical minuets, is the mind commanded to know itself? 'I think it means', he answers, 'that it should think about itself', *ut seipsam cogitet*. The passage thus introduced will be worth quoting in full, because it expresses so well St Augustine's religious concern in the question he is discussing; a concern for man to turn back towards God and to start his lifelong quest for God by finding himself.

Why is the mind commanded to know itself? In my opinion it means that it should think about itself, and live according to its nature; that is, it should want to be set in its natural place and order, *under* him it ought to be subject to, and *over* things it should be governing. In fact however its desires are bent and twisted, and so it does many things as though it had forgotten its true self, as follows. It sees certain inward beauties of that more sublime nature which is God; and while it ought to stand still and enjoy them, it wants to attribute them to itself. It wants to be independently what he is, and is not content with being dependently like him, and so it turns away from him and starts shifting and slipping away into less and less, which it imagines to be more and more. It is, after all, not sufficient for itself, nor does anything else suffice it once it departs from him

who alone can suffice it. And so in its poverty and distress it becomes excessively intent on its own actions and the unquiet pleasures it gets from them; in this way it becomes greedy to acquire experience from things outside itself, the sort of things it loves when it gets to know them, and which it realizes it may lose unless it takes anxious care to hold on to them. The result is that it loses its sense of security, and takes ever less trouble to think about itself the more assured it is that it cannot lose itself. That it does not think about itself does not mean, of course, that it ceases to know itself—we do not say that a man learned in many sciences is ignorant of grammar when he is not thinking about it because he happens to be thinking of medicine instead: and yet such is the power of love that when it has spent a long time thinking lovingly about these exterior things and has glued itself on to them with anxious care, it draws them back with it even when it is returning in some way or other to thinking about itself. And because the things outside, which it has fallen in love with through the senses and wrapped itself up in by long familiarity, are material bodies and cannot therefore be brought into the region, so to say, of its own immaterial nature, it rolls itself up in their images, and clutches on to what it has made out of itself inside itself. For it gives something of its own substance to their formation; but it also keeps something back by which to judge freely about the look of such images, and it is this something which is kept back to judge with that is really mind, i.e. rational understanding. For those parts of the soul which are impressionable by the likenesses of bodies are common, so we observe, to us and to animals. (x, 5 (7))

As a description of mental processes this passage may well be thought to be strangely crude and archaic. But that is not really how it is intended; it is much rather a transcription into mental terms of the story of the fall of man. Hence the strong vein of personification, and the whole moral perspective. It is a story of disordered knowledge caused by disorderly love: of the dissipation of mental energies downwards and outwards. The converse process, which we are supposed to be engaged on, of reintegrating the distorted image of God in the mind, is a movement inwards and upwards. The first step is conversion back to God in love, a look over the shoulder from afar; that is why this section began in the previous book with the paradigm of the mind and its love, a true love of self being involved, of course, in the love of God. But a true love of self demands a true knowledge of self, and this is the second stage of the return inwards and upwards to God, to come to a

true knowledge of self, to think about oneself, and as mind to discern oneself from what is not really oneself. The mind, having wallowed so long in a preoccupation with bodily things, is so cluttered up with their images that it tends to mistake them for its own substance. When it is commanded, then, to know itself and starts thinking about itself, its task is 'not to look for itself as something absent to be discovered, but to mind itself as something present to be discerned; it does not have to investigate itself as something unknown, but to distinguish itself from what it already knows as other'. The Latin word-play may be more intelligible than a clumsy English translation: *Non itaque velut absentem se quaerat cernere, sed praesentem se curet discernere; nec se quasi non norit cognoscat, sed ab eo quod alterum novit dignoscat.* (x, 9 (12))

The exercise is a simple one: the mind may well imagine that it is all sorts of things, blood, fire, grey matter, electric currents, but it does not know for certain. On the other hand it *knows* that it is, that it lives, that it understands, that it wills, that it thinks, makes judgments, remembers. 'Let it put aside what it thinks itself to be, and mark what it knows': *Secernat quod se putat, cernat quod scit.* (x, 10 (13)) We will not follow St Augustine in his argument to prove that the mind cannot be what it only thinks it may be but is not sure that it is. It is a metaphysically important point, establishing the immateriality of mind, but it hardly affects the development of the trinitarian image in the mind. His next step after that is important for us, and may seem arbitrary. 'Putting aside for the time being', he says, 'all the other things which the mind knows for sure about itself, let us concentrate on these three—memory, understanding, will'. (x, 11 (17))

The assumption must be that these three activities are cardinal or nodal. Why this should be, however, is not explained, except to say that it is in terms of these three that we customarily scrutinize the *ingenia parvulorum*, the promise shown or not by children. It is clear why he puts aside the existential, or as he would say substantial, predications of being and living; in his exploration of the trinitarian image he is looking for three terms that imply relationship, to correspond to the divine relationships which constitute the divine persons.⁴ But this still leaves him plenty of mental activities to choose from. His choice of understanding and will needs little explanation; they are the obvious declensions, so to speak, from the mind's knowledge and love of itself, which were introduced in his first sketch of the image. He changed the terms 'knowledge' *notitia* and 'love' *amor* into 'understanding' *intelli-*

⁴As explained in bk V; see the article in LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, November 1961.

gentia and 'will' *voluntas*, probably because he wanted words which, while still signifying mental activities, could also stand for the power or ability to perform such activities. For his concern, as we have seen, is with the dynamism of the image as something to be realized and actualized, a possibility requiring to be put into effect.

What is less easy to account for is his choice of the activity or capacity of 'memory'. This too, I suggest, is a declension, but this time a linguistically governed one, from the term employed in his first draft trinity, 'mind' *mens*. This word had to be resolved into some other, because it is an absolute or substantial and not a relationwise word, and so cannot suitably stand in the mental trinity for the Father in the divine Trinity. It properly corresponds to the divine substance, or the word 'God'. But the word *mens* is clearly related to the word *meminisse*, 'to remember'. Remembering therefore might well be considered as the most fundamentally mental of all mental acts; the thing most proper to the mind is minding, in the Scotch sense of 'minding the day I first saw Jeannie'. He has already hinted at the cardinal importance of memory when, describing the mind's degradation of itself, he had said 'it does many things as though it had *forgotten* its true self'. That it was an ever fascinating mystery for him is evident from the tenth book of the *Confessions*. But it must always be remembered that here in the *De Trinitate* St Augustine is not concerned with memory in general but with memory of self and memory of God, and this will give a very unfamiliar aspect to the concept.

Having chosen his three terms, Augustine shows briefly and without much difficulty their aptness for describing the mental image; their consubstantiality and equality, and their mutual relationships of origin and procession. This is, in fact, his last word on what the image is; having educed the trinity of memory, understanding, and will from that of mind, knowledge, and love, he makes no attempt to educe further refinements—these are the final terms. He has still, however, to show how this image works, how we should set about trying to realize it, in what activity its ultimate perfection consists. To that he will devote the last books of his work. But before he goes on to that, there is one obscurity he feels he must try and clear up. It is all very well, he says to himself, to parade these three terms, to produce *memoria* out of *mens* and so form a logically more appropriate mental trinity; but is it anything more than words? Is there any real difference between memory of self and understanding of self, or are they just two names for the same thing? If they are, then the whole image collapses.

He will try and answer this question in book xi by illustrating the functioning of the mental trinity through the analogy of lesser trinities which he will find in the fields of sensation and imagination. The more easily observable structure of the 'outer man's' cognition will throw light on the obscurer workings of the 'inner man' (Augustine's own phrases), which are presumed to have the same sort of rhythm. We will follow him in his downward and outward exploration from the citadel of mind in the next article.