

Response to Dr Wayne J. Hankey, “Augustine’s Trinitarian Cosmos”¹

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Dr Hankey has taken us through the *Confessions* as through an *itinerarium mentis in deum*, a journey of the mind into God. I believe he has suggested, further, that to read the *Confessions* in this way provides an opening, through which a self-critical Augustinian may through Augustine himself approach later corrections and transformations of Augustine. These corrections and transformations come in an implicit form through the encounter with Proclean-Dionysian forms of thinking, particularly in the work of Eriugena and St Bonaventure. In the second part of his paper Dr Hankey turns to the more explicit criticisms of the 20th century Neoplatonists Duméry and Trouillard, among others. Again, for these thinkers it is Proclus who provides the key for preserving the transcendence of God as One-Good against the Augustinian tendency to reduce the infinite into the finite. The claim of the 20th century thinkers is that this Augustinian tendency results in a destructive hubris in the human which plays itself out in countless tyrannies over nature and humanity throughout the Western world and beyond.

How might a reading of *Confessions* as an *itinerarium* address the problem which the 20th century thinkers have brought to light? By way of response I would like first to retrace the steps of the pilgrim that Dr Hankey and Fr Crouse have seen played out in the *Confessions*. In reading it in this way they themselves are following, significantly, in the prints of St Bonaventure.

First, there is the question, what does it mean to read in this way? It has been a feature of Dr Hankey’s teaching to work through certain ancient and medieval texts as *itineraria* or spiritual journeys. Not all ancient texts lend themselves to this way of reading, of

1. This response was first delivered at the 2017 Atlantic Theological Conference (God Every Day and Everywhere) in Halifax, Nova Scotia and can also be found in the annual published Report of these conferences.

course, but Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Anselm and Aquinas all do, though not without a wonderful diversity of expression. One might go so far as to say that the text that plays out an *itinerarium* or spiritual journey is one of the distinct gifts of the Hellenic tradition—a literary form that suggests itself naturally given the Heraclitean dictum that “the way up and the way down are the same.” To understand *Confessions* as such a spiritual journey in this tradition, it is necessary to approach it first as a “unified argument”. No part or book can have its proper transformational work if read in isolation from the others. In particular it is the final three books, the theological ones treating the creation in *Genesis*, which are crucial to this transformation and to the logic of the whole work. Without them, the journey into God is cut short.

Dr Hankey has shown how Augustine “works through the mutual necessity of the way down to creatures and the way up from them.” The pilgrimage proceeds through a series of trinities or triads step by step from the lowest triad of measure, number and weight to the Trinity Itself. It is not enough to enumerate all the triads and consider them in relation to one another in the abstract. Rather, the triads “occur one after another according to their proper place in the journey of mind.” Further, as Fr Crouse taught, the structures that govern *Confessions*, crucially, are themselves triadic. So the work runs through exterior things to interior ones, and from interior things to the things above, the spiritual creation. On the literary level this ascent takes the form of a movement from autobiography, through psychology, and finally to theology in the final three books. All of these triads are workings-out of the great Hellenic triad of “God, reasoning being and nature,” held in common by its pagan and Abrahamic heirs.

So reading *Confessions* as an *itinerarium mentis in Deum* requires reading it as a whole, and attending to every triad in the order in which it appears, observing how it transforms into the next triad along. For example, the third term of the cosmic triad, ‘weight’, becomes the instinct for self-preservation in the infant, the willing of the child for his own good, and the loving of the young boy as he grows into the capacity and desire for friendships and lovers.

If *Confessions* is an *itinerarium* whose journey is it? The overall structure of autobiography—psychology—theology suggests immediately that the pilgrimage is not Augustine's alone. The expansion of the smaller triads also suggests this, as we have seen in the movement from weight to love mentioned above, which moves through the stages of the human from infant to adult. This is the journey of every human soul.

But, there is more. This is not just the journey of every human soul. It is that first triad, measure, number and weight, that is the sign of this. Despite its humble appearance, that triad lies at the heart of the structure of the cosmos. It appears as the first triad in Book I, and then returns in Book XIII. With the words "my weight is my love" in Book XIII, juxtaposed with the first articulation of the Trinity of God Himself, we discover just how deeply the cosmos is related to the Trinity Itself. The juxtaposition of these first and last triads in the context of the exegesis of *Genesis* shows that the very cosmos itself is on pilgrimage, undergoing the same transformations, if on a different register, as Augustine himself, and as every human, on its return to its Source. Dr Crouse wrote: "All of creation runs through *exterior* things in temporal succession, *interior* things in its abiding formal reality in the "heaven of heavens", and *superior* things in its sabbath rest..." St Paul writes, "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves..." In running through, articulating his own conversion, the human plays out the conversion of the cosmos. "As measure, number and weight, God is the fundamental structure of every physical thing."

But there is still more, radically more. The return is not just that of the human and the cosmos together into God. *It is also the self-return of God Himself*, which enables and sustains the other returns and is in fact expressed through them. Dr Hankey points to this passage from Book XIII:

When people see these [good things you have created] with the help of your Spirit, **it is you who are seeing in them**. When, therefore, they see that things are good, **you are seeing that they are good**.

Whatever pleases them for your sake **is pleasing you in them**. The things which by the help of your Spirit delight us **are delighting you in us**....God is loved in that which he has made, and he is not loved except through the Spirit which he has given. For 'the love of God is diffused in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given to us' (Rom. 5: 5). By the Spirit we see that everything which in some degree has existence is good; for it derives from him who does not exist merely in some degree since he is Existence.

Dr Hankey writes, "Augustine's personal conversion is part of the return to God of the whole creation. God's own Trinitarian conversion upon Himself creates and enables both the cosmic and the human triadic conversions and connects them, joining the autobiographical and the exegetical Books into one work."

Self-othering is the ordering principle of the mind's activity by which the triads expand in *Confessions*. "God's life is the extremity of self-othering activity," and the consequence of this is "the greatest possible mutuality". So the end of the triads' expansion is the conversion or self-return of not one, not two, but of all three terms of the Hellenic triad: nature, the reasoning being and God Himself.

Reading *Confessions* as an *itinerarium*, means that "self-othering and the co-relative gathering-return back into the originating self"² is not seen all at once but approached via a series of triadic expansions. Such a way of proceeding brings Augustine closer to the forms of thinking employed by Eriugena and St Bonaventure. Does it bring us close enough to these thinkers to reduce the contribution of Proclus and Dionysius through their workings-out of the primacy of the One-Good beyond Being?³ Or does it bring Augustine just close enough to allow us to appreciate the difference? In either case, what is necessary is that we, to the extent that we are Augustinians, engage deeply with this criticism and allow ourselves to be transformed by it. This may bring us into a deeper encounter and a truer friendship with our fellow inheritors of the Hellenic tradition in its various expressions.

2. Wayne J. Hankey, "The Conversion of God in Aquinas' Summa Theologiae: Being's Trinitarian and Incarnational Self-Disclosure," address for 'Wisdom belongs to God' conference, University of King's College, Halifax, Nova Scotia, June 21st, 2017.

3. Another way of putting this: what happens at Ostia?